

2015

## **Pchiru Shelni: a sexual practice in Bhutan**

Tshering Yangden  
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**UNIVERSITY OF  
WOLLONGONG**



**Department of**

**Law, Humanities and the Arts**

**Pchiru Shelni: A sexual Practice in Bhutan**

**Tshering Yangden**

**"This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the  
award of the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of the  
University of Wollongong"**

**Month and Year**

**February 2015**



**Rural Bhutanese women at a festival (Photograph: Author)**

This festival takes place in Shaa valley of Wangdue district. It is held once in every three years and is known as *Shaa gi Locho*. The festival is a form of religious ritual to protect the village from natural disasters. Each household is required to contribute a man and a woman for this purpose. While the men perform warrior dances, the role of women symbolizes nurturer. The roasted rice in containers and home brewed wine in bottles in front of the women are the offerings made to the leader of the warriors known as *Yangpoen*, the *Pou* (spiritual guide) and the *Neyljorma* (consort). The women stand in line in their finery ready to make the offerings once the dance sequence is complete. This in a way symbolizes the gender roles played out in everyday life where women prepare food while the men come back from work. However, the spectators tend to judge the looks and the quality of finery the women wear and become the subject of discussion around the villages pressuring the women to look as best as possible.

## **THESIS CERTIFICATION**

I, Tshering Yangden, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

The document has not been submitted for qualification at any other academic institution

Signature

Date

## ABSTRACT

Pchiru Shelni is a sexual practice that has been an entrenched cultural and social practice believed to have started in rural Bhutan. The exact time when it began is not known. The process involves men having sexual relations with women by stealth, with or without consent, typically by sneaking into a woman's bed or breaking into their houses under the cover of darkness. Anecdotal beliefs have shown that this practice occurs in major parts of rural Bhutan but not in the southern region of the country. This practice is popularly known as 'Night Hunting' in Bhutanese urban literate circles as well as outside the country. The practice is distinctly rural and is perceived as a traditional innocuous courtship/dating custom between single young men and women.

There has not any documented substantive research on the practice except for a small study conducted on the subject within the context of courtship. While a study by one researcher, Penjore (2007) presents Pchiru Shelni as a traditional and harmless courtship practice that is mostly positive social and cultural custom, there has been recent questions raised in the public arena (traditional and social media for example) that point to a conflict of opinions between those wanting to treat it as an entrenched and socially acceptable practice and those who maintain it is a form of sexual coercion and systemic violence against women. This allows for the possibility that the practice may even be a neutral experience for women. Therefore this research starts with this premise.

Using social constructionist and feminist theory, this thesis examines the different contexts (coercive and consensual) in which Pchiru Shelni takes place and the relation of Pchiru Shelni to wider social, cultural and political patterns as well as the implications for wider forms of gender inequality. Utilisation of qualitative method design, literature review and semi-structured interviews resulted in the conceptualisation of Pchiru Shelni. Despite the common assumption that these two practices are one and the same, data analysis also show that whilst they overlap in some respects, Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting differ in some aspects.

This research revealed that while sexual coercion is a major component of the Pchiru Shelni practice and has major consequences for women and children, it acknowledges that the practice of Pchiru Shelni serves some social purposes. Thus, this research recommends a 'reworking' and 'reframing' of Pchiru Shelni in order to 'lay bare' elements of sexual coercion, enable a 'rethinking' of the ways women are conceptualized within this practice and limit the harmful consequences of Pchiru Shelni. Furthermore, whilst the positive aspects of this sexual practice are acknowledged, changes in government policies are needed to redress gender

inequality, empower Bhutanese women, provide for their children and support their wider communities.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Bhutan has a unique sexual practice known as Pchiru Shelni in *Dzongkha* (national language of Bhutan) and Night Hunting in English. Pchiru Shelni is a traditional practice of courtship that takes place in rural Bhutan. The process involves men having sexual relations with women by stealth, with or without consent, typically by sneaking into or breaking into their houses either from the windows or doors. This sexual practice is distinctly rural and always happens at night. The practice is believed to have developed from absence of formalized dating protocols and a lack of time during day in olden times. The term 'Pchiru' means night and 'Shelni' means to wander around (here it means wander in search of women by men). Daytime secretive meetings are not considered Pchiru Shelni even though the motives may be same. These behaviors may be seen as normal by Bhutanese but this thesis argues that there are consequences for this ongoing practice which this thesis intends to explore.

Depending on locations and their dialects, Pchiru Shelni in *Sharchokpa* (eastern) dialect is known as *Yamlang* literally meaning reaching adulthood. This is based on the notion that youths become adults on their first sexual experiences believed to be achieved usually through *Yamlang*. In the Kheng region under Zhemgang district, it is termed *Bomena* meaning 'going towards a girl'.

Night Hunting is also the popular term for Pchiru Shelni referred by the literate in Bhutan and the outside world. In the media, the term 'Night Hunting' is frequently used to refer to this sexual practice and there is a common belief that Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are one and the same practice. Penjore (2007) suggests that the English term 'Night Hunting' is relatively new and is allegedly coined by expatriates in Bhutan. However, there are other stories that the term has been coined by educated young men who began participating in this practice in the villages. The later claim seems to be more reliable since Night Hunting is practiced by Bhutanese men and not outsiders. This thesis will argue that Night Hunting is an offshoot and

overlapping practice of Pchiru Shelni and are in some ways different from each other. In this thesis, Night Hunting term is used only when the discussion relates to references made from written materials from the media as well as both government and non-governmental agencies reports.

This thesis will also discuss briefly another variant of Pchiru Shelni known as *Khig Kelni* (literally meaning ‘accompany to a place’) involving influential urban men and rural women. Unlike Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting where men break into houses, Khig Kelni involves men of position and status demanding or being offered sexual favors during their visits to rural places.

Drawing on feminist perspectives, this thesis investigates the ways in which gendered inequalities of power are evident in women’s and men’s sexual and social relations, focusing in particular on the practice of Pchiru Shelni. It also examines the extent to which Pchiru Shelni involves and sustains gender inequalities and the links between Pchiru Shelni and wider gender inequalities.

Local beliefs that Pchiru Shelni is a ‘normalized’ traditional form of practice and that no harms are associated with the practice is also examined. It purposely focusses on the idea of Pchiru Shelni as a traditional practice and argues that more than a courtship practice; it involves more of sexual coercion that has contributed to gender inequalities in Bhutan. Therefore, this study hopes to make an empirical contribution towards understanding the consequences of this cultural practice for the women of Bhutan.

## **1.1 Rationale for the study**

Unlike most countries, there have never been either individual feminists or a separate feminist movement in Bhutan that advocates for women and highlight gender discriminations and violence against women. Whatever positive steps have been taken so far has been the result of initiatives taken by the government.



Following Bhutan's membership in several international organizations such as the World Bank, United Nations and Asian Development Bank, Bhutan has embarked on providing a gender equality policy to fulfil the requirements of providing basic human rights of which ensuring equal rights to women and men is a part. The National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB) was commissioned in 1981 following Bhutan becoming a signatory of Convention for Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1980. Gender equality is considered fundamental to international and regional instruments including CEDAW. The importance of a gender equality policy is evident from a separate chapter devoted to women's development included in the ninth five year 2001-2005 plan<sup>1</sup> (Yangden, 2009).

Bhutan's transition to democracy in 2008 made it all the more important that Bhutan respect basic democratic principles which include gender equality. The principle of non-discrimination has also been reflected in the Constitution of Bhutan (2008) under the Article 9 (3), which states:

The State shall endeavour to create a civil society free of oppression, discrimination and violence, based on the law, protection of human rights and dignity, and to ensure the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people.

Article 9 (17) declares that:

the State shall endeavour to take appropriate measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination and exploitation against women, including trafficking, prostitution, abuse, violence, harassment and intimidation at work, in both public and private spheres.

---

<sup>1</sup> Modern development in Bhutan started with the introduction of first five year plan in 1960s and continues on a five yearly basis.

The National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) was established in 2004 is an autonomous institution of the Bhutan government and is given the responsibility to lead and fulfil the country's obligations to regional and international conventions. In documenting violence against women, NCWC had expressed concerns about the 'Night Hunting' practice as being detrimental to village girls as well as their families. This report highlighted issues surrounding Night Hunting (NCWC, 2007:133), and proposed that the practice be 'rebranded' as violence against women and categorized as rape punishable by law. However, to date, this proposal has not been raised for discussion in the Bhutanese parliament (Bhutan Times, 2008).

Bhutan being a developing country, it is possible that looking at Pchiru Shelni from a western feminist point of view could lead to accusations of western cultural imperialism and which subverts the very structure of traditional societies (Movius, 2010). Western feminism is criticised for categorising women in the 'third world' as a homogeneous entity and for overlooking the differences between women of developed and developing countries. The experience of oppression by women in developing countries is argued to be vastly diverse from that of western world and is dependent upon geography, history and culture (Mohanty, 1984). The fact that such an accusation is possible is evident from the discussions conducted online in Bhutanese media about Night Hunting where it has been argued that government should keep out of discussion about Night Hunting and it should be treated as an accepted cultural norm (Bhutan Observer, 2008). However, it should also be noted that no culture, religion or countries remains immune to violence against women. The World Report on Violence and Health by World Health Organization illustrates this (WHO, 2002). Contextual cultural considerations discuss gender equality are essential and Pchiru Shelni will be examined within the context of Bhutanese culture.

## **1.2 Objectives of this study**

My motivations for this study are fourfold: First, I am a Bhutanese, grew up in Bhutanese culture and have completed my undergraduate in Bhutan. My affiliation with the local culture that includes practices of Pchiru Shelni has motivated me to seek further answers about Pchiru Shelni: Is it a practice that can be condoned or is there something else within the practice that affects women and the community in a certain way? By placing myself as a researcher, I want to seek more knowledge on the practices and more understanding on the subject.

Second, as a researcher, I seek a position that will allow me to look into the experiences and the impact this practice has on women without having to take a rigid theoretical position. For instance, until my higher education abroad, it had never occurred to me to question my own culture as that of being discriminative against women until I started my research on culture and gender in Bhutan. While writing for my Master's thesis, I have learnt to be critical of Bhutanese culture and argued that in many ways as much as Bhutanese culture empowers women compared to the neighbouring Asian countries, there are many aspects of Bhutanese culture that acted as an obstacle to women's development. In the case of Pchiru Shelni, there is a possibility that it may even be a neutral experience for women. Therefore, this research begins with an open ended investigation.

Third, I hope to ultimately contribute to enhancing social services and promote well-being of victims if any. This places my position as that of a social welfare native researcher. Insider or native research takes place when a researcher conducts research with populations for which one is already a member sharing an identity and language (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). The native researcher is placed in a dual position. The native researcher becomes both the object as well as the subject. The margin that separates the researcher from the research is the native researcher (Kanuha, 2000). The native researcher can acquire the experience of negotiating private and public spaces and is also able to examine and challenge western ways of

knowing native subjects (Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

Fourth, I expect that my research will have policy implications and it is expected that relevant authorities in Bhutan will consider the findings of this study to formulate policies and plans to support victims of sexual violence.

I was further encouraged by the response of the research participants of this study. During my interaction with rural people, they expressed their appreciation that there is somebody (the researcher) who is going to expose the problems of Pchiru Shelni to a larger audience (meaning the government and other stakeholders). These people believed that exposing the problems of Pchiru Shelni was a way of informing the government that something needs to be done about the various problems women face as a result of these practices. We must understand that the circumstances of sexual crimes committed against women during the normal course of life and the Pchiru Shelni are different and warrants a careful re-visitation of existing laws. This thesis discusses the very circumstances under which Pchiru Shelni take place. On the contrary, I was surprised by the attitudes of the literate and some people who are in good positions in urban areas. While I expected them to support my research in order to be supportive of our women, these very people suggested I am embarrassing the country by exposing our 'dirty little secret'. As far as I am concerned, it is public knowledge. Everyone knows such practices exist and media have mentioned about it in small 'doses' but no one had actually taken it up as a major research project.

Many researchers have provided a wide range of information on sexual behavior in other parts of the world. However, there are some countries where research topics on sexual behavior could not be introduced earlier either because of sensitivity of the topics or lack of research initiatives (Adhikari and Tamang, 2009). Bhutan is one such country where research work has started gaining significance in the last few years. For this purpose, an autonomous body was established in 1999 and came to be known as Centre for Bhutan studies. One of the main objectives of the Centre is

conducting evaluative studies and provides feedback on how improvements can be made in government policies and programs (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2011). The Centre has so far published numerous journals on the Gross National Happiness (GNH) development concept of Bhutan and has been widely regarded by scholars from all over the world. Many of the articles have been contributed by foreigners who are taken up by the new development concept of Gross National Happiness rather than using Gross Domestic Product to measure a country's growth. However, as of date no articles on issues such as sexual behaviors, gender, and domestic violence appear in any of their publications.

Through this study, the study aims to:

- Offer an original contribution to the study of this significant practice;
- Contribute to scholarly understanding of gender inequalities in Bhutan;
- Contribute to emerging international literature on distinct forms of violence against women;
- Contribute to understanding the ways in which particular forms of violence/sexual violence are linked to gender relations/gender inequalities and constructions of traditions and culture.

### **1.3 Research questions**

The following research questions were investigated to examine the practice of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

There are two overarching research questions:

- (1) How is the practice of Pchiru Shelni/and Night Hunting understood in Bhutanese society?**

**(2) What are the wider, social, cultural, and political factors which shape the practice of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting?**

Each of these questions was further followed by sub questions:

Sub questions 1:

- a) What is Pchiru Shelni?
- b) What does Pchiru Shelni involve?
- c) What is the history of Pchiru Shelni?
- d) Does Pchiru Shelni overlap with, or differ from, other sexual practices which may be either consenting or coercive?
- e) Does Pchiru Shelni differ in different contexts, e.g. urban versus rural?
- f) What are the discourse which underpin and 'make known' Pchiru Shelni?
  - a. Are these discourses gendered?
- g) To what degree is Pchiru Shelni part of Bhutanese traditions, cultural practices and social knowledge?

Sub questions 2:

- a) How is Pchiru Shelni related to wider social, cultural and political patterns/factors/forces?
- b) How is the practice of Pchiru Shelni shaped by wider patterns of gender inequality?
- c) How has Pchiru Shelni changed (if at all)?
- d) How are such changes connected to wider changes in Bhutanese society?

In addition to the above questions, there are further questions focused on the anecdotal reports that Pchiru Shelni sometimes involves transactional sex such as use of gifts, money and favors.

Sub questions 3:

- a) What factors determine transactional Pchiru Shelni?
- b) Does the economic status of the household influence outcomes?
- c) How much of a factor is education?
- d) Does transactional sex occur at the urban places as well?

#### **1.4 Brief background on Bhutan**

Bhutan has been without contact with the rest of the world for most of its history. However, there was occasional trading with Tibet in the north and India across the southern Bhutanese border. The country welcomed its first tourists in 1974 during the coronation of the fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye wangchuck (Yangden, 2009). For many people in the world, Bhutan, as a country, is an unknown place. Therefore, it is important to introduce at this point, a brief background of the country and under what conditions the practice of Pchiru Shelni takes place.

##### *1.4.1 History*

Bhutan's early history is shrouded in mystery and most historical archives have been either lost or destroyed by earthquakes or fire. Whatever documents that survived seem to have been reproduced in several books. One of the authorities on Bhutan is Dr. Michael Aris.<sup>2</sup> Dr Aris has written several books on early history of Bhutan. His sources have been supported by Bhutanese people who held important positions and had access to the important documented history of Bhutan. Even though Bhutanese history has been documented as early as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, they are in the form of religious scriptures, and as such use a language not easily understood by lay people.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Aris lived in Bhutan from 1967 to 1972 and was a leading western authority on Bhutan's history. He was also the husband of Aun San Suu Kyi, the Burmese Nobel Laureate.

Michael Aris has documented information such as the founder of Bhutan, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, the administrative system and the construction of the *Dzongs* (fortresses). Older people in villages talk about how the public had to contribute free labor to the government in order to renovate and maintain these *Dzongs*, which in those days became a meeting ground for young men and women outside their own community.

#### 1.4.2 *Monarchy*

Monarchy was introduced in 1907 with the crowning of the first king Ugyen Wangchuk (1862-1926). The dual system that was introduced by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel after his arrival in Bhutan in 1616 was abolished but the post of Head Abbot remains to this day to look after the religious affairs of the country. Ugyen Wangchuk was also responsible for the initiation of gradual modernization by introducing a western form of education, building infrastructure and encouraging trade with India. Women started enrolling in schools during the time of the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk (1952-1972) and women began working as civil servants albeit at the lower levels of government. It is during the fourth King's time (1972-2006) that women started occupying executive level positions in the civil service. In 1999, internet and television were introduced in the capital city, Thimphu for the first time. After the Bhutan Information Communications and Media Act, two private newspapers were established that challenged the dominance of Kuensel, the state-run daily newspaper. The establishment of these media provided researchers with access to online materials that could be used for the purpose of studies. These media have been used in this thesis to evaluate public opinion on the practice of Night Hunting.



### *1.4.3 Constitutional Monarchy and Democracy*

In December 2006, the King abdicated in favor of the crown prince Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. Democracy was finally ushered in with the first ever democratic elections on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2008. In this election no woman was appointed to a ministerial position however the second democratic election in 2013 produced its first woman Minister<sup>3</sup> (Bhutan Observer, 2013).

### *1.4.4 Geography*

Bhutan is one of the smallest nations in Asia with an area of 38, 394 sq.km (NSB, 2010). It is sandwiched between the two most populous countries in the world, China in the north and India in the south. Bhutan is located in the eastern Himalayas, heavily forested and mostly mountainous. According to the latest statistical year book of Bhutan 2010,

72.5 percent of the Kingdom is covered with forests; 10 percent with year-round snow and glaciers; nearly 8 percent is permanently cultivated or used for human habitation; another 2 percent was used for shifting cultivation (tseri), a practice banned by the government; and 3.9 percent as meadows and pastures, while rest of the land is either barren, rocky or scrubland' (NSB<sup>4</sup>, 2010A: vi).

The country has three distinct climatic zones. Monsoons are experienced in western Bhutan, humid and subtropical in the southern plains and foothills, temperate in the inner Himalayan valleys of the south and central regions and cold in the north with year round snow on the main Himalayan summits.

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<sup>3</sup> Dorji Choden, Minister for Works and Human Settlement

<sup>4</sup> National Statistics Bureau

#### 1.4.5 *Economy*

The economy of Bhutan explains why the majority of Bhutan's population is based in the rural areas. Bhutan is the smallest and the least developed country in the world with the main economy based on agriculture and forestry (UN-OHRLLS, 2012). Agriculture provides livelihood for more than 65% of the population (NSB, 2010A). Agriculture in Bhutan is mainly subsistence farming and animal husbandry. The mountainous terrains of the country had made it difficult for the country to build infrastructure and roads on a large scale. The economy is heavily dependent on India's financial assistance as is evident from the fact that India fully financed most of the early five year development plans that started in 1961. Most of the industries are cottage based and the country is still dependent on imports for technology. Bhutan earns most of its foreign currency from Hydro projects and Tourism (NSB, 2010A). The country's population in the first recorded census in 2005 was 634,982. 47.4% were men and 52.6% were women. 30.9% of the population lived in the urban areas and 69.1% in rural areas. 83.1% of the urban men were literate and 67.5% of urban women were literate. In the rural areas, 62.6% of men were literate and only 40.6% of rural women were literate. Overall 69.1% of men and 48.7% of women were found to be literate (RGOB<sup>5</sup>, 2005). The next census registration is due in 2015.

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<sup>5</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan

## **1.5 Chapter outline**

This thesis consists of eleven chapters preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion.

In the introductory chapter above, I introduced and defined the topic of the thesis. I explained the rationale and objectives of this study. Because it is a first time detailed study on a subject that has previously been not explored before and the country is less known to the outside world, I concluded the chapter by providing a brief background on Bhutan in order to familiarize a first time reader.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature and justify the lack of local literature and why I rely on international literature to compare and contrast with similar practices in other parts of the world. This is followed by the theoretical framework that underpins the conceptualization of gender relations in sexual sphere in rural Bhutan.

In Chapter 3, I lay out the methods and techniques used in this study and analyze the outcome of fieldwork. This is an empirical research that uses a range of techniques underpinned by constructionist and feminist theoretical framework. This project analyses the production of cultural meaning thus favoring the qualitative methodology based on primary data collection. A range of methods are employed; from in-depth semi structured interviews, to participant observation, textual analysis and newspapers.

In Chapter 4, I introduce the meaning of Pchiru Shelni and then explain how it overlaps with the practice of Night Hunting. I touch upon the similarities and the differences between the two practices. Deriving from data analysis, I discuss the characteristics of Pchiru Shelni that show involvement of both consensual and non-consensual sex. This chapter also discusses rural perception of Pchiru Shelni and urban perception of Night Hunting. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion on

another offshoot of Pchiru Shelni known as Khig Kelni and the decline of this practice.

In chapter 5, I examine the extent of sexual coercion involved in Pchiru Shelni. It shows that the spectrum of coercion ranges from physical aggression, verbal coercion to manipulation.

In chapter 6, I discuss the impact of sexual coercion in both Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting and how it impacts women and children. I also discuss the negative impacts of both these practices on men themselves.

In Chapter 7, I explore the different forms that Pchiru Shelni takes and discuss issues beyond consensual and non-consensual sex. I argue that Pchiru Shelni involves more than one form of sexual activities. I suggest that courtship, casual sex, transactional sex, pre-marital sex and even extra-marital sex are conducted under the name of Pchiru Shelni. I show that Pchiru Shelni is a pattern of secretive meetings that share some similarities with sexual practices in other parts of the world.

In chapter 8, I explain the social and cultural structures that shape the practice of Pchiru Shelni. The rough mountainous terrain and lack of proper roads in rural Bhutan make it difficult to access rural areas easily and thus requiring men to walk long distance at night in search of women from one village to another and even sometimes from one house to another depending on how far they are scattered from one another. Likewise, the unique architecture of traditional Bhutanese houses enables men to gain easy access into the house through doors and windows. I end the chapter by discussing the influence of the Gross National Happiness (GNH) concept on Bhutanese people's behaviour.

In chapter 9, I focus on the gender inequalities that shape Pchiru Shelni practice. I examine gender inequalities in decision making levels, in the employment sector

and education opportunities and how they affect women's vulnerabilities to domestic and sexual violence and further expand the gap between women and men. The reasons for under reported crimes against women in Bhutan and how they increase women's vulnerabilities are explored. This chapter also discusses the impact of traditional practices and beliefs and how they impact gender relations in Bhutanese society.

In chapter 10, I discuss the impact of development and modernization on the practice of Pchiru Shelni and how they have reshaped Pchiru Shelni according to changes that have taken place over the years. The developments are in the form of introduction of electricity, modern communication facilities, the media and changes in house structures. Based on data analysis, I analyse people's perception of government responses towards this sexual practice. I then examine how the changes in laws have impacted men's attitude towards women and how women are affected by it. The chapter concludes by a discussion on the future of Pchiru Shelni.

In chapter 11, I use the results of this research to make a final analysis of the role of Pchiru Shelni in rural Bhutan and its cultural association used to justify the existence of this sexual behaviour. Furthermore, I speculate on the future of Pchiru Shelni and what people and government must cooperate to address the problems that result out of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. Policy recommendations and further areas of research are identified.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### 2.1 Introduction

The first part of this chapter reviews existing materials on Pchiru Shelni and explains the reasons for lack of literature on the subject of sexualities in Bhutan. The second part outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this research.

### 2.2 A timeline of scholarly work in Bhutan

The absence of scholarly literature on sexualities has been shaped by Bhutanese traditions and its language. How Bhutan was ruled before 1616 is unclear but rulers after 1616 have been people from strict Buddhist background and as a result every aspect of Bhutanese lives has been influenced by religious philosophies. This explains why most of the scholarly work in Bhutan was mostly related to studies about politics, religion and biographies with a lack of literature on gender, sexualities and other social issues.

Until the 1960s, early writings by local scholars in Bhutan were done exclusively in *choekyed*. *Choekyed* literally means the ‘the language of the dharma’ and only traditional scholars such as the lamas<sup>6</sup> and the monks were able to comprehend the meanings of *Choekyed*. The spoken language was *Dzongkha* and continues to be so. *Dzongkha* is translated as ‘language of the fortresses’ and is the national language of Bhutan. The word originated from the language spoken in fortresses that stood on hilltops overlooking the valleys in many districts (Thinley, 2002). The difference between the spoken language and written language made it difficult for common people to understand recorded Bhutanese history and culture. It created a gap between the literate and the illiterate. While the educated had records to fall back on for information, the common people depended on oral tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> Buddhist priests

Until the late 1950s, the old system of education was provided through monastic education and only privileged boys had access to it. The focus of early scholarships was based on Buddhist philosophical teachings, classical scriptures and religious physical and mental disciplines. Individual curricula in monastic education were based on history, medicine, philology and various other subjects (van Driem, 2011). Thus the purposes of monastic education were to preserve culture and religion which after the introduction of co-education in early 1960s has been reduced to spiritual progress and sustaining the state religion, Buddhism (Yangden, 2009). Most of traditional scholarships were recorded during the theocracy years (1651-1907). During this period, Bhutan was ruled by temporary rulers known as *Desi*. It is evident from Bhutan history (known as *Gyalrab*) that these *Desis* were highly learned conservative and deeply religious people and were the traditional Bhutanese scholars. Any theme unrelated to religion and history was considered unimportant by these scholars. Thus, in this deeply religious context, it is not surprising to find that topics of sexuality were absent from discussion. The aforementioned difficulty in accessing and understanding historical documents make a coherent analysis of any reference to gender or sexuality difficult, if not impossible.

The first recorded writings on non-religious matters in a foreign language can be traced back to two Portuguese Jesuits, Fathers Stephen Cacella and John Cabral who visited Bhutan in 1627. Their letters and accounts provided information on the founder of Bhutan who ruled Bhutan from 1616 to 1651 (Aris, 2005). The next account of Bhutan on non-religious matters appeared between 1774 and 1910 in texts provided by missions sent to Bhutan for trade and political purposes by the then British Empire in India (1858-1947). The next phase of writings on Bhutan in English comes from Indian expatriates<sup>7</sup> and foreigners visiting Bhutan in the early 1950s and 1960s before and after the first five year<sup>8</sup> plan (1961-1965) when the first formal schools were established. The formal modern system of education in

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<sup>7</sup>India was a British colony and hence English was used widely. Therefore it is not surprising that many Indians authors write in English.

<sup>8</sup> The first development activities started with support from India.

Bhutan involves a classroom system of teaching with English as the medium of education. Examples of early writings by expatriates include *Politics of Bhutan* (Parashar Parmanand, 1992) and about Bhutan's monarchy *The Raven Crown* (Aris, 2005).

The initial stage of modern education did not equip local people with the capability to do research work in the English language. The most recent source of scholarly literature on Bhutan related topics are found with the Centre for Bhutan Studies whose role is to conduct multi-disciplinary research on Bhutan's economy, history, religion, society, polity, culture and other related themes.

Much of the scholarly works that are found in the Journals held by Centre for Bhutan studies relate to unique Bhutanese customs and culture. Of some relevance to this research are the works on Bhutanese marriage customs and match-making process. In particular are the articles on marriage customs of the *Brokpas* of Merak and Sakteng, a nomadic ethnic group in north-eastern part of Bhutan (Dorji, 2003: 38-52). The customs involve a process of childhood engagement ritual, matchmaking, exchange of gift and ultimately marriage. Dorji (2003) also wrote about *serga mathang* (golden cross-cousin) marriage in Monger located in eastern Bhutan and on another practice known as *ngenzhung*.<sup>9</sup> This marriage practice requires a man to offer three years of labor as bride service before he can officially be declared the husband of the woman.

Social studies are a new academic discipline in Bhutan. The Royal University of Bhutan started its sociology course in Sherubtse College in 2010. Another private college that offers sociology is the Royal Thimphu College which was founded in 2009. Thus, because of this and other cultural and social restrictions and limitations, there was no academic research conducted on Pchiru Shelni. However, two academic works addressing Pchiru Shelni appeared early in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>9</sup> This term is not easily translated into English and the closest approximation to its meaning is 'Betrothed'.



The first mention of Pchiru Shelni in academic writing is found in Barth and Wikan's study<sup>10</sup> of *Situation of Children in Bhutan: An Anthropological Perspective* (2006) where the description of the traditional practice of 'ambiguous courtship' refers to a process where the boy sneaks secretly into a girl's bed and then out quietly again.

The traditional customs entail nightly visits by the boy, who sneaks into the house after the parents have fallen asleep and spends some time there before stealthily leaving again. In the epigrammatic style of one male informant: first you sleep with the girl – then you start talking to her, and may get to know her a little (Barth and Wikan, 2006: 39).

Night hunting in this document was mentioned in relation to early marriage and child birth where it states that school girls in the age group of 15, 16 and 17 are targeted by men and then become young mothers. The impact of this is found to be early teenage pregnancies, school drop outs and increase in single motherhoods. Similar findings have been made in this study as seen in chapter 6.

The second reference to Pchiru Shelni in academic studies appears in Dorji Penjore's (2007) study of the same practice for his thesis for a Master Degree. In this he terms the practice *Bomena* which is a local term for Pchiru Shelni in Zhemgang, Bhutan. Penjore critiques Barth and Wikan's previous study as lacking in-depth understanding of the practice and blames their short term stay in Bhutan for their failure to fully understand the holistic nature of 'Night Hunting'. Penjore positions the practice of *Bomena* as an institution through which marriage partners are sought and contends that the practice of *Bomena* imparts sexual education, provides space for socialization and serves as an alternative to the lack of entertainment facilities in the villages. For him, the benefits of *Bomena* outweigh its

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<sup>10</sup> Unni Wikan and Fredrik Barth are both anthropologists assigned by the UNICEF office in Bhutan to conduct a study on the welfare of children in Bhutan.

negative impacts. Other than relating Pchiru Shelni to courtship practices, Penjore's study does not explore any other sexual or sexually related practice.

Other documents that offer a minimal account of Pchiru Shelni include government reports on health where 'Night Hunting' is linked to sexually transmitted diseases, promiscuity, multiple sexual partners, early sexual experience and widespread extra marital affairs (Wangchuk, 2005). There have been other mentions of Night Hunting by NGOs, UN agencies and the media. The *Situation Analysis of Bhutan report of UNICEF* in 2006 mentions Night Hunting as an indirect way of exploiting women in the name of traditional forms of courtship. The report suggests that Night Hunting was acceptable when it was consensual and other means of communication between the partners was absent but it acknowledged that some men simply imposed themselves upon women. However, in spite of availability of modern means of communication, men are seen to be exploiting the tradition to harass and rape women and girls (Black and Stalker, 2006). The National Commission of Women and Children (NCWC) in their 2007 report regarded Night Hunting as a form of sexual exploitation of women that warrants a separate section in the law and suggested that the practice should be regarded as 'rape'. No other reports seem to be available that document advocacy against sexual crimes except for a petition submitted by a concerned group calling for harsher laws on the disturbingly increasing porn clips that are circulated via the internet (Kuensel, August 15, 2015). However, the government had come up with an advocacy framework for men who have sex with men (MSM) and Transgender people to protect their sexual rights and also to educate them about sexually transmitted diseases particularly AIDS (UNDP, 2013).

The custom of Night Hunting has been debated on online forums in Bhutan since internet was introduced in 1999 with some commentators arguing that the practice should be declared illegal, whereas some others declare that it is a part of traditional culture in which the government has no business interfering. These debates are found in the online forums of *Kuensel* (Bhutanese national paper),

*Bhutan Observer* (Private news agency) and *The Bhutanese*, another private media publication. Outside the media and writings, several tourist guides<sup>11</sup> have mentioned that Night Hunting is an interesting topic to bring up with visitors. The guides told me that depending on who is listening, some visitors are known to express their concerns for women whereas others take a more flippant approach.

Night Hunting issues are occasionally depicted in movies. In the film *Lengo* (2005), a rural woman becomes a 'target' of Night Hunting by a visiting temporary teacher. She eventually has consensual sex but when the teacher leaves her and she finds herself pregnant, she is ostracized by the community and temporarily disowned by her family. Eventually she is united with the teacher but not before she undergoes years of hardship. The film *Gawa* (2012) focuses on the less pleasant side of Night Hunting where the woman is raped in the name of culture and left to deal with her personal trauma.

### **2.3 Pchiru Shelni in oral tradition**

While academic research on Pchiru Shelni is virtually non-existent, the practice does appear in various forms of oral tradition. Oral traditions are important sources for history (Vansina, 1985). The expression of past events in poetry, folklores and songs is one way of recording unwritten scholarship. Bhutanese often use songs and folklores to express accounts of Pchiru Shelni and a song still sung today describes the practice as follows:

*Gola Neshi Machap*

*Dhoma Pani Jinge*

(Sung by the male)

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<sup>11</sup> During my field research I met some tourist guides who asked me about my research. When I mentioned that I am working on Pchiru Shelni, they mentioned about their experience with the tourists and their opinions.

*Dhoma Pani Mengo*  
*Tiru Betam Basho*  
*Lhamchu Throk Throk Maje*  
*Omsa Sheni Joensho*

(Sung by the female)

The above song translates into English as:

Do not bolt the door  
I will give you Areca Nuts and Betel Leaves

(By the male)

I do not need your Areca Nuts and Betel leaves  
But bring money in coins  
Do not make thumping noise with shoes  
It will make noise  
Wear socks and come

(By the female)

The words used in the songs indicate that the song was composed during the time when paper money was not in use<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Although coins were used as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century relating to a period of Zhabdrung's rule<sup>12</sup> between 1640 and 1643, the use of coins increased during the 1950s and new coins were widely in use along with Indian rupees. The exchange rate of Bhutanese coins in 1950 was calculated at 3 Betams equaling to one Indian rupee (Rhodes, 1999:110) and there is strong evidence that areca nuts imported from India were used in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and their use was associated with social status and luxury. The cost of areca nuts during those times was ten times greater than it is today. Areca nut was a valuable gift and was even used as an excuse to take the opportunity to flirt with girls. Offering areca nut also symbolized a wish to continue friendship with a new person (Pommaret, 2003).

The use of modern shoes in the song also establishes the song's time as after the coronation of the first king in 1907. The pictures of the king before the coronation show the King either barefoot or in Bhutanese traditional shoes. The song refers to the use of a modern shoe because it made a thumping noise (*throk throk*). In contrast, traditional Bhutanese shoes were made of a combination of animal hides and clothes and the thickness of the soles was almost the same as the body of the shoe hence rarely making noise. Thus the origin of this song can be traced to sometime after 1907 when *Betam* coins were used and the areca nut was valued.

In the song, the male makes the first move in arranging a meeting at the woman's house and his request that she should not bolt the door indicates his wish for secrecy. The woman seems to agree to the arrangement by asking him not to wear shoes but to come in socks. Her preference for *Betam* over areca nut shows that she values money over areca nuts. There is a hint of prostitution taking place as there is a likelihood of exchange of money and services. She even uses the honorific words that are used to address people of position and social status or in this case somebody whose status may be defined by his wealth. Here the use of honorific words to welcome the man to a *Pchiru Shelni* session can even indicate that either the man has money or even if he is an ordinary man, he is expected to bring some form of gifts for the woman.

Another song whereby the woman reprimands the man for not keeping up the promise in what appears to be consensual *Pchiru Shelni* shows that not all promises are kept. In this song, the woman meets the man next day and sings to him:

*Pchiru sho sa droba me*

*Droba Tsaka matsuba*

This translates as:

I asked you to come at night

You turn up in the morning

By then it is too late

Pchiru Shelni also figures in a popular Bhutanese love story between a wealthy girl and a poverty stricken servant boy in Wangdue district, (the love story depicted in the Bhutanese movie *Damtsi Pangtsog* (1999). The timeline of the event can be traced back to the administrative tenure of Wangdue Dzungpoen<sup>13</sup> and when serfdom was practiced in Bhutan. Serfdom was abolished by the third king in 1958.

#### **2.4 Comparative Pchiru Shelni- like customs in other cultures**

Pchiru Shelni has a pattern of secrecy in meetings but such secretive meetings are not confined to Bhutan. Similar customs are practiced in neighboring Asian countries as well as the rest of the world. For instance, Benett (2002) writes about a secretive meeting between young men and women in Indonesia known as *Pacaran Backstreet* (secret courtship). The practice is known to be so secretive that even close friends and relatives are not aware of the liaisons. Another example is the practice of *tisese* in China. According to Stacy (2009), *tisese* literally means ‘walking back and forth’ referring to the visiting sexual relationship that takes place between men and women in Moso community in China. Shih (2000) describes *tisese* as a relationship where the two partners spend the night together but during day time go back to their respective houses to work. These practices are detailed in chapter 7.

#### **2.5 Summary**

The section above of this chapter explores the practice of Pchiru Shelni through the written and oral history of Bhutan, as well as gives an overview of the few recorded

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<sup>13</sup> District Governor

instances of the practice. It also outlines some academic research done in the early part of the 21st century and shows how the emphasis on traditions, religion and the late introduction of English language in the country is responsible for an absence of scholarly literature on sexualities in Bhutan. Oral tradition has in some ways compensated for the lack of literature on Pchiru Shelni.

## 2.6 Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical approach used in this study is informed by constructionist and feminist perspectives. Constructionism theory assists us with understanding how to be critical of 'taken for granted' knowledge, understand historical and cultural specificity, recognize that knowledge are sustained by social processes and that knowledge and social action go together (Burr, 2003). A constructionist theoretical framework contends that knowledge and 'truth' are not fixed. Instead, it asserts that the way people make sense of 'things' and the meaning they give to the physical world are culturally and historically produced within communities through symbolic and communicative resources; especially language (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Language is more than a medium of truth and meaning, and it is through the ways that language is used to describe the social practices and beliefs of rural Bhutanese men and women that the practice of Pchiru Shelni is explored.

In this study, the practice of Pchiru Shelni itself, its prevalence, workings, impacts and the context in which it takes place is examined. Cultural discourses or meanings given to the practice of Pchiru Shelni are used to investigate communicative events representing many perspectives, representations and notions and may vary from culture to culture. Cultural discourse has been defined as

....a historically transmitted expressive system of communication practices, of acts, events, and styles, which are composed of specific symbols, symbolic forms, norms, and their meanings' (Carbaugh, 2007:169).

For instance, holding hands and kissing in public are acceptable as a symbol of courtship in some western countries. Such behaviour in Bhutanese society however, is deemed inappropriate and is seen as a 'private thing' that should be conducted within the privacy of a home. This represents two perspectives on one action: the



meanings given to Pchiru Shelni by Bhutanese men and women as well as the ways in which it is socially and culturally organized.

Western feminists assume that gender is socially constructed and that power relations between men and women are perpetuated by exaggerating or minimizing gender differences (Tyler et al., 2006:9-10). The reality of what is seen is assumed to be constructed over a period of time shaped through a process of 'social', 'cultural', and 'interpersonal developments' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 15). Therefore, the analysis of gender differences and the power relations is believed to be best achieved by looking at specific socio-cultural and historical context, in this case the analysis of rural Bhutanese culture on sexual customs.

Disagreements among feminists remain on what elements should be included in feminist theory but the general consensus is that a theory is feminist 'if it can be used to challenge a status quo that is disadvantageous to women' (Lindsey, 2010:12). The common principles that feminist theories are founded on are: 1) that women have valuable contribution to make to every aspect of the world, 2) women have been oppressed for so long that they have been unable to achieve their potential, and are powerless to gain recognition because they have been not able to participate fully in society and 3) feminist research should contribute to social transformation as well as critique (Ropers-Huilman, 2003). Feminist assumptions that societal institutions subjugate women and other vulnerable groups and their voices are denied by these institutions (Abbot and Wallace, 2005; Steans, 1998) influence the theoretical framework for the examination of the particular sexual practice Pchiru Shelni and its relationship to gender inequalities in rural Bhutan.

Feminists have used theories to explain how and why women have been oppressed. Of relevance to the study of rural Bhutanese women's status is the argument that society believes women are by nature considered less intellectual and less physically capable than men, a belief examined in chapter nine. Another feminist theory is that 'female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal

constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world' and that emphasizing political and legal reforms are a means to ensure gender equality (Tong, 2009:2).

Western feminist theorists believe that patriarchal society is the root of all inequalities. Controlling and abusing women's sexuality is one means of conforming to patriarchal culture (Fergusan et al, 1984:108). Men's privileged positions of being able to hold important positions in institutions that control society gives them the advantage of being able to construct female sexuality and control sexual activity. This patriarchal state is the result of historical separation of the public from the private sphere, 'with women being located in later whilst men would be governors of the public as well as the patriarchal family' (Hansen, 2010: 21). Through this institutional power, men are able to enact cultural laws and policies that can regulate the behavior of women and children in public as well as private lives, a situation visible throughout this research.

Feminists believe that if women are provided equal access to resources, the level of gender inequalities can be reduced. For instance, True (2010) argued that women's access to productive resources such as property, employment and education is likely to reduce the extent of gender based violence and abuse against women.

This thesis uses feminist theoretical frameworks to suggest that not only gender but also sexuality is socially constructed. Feminists reject biologically deterministic approaches, arguing instead that sexual behaviour like any other behaviour is shaped by social norms and rules and that individuals can control their impulses to conform to existing rules (Martin, 1995:29). Thus cultures and societies are believed to organize sexual customs 'into approved, permitted, and tabooed patterns that are internalized by individuals and that meanings of sexual behaviour vary over time' leading to socially shaped multiple meanings of sexuality (Lorber, 1994:56). For instance, while sexual acts within heterosexual marriages are supported in many cultures, social norms often stigmatize pre-marital and sexual behaviours

outside marriage. Some social norms tend to be lenient and are likely to be accepted as long as the relationship is carried out in secret. For example, the customary practice of courtship in Indonesia known as *Midang* is carried out in secret but people knew of its existence and accepted it (see chapter 7 under the section 'Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting as a pattern of secretive meeting). However, every aspect of sexuality is gendered, reflects culture's view of nature and is permeated with power (Lorber, 1994).

Feminist theory argues that the social construction of sexuality intersects with gender inequalities. The theory suggests that when sexuality is socially constructed in favour of men, men are able to exert sexual dominance over women resulting in unequal economic and occupational power. Thus, control over women's sexuality is used as a means to increase women's dependence on men economically, socially and thereby politically weakening women's potential for social equality (Martin, 1995; LeMomcheck, 1997). Women on the other hand are fearful of challenging their rights and confronting the sexual dominance of men thereby internalizing their own shortcomings (Chaudhuri et al., 2014). This study therefore uses feminist perspectives to examine the extent of men's control over women's sexuality in rural Bhutan and whether this control is used to coerce women to participate in the non-consensual sexual practice of Pchiru Shelni.

This thesis embodies the feminist argument that research should not only investigate but must also redress these gender inequalities. Feminist theory argues that in order to generate new ideas, existing ideas should be examined in detail and the findings should be actively disseminated in order to ensure maximum benefit. It also posits that in order to capitalize from new ideas, it is important to involve people from all walks of life who are interested and are likely to make use of the ideas to empower women. By seeking active participation in the distribution of new research findings, social changes to benefit women are possible (Bouta et al., 2004). Applying this idea, this research attempts to encourage a more critical understanding of Pchiru Shelni. This is one of the major reasons for conducting this

research: that is, to investigate whether or not if Pchiru Shelni is an exploitative sexual practice and a form of sexual violence against women. The outcome of this research will be made available to relevant agencies in Bhutan so that policies to benefit women can be initiated (Hekman, 1997). The findings will involve contribution from various actors; those who experienced Pchiru Shelni as well as people who are in a position to use the knowledge from this study to empower women.

This research uses feminist perspectives to open up discursive spaces in which Bhutanese women and men can express their personal history and experiences. For this purpose, personal stories of the participants' sexual experiences which are narrated within the context of Bhutanese culture are used. Their experiences describe the power relations that men and women share in rural Bhutan (Flax, 1987: 628-629). The analysis of the interview data will explain how discourses are interpreted, how participants are affected, what they think and how they act upon their own sexualities.

Chapter 3 outlines and discusses the methodologies employed in understanding Pchiru Shelni and the epistemologies used to analyse the interview data.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the methodology used in this study. It explores the methods and epistemologies that informed the process of this research. This is an empirical study focused on the analysis of a sexual customs in rural Bhutan where this practice takes place<sup>14</sup>.

#### **3.2 Overview of the Research Design**

The theoretical approaches which guided the progress of this research methodology as explained in the preceding chapter are social constructionism and feminist perspectives. Social constructionism, according to Lock and Strong (2010:6) is “concerned with meaning and understanding as the central feature of human activities”. It is concerned with how languages, human behaviors and social interaction convey their meanings and how meanings are relevant to particular specific times (Lock and Strong, 2010:6-7).

The use of social constructionist theory for this research is strongly influenced by the approach of Burr (2003). According to Burr, a critical stance is needed to examine ‘taken-for-granted’ knowledge because it challenges the ‘face value’ of existing information, and enables the understanding of cultural and historical relativity. It also recognizes that knowledge is sustained by social processes, and that actions and knowledge are interdependent. Following Burr, I adopt a critical stance towards taken for granted knowledge in that the face value of existing information will be examined, understand cultural and historical relativity, acknowledge that knowledge is sustained by social processes, and recognize that actions and knowledge go together.

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<sup>14</sup> This thesis is written in the third person as much as possible in keeping with academic convention. However, because the methodology for data collection involved direct input and participation from the researcher (me), for some sections of this chapter, and for purposes of clarity and authenticity, the use of the first-person ‘I’ has been used.

Feminist perspectives assume that 'personal is political' in that domination and subordination of women are pervaded with social and domestic life (Rosenblum, 2002:152). The phrase that 'personal is political' is believed to be related to women's personal and day to day activities that has political meaning whether intended or not. This means that certain aspects of women's lives that had been seen purely as 'personal' such as house work, sex, and relationships are shaped by broader social contexts of patriarchy and oppression of women. This principle of 'personal is political' was seen as a foundation for 'feminist therapy'<sup>15</sup> and qualitative methodologies have been adopted by feminists precisely because they permit access to 'personal' experience, the 'political' implications of which can be drawn out through the research (Kitzinger, 1996). The 'personal is political' slogan is a means to convey to women that their silent sufferings are in fact consequences of widespread sexism. Many rural women in Bhutan are victims of sexual coercion and suffer in silence as a result of sexist views on women which are discussed in chapter 5. Therefore, it is important to listen to the participants' narrations to understand their personal experiences of sexual behavior in rural Bhutan which in turn establish meanings as to how Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are perceived.

Qualitative methods such as oral narrations, experience narrations and in depth interviews enable meanings, experiences and discourses which shape people's lives to be understood. The importance of oral narrations and in-depth interviewing in qualitative studies is explained in detail later in this chapter. The open-ended interviewing method in qualitative study is better suited to provide the participants the opportunity to tell their life experiences and how their life styles are reflected in society. It also provides the participants with a certain degree of control of what they choose to say (Corbin and Morse, 2003:339). Qualitative methods conform to social constructionism and feminist perspectives because

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<sup>15</sup> Feminist therapy acknowledges that sex roles, female socialisation, and women's minority status in a patriarchal society are sources of psychological difficulties' and that mental health improvement can be made through structural changes to society (Israeli and Santor, 2000: 234-235).

They give 'priority to actors' own subjective experience and emphasize the emotional aspects of social life grounded in concrete, daily experiences. For them, data must be qualitative in order to reveal these aspects' (Sprague and Zimmermam, 1993:255).

### **3.3 Rationale for choosing qualitative methods**

This project makes use of qualitative methods of research. The reasons are multifold. Firstly, Pchiru Shelni/Night Hunting is a topic about which very little is known. Qualitative methods were chosen because it allows the research participants to take a dominant role in guiding the study especially where the topic is a new area of research and there is not much literature on the topic (Padgett, 1998: 7).

Secondly, qualitative method was chosen because Pchiru Shelni is a topic of sensitivity and emotional depth. For many sensitive topics, the use of standardized, closed-ended interview is inappropriate and insensitive (Padget, 1998:8).

Thirdly, it is imperative to capture the 'lived experiences' of participants who experience Pchiru Shelni and create meanings from their experiences. Qualitative methods help in explaining a participant's point of view rather than seeking interpretation of an 'objective outsider' (Padget, 1998:8).

Fourthly, qualitative methods 'gets-inside' the actual practice of Pchiru Shelni and get the details of what happens during the practice of Pchiru Shelni. Qualitative methods are useful in evaluating situations, enabling an understanding of what takes place and through the analysis clarifies what can be done about it (Padgett, 1998:9).

There are other advantages of using qualitative methods in social studies. Sarantakos (2005) suggests that qualitative methods work on the assumptions that

realities are socially constructed and unpredictable factors are often complex and difficult to measure (Sarantakos, 2005:37). Qualitative research also assumes that:

Individuals have an active role in the construction of social reality and that research methods that can capture this process of social construction are required. The ontological stance of constructivism asserts that social entities are not pre-given but that human beings attach meaning to their social reality and that as a result human action should be considered meaningful (Boeije, 2010:6).

Because qualitative methodologies are not bound by strict formats such as survey questionnaires, this method enable research participants to raise issues important to them. This is particularly useful in new areas of research.

Qualitative methodologies are exploratory, flexible and help us understand perceptions and meanings of social behavior. The study of Pchiru Shelni is also exploratory rather than confirmatory and this study will try to determine if, and how much sexual coercion is involved. Qualitative method is used extensively to explore social meanings within social science research (Ritchie, 2003:25). This method allowed the interviewer and the participants to be guided by an overarching framework: that of sexual behavior in Bhutan.

There are some questions that can be answered only through the use of qualitative methods. For instance, quantitative methodology does not allow analysis of certain kinds of behavior. Statistically based quantitative methods make it impossible to obtain an in-depth understanding of issues. Even though quantitative method can be used as a complementary method in studying Pchiru Shelni, the lack of data and time constraint to do a larger area of survey makes it difficult to apply a quantitative method. Quantitative measurements would be ambiguous in the sense that the extent of sexual coercion involved in Pchiru Shelni is unknown (Stebbins, 2001).



Qualitative research allows the researcher to pick up information that otherwise could be missed by any other method (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: xv). Qualitative methods provide a means of obtaining unquantifiable realities about the 'lived experiences' of people's everyday lives. As a result, qualitative methods facilitate sharing the understandings and perceptions of others and explore how people structure and give meaning to Pchiru Shelni (Berg, 2001:7). Conforming to these arguments, the study of Pchiru Shelni is a social issue and is concerned with the sexual behavior in rural Bhutan. By talking to participants, meanings of Pchiru Shelni practice can be interpreted based on the understanding of what the actual participants think and feel about this sexual behavior. As such, qualitative research offers an 'approach that integrates and places important value on complete understandings, and how people (the social aspect of our discipline) understand, experience and operate within milieus that are dynamic, and social in their foundation and structure' (Tewksbury, 2009: 39)

The semi-structured method of interviewing enabled approach which explored. I was in a position to explore issues the participants might raise and allowed for additional questions. This method was also very suitable for this study because semi-structured interviews allow the participants to talk at length and provided a normal relaxed atmosphere where sensitive topics can be explored in a way that the participants can control.

Qualitative methods are better in contributing to bodies of knowledge in terms of meanings, traits and defining characteristics of people's interaction and cultural settings and experiences. Thus the knowledge gained through qualitative investigation has more information, is richer and offers better understandings compared to quantitative methods (Tewksbury, 2009: 38-39). Qualitative method of analysis will be useful in helping to understand people's interpretation of Pchiru Shelni, the changes in people's perception about Pchiru Shelni over the years and develop ideas about what the data could mean. Under this approach, three sub-methods are used: 1) in depth interviewing, 2) textual analysis and 3) participant

observation. The following explanation provides a clearer picture of the qualitative methods used to gather information during the field work.

1. **In depth Interviewing:** This involved talking to three groups of people, rural participants, rural older people for oral narration and key informants from urban area.
2. **Textual Analysis:** This method involved analysis of texts including media, songs, poems and proverbs.
3. **Participant Observation:** Here, men and women are observed as they work and interact with each other in their daily lives in two rural areas.

### *3.3.1 In depth interviewing*

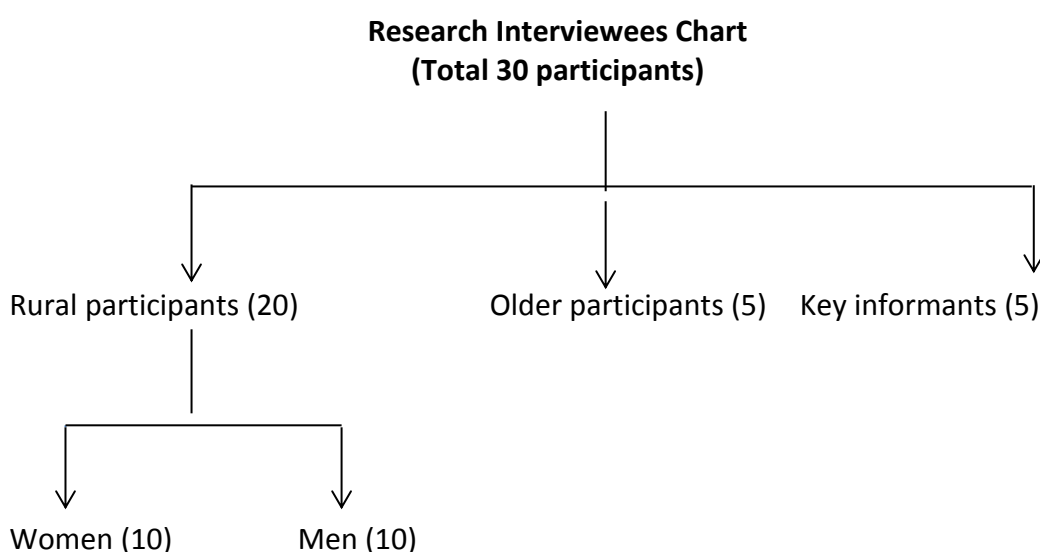
This method is used to gain access and understand events that could not be directly observed by the researcher (Minichiello et al., 1995:70-71). This uncovers the history of Pchiru Shelni through oral narration and gains access to people's overall broad views of situation, people and the environment they live in. Using semi-structured questionnaire, same questions were asked to all the participants, men and women for both urban and rural areas. Depending on the gender, slight variations were made to the questions. For example, to date, the men are anecdotally regarded by general Bhutanese as the night hunters and the women as victims. In this case, a same question like 'How do you figure out which house to choose for Pchiru Shelni/Night Hunting' for both men and women was inappropriate since the men were seen as the active participant with agency or choice, whereas the women are regarded as unwilling participants without agency or choice. Therefore, the perspectives of men and women would be different.

In depth interviewing allowed the participants to open up more and even allowed elaboration as well as make way for follow up questions. This led to more in depth

and comprehensive information. Personal experiences narrated by the interviewees<sup>16</sup> are included in this study to analyze the variables related to Pchiru Shelni in order to add knowledge to what is already known. This method of interviewing also allow for the participant voices to be ‘heard’ and for the wider community to understand about Pchiru Shelni and its consequences from a ‘first-hand’ point of view.

Semi-structured qualitative method of interviewing is flexible and allows for better analysis of the contents of the interviews. This method provides a way to reflect on the implications of the knowledge produced through the interviews, study reality in its own terms and its manifestations in everyday life and to conduct un-standardized interviews without setting external limits to the participants (Sarantakos, 2005:270). This one to one interview helped me uncover the thinking of each participant without having to be judged by group dynamics as it happens in focus group interviews. A personal rapport is encouraged and enabled by this method of interviewing so that intimate topics can be discussed in confidentiality.

The interviews were conducted with three groups of people: (a) rural participants, (b) rural older people providing oral narratives, and (c) urban key informants.




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<sup>16</sup> Participants are kept anonymous by assigning code names and cannot be identified.

**a: Rural interviews:** The first group of participants involved talking to rural people. A total of twenty participants, ten women and ten men were interviewed. While I have not categorized the participants' individual marital status, I can confirm their backgrounds range from never married, divorced, separated and widowed<sup>17</sup>. The Face –to-face in depth semi-structured interviews with participants allowed for the experiences of participants and how they related their experiences to their everyday and traditional practices to be told. This method was used to access the knowledge of meanings and interpretations that participants give their everyday lives. The interviews explored cultural understandings and meanings of Pchiru Shelni through recounting their experiences. The interview sample included participants within the age group of 18 and 60.

The interviews explored rural people's perceptions and their Pchiru Shelni experiences and their other sexual behaviors in order to understand the scenario in terms of Pchiru Shelni versus Night Hunting. The men and women's version were useful in analyzing the experiences of both men and women and their perceptions about Pchiru Shelni. Older people were also interviewed to gather as much history about Pchiru Shelni as possible. This involved talking to participants to find out why the practice was and is acceptable in most parts and their opinion on why they thought it is not acceptable in some parts like the south.

**b: Oral narrative interviews:** The second group of interview took place with rural older people for the purpose of noting narrations on their past experience and what they know. Their ages are between 60 and 90. Oral traditions during the interview form an important part of the data. According to Kargbo (2008: 442):

Oral traditions, by definition, are recollections and living memories

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<sup>17</sup> Since women without men in their lives were considered 'single women' within the context of Pchiru Shelni, it is unlikely that the status of being never married, divorced, separated or widowed made women any less vulnerable to the practice of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. However, being Buddhists, it is likely that widows have a longer period of respite from sexual harassment either for fear of social ridicule or on compassionate grounds.

of the past that have been orally transmitted, recounted and shared throughout culture. Oral traditions include not only oral history but also poems, myths, riddles, songs, stories, proverbs and legends to name but a few.

Vocal transmission of information from generation to generation is carried out through oral tradition in the form of songs and storytelling. Even after writings were introduced, oral traditions remained a strong source of information for the common people in rural Bhutan. This is because modern education started in 1964 and during earlier period's education was imparted through the monastic system of education exclusively provided for boys. Many of the old aged people in Bhutan are illiterate where cultural and social traditions were passed down through oral recitation and practice for generations. In the absence of written, oral traditions play an important role in providing information on the past and the evolvement of culture. Bhutan has a rich tradition of songs, poems, proverbs and folk stories that describe Bhutanese culture, courtship, gender difference, relationship between the rich and the poor, high caste and low caste, the governance system and people's way of life.

Oral tradition complements written literature, can point the way to non-documentary sources such as songs, poetry, narratives, folklore, myths and fables and can be distinguished from material culture. The term 'oral' implies that the tradition in question is in some way verbal, non-written and in some way belonging to the common people, fundamental and valued transmissions made over generations through individual actions (Finnegan, 1992:7). As such, the lack of written materials on Pchiru Shelni can be compensated for by talking to older people in the villages which formed a valuable resource for collecting data.

Various songs, poems and proverbs that are related to Pchiru Shelni and relation between men and women are used to throw light on the practice of Pchiru Shelni and the wider social values and traditional beliefs that shape gender relations in

rural Bhutan. The songs, poems and proverbs are drawn from two sources: one from my own knowledge that I learned during my time in the village and the other from the participant observation period. The lack of literature on Pchiru Shelni is in some ways compensated through these means.

**c: Key informant interviews:** The third group of people interviewed are from the urban area. This involved talking to key informants who held responsible positions in relevant institutional and legal contexts. The key informants were asked about the regions they came from but were not asked specific districts since it was decided that it was not important as they actually did not participate in Pchiru Shelni. Although all the key informants work in urban places, they have grown up in their villages and have completed their High Schools in their home towns. Even after moving to urban places, they still maintain close relationship with their paternal home and visit their villages regularly for religious rituals and social obligations. In the process they meet their parents and siblings. Thus their knowledge about rural places is likely to be as valid as knowledge among rural people themselves. Key informants as a result of their position in society and personal skills are able to provide deeper insight, better information because of their ability to observe development in culture and people's behavior around them and are thus an expert source of information (Marshall, 1996A). Key informants also serve as a check on information received from other informants. A key informant can be a person who plays an important role in the social setting being studied (Homburg, 2012). Since the key informants came from different parts of the country, the five key informants were sufficient to represent the whole of the country.

Key informants hold first-hand knowledge about Pchiru Shelni practices in Bhutan and they are able to provide insight into the problems created by Pchiru Shelni. Talking to key informants gives a different perspective to that from rural participants and allows to establish whether these sexual practices were 'held' in the rural areas because of rural life, or whether these practices continued to be

supported across the Bhutanese culture, regardless of where people lived or what educational status they held.

Key informants provide expert source of information and have been used in wide range of studies that include anthropology, sociology, psychology and increasingly used even in the field of medical research. One other advantage key informant technique offer is the quality of data that can be collected in a limited period of time. The approach is also potentially useful as an isolated research technique as well as in combination with other qualitative methods (Marshall, 1996A).

Use of key informants involves interviewing knowledgeable participants as an important method of investigation. Though not exclusively but it is mostly associated with qualitative method of research. Key informants can extend the investigator's reach in areas where the researcher cannot be a direct observer as well as throw light on the meanings that the researcher does not understand because of the informant's understanding of the subject to be studied.

Based on the position, responsibilities and the relevance of the organization, five people were requested to be key informants. All the key informants are from the urban area and held responsible positions in organizations related to looking after the welfare of women and children such as RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Educate Women), NCWC (National Commission for Women and Children) and GNHC (Gross National Happiness Commission).

RENEW, a non-governmental organization was founded in 2004 to empower women and girls in Bhutan, especially the victims and survivors of domestic violence. As an NGO, it is

actively involved in preventing domestic violence and helping the abused get back to the communities as independent and productive members of the society. In addition, services such as counseling, temporary shelter, legal

assistance, and skills development trainings are provided to the victims of the domestic violence' (GNHC, 2011:29)

NCWC was 'established in 2004 as an agency to monitor and coordinate all policies and activities related to protection and promotion of rights of women and children' (GNHC, 2011:27).

GNHC is the overall Planning Commission in Bhutan and is responsible for ensuring that GNH (Gross national Happiness) is mainstreamed into the planning, policy making and implementation process by evaluating their relevance to the GNH framework of:

- developing a dynamic economy as the foundation for a vibrant democracy;
- Harmonious Living – in harmony with tradition and nature;
- Effective and good governance; and
- Our people: investing in the nation's greatest asset' (GNHC, 2013)

The reason for approaching GNHC to request for a key informant is that GNHC is responsible for developing plans and policies for the country and gender mainstreaming under NCWC is one of the objectives of GNHC to ensure that gender equality policies are carried out.

Some key informants from a further two organizations were interviewed, however, at their request, and for the purposes of preserving their anonymity; the names of these organizations are not identified.

While citing the participants in this thesis, the participants will be denoted by coded initials followed by the date of interview, for example, (XX, 1/1/00). The same procedure will be followed throughout this thesis.

In addition to the above means, this project adopted two other qualitative and social research methods: textual analysis and observations.



### 3.3.2 *Textual analysis*

Textual analysis is a method of gathering data by understanding how members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of their identity and how they perceive the world they live in. Textual analysis makes the most likely interpretation by taking an educated guess at the text such as 'films, television programs, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti, and so on' (McKee, 2003:1). The languages that texts convey constitute social relations and the strength of textual analysis is the way it connects media content to wider cultural discourses of a given time (Fursich, 2009). Social media has a proven role in influencing the way people relate to each other, share ideas and engage with information (Goulding, 2011:11) and ideas are shaped by what people express in the media.

According to Silverstone (1999), media represents the ordinary and the continuous and that media is 'ubiquitous, that they are daily, that they are an essential dimension of contemporary experience' (Silverstone, 1999:1). Silverstone also argues that media is central to everyday lives and it is essential to 'study them as social, cultural as well as political and economic dimensions of the modern world' and media can be thought of as a language that provides tests and representation for interpretation (Silverstone, 1999:2-3). Media is a part of important communication tool. Individual ideas and opinions are shaped and informed through the use of media and is thus a very effective medium. Media also act as a mouth piece to inform a larger audience about the social problems of a particular area. In Bhutan, newspapers and online forums allow for the discussions about Night Hunting by the literate Bhutanese. Some of the online forum discussions take place in Kuenselonline, Bhutanese national paper website, and other commercial media such as Bhutan Today, Bhutan Observer, the Journalist and Business Bhutan and on social media like Facebook. The research for this thesis has taken the opinions of the writers on these forums to understand how Night Hunting is perceived by the urban and the educated Bhutanese.

Data was collected from any published articles such as the newspapers, government reports and any discussion on Night Hunting on online forums<sup>18</sup>. This was done using the Google search engine with the key word 'Night Hunting' which was posted after January 2000. This is because internet was introduced only in June 1999 and many newspapers were established only after 2006. Kuensel, Bhutan's first newspaper founded in 1967, did not archive any news articles prior to 2000, so only stories that were able to access via their archive after 2000 were used.

### *3.3.3 Participant observation*

In order to learn about the activities of people under study in the natural setting, I used participant observation method for this purpose. I observed, listened to normal conversations, took notes and engaged in informal exchange of views. Participation observation is defined as a 'research in which the researcher observes and to some degree participates in the action being studied, as the action is happening' (Lichterman, 2002: 120). The process of participant observation is known to demonstrate a commitment to studying everyday events in the way people experience and is understood by the participants. Participant Observation is conducted in the context of peoples everyday lives, ensures authenticity, and an understanding of how people experience the reality of their environment (Sarantakos, 2005: 231). Participant observation establishes rapport within a community and enables the researchers to blend with the locals so that the researcher is able to observe the members in their natural setting without being personally involved. This un-obstructive way of collecting data also enables the researcher to understand what is going on and be able to write about it (Kawulich, 2005).

Participant observation is useful in many ways. It provides a way of checking

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<sup>18</sup> Kuenselonline, Bhutan Observer online, Bhutan times online are all Bhutanese media that print newspapers. All these newspapers are printed in hardcopy as well as posted online but have provision online for discussion on various topics that includes Night Hunting.

nonverbal expression of feelings, interacting with the community, observing time between various activities. It allows researchers to observe events that may seem impolite to informants or unwilling to share, and allows for the accuracy of the data gathered to be validated by the participants. Participant observations can also be used to validate a study as the observations provide the researcher with a better understanding of the context and subject of the study (Kawulich, 2005).

As a part of participant observation requirements, I resided in two different villages for one and half month and studied the way of village life and talked to the people about Pchiru Shelni and how romances are conducted. Even though I have been born and brought up in the village, it has been ages since I spend time in the village for durations exceeding a week. This stay allowed me to record the changes that have taken place since the last time I was in the village and current situations. As Herdt (1999:104) argued, my duty as a researcher would be to observe this unique sexual culture and not change it. Since the taboo associated with sexual behavior made it difficult to discuss openly with people involved in the activity, there was less interaction on sexual issues with the people I observed. I also drew from informal conversations that took place in the community. One advantage of that was that I was able to study unexpected behavior and gain unknown knowledge at the same time making me adaptable to changed circumstances (Palsson, 2007: 150).

Three weeks of September month of 2012 in one village and three weeks of October 2012 in another village were spent interviewing and observing the behaviors of male and female at work in rural Bhutan and in their daily lives. This included observing them at work places at the farms and watched men and women interact with each other. Conversations were observed as well as men and women physically being playful with each other. Sometimes, I was a silent spectator in a corner when women and men gossiped about extra marital affairs and talked about sexual experiences. All these observations were done from a distance and I was not intimately involved in any of their daily activities. The observations I made were

noted down as soon as I was alone.

### **3.4 Verbal consent**

The use of verbal consent is supported in many in researches in other parts of the world under certain circumstances. For instance, the University of California (2011) allows use of verbal consent when all important information of the research subject is provided to the potential participant, a written information sheet is provided, the potential participant has read the information, the participant is given a reasonable time to make decision as to whether to participate or not and any queries by the participant is answered and a verbal consent is obtained.

Even in other parts of developing countries, there have been instances where the use of verbal consent was justified. For example, Creed-Kanashiro et al. (2005) argue that written and signed consent form are not appropriate for some developing countries because some people in local communities are naive and are afraid of being taken advantage of. For instance, Creed-Kanashiro et al (Ibid) cites the examples of nutritional research work conducted in communities in the Highlands of Peru using verbal consent. This was because in the past some of the people in this community lost their land when they signed papers they could not read.

A third party witness is recommended by widely referred research guidelines (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2002) for verbal consent. However, for this thesis topic is sensitive in nature, and a third party might violate the confidentiality of the participant's identity. Therefore, verbal consent took place between the participant and the researcher at the same time respecting the participant's wish to continue with the interview or withdraw from the interview.

Nuffield Council of Bioethics (2011) provides widely referred guides to obtaining consent. The Council recommends that in developing countries, an independent witness be available to observe the process of providing information regarding the

research and obtaining verbal consent when illiterate participants are involved. However, involving an independent witness was not appropriate for this research because ensuring anonymity of the participant is essential because of the sensitive nature of the research topic. Therefore, the verbal consent process with the semi-literate and illiterate participants in the rural areas was processed in a one-to-one context without the involvement of any witnesses.

The strategy therefore was using the information sheet as a guide to obtaining verbal consent. The process of informing participants about the information sheet and consent was carried out at the beginning and end of interview and where required I returned to the consent process during the course of the interviews. The language used during the interviews was in Dzongkha, Bhutanese national language which is also my mother tongue. The notes were later translated into English personally by the researcher.

Verbal consent of all the participants was fundamental to the integrity of this research, because of several reasons. Firstly, the majority of rural people in Bhutan are illiterate (GNHC, 2005) and it was assumed the rural participants would be either illiterate or semi illiterate. Illiterate people in Bhutan normally use their thumbprint in place of signatures. However, it could be argued that signing a paper they are not able to read would be seen as dishonest research practice. Moreover, in Bhutan, official forms and papers needing signatures are associated with officialdom and regarded with skepticism by participants (Research Administration, 2012). Thus, there are no written consents from participants in the general interviews.

Many research works have been conducted by the Centre for Bhutan studies on different subjects but not one of the publications discuss the issue of protocols regarding obtaining either verbal or written consent. It can thus be assumed that obtaining participants verbal consent itself in this research is a step forward in establishing proper protocols of research in Bhutan. It is important to clarify that

information regarding consent and about the purpose of the research was conveyed verbally by the researcher (me) as it was read out to them in each interview instance.

The older participants who were interviewed for the purpose of oral narration also waived their right to anonymity. This was based on their statement that they are old people and are no longer involved in any of the Pchiru Shelni practices and thus has nothing to hide. They also stated that their stories are based on past experiences and stories they have heard from their ancestors will not have personal harm to anyone either directly or indirectly.

Verbal consent was also obtained from the key informants even though they were able to sign a written consent. This is because they felt that the research subject was not confidential in nature to them because they are not actual participants and they only saw themselves as providing their professional opinion by virtue of being in a responsible position, in an organization that deal with women and children's welfare. It was explained to the key informants that a written consent was preferred, however, they all read and understood the information sheet provided to them and in all instances gave verbal consent.

### **3.5 Note taking**

This project relies on the use of note taking to record information from the participation in this research. This methodology is appropriate for this thesis: First, there are important reasons why electronic recording of interviews is not appropriate in the Bhutanese context, and why note-taking is an appropriate substitute. Note taking is an appropriate substitute for recording when a participant refuses to allow audio-recording. This could be due to suspicions about who may have access to the recording or what may be done with it (King and Horrock, 2010).

The objective of having a recorded interview is to have a data that can be analyzed

to illustrate the key themes and theatrical frame of the research topic (Travers, 1996). Full concentration can be given to the interview without having to worry about missed notes. However, sound recording is seen to make the interviewees uncomfortable and may end up denying permission and it is found that more revealing data are collected after the recording is switched off or in the absence of a sound recorder even by some people of the developed world like United Kingdom (Travers, 1996).

Second, existing research in Bhutan relies on using these practices. One of the major interviews conducted by the government of Bhutan on a wide scale was the first official documentation of census in Bhutan in 2005. The interview throughout the country was conducted without the aid of recorders and was successfully completed. In addition to collecting demographic information, questions included asking people about their opinion on the government's concept of development, Gross National Happiness, health issues and economic conditions of the people.

Third, note-taking is justified in the academic literature as legitimate and ethical practices in certain contexts. In many parts of rural Bhutan, people who have never seen a recorder regard the recorder as a foreign object. This is because many parts of rural Bhutan do not have electricity and developed infrastructure such as roads. The absence of electricity also meant absence of use of electronics. Past attempts by researchers to interview rural people using recorders resulted in mistrust and data that was compromised. For example, Dorji Penjore (2007) discusses the discomfort of people he interviewed in his village in rural Bhutan with recorders. He had to resort to note taking instead. Therefore, in this research, all data was collected in the form of written notes. There is no doubt that, despite the lengthy process it entailed, note-taking was a robust and empirically sound method of collecting data for this thesis.

One disadvantage of note taking is that it when the participant speaks non-stop and does not want to be interrupted, it is very difficult to catch up with recording the

story in writing. While listening to the oral narrations and taking notes, it was difficult to keep up with the speed of the narration from older rural participants. Therefore, half of the oral narration was in notes and half in recording with the permission from the narrators. None of the confidential participants were digitally recorded.

### **3.6 Interview questions**

The interviews questions were semi-structured (see Appendix E). In other words, they were based on a pre-existing schedule of questions formulated from my knowledge of people's behavior and existing gender policies in Bhutan, but also flexible enough to follow particular topics and lines of enquiry as they emerged during each interview. This was done to create a relaxed atmosphere and initiate a non-threatening conversation. Same questions for both sexes were used for the interviews with only slight gender variations. This allowed for better analysis of the data. The questions were ordered using a funneling approach which, according to Minichiello et al. (1995) is a process in which the direction of the flow of questioning is controlled by the interviewer. In this way, the interview begins with questions of a general and broad nature and progresses throughout the interview to more specific questions.

### **3.7 Location of the study**

According to the National Statistic Bureau (NSB, 2010B), there are 250 *gewogs* (sub-district levels) in Bhutan and each *gewog* has several villages. The number of villages has not been officially recorded but unconfirmed reports states there are more than 1500 villages in Bhutan. Because of time constraints, only two rural areas were chosen. The places were chosen based on anecdotal reports that Pchiru Shelni and Night Huntings are practised widely in these areas. Even though the practices were known to exist in many places, the locations were chosen for their



convenience, availability and willingness of the participants to be part of this research. Another reason was also the good network of people already known to the researcher. Because the researcher was well-known to them, a comfortable interview environment was enabled.

### **3.8 Participant selection**

#### *3.8.1 Sampling*

According to Marshall (1996B), qualitative studies use three approaches of sampling: 1) convenience sample, 2) theoretical sample and 3) judgment sample. 1) Convenience sample refers to the selection of the most accessible subjects and is believed to be the least rigorous. 2) Theoretical sampling is normally theory driven to a greater or lesser extent and necessitates interpreting theories from emerging data and the selection of new sampling for further examination and elaboration of theory. Theoretical sampling refers to the process of choosing new sites to compare with studies that have already been done on a same topic. Because there has never been any detailed research on Pchiru Shelni, there is no comparison to be made. 3) Judgment sampling on the other hand is the most commonly used sampling technique where the researcher uses the most productive sample to answer research questions. The researcher here is assumed to have some knowledge on the research topic and the population to be studied. This fits in with the methodology for this thesis as the practice of Pchiru Shelni is familiar to the researcher (Marshall, 1996B: 523).

Based on the researcher's knowledge about the research topic, this study uses judgment sampling method also known as purposive sampling. This is because this method requires the researcher's practical knowledge about the research area and existing literature from which a framework of variables that might influence individual contribution can be developed. The method is also a more intellectual

strategy compared to other simple demographic strategies used for epidemiological studies (Marshall, 1996B:523). The method is purposive because the participants are selected based on their ability to generate meaningful data for this study.

### *3.8.2 Selection for interviews*

The Bhutanese community is relatively small, and community networks are close and easily accessible. Based on my knowledge about the area and people, I asked the opinion of people I know and relatives as to who would be the best candidates for the purpose of general interviews. Listening to informal talk i.e. 'gossip' about people was another way of identifying a potential participant. Given my knowledge about social behavior in Bhutan, the best way was to approach potential participants directly and explain the purpose of wanting their participation once they were identified. I had to explain about the manner this research was to be conducted, explain about the nature of research and what I intended to achieve at the end of the work.

I had to allow some flexibility in terms of the selection process. For example, it was initially believed that participants between the age group of 18 to 35 were the most appropriate for interviewing because they were perceived by the researcher to be the most sexually active. However, as the research began, it became apparent that some men in their 50s were sexually active and also participated in the practice of Pchiru Shelni. Thus the confidential participants' ages were broadened from 18 to 35 to 18 to 60.

The selection process involved explaining to potential participants for general interviews the concept of confidentiality, how their contribution was to be analyzed, discussing their anonymity and compensation for their time. The confidentiality process was explained to all the participants, however for reasons explained elsewhere in this chapter; anonymity was maintained only for rural participants who were interviewed based on their experiences in Pchiru Shelni and

Night Hunting and three key informants. The places of interview were left to the discretion of the participants, whether it should take place at their house, privately outside the house or would they be willing to be interviewed at another place that offered a good interview. Alternative interview suggestions were a park, home for urban participants and in case of rural areas at their farm, house or working place.

Interviewing urban people was easier than rural participants as they were able to read the information sheet provided. However, when preparing to interview rural people, illiteracy made it more difficult, so the information sheet was verbally read to them. It is important to note that for this process to be successful, a comfortable level of rapport with the participants was needed before the interview. Establishing rapport was important because of the sensitive nature of the subject involved. According to McCosker et al., (2001) and Fontes (2004), 'sensitive' research topic is shaped by both context and cultural norms and values and that there are three issues that create a concern about sensitivity. The first of these issues are those considered private, stressful, or sacred, such as sexuality or death. The second are those issues that if revealed might cause stigmatization or fear, such as youth studies that reveal illegal behavior. The final issues are related to the presence of a political threat where researchers may study areas subject to controversy or social conflict (McCosker et al., 2001 and Fontes, 2004).

Fontes provides an additional circumstance when a subject of study becomes sensitive: i.e. researches that deal with things sacred to those being studied which they do not wish to be disrespectful of. The research on Pchiru Shelni certainly meets the first, second and the third criteria.

The participants in the rural area were sought with the help of people I know as I was raised in the village myself and my siblings still live in the villages. My relatives helped me identify a list of potential rural participants as the community is small and the people living in the villages are aware of who are involved in Pchiru Shelni. Some of the participants were considered based on anecdotal information about

them. Some others were chosen because of their own disclosure of their experiences in Pchiru Shelni. From the list of potential participants I received, I selected my own participants and the names of the chosen participants remain secret to ensure further confidentiality. I had no other alternative but to rely on friends and relatives to identify potential participants because social networking such as internet is not used by common rural people. However, I am aware and acknowledge that there could be biasness associated with selecting participants based on relationship with relatives and friends. There is a possibility that my informants may be biased in giving me a list of potential participants based on their likes and dislikes. However, verification of the participants took place indirectly as many potential participants were repeatedly recommended.

There were some conditions that were important to the integrity of this method of data collection. The confidential participants had to be from rural Bhutan, they should have had experiences of Pchiru Shelni and they should be willing to participate in the research.

No posters or printed materials such as leaflets were used and no public announcements were also made to recruit participants. Pchiru Shelni is seen as normal cultural sexual practice but people would still like to believe that it is a practice conducted in secrecy.

### **3.9 Data Collection Procedure**

After the participants were contacted through the network of my relatives and friends a day and time was fixed to meet in person for discussion on study requirements. Depending on the participants' availability of time, gaps of sometimes days and weeks were kept between interviews because of their prior engagements.

For the interviews, some of the participants asked me to pick a place where the

interview could take place in private. Some of the key informants asked for a copy of my research work at the end of my studies which I agreed to.

Based on separate semi-structured questionnaires, the key informants were interviewed in urban Bhutan and the confidential participants were interviewed in rural areas of Bhutan. All the narratives were conducted in Dzongkha (Bhutanese national language) and local dialects depending on places where interviews were conducted and then translated into English.

In the middle of interviews, participants sometimes stopped answering questions and began telling their personal stories and incidents that they thought were relevant to the interview topic.

At the end of each interview, open ended questions such as 'Is there anything that you would like to add', 'do you have any incidents in your life that has made an impact on you' (for women) and an additional question to men 'tell me a funny incident during your Pchiru Shelni episodes' helped participants talk freely and even allowed a humorous addition to the description of this otherwise serious and significant practice. It may seem that those who considered Pchiru Shelni humorous were not seriously aware of the impact the practice has on society, women and children. However, this was outside the scope of research for this thesis and why the consequences Pchiru Shelni are not taken seriously (by some in the Bhutanese culture) is consideration for further research.

### **3.10 Data Analysis Process**

The analysis of the data was guided by the theoretical perspectives of social constructionism and feminist perspectives. The oral narratives, interview feedbacks and personal notes formed the data to be analyzed for this study. There were several steps in analyzing the qualitative data (LeCompte, 2000: 148-152). Once data have been collected, they were read several times, recorded in order by nature of data, categorized by relevance and in the context in which they were collected. I

personally transcribed the interviews and oral narrations. The data was then translated into English and then read several times until I could make sense of what the data meant.

Repeated readings resulted in emerging themes, perspectives and theoretical hypotheses. The data was reordered based on themes and regrouped by order of questions. As all the rural participants were asked the same questions in the same order, it was convenient to group them in the order of questions as each set of questions carried different themes. Since only some of the key informants have asked for copies of the final outcome of the research work, there was no need to share preliminary findings with participants. The data was presented in a narrative form in the order the stories were talked about during interviews. As such, the essence of the data was not lost and the voices of the participants were presented more accurately. The themes identified in this study recognized the shared experiences of the participants.

### **3.11 Validity**

In qualitative research, 'validity is related to accuracy, relevance and reliability of measurement' and the process is not to seek measurement but to 'understand, represent or explain something, usually some fairly complex social phenomenon' and an account is valid 'if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorize (Pyett, 2003:1170). Validation is strength of qualitative research and is used to determine if the findings are accurate from the stand point of the researcher and the participant (Creswell, 2003: 195). In social science research, Validity refers to 'the accuracy and trustworthiness of instruments, data, and findings in Research. Nothing in research is more important than validity' (Bernard, 2000: 46).

While accuracy refers to how close an estimate is to the true value (Singh, 2007:77) reliability means whether or not one gets the same answer using a same tool more

than once (Bernard, 2000: 47). One problem that arose during the transcription process was maintaining accuracy the use of translated words. While translating from *Dzongkha* to English, Sometimes there were no equivalent words of Dzongkha in English. In such cases sometimes terms whose meanings are closest to the Dzongkha word were chosen. For example, all the participants used the terms *Drang* or *Kokti* both literally meaning 'Bastard' for children with unknown fathers, a term that I felt was pejorative. The challenge was to find a term that conveyed a less judgmental meaning and also one which did not imply 'victim blame'.

Relevance refers to relevance of the research results to society and how the results of the research can bring about improvements to an existing situation (Bless et al., 2007:23-4). As Pyett (2003) explains, researchers need to ask themselves whether they have confidence if the account of the research provides an accurate representation in order to ensure validation. This process is in some degrees achieved during the writing up process where the researcher's honesty, flexibility, discipline and rigor are demonstrated (Pyett, 2003:1171). In order to ensure validation, I personally interviewed each and every participants, transcribed all narratives and interviews. I also translated all the interview feedbacks personally. This assured me of the validity of the contents and the source of data.

Social research methods enable the understanding of 'personality characteristics' which have substantial influence on how people interpret meanings. It is important to consider the influence of culture to understand shared human behavior (attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors) in a social context (Schneider et al., 2005:16). As a native Bhutanese, born and brought up in rural Bhutan I have the ability to understand and experience Bhutanese culture first hand. Understanding and speaking the language played a key part in establishing rapport with the participants. In fact during some interviews, participants became so comfortable that they even confided experiences that were not included in the questionnaire but were relevant to this study.

Because I had been educated outside the country, I could act as both the 'insider'

and the 'outsider' (Kanuha, 2000). In other words, I could look at my own culture as a native participant because I am from Bhutan and grew up in rural Bhutan. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this places my position as that of a social welfare native researcher. I can view my own culture as an outsider by virtue of having studied in countries such as Japan and New Zealand for several years. Currently being in Australia, I had opportunity to observe cultures other than my own country's culture and make comparisons. On several occasions, more men than women expressed their appreciation that I as a woman took up such a sensitive topic which in their opinion were quite harmful for women.

It is a paradox in that many men are accused of being perpetrators in Pchiru Shelni practice, yet they seem to want something done about the practice and brought to the notice of policy makers so that they become aware of the inconveniences women face in the process.

### **3.12 Ethical concerns**

The stated objective of research which is conducted for the express purpose of highlighting a cultural or social issue can create tension when combined with the rights of the participants to maintain privacy. However, harm can be prevented or reduced through the application of appropriate ethical principles. The protection of human subjects and participants in any research are of utmost importance (Orb et al., 2001:93). The objective of meeting ethical requirements is to show respect and dignity, assess risks and benefits, be sensitive to the rights and interest of the participants involved and reflect on the social and cultural impact of the research work. Ethical requirements also ensure that justice is done by addressing the question of who receives the benefits of the work (Walter, 2006).

Of many sensitive topics, violence against women is likely to be too sensitive a topic and that shame, self-blame or fear of further violence could prevent women from discussing their experiences. As such, researches related to sensitive issues



especially those that concern women's welfare and sexuality should prioritize women's safety and build into study designs ways to protect participants and to ensure that the research is conducted in an ethical and appropriately sensitive manner (WHO, 2001).

In order to protect my participants, all participants were given information on the nature of the research prior to their participation. The participants were advised of any potential risks such as recalling traumatic experiences and being embarrassed to talk about their experiences. They were also advised that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and they could withdraw at any stage of the interview if they felt uncomfortable and that their withdrawal would not adversely affect the participants.

The information had to be provided because of some ethical concerns that this proposed project needed to address. The nature of the research topic involved discussions that could be considered risky such as rape and sexual coercion. However, I decided to do nothing about admission of past criminal activities but also do nothing if they mention any intention of performing any activity that is considered criminal under Bhutanese law. Fortunately for me, none of the participants had any admissions to make that were criminal in nature nor did they speak of any future intention to commit crimes. To the best of my knowledge, there is also no mandatory requirement to report past crimes or intended crimes during the course of a research under Bhutanese law.

The interviews had the potential to cause emotional stress to some of the participants especially the women as they talked about their sexual experiences and recall traumatic experiences. However, none of participants showed any sign of breaking down and in fact spoke in a 'matter of fact' tone about the problems they faced and expressed their gratitude that at least somebody (was making an effort to understand the issues surrounding Pchiru Shelni) understood women's problem. Nonetheless, as a part of the ethical provision of the research, the participants were

given a list of local and national resources which could provide counseling services if needed. On a personal note: I did feel for most of the women participants and found the stories of the participants moving. Observing the strong nature of these rural women and their ability to cope with difficult situations was however, a consolation to me. Facing emotional distress by the researcher is not a new thing in subjects that are by nature sensitive. Gilbert (2000) talks about the emotional trauma she underwent when she interviewed bereaved parents. The extent of emotional trauma on her was so great that she began to fear losing her own children and even dreamt about losing them. She coped with the situation by describing and convincing herself that she was an 'informant conduit', a means by which she conveyed the stories of the participants (Gilbert, 2000:5-6). I approached the interviews and collection of data with the same attitude and embodied the role of an analyst in order to separate myself and my feeling about what was being told to me by the participants.

Furthermore, the confidentiality of the participants has been guaranteed by use of pseudonyms, not mentioning the name of places, change the details of discussions and the secure storage of data. During the interview process, all hard copies of data was carried by me and kept under lock and key at the place I lived during fieldwork. I had sole access to the safe I have at the place where I live in Bhutan. During the writing process at the University, I again had sole access to a locked cabinet and the soft copies were stored in a password protected computer.

The hard copies will be kept under lock and key with me in my research room at the University and only I will be able to access it. On completion, the data will be handed over to my Supervisor for safekeeping. Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the Supervisor's locked office. My Principal Supervisor will be given the full set of data for safe storage in a secure office to be destroyed after 5 years.

### 3.13 Study limitations

Several factors affected this research. First I am a Bhutanese woman, concerned enough about the impact of Pchiru Shelni/Night Hunting on the Bhutanese culture and on the lives of women I see every day around me to embark on a PhD thesis about it. I could not be an impartial researcher, (nor would I want to be) but I was acutely aware of this limitation and not only approached my research with this knowledge, but endeavored to frame my questions and approach my writing in such a way that presents an open viewpoint of the practice of night hunting. In other words, I wanted to present the problems created by the practice of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

Second factor was the lack of Bhutanese literature on sexual practices in Bhutanese culture and the ramifications and impacts on Bhutanese women and children. I made best use of whatever was available in Bhutanese media and government documents supplemented by my own field work feedback.

A third challenge was convincing participants to agree to interviews since this was a sensitive issue especially for the rural women. However, this hurdle was cleared by virtue of me being a Bhutanese woman and being able to identify myself with the participants. My knowledge about the local people helped in some ways towards mitigating this limitation.

The fourth factor was the distance that I needed to travel from the main road. It involved hours of working and unlike in developed countries where appointments can be made ahead, I normally had to fix a time when they were most likely to be free. Since most are farmers, tracking them in their fields was a very difficult job. Early mornings or late evenings were the best time to meet them. No manual work is done on certain days in a month which are considered sacred days known as *Dhuezangs* in order to conform to Buddhist teachings of non-violence by avoiding killing insects. I took advantage of such days to meet my participants. The questions

were framed in such a way that they were neither judgmental nor disapproving with an impartial view.

A final issue arose during the translation period. I faced difficulty with translating Bhutanese words (Dzongkha) into English and conveying the exact meaning. Sometimes there were no equivalent words in English. In such cases I had to use terms whose meanings are closest to the Dzongkha word and are in my opinion the most appropriate considering the sensitivity of the research subject.

How men would have reacted if I was a male instead of a female researcher is open to speculation but one male participant did mention that he would not have been so honest if the researcher was someone he did not know. My being a native researcher certainly helped the situation which perhaps may have been supported by the social norms in Bhutan that permitted frank conversation between men and women. To ask if the gender of the researcher would have made a difference in such sensitive subjects is an important point to be included in future studies.

Chapter 4 explains the meaning of Pchiru Shelni, what it involves, how it overlaps with Night Hunting and how both the overlapping practices are perceived in Bhutanese society.

## **4 WHAT IS PCHIRU SHELNI AND NIGHT HUNTING?**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines what Pchiru Shelni involves, how the practices are carried out and the characteristics of those men and women who are defined as ‘coerced’ or ‘consensual’ partners. The meanings of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are explored and the definitions defined to show how they differ and overlap at the same time. The analysis of the interview data will be used to discuss people’s perceptions of these practices. The practice of Khig Kelni will also be discussed which is a variant of Pchiru Shelni but has been on the decline in recent times.

### **4.2 What is Pchiru Shelni?**

Pchiru Shelni is a local term used to describe the practice of men going out at night to look for potential sexual partners. The word ‘Pchiru’ means night and ‘Shelni’ means to wander or move around (with the intention of having sex). As explained in the introductory chapter to this thesis, there are a range of local terms for the practice but for the purpose of simplicity, the standard term Pchiru Shelni is used because it is in the national language of Bhutan (Dzongkha).

One of the characteristics of Pchiru Shelni is that it takes place between rural men and rural women<sup>19</sup>. The sexual activities are between men and women of the same community and by rural men travelling to other villages or rural communities. The participants indicated that it was mostly single men who participated in this practice; however, married men also sometimes take part. This is occasional and mostly involves men who are able to lie to their wives on some pretexts to go out at night. Women involved are also mostly single and like men, but married women are sometimes involved.

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<sup>19</sup> Chapter 8 explains why Pchiru Shelni is only in rural areas

Rural young men are known to have their first sexual experience at a very young age, sometimes as young as thirteen years old. The rural participants have indicated that most of the first sexual experience is through Pchiru Shelni activities. The older experienced men normally 'drag' younger men along on Pchiru Shelni activities. However, it should be noted that there may be other methods by which young men experience their first sexual act. Likewise, most of the women participants also reported that they experienced their first sexual act through Pchiru Shelni incidents (both coerced and consensual). Even though women participants informed me that the age of first sexual experience is generally seventeen or eighteen, there is general consensus among rural people that girls as young as twelve and thirteen are harassed by men for sex and that it might have been out of a cultural embarrassment that the real age of first sexual experience is not revealed. Men stated that their desire to go out at night wanes by around thirty five years of age if unmarried and most stop after getting married<sup>20</sup>. For women, they are 'deemed available' as long as they remain single and stops becoming 'targets' once they are married. But even for women, once they have reached the age of thirty<sup>21</sup>, men are less likely to bother them at night. This is either because men said they like to look for younger women. The other reason is that the strong cultural beliefs that young people must show some respect to people who are older. Bhutanese social relationship structure emphasizes a respectful attitude towards the elders by the younger generations. Irrespective of relationships, it is very common to see a younger person address an older person as 'Acho' (elder brother), 'Ashim' (elder sister), 'Apa' (father), 'Ama' (mother), 'Agay' (grandfather), 'Angay' (grandmother) depending on gender and age. It is considered very disrespectful for younger people to make sexual remarks in front of older people and especially to think about them as potential sexual partners.

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<sup>20</sup> Because most of the marriages in Bhutan are informal, a median age of marriage cannot be provided. Even the national statistics report does not include median age of marriage.

<sup>21</sup> It must be understood that farm work in Bhutan is done manually in rural areas and people work under the sun and rain throughout the year without the use of cosmetics which are anyway beyond their means. This makes them age fast physically and gives the impression that they look much older than they actually are. Therefore, thirty years old may sound young to a western society, but it is not surprising if a thirty year woman is treated like a forty year old based on her physical features.

According to the participants of this study, the frequency of Pchiru Shelni varies from season to season. During summer, farm work is heaviest where every young household member excluding children is engaged in transplanting, irrigating and guarding rice plantations. This takes place from beginning of May to end of October when rice is finally harvested. During this period, Pchiru Shelni activities are lowest. The heaviness of workload is compounded by the fact that it is the rainy season from May to end of August and the farm roads and footpaths are infested with leeches and gnats which makes it very uncomfortable for people to venture outside unless necessary. During these times, the frequency drops of Pchiru Shelni to almost once a week or no activities at all. In the photo below, is an example of a rural Bhutanese farm.



Figure 4.1: A farm in rural Bhutan, photo by Lakey Wangdi

Starting from November and ending in April, farm workload is less and weather conditions are dry and parasitic insects hibernate making it feasible for men to venture out at night. Thus, during the lean (when farm work is less) season, men involved in Pchiru Shelni are known to go out in search of sex almost every night.

#### 4.2.1 *Location*

Pchiru Shelni is not representative of all of Bhutan; it is likely to be practiced widely only in East, West, North and Central parts of Bhutan and as previously mentioned is distinctly rural. There are two reasons to think why Pchiru Shelni is not practiced in the South of Bhutan. First cultural differences between Bhutan's regions are likely to involve greater prohibitions on liberal sexual practices as Pchiru Shelni is assumed to be one such practice. Second this likelihood is corroborated by key informants who agreed that Pchiru Shelni is likely to be absent in south because of more conservative social norms. Cultural difference is believed to be the reason why Pchiru Shelni is not practiced in the south. As culture is 'most simply, the learned and shared behavior of community of interacting human beings' (Useem and Useem 1963:2), it could be supposed that the practice of Pchiru Shelni exist in parts of Bhutan where culture allows it.

The country's population comprises of two broad ethnics groups: the Drukpas who are of Buddhist faith making up of 80% of the population spread over north, east, and west and central and 20% of ethnic Nepalese origin who are mainly Indo-Aryan of Hindu faith live in the south (GNHC, 2000). The culture of those ethnic Nepalese in the south seems to have prohibited more liberal sexual activities. Actual interviews with southern Bhutanese were not conducted because the topic of sexuality is a very sensitive subject and any discussion on sexuality is considered a taboo (Adhikari and Tamang, 2009). As these people settled in the southern part of Bhutan, they brought their culture which is still practiced widely. It cannot be confirmed with certainty that Pchiru Shelni is completely absent in the southern region of Bhutan because no research has ever been conducted on it and thus there is no evidence to prove that Pchiru Shelni does or does not exist in the south.

An understanding that culture often works as a regulator is echoed by many of the participants. For instance, one woman describes her surprise at the behavior of a friend's husband from the south. This woman grew up in rural Bhutan where people



have a relatively liberal view of interactions between men and women. Her friend came from the same background but is married to a man from the south. The conservative nature of south is clearly visible in the way she speaks about her friend's husband<sup>22</sup>:

I think southern region has strict conservative culture so it must be a taboo to have sex outside marriage. I have a friend whose husband is from the south. A male friend patted her hand and the husband nearly beat her up for allowing him to touch her (NS, 19/9/12).

Few participants shared their views on this about why the cultural practice of Pchiru Shelni was different for each region but many expressed ignorance of culture outside their community. This is because they have been confined within their village for most of their lives and have had fewer opportunities to travel around. A few participants who expressed their views based their opinion on hearsay from people who had travelled outside their communities and their understanding of the behavior of people from the south. For example, teachers in community schools are appointed by the government and can be from any part of the country. These public servants are required to serve in one place for a period of time specified by the government employing agency in chapter 14, clause 14.2.6 (RCSC, 2012).

The feedback from three participants below also reinforces the idea that culture has strong impact on determining human behavior: in this case sexual behavior. A single mother of two explains this:

Maybe southern culture does not allow multiple sexual activities. I heard that if a woman is defamed, she will never be able to marry. In our culture, even a mother of five or six children can get many

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<sup>22</sup> The denotation of the participants is as follows: NS – participant, 19/9/12 – the date that the interview took place. For all other participants, the same procedure will be followed throughout this thesis.

husbands. Difference in culture determines how many sexual partners one can have (SP, 7/9/12).

A rural woman expression supports the above statement:

I heard that in the south, reputation is very important for women and they don't participate in sexual activities outside marriage. Once they get married, it is for good whether they like it or not, unlike our culture (CD, 2/9/12).

Another single mother voices her view:

I believe the south has strict cultural practice where the women are kept in confinement by their parents. Southern men also seem to have more respect towards their women in the sexual sense (PT, 14/9/12).

PT seems to believe that the very absence of Pchiru Shelni indicates more respect towards women and strict cultural values restrict sexual abuse. Here it must be understood that PT is speaking in the context of her own life where she has known only her culture within her own community and has never been out of her village to experience cultures of other societies. Therefore, it is most likely that she does not understand the dynamics of different cultures. However, it is worth noting that all the interviewees above mentioned culture as the main factor in influencing sexual behavior. This is consistent with the general perceptions that cultural differences impact sexual behavior.

There is another reason why the existence or the non-existence of Pchiru Shelni practice in southern Bhutan cannot be confirmed: the lack of previous research and the shortage of time for this current research. The field work for this thesis was limited to two villages and to cover all regions of Bhutan was beyond the scope of

this study. However, this would be of interest for future research projects on this topic.

#### *4.2.2 The practice of Pchiru Shelni*

The practice of Pchiru Shelni involves three steps: planning, dispersion and execution. The planning stage involves two methods. One way begins with men gathering together during their free time after their day's work. Men then discuss which women they know are likely to agree or can be coerced to have sex when they go out of their house at night. Sometimes, group of men are known to target one woman and most of the time, men look for multiple women so that each can have individual sexual partners if successful. Some men are known to venture out alone especially in the case of prior arrangements. The second method involves mutual arrangements between men and women.

The dispersal starts after dinner, when men wander out in a group and then disperse individually towards places where potential sexual partners live. Sometimes, small groups of 2 or 3 men target a single woman. Women never come to the men's houses, as the men always come to find them. This could be because cultural norms dictate that men and women have different 'rules' guiding sexual behavior: with men stereotyped as sexually assertive and women as sexually passive (Crawford and Popp, 2003). The execution of the practice of Pchiru Shelni comes after potential sexual partners have been identified, and involves the process of studying individual women's houses to find possible entrances and escape routes, before finally getting into the beds of the intended woman as stealthily as possible. The entrance can involve quietly forcing open a traditional door or breaking in through a window, or by prior arrangement with the woman to leave a door unlocked. The most common form of execution is non-consensual by using portable wooden ladders to break in through window with mostly non-married women.

A typical feature of Pchiru Shelni is that sexual activities occur only at night. A male participant explains why this is so:

Day time it is very difficult to maintain secrecy and sexual activity during day time does not look appropriate either. Besides we have too much work at our farms. Night time is used for Pchiru Shelni because it is assumed sexual activities can be conducted in secrecy (YD, 10/9/12).

It is interesting to note that YD debates between the appropriateness of participating in day time sex and the need to spend time on work. YD attributes heavy farm work for not being able to have daytime secretive meetings. His comments reflect the fact that Bhutan is still a developing country and most of the farm work is conducted manually. Though the Agriculture Machinery Center (AMC) established in 1983 introduced several labor saving machines such as rice mills, flour mills and power tillers (GNHC, 2009), few households are able to afford such machineries and they have been concentrated in regions close to urban centers such as Paro, Bajo and Khangma. The lack of modern farming equipment requires that rural people still resort to manual labor on a large scale and even small children are not spared, entrusting them with what little they can do such as looking after calves or guarding cultivated fields from domestic animals.

The distance travelled by men at night is determined by the availability of single women within a community. When there is a shortage of single women in the men's community, they sometimes travel long distance at night looking for sexual partners. A woman who had been a target of Pchiru Shelni several times explains why men often travel long distances:

There are several men in my village who go out looking for sex every night. They must be making consensual rounds as well as break-ins. They target any house that has women living in it. Whether they are always successful or not, I don't know. If they don't get women in

our own village, they walk long distances at night to target women from other communities. Men do not feel lazy to walk long distances at night as long as they get sex. It is like entertainment for them (DC, 4/10/12).

This woman's testimony and several other interviews have suggested that rural men do not restrict themselves to women of their own community but also target women of other villages. In these cases, Pchiru Shelni may mostly involve forced entry as there is a likelihood of targeting houses at random because of the men's lack of knowledge of household members and their information on the availability of women could be based on hearsay. Another point to be noted is the use of the word 'entertainment'. Rural areas do not have access to any other form of entertainment such as movies, shows and venues selling alcohol. Therefore, it is likely that DC is referring to men using Pchiru Shelni as an alternative to the lack of entertainment activities in rural areas.

#### *4.2.3 Timing*

According to the participants of this research, there is a specific period of time to engage in Pchiru Shelni. The right time to go out and look for women at night normally ranges between 11:30 pm and 4.00 am as one man explains:

The right time to hang around the women's house till 11:30 at night and leave the house around 3 or 4 in the morning before the rest of the household wake up and the cock crows (RG, 6/10/12).

This is because, by 11 pm, all the people are in a deep slumber, allowing men to break into houses with the minimum of noise so as avoid waking other members of the family after their day's hard work. In consensual sex, men normally stay with women until just before dawn so that they are able to slip away silently and be back in their own beds, pretending to have slept there the whole night. This pretense is

kept so that they can avoid questions from their own family members about their whereabouts at night. Most men said that their families are aware that men slip away from their homes at night but choose to pretend they do not know about it. Thus, it is a case of pretense from both sides.

#### *4.2.4 Secrecy*

Pchiru Shelni is primarily associated with secretive sexual activities. The rural participants reported having reasons to maintain both genuine and performed secrecy during night time sexual activities. Some men genuinely try to maintain secrecy to protect the reputation of the woman about whom they are serious and when some liaisons are not approved by the parents. In these cases men not only sneak out from their own house in order to avoid detection but also go out alone without their friends. However, other men only pretend that they are invested in secrecy during the act, but are quick to identify the women participants when boasting about their sexual activities. An example of such behavior is explained by an active male participant in Pchiru Shelni:

The pretense of secrecy is maintained only in front of the women at the time of having sex. The next day, men brag about their conquests in front of our friends both male and female and then slowly spoil the girl's reputation. Then it is difficult for the girls to find a husband afterwards (RG, 6/10/12).

RG is boasting in front of female friends is curious. He does not explain why men do so. It could be perhaps it is to increase his own importance to women he is confessing in order to manipulate them to be his future sexual partners. His intention in this interview is unclear.

RG's statement also indicates that some men equate multiple sexual partners with masculinity. Masculinity according to Connell (2005) is multifaceted and varying

forms of masculinities are associated with power differential where certain behaviours and types of men are privileged and dominant over other men and women (Connell, 2005). In the context of Pchiru Shelni study based on interview feedback, masculinity has two meanings for men: one meaning relates to 'having as many sexual partners as possible and higher the number of women sexual partners, more masculine one is seen as'. The other meaning refers to the ability to provide for the family. It does not seem to matter what method is used as long as the number of sexual partners exceeds that of their friends. It is also an illustration of men's indifference to women's reputation and the consequences of their actions to a women's emotional well-being. In small communities such as those of rural Bhutan, a slip of the tongue or bragging in front of friends by a person involved in Pchiru Shelni is enough to bring this supposedly secret incident into public knowledge in a short matter of time.

This behavior of bragging about sexual prowess by men and women's silence resulting from a feeling of shame (and the knowledge that being associated with such activities stigmatizes them), allows men to get away with non-consensual sexual activity or sexual crimes and avoid legal repercussions<sup>23</sup>). Bragging and boasting of sexual coercion may attract legal action but only if it is done in front of authorities and if the listener reports to authorities.

Disclosing involvement in Pchiru Shelni by any of the sexual partners to friends, family members and other sexual partners risk gossip and intimidation. The intimation is mostly directed towards women by men who hope to have sex with the assumption that if others could obtain sex with her then so could he. Inherent here is also the notion that being involved in Pchiru Shelni is a source of shame especially to women while it is a source of pride for men to be labeled a 'stud'. One woman's account of her worries during Pchiru Shelni is an indication of her being shamed in society:

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<sup>23</sup> See chapter 10 under marriage Act and Penal code sections for legal penalties for sexual crimes against women.

I was very scared of getting pregnant, bringing a bad name to my family and was worried of showing my face in my village. In spite of all these, it still happened (NS, 19/9/12).

The statement demonstrates women's personal shame, worry about pregnancies and dishonor to families. Even though family dishonor<sup>24</sup> is not a big social issue in Bhutan, the woman's fear shows that it does impact women's psychological well-being which can lead to further problems.

#### 4.2.5 *Consensual sex in Pchiru Shelni*

Pchiru Shelni can involve both consensual and non-consensual sexual activities. One of the purposes the practice of Pchiru Shelni serves is courtship even though the proportion of Pchiru Shelni involving this purpose is very small, as indicated by most of the research participants. As argued above, due to heavy workload during day time, young men and women use night time to meet for courting as well as sexual activities. In this case, sexual acts are consensual but until the relationship becomes formal in the eyes of the public, sneaking in and out of the woman's house is still the norm. Here, prior arrangements are made between young couples. This can be without the knowledge of the woman's relatives at home but she will know her boyfriend is coming. Men will meet women at work during farm work and will make an arrangement for the night. These meetings can be planned even during social gatherings and other places where participants have the opportunity to meet. The risk involved here is lesser even though men might have to face the wrath of disapproving parents and relatives. For instance, a male participant explains how he proceeds with an arrangement that has already been fixed:

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<sup>24</sup> Unlike some other Asian countries, there is no honour killing, acid attack and even though unwanted pregnancies maybe gossiped about for a while, it is all forgotten and forgiven soon.



If the woman has already agreed to my visit, there is not much risk for me. She will open the door for me and I can get in quietly (YL, 11/10/12).

A similar experience is shared by AP:

Most consensual Night Hunting entrance will be through the door. Normally, the time of visit will be fixed too. Sometimes, I ask the girl to pretend to go out for toilet and then she can come and get me. Toilets in the villages are outside the houses (see photo below). Sometimes, we fix a signal by the count of knock on the door. I only break in where I think I will be safe. I will ask the girl to sleep at a particular place so I know which window to break in (AP, 20/10/12).



Figure 4.2: A rural house and an outside toilet, Photo by Yeshey Dorji

Another man shares his consensual experiences:

I plan ahead and seek women's consent before I go to visit a woman. Whether the house is big or small it does not matter in case of

consent but I have to be careful not to make noise and wake her household (SG, 3/10/12).

Even without prior arrangements, young men seem to look for possibilities of consensual sex as seen in this statement by another male participant:

Some are impromptu actions. I just go to try and find out if it would be possible for the next visit. Best time is during festivals when parents are absent from home (AP, 20/10/12).

The man's 'impromptu action' to check out the possibility of the next successful visit implies that consensual sex does occur even in the first visit that is not pre-arranged. In other words Pchiru Shelni can involve participants looking for consensual but non-committed sexual relationships or casual sex.

Young women shied away from stating they elicit consensual sex perhaps to avoid embarrassment but older participants seem to indicate that some young women solicit consensual sex through mobile phones. This could also mean that the proportion of non-consensual sex varies according to age. Younger people who make more use of mobile phones are likely to arrange more consensual sex compared to older people who use mobile phones only when necessary.

#### *4.2.6 Non-consensual sex in Pchiru Shelni*

In non-consensual Pchiru Shelni, the search by male perpetrators for potential sexual partners depends on their knowledge of the local area and identification of specific households where single women live. Men 'scope out' a particular house during the daytime if they know a single woman lives there, in order to weigh the pros and cons for a possible break-in. If the house has a number of other inhabitants, including strong male relatives and strict parents, then the men usually give up. They will also study the structure of the house and look out for possible

entry points. For instance, if the house has two or three stories, the men look around to see if the portable wooden ladders (see figure 4.3) that farmers normally use for farm work are easily accessible.



Figure 4.3: Portable wooden ladder, photo from Google

Inaccessibility is not a hindrance for a man on the hunt, as one male participant notes:

As long as there are eligible girls inside, I climb windows of all houses irrespective of whether they are one storied or three storied (YD, 10/9/12).

The process of searching for potential sexual partner is explained by another man:

In case of sudden Pchiru Shelni, I look for houses with easy access, absence of parents and usually where the woman is alone. It does not matter if it is a big house or a hut in the middle of a field as long as I am sure there is a woman inside. Even if the houses are

scattered and are long distances away from my house, I know which house has potential women to target for sex (PD, 15/10/12).

The women who are identified for Pchiru Shelni may already be known to be living in a particular house, or they may have come from outside the village to spend a few nights in a particular house either on visits to relatives or to fulfill other social obligations. Even if the men know the women are not willing, they may 'try their luck' anyway. Another method chosen by men is to target any house at random, although this often leads to disappointment since they may not find any women at all.

Some men attempt to get inside a woman's bed to manipulate the woman for potential future sexual favor:

I sneak quietly next to the girl's bed and she will ask me who I am. I introduce myself and if they know me and like me they will let me stay. Some allow us to sit and talk only. But it is only a matter of time. If I try couple of times, they normally give in (SG, 3/10/12).

Another man talks of a similar method:

I usually target female friends. It is easier with them because they will know me and would not chase me away suddenly even when it is unplanned. In order to gain their confidence, I creep in quietly and sleep next to them for long duration without attempting to have sex. I then slowly gain their confidence and get them to trust me. Then there is every chance of having sex with the woman (TN, 3/9/12).

YL, a third man talks about men's intention to coerce or rape women:

Of course men go out with the hope of getting consensual sex, but in many cases that is not the case. We then try using lies and if it does not work, then we must be prepared to use some kind of force (YL, 11/10/12).

Considering that men sometimes go out in group, the question of possibility of gang rape arises. Some men did state that they tricked women into consecutive gang rape. Since women sometimes cannot identify the features of the men who break in and sexual activities take place as quietly as possible, men sometimes pretend they go out for toilet and let in their friends in turn thereby tricking the women into believing that the men are one person confirming indirect form of coerced sex. This is very similar to a form of multiple perpetrator rape known as 'streamlining' where men invite their friends to rape women they no longer like or respect (Jewkes et al, 2015). Jewkes et al, suggest that streamlining rapes are perpetrated both as entertainment and to impose sexual punishment for women who are seen to challenge the traditional notion of submissive sexual behavior. Similar to Pchiru Shelni where darkness of night is used to trick women into changing sexual partners, streamlining involves use of alcohol to trick women into a situation.

The following section discusses the practice of Night Hunting; how it overlaps in definition and practice with PS and how it differs.

#### **4.3 What is Night Hunting?**

Night Hunting is the English translation of Pchiru Shelni. However, in reality the two are different because of the characteristics of men involved. Night Hunting differs from Pchiru Shelni because the male participants are urban men whereas in Pchiru Shelni, those men involved are rural men. However, the two practices also share similarities because the objective in both cases is to have either consensual or non-

consensual sex and the women involved are from rural areas as in Pchiru Shelni. There are some cases of urban women being harassed but these are isolated cases as in the example provided in chapter 6 under the section 'emotional health'.

No one knows when Night Hunting began but it is possible that it is after the development activities were introduced in Bhutan through the 'Five Year Plans' that started in the 1960s. With development, comes improvement in transportation and communication. This gives more opportunities for rural and urban people to travel around more which was not the case before 1960s when the motor roads were not constructed. It is possible that as more people from urban areas started visiting rural areas, they became aware of the existence of Pchiru Shelni in rural areas and then slowly started participating in the practice.

Trading methods and administrative system in earlier in Bhutan were different from what it is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in terms of determining how urban and rural people mingled with each other. Trading took place across the country's border to Tibet in the north and India in the south. According to older participants, because people in Bhutan were subsistence farmers, such trading took place mainly once in a year. One trader could represent as many as three or four households as the journeys were dangerous and involved many overnight stops along the way. Several traders would come together and embark on journey in groups. Businesses were conducted through a barter system that involved the exchange of rice, eggs and local-made products exchanged for salt, areca nuts and tea (Aris, 1979).

These trading and administrative systems have now been replaced by more modern methods. Officials now visit rural areas to see if development plans are being carried out. People bring businesses to villages and because of modern farm roads vehicles can enter many rural areas enabling people from outside the community to

visit areas that were previously difficult to access. As such, urban people are able to travel to and from rural areas much easier and more frequently than before<sup>25</sup>.

The arrival of urban men to rural areas and adoption by them the local practice of Night Hunting overlaps with the practice of Pchiru Shelni. This variant of Pchiru Shelni is termed 'Night Hunting' and is widely known by the same term by the urban literate people and the outside world. However, all the rural participants reported that they have no understanding of what Night Hunting is, as to them it is a foreign word. A conversation with one of the male participants shows that Night Hunting is a foreign term for the locals:

I have always referred to our nightly sexual activities as Pchiru Shelni and have never heard of the term Night Hunting. Even if I heard of it, it does not mean anything to me. I do not understand English (PD, 15/10/12).

Two of the key informants explain how the term 'Night Hunting' is believed to have originated. A Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a Non-Governmental Organization known as RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women) who is in charge of looking after victims of domestic and sexual violence in Bhutan offers a possible explanation on how the term 'Night Hunting' developed. According to her,

The term Night Hunting may have been coined by urban night hunters because sexual relations through traditional practices do not amount to Night Hunting. It is also not a problem when such sexual encounters occur between men and women of the same village. They know each other and it had been an accepted norm. These sexual relations become a problem when the term Night Hunting is used and the traditional practice is exploited by urban visitors. The

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<sup>25</sup> I cannot provide a concrete citation for this since there is nothing written on urban visits to rural areas, but it is apparent from constructions of roads after the 1960s, establish of government offices in rural areas and visits to rural areas by urban men is something that widely known and can be seen.

term Night Hunting could not have been invented by the tourists. Because they would not know what Night Hunting even would be unless it was explained to them by the local male tour guides (CEO, 9/9/12).

She further goes on to explain that the tourist guides sometimes lead visitors to believe that Night Hunting is an exciting traditional practice and falsely mislead outsiders into thinking that it is acceptable for anyone to attempt the same. She credits (in a negative way) the semi-literate and the literate for coming up with the term Night Hunting and also thinks that women are 'hunted like animals' at night. She argues that this very use of the term 'hunting' equates this sexual practice with hunting animals; thus using women for gaming purposes. She also explains that the term Night Hunting became so strong among the urban people that the meaning of the traditional practice was actually eclipsed by this modern term leading to more rampant practices and the glorification of Night Hunting.

Another key informant who is a senior officer who works for the government also believes that Night Hunting is a term created by the urban literate. According to him:

Pchiru Shelni is not Night Hunting when it is conducted between men and women of rural areas. It started as a misuse of Pchiru Shelni culture by the urban men. These sexual activities mostly happen for personal sexual gratification. This culture of roaming at night is exploited by urban people when they visit villages for one reason or the other. Urban men dress smartly and village girls are sometimes taken in by their appearances and agree to have sex with them. In the end it is the women who suffer (TS, 1/10/12).

From the above conversation, it is evident that both the key informants regard the two practices as different depending on the types of men involved. They indicate



that Night Hunting is more exploitative in nature because urban men are likely to be temporary visitors and not serious about long term relationships. The term 'exploitative' refers to the attitude of the urban men taking advantage of their own position, power and lies to manipulate impressionable rural women into having sex.

#### *4.3.1 Men involved in Night Hunting*

As discussed above, one major difference between Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are the characteristics of the men involved. In Night Hunting, the women are always from the rural areas, and the men are always from the urban areas but are in rural areas for shorter durations for business or work. It implies that urban men who engage in this practice take advantage of local sexual practices during their short visits to rural villages. These urban men are often tourist guides, government officials and business men. Urban men's involvement with rural women for sexual activities is best explained by one woman who comments that women end up having sex with the 'short time' visitors who come to the village for work.

In our village, drivers form majority of the perpetrators. These men work as excavator drivers and taxi drivers. While taxi drivers come from all places with passengers and stay for shorter period of time, excavator drivers normally stay for longer duration working on farm roads and government constructions. In the process these men end up going Night Hunting and eventually many women becomes mistresses to these visitors (SP, 7/9/12).

While SP described the types of urban men involved, NS and LD below explains women's motivation for being involved in sexual relationships with urban men, some of whom are complete strangers:

Women who have sex with urban visitors think that these men have lot of money and willingly have sex in exchange for gifts and

presents. Most outsiders are drivers and contractors and girls end up becoming mistresses in exchange for presents and money. Many of my friends have become mistresses. Many of the urban visitors are married men. They initially tell the women they are single but once they have sex with the local women, then it turns out that they are married at home (NS, 19/9/12).

NS's statement suggests that one of the motivations for rural women to have sex with urban men is economic. Although NS did not identify herself as being involved with urban men, she commented to me that she was sympathetic towards women who were forced to have sex with urban men because of poverty but showed less sympathy if women got involved because of greed or alcohol and were later left by men, leaving the women with children with no present fathers.

A third woman who was involved with an urban man during his short visit explains why she was seduced:

Some of the urban visitors to our village are civil servants who come on tours and official work. These men have stable jobs and are in a position to flatter rural women with gifts. The women believe that these men are rich potential future partners and give in easily (LD, 7/10/12).

To provide a parallel example, LD's account of her involvement with urban men is similar to the problem of rural Chinese women who leave their home villages and migrate to urban in search of better lives. Even though young Chinese rural migrants were most likely to find low wage, low skilled jobs and tolerate harsher working conditions, urban life is seen as a liberating experience for many rural women who had to toil hard on their farms (Zhang, 2009). Rural Bhutanese themselves physically do not move to the cities but the attraction of city glamour is

unmistakable here in both the Chinese rural migrants' and rural Bhutanese women's cases.

The lure of being associated with men from urban areas is another reason why women get involved in Night Hunting. Association with an urban man especially with someone who has a good job or business is seen as a sign of status for rural women. This tends to elevate such a woman's status in her village perception that they are better than other rural women who are not able to find an urban sexual partner. GZ, a fourth woman commented that many rural households expect the household member working in the urban area to supplement the household income. However, when there are no relatives employed in the urban sector, then the alternative is to have a husband or boyfriend. Such a situation is comparable to the position of Thai rural women who are attracted to urban consumption practices i.e. to have modern household appliances at home. For Thai rural women, being able to have access to urban consumption practices provides them with a feeling of superiority over other rural women who have no access to modern goods. This also serves their own interest to limit subordination within the wider society even though it may be a temporary phase (Mills, 1997). The same is true with rural Bhutanese women. Having a sexual partner who is from the urban place and has a good source of income provides the women with an alternative means to satisfy their desires for material goods and other less tangible advantages. LD's story above and GZ's explanation below show that such is the case and it is thus a reason to have sex with urban visitors:

Urban men are more attractive compared to the rural guys. Urban men wear better clothes and even if they are not good looking their clothes and money make them look smarter whereas rural men have hardly time to take a bath even once a month. They will be wearing one dress like a skin for long durations and are sweaty and smelly. Rural women are carried away by the visual attraction of the urban

men and their modern looks. Urban men are also able to look after women better with gifts and money (GZ, 16/10/12).

In recent times, Bhutanese semi-literate rural women have started migrating to the cities for low paying jobs such as bar dancing<sup>26</sup>, child-minding, and house-keeping and sometimes as mistresses of rich men where women get drawn into a different kind of sexual exploitation. In this case, no physical threats and manipulation are involved but the arrangements are determined by the economic disadvantages of the poor rural women. In the absence of alternative viable living, they are financially dependent on their 'exploiters' (employers). Bhutan Broadcasting Services (BBS, 2012) published an article expressing grave concerns about the increasing trend. The article reported how young women are exploited by employers and male customers and the article raised concerns that were serious enough to be discussed in the National Assembly. While it is evident that the dynamics of Bhutanese sexual exploitations are changing, this is a different research area which is beyond the scope of this study.

Rural men, on the other hand indicate that urban men targeting rural women during their visits to the villages is more about sexual exploitation and less about economies. A male participant explained that he thinks urban men use rural women for sexual gratification and exploitation:

Urban people may not have opportunity to go Pchiru Shelni in town but these men are the biggest perpetrators when they come to the village. They won't leave our women alone. In fact they indulge more than rural men. Some men are travelling businessmen. They try to have sex with rural women at every place they stop to sell their products (KD, 18/9/12).

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<sup>26</sup> Venues involving bar dancing known as 'Drayangs' have opened in many districts in the cities. However, some districts have banned them citing the negative impact they have on society in terms of sexual exploitation of young women. Bar dancing young women are quite common in major cities such as Thimphu, Phuentsholing, Wangdue and Paro.

KD's story suggests a hint of rural men's jealousy over urban men's perceived easier access to rural women for sex. Possibly this is because urban men who are better dressed and who are able to offer better gifts to women pose a threat to rural men who cannot provide these material gifts to the same extent. Some rural men have reported feeling they do not 'stand a chance' with a woman if they happen to venture out together with an urban man to look for sexual partners.

#### *4.3.2 Access to rural women by urban men*

The use of local 'middlemen' to access rural women by urban men is another difference between Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. As Berman (2009) puts it, indigenous knowledge is essential for successful execution of initiatives. Urban men who visit rural areas are new to the area and have to rely on the knowledge of local men to locate single women. While some rural men may be jealous of the advantages urban men possess because of the way they dress and their access to money, there are some other rural men who are willing to help find women and to experience successful Night Hunting process. This process is initiated through new friendships between urban and rural men. In some cases urban men sometimes offer money or some favors and sometimes even use their status to obligate rural men to repay their friendship by offering hospitality or even women for their entertainment.

At other times, local men act as intermediaries between the intended woman and the man from the outside to arrange meetings for sex. Sometimes, the local men accompany the urban man till they reach the house. While the urban man gets into the house and has consensual sex provided the woman is willing, the local man waits outside the house to accompany him back. A 49 year old man explains how urban men gain access to rural women:

It is very important for the urban men to make friends with local men. Only rural men can tell them which house has eligible women,

where to go and how to go about it. These urban men bribe rural men by giving some money and winning their confidence. Some rural men are flattered by the urban men's attention and go out of their way to accompany these men and sometimes talk to the women on behalf of the urban men (YD, 10/9/12).

An influential man in the village supports this account of Night Hunting:

Urban men gain access through some people in rural areas who attend or host these urban visitors (SG, 3/10/12).

It must be made clear that not all incidents of Night Hunting involve rural men who act as middlemen. In some cases, it is likely that urban men and rural women meet at public gatherings such as the market place and plan to have consensual sex at night. In other cases, urban men have grown up in a village and have knowledge about their own community. It must be noted that the Night Hunting practice that does not involve middle men share other similar features with Pchiru Shelni such as breaking in through windows, sneaking into women's beds and the intention of having coerced sex if women do not consent. From the above discussion, three differences have been determined between Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting: the involvement of urban men, the likelihood of economic transaction as motive and local men's participation as middle men in many cases. The motive for rural women to engage in Pchiru Shelni with rural men has been briefly discussed but warrants greater detail and is discussed in the next chapter.

#### *4.3.3 Location*

As in Pchiru Shelni, Night Hunting also takes place in rural areas. This is because the women involved are always rural women. And as in Pchiru Shelni, it is not established if Night Hunting takes place in southern region of Bhutan. Thus the location is a common feature between Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

Based on the interviews with older participants, the reason for both Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting being located in rural areas is that Pchiru Shelni originated in rural Bhutan and has ever since remained that way. However, over time, men have been unable to export the practice to urban areas because men are not able to coerce urban women in the same way. This is possibly because it is believed that there are alternative and more refined versions of courtship and sexual meetings in urban areas. For instance, a male participant voices his opinion on the availability of alternative forms of secretive sexual meeting in urban areas:

Maybe it is true that there is no Pchiru Shelni in urban areas because urban men do not need to go out and look for girls. They have access to sex through money and other facilities. They have many other options such as hotels, cars that can make dating easier (TN, 3/9/12).

Another man feels that it would be difficult to conduct Pchiru Shelni in bigger populated areas:

In towns, it is difficult to track down where a girls lives because of larger population. Therefore I think it may not be possible (AP, 20/10/12).

There is also a strong indication that urban people consider Pchiru Shelni as a crude form of sexual practice that is beneath the status of the educated people even though many urban men are known to actively participate in Night Hunting as one rural man comments:

Educated men are embarrassed to admit they get involved in Night Hunting because they think they have a reputation to protect. They think Night Hunting is only for rural areas and they try to disassociate themselves with Night Hunting even though they are

one of the biggest culprits when they come to villages. They know very well that Night Hunting carries a bad name (SG, 3/10/12).

SG's comment suggests that even if Pchiru Shelni was practiced in cities, urban men would not admit that they take part. There is also an indication that the urban form of dating and courting is considered superior to that of the traditional ones in rural areas suggestive of an urban hierarchical dominant attitude towards rural people.

The likelihood that Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting practices are absent in urban areas is strengthened by the fact that houses in the urban areas are not remote and it is more difficult to gain access into houses because they are better secured than rural houses. The presence of security patrolling at night is also likely to prevent urban men from acting in a suspicious manner at night.

#### *4.3.4 Timing*

Since the purpose of both these practices is to look for sex at night, the timing of Night Hunting is likely to be same as that of Pchiru Shelni as the daily schedule of rural people remains the same.

#### *4.3.5 Secrecy*

Like Pchiru Shelni, Night Hunting is associated with secretive sexual activities. While the reasons for maintaining secrecy in Pchiru Shelni are stated as protecting reputation of women men care about and hide sexual activities outside marriages, the reasons for maintaining secrecy by urban men are likely to be different. Because no urban men were interviewed for this research, their point of view cannot be provided. But from further interview data, there is a suggestion that urban men try to be as secretive as possible to protect their own reputation as well as to hide from their wives (since most turn out to be married) back in the cities. Communication



has become much easier with mobile phones, there is frequent rural urban movement of people, and Bhutan is small society meaning that news travels faster. Urban men, while being active participants in Night Hunting, also try to disassociate themselves from Night Hunting because of the bad reputation of the practice. There is another possible reason for wanting to be secretive: if the rural women (who are mostly strangers) become pregnant, these men can avoid the responsibility of paying child support and escape being linked to their illegitimate children thus avoiding legal repercussions.

#### *4.3.6 Consensual sex in Night Hunting*

Similar to Pchiru Shelni, there are instances of consensual sex in Night Hunting. The notable variation is that there is more use of mobile phones to arrange the sexual meetings. Most rural people own mobile phones now and these are also used for Pchiru Shelni activities. However, face to face contact between rural men and women is greater than among urban men and women and thus there is greater usage of mobile phones in Night Hunting.

Urban men and rural women may be introduced to each other through numbers passed on by friends or even random phone calls, and relationships can slowly develop. Two rural women discuss the courtship opportunities afforded by new communication technologies:

I met my husband through mobile phone. Someone had given him my number and we started talking over the phone. He asked me if he could come to my place at night and I consented without even knowing him in person. After few incidents of Night Hunting and consensual sex we got married. There were two reasons why I married him. One, because I needed a male at home to work on the farm, the other, men stopped bothering me if I had a husband. Even though he was from an urban area, he was not holding a proper job

and agreed to live with me and work on my farm after our marriage (GZ, 16/10/12).

Another woman provides more evidence of consensual sex in Night Hunting:

My husband is from the city. Because of some work relation, my father had given my number to him and he started calling me. He wanted to come to my place and I agreed without even seeing him. The next night, we had sex and then he stayed on as husband. Our romance was through mobile phone and by the time we met each other, it was not so uncomfortable. Until he stayed on as a husband, men kept bothering me (GG, 21/10/12).

Both the incidents described above are between urban men and rural women and both the acts are consensual although reported as being initially 'uncomfortable'. Since the final outcome resulted in marriages, it can be also considered part of the Night Hunting courtship ritual despite the unusual circumstances in which the marriages take place, i.e. the added impetus to marry to escape sexual harassment.

#### *4.3.7 Non-consensual sex in Night Hunting*

As in Pchiru Shelni, the majority of sexual activities that happen in Night Hunting are non-consensual and coerced. The degree of coercion in fact may be greater in Night Hunting when men who have power and position are involved because as discussed, the power relations are so unequal. The fact that many women are unable to trace the father of their children born to urban men out of wedlock demonstrates why many of these men who have fathered children, can avoid any responsibility. Urban men who are not men of power tend to use verbal manipulation to coerce women according to accounts given by the interviewees. For instance, DC, a rural woman, reports being tricked into having sex by an urban man:

Men use all kind of tricks, money and lies. Some women willingly agree to have sex based on the lies. For example, a carpenter from urban area came to our village and he came to my sister's place at night. He was caught by our parents and he promised a marriage certificate as well as building a house for us. He stayed for two days and after he left, my sister called his mobile. His wife picked up the phone and started quarrelling over the phone. He never mentioned he was married (DC, 14/10/12).

The use of verbal manipulation by lying is corroborated by another man who admits to being actively engaged in Pchiru Shelni:

I used to lie all the time. I tell the women I will leave my wife. I tell women who do not know me properly that I am not married. I do not regret telling lies as long as I get what I want. For strangers, the magic word is 'marriage'. Some women dream of a better and easier life in the city. So it is easy to get women to agree (YL, 11/10/12).

The use of women's vulnerability to acquire sex is obvious in the above conversations reflecting a gender power imbalance where rural women do not have the capacity to protect themselves sufficiently against the more sophisticated strategies of the urban men.

The next section will discuss the changing perception of the general public towards the practices of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

#### **4.4 General perceptions of Pchiru Shelni**

The general notion by the Bhutanese people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that Pchiru Shelni has always been a traditional harmless practice. Thus Pchiru Shelni is widely assumed to be consensual and a taken-for-granted social norm. On the contrary,

this research has shown that that is not the case because a large extent of Pchiru Shelni involves coercion and the success of Pchiru Shelni (having sex) is judged by the ability to obtain sex irrespective of the methods used: consensual or coerced. This means that if it was a harmless practice, all sexual activities in Pchiru Shelni should be consensual.

While rural people generally viewed Pchiru Shelni as a harmless traditional practice, there are indications that there is beginning to be a shift in this view. This is evident in the way some men have started expressing concerns about the negative impacts Pchiru Shelni has on women and children when Pchiru Shelni is conducted for purposes other than courtship. JS's feedback is an example of this shift. He states two ways of looking at the practice of Pchiru Shelni:

If it leads to marriage, it is a good thing. But if it creates problems when men impregnate women and then disappear without giving any child support, then we should not indulge in Pchiru Shelni. At the same time, it is good for busy people who have no time for courtship (JS, 15/9/12).

It is not only the men who are becoming aware of Pchiru Shelni's negative consequences. Women have started feeling that the coercion involved in Pchiru Shelni is not right and unlike in the past where women internalized their problems, the media have reported several cases of women filing cases against men to have their children legitimized in order to be awarded child support. For instance, in 2001, Kuensel newspaper reported that the Wangdue district court tried more than a dozen cases of 'runaway' fathers. In reporting the outcome of some of these cases, the paper reports on the Night Hunting practice saying: 'what society humorously calls night hunting, a rampantly accepted culture in most parts of rural Bhutan where young men courted girls by visiting them in their houses at night' (Kuensel, December 28, 2001). Here it should be noted that it is the women who file the cases indicating a growing awareness of women's rights. It is also noticeable

that the newspaper does not report the case as involving sexual coercion, rather that they involve issues around courtship practices. There have been many recent similar cases filed by women of which are not reported in the media and not documented.

In spite of these attitudes, there are men, irrespective of the reputation which Pchiru Shelni holds, who cite their own reasons for wanting to continue practicing Pchiru Shelni. For example, JS says:

I feel Pchiru Shelni is absolutely necessary. This is the only entertainment men have in the village (JS, 15/9/12).

One man felt that the practice is good as long as it is consensual:

I enjoy going Pchiru Shelni especially when I meet good and kind women. I think it is an excellent practice. Both men and women can enjoy sex and both can be happy (KD, 18/9/12).

The above statements show a complete disregard of the consequences for women who are forced to participate in Pchiru Shelni, namely unwanted pregnancies and illegitimate children.

It was observed that rural men in general do not consider Pchiru Shelni to be an issue of concern. Rather, their behavior implied a humorous view of the practice. During the observational collection of data, it was apparent that when the men talked amongst themselves about Pchiru Shelni, they smirked and threw sly glances at each other. It must be noted however, that this was not the only gendered reaction to Pchiru Shelni, and that women who were party to the men's discussion also grinned and made further jokes; this was only as long as they were not the subject of the Pchiru Shelni talk.

#### **4.5 General perception of Night Hunting**

There is a common perception that Night Hunting and Pchiru Shelni is the same thing. Interviews with key informants have shown that they consider these two practices to be same and harmless as long as the sexual activities in these practices remain consensual.

Similarly, there is an increasing debate by online forum participants about Night Hunting with some against it while others are in favor of maintaining the practice (Bhutan Observer, 2008). Even in the media, Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are talked about as if they are the same thing. Rather both the practices are seen as same and like the key informants the media suggest that it is only problematic when mostly urban men are involved. Night Hunting is discussed in several media sources: the Kuensel (national newspaper) and the private newspapers such as Bhutan Observer, The Bhutanese and Bhutan Times.

Kuensel deals with mostly with news related to government policies and issues. It is supportive of government efforts in bridging gender gaps and often carries articles on women's vulnerabilities. Thus, it is not surprising to read negative news stories about Night Hunting because the general perception is that Night Hunting has a bad name. The following article clearly makes a distinction between traditional forms of consensual sex and casual or coerced sex:

The term "Night Hunting" is even more complex than an elephant. The basic flaw in our discourse is that we are condemning or defending different perceptions of the term. We know that it sometimes refers to a form of courting in rural communities. It is a loose term for rustic amour that amuses tourists but there is no element of hunting. It just happens that the courtship takes place at night for discretion. The girl, sometimes even her parents, is aware of a man's visit. But the term Night Hunting most frequently refers to

men out in search of sex. They include officials on tour or business people pursuing village women or girls, who are intimidated into submission, sometimes by force, sometimes by a misplaced sense of awe. This is where the problem lies. It is morally questionable when a man goes out at night seeking sex with a woman without knowing, or caring, who she is. It is wrong that a woman is expected to accept being woken up by strange men in the night. It is a tragedy when schoolgirls do not return to school after the holidays because they are pregnant. The tragedy is far greater if she is left with a fatherless child. Something is seriously wrong when a schoolteacher is harassed all night and has nowhere to complain. We should also be aware that this loosely defined term, Night Hunting, is not unique to Bhutan. Many rural Asian societies had the same practice and the Japanese word for it even translated as Night Hunting. In many parts of rural Africa, men pursue women in crude forms of Night Hunting. (Kuensel, 8<sup>th</sup> October, 2008).

The above media account critiques the exploitative nature of Night Hunting. It admits that sexual violence occurs across the world but this does not mean that the significance and consequences of the sexual violence in the local Bhutanese context should be downplayed.

Another private newspaper attempts to provide cultural relativity as a rationalization to maintain the practice of Night Hunting. However, it does suggest that sexual crimes in Night Hunting should be dealt with by laws that cover sexually-related crimes such as rape and sexual assault. In other words, it condones Night Hunting without sexual violence:

There are views that night-hunting should be considered rape. Here again, let us put things in perspective. Night-hunting is a cultural practice, and it is per se neither evil nor good. So it cannot be

considered rape, violation of women's rights or the root of domestic troubles. Simply separate night-hunting from rape, and the practice will stand innocent. Likewise, separate courtship and romance-related crimes from night-hunting, and the practice will stand innocent (Bhutan Observer, 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2008).

An article that appears in *The Bhutanese*, clearly is not in favor of continuing the tradition. It argues that cultural values that are no longer useful should be done away with in the interest of general public:

For all the talk of women's participation in our society, Bhutanese society is a male dominated society and, therefore, male notions on sexuality prevail. One such notion is 'Night Hunting' which is mistakenly identified with rural tradition. The notion that Night Hunting is a 'romantic liaison' between two willing lovers stands only for a few cases. By and large, the act of Night Hunting in many cases is equivalent to legal rape. A stronger male forcing himself on a sleeping and unaware woman against her will is rape, and cannot and should not be couched in any notions of tradition or accepted social behavior. If Night Hunting is tradition then desperate men should also attempt a 'night hunt' at the home of a powerful local official or local leader in order to also not leave them out of traditional values. The men in all probability will either be jailed or suffer other consequences (The Bhutanese, 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2013).

There is debate in these articles about whether Night Hunting is harmless or harmful. While some see Night Hunting as a cultural practice that should be allowed to exist as it is because it is a long-held traditional practice, others are of the view that Night Hunting allows men to dominate women through the use of physical force and sexual coercion.



From the above, it is also evident that the practices of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are treated in the media as the same practice in general, and treated as problematic only when urban men are involved and the relationship becomes sexually exploitative. However, this thesis argues that consensual sex in both Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting forms a very insignificant percentage of the overall practice but in fact most men treat it more as a form of entertainment and means by which to gratify their sexual needs.

#### **4.6 Rural people's perception of Pchiru Shelni in urban areas**

While I argued earlier that Pchiru Shelni is likely to be less common in urban areas because of better security in houses and police patrol, many rural people assume that Pchiru Shelni is not limited to rural areas. Almost all the rural participants felt that some form of Pchiru Shelni takes place in urban areas and some even felt that the practice of Pchiru Shelni must be more rampant than rural areas.

Rural participants provided various reasons for their beliefs that Pchiru Shelni must still exist in urban areas.

One reason was that even though Pchiru Shelni may take place in urban areas, rural people believed that urban people cared more about their personal reputation and were trying to deny being involved in an activity that will otherwise mar their status in society. For example, two rural men's explanation is evidence of this thought. NT assumes that Pchiru Shelni also takes place in urban areas:

If urban people say that Pchiru Shelni happens only in rural areas then it is a big lie. I am sure it exists at a large scale in urban areas. They are in denial. Urban people think that they have superior behavior to rural behavior and want to prove themselves good by trying to distance themselves from a practice that has a bad name (NT, 4/9/12).

Another man, SG, feels that Pchiru Shelni takes place in urban areas because urban men seem to know what to do:

These people are not monks. So they must have engaged in several Pchiru Shelni experiences before they eventually got married. When these people visit villages, they are worse even if they have wives at home. I know some men live in the city and then call up rural girls to ask if they can come at night. It is a lie that it does not happen in urban areas (SG, 3/10/12).

The same opinion is shared by another man, LD:

Urban people may or may not engage in Pchiru Shelni in towns but urban men are the biggest culprits when they come to the village for festivals and holidays. In fact they indulge more than rural men. They must have habit of going for Pchiru Shelni in the city. That is why they do in rural areas too. I don't believe them if they say there are no Pchiru Shelni in urban areas (LD, 7/10/12).

One man, PD, even questions the double standard of sexual behavior of urban men when it comes to Pchiru Shelni:

Urban men cannot deny they do not have Pchiru Shelni. In fact they have more impact on our girls with their white cuff,<sup>27</sup> car and money. They must have experience trying their charms on urban women and do the same when they come to rural areas. It is hypocrisy on the part of educated people. They make noise against Night Hunting but at the same time, they make use of innocent rural women (PD, 15/10/12).

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<sup>27</sup> Part of the white blouse known as *Lagay* men wear inside their traditional dress and folded outwards into a cuff. Rural men wear it only on formal occasions while urban men wear it almost all the time.

Out of the 20 rural participants, only two people thought that Pchiru Shelni may not exist in urban areas. For them the circumstances that favor Pchiru Shelni in rural areas are missing in the urban areas. For example, DC a rural woman thinks urban people have more opportunities to have sex:

In urban areas, they have many places to go out for dating and have sex. Here in the village, a house and the night is the only place and opportunity to have sex (DC, 4/10/12).

AP, another participant, thinks that absence of electricity is a major factor in the practice of Pchiru Shelni:

Such things cannot happen in urban places. Pchiru Shelni was practiced only in areas where there was no electricity. Every house and street has electricity in urban areas. I don't think Pchiru Shelni is possible in urban areas. Even in rural areas, it has declined because of lights (AP, 20/10/12).

Just what is the real situation needs further research but the two differing opinions provided by the participants are likely to be true in their own ways. Urban people mostly work nine to five and have free time to themselves after office hours, during weekends and public holidays. Salaried people are entitled to accumulate yearly leave and are able to take time off from work for private purposes. They also have various places for dating or to conduct secretive sexual meetings such as private homes, hotels and outside places. While meetings can be arranged through the use of mobile phones or the internet, urban men have better means of transport. And as the rural participants pointed out, as long as one is not celibate, sexual activities can occur anywhere. The common Bhutanese assumption that urban people have more access to money and can easily pay women to have sex makes the rural people believe that Pchiru Shelni can easily be replaced by other more sophisticated arrangements rather than the rural 'version' of Pchiru Shelni, which is considered

more crude and basic.

In conclusion, there are several reasons why rural people think that Pchiru Shelni is not an urban practice not the least of which is their perception that the way larger cities are organized (larger populations and differently organized buildings for example), make the practice of Pchiru Shelni more difficult if not impossible. Teasing out these perceptions and the reasons for them is beyond the scope of this thesis but is consideration for further research.

#### **4.7 Khig Kelni**

This chapter will end with a discussion of another variant of Pchiru Shelni known as *Khig Kelni*. This different but related sexual practice came into picture during the process of the field work for this research and even though the practice is on the decline, the comparison to Night Hunting is interesting to discuss. In *Khig kelni*, men who engage in this practice are usually urban men who hold responsible positions such as public figures who need to maintain a 'clean' public image.

*Khig Kelni* literally means 'accompany to a place'. As in Night Hunting, this sexual activity involves urban men and rural women but with a slight difference. Here, instead of ordinary urban men such as general government servants, tour guides, drivers and roaming business men, the men involved in *Khig Kelni* hold privileged positions, have status because of their wealth and thus exercise a high level of authority over local people. When these men visit rural villages, it takes several days to scope out government projects. Unlike the other urban men in Night Hunting, these men are often offered local rural young women for their pleasure. Ironically, the local men who participate in arranging these meetings are known to be men who are supposed to be in a position to protect the rights of women such as village authorities. Several conversations with the participants provide evidence of this practice. For instance, a participant talks about an incident in her village:

A few years ago, a very senior official came to our village. Since our village did not have eligible pretty girls, the village host who is also an authority here managed to offer a divorcee from our neighboring village. She later got a job through the official (NS, 19/9/12).

A man offers another reason that some rural men are fearful of being in the bad books of the visiting officials:

Local people used to be afraid of power the officials held. Young women were offered to visiting officials hoping to be in the good books of the officer. In many cases, the officials themselves order to bring girls specifying age group (AP, 20/10/12).

AP's account reveals a sense of entitlement because of some men's positions and is certainly an indication that power and status do influence men's decision to pursue inappropriate sexual activities.

Occasionally, parties are held to entertain important visitors in villages. Young women are usually asked to come as dancers and sometimes this is used as a pretext to hold the women back for the night for sexual purposes. A male participant explains this process:

Women are taken as dancers to entertain the visitors. Usually girls from weak [poor] household are targeted. Girls from strong household won't be allowed to go out at night by the relatives. The visiting officials usually give order to the host to get young women for the night. The young women are normally promised good rewards (KD, 18/9/12).

The exchange of sexual favors for rewards suggests that this is a sort of informal prostitution which can be either coerced or consensual. The demand for sexual favors by the visiting officials certainly seems to indicate a sense of entitlement for

sexual favors and use of positions to influence their decision to pursue such sexual activities.

Another male participant says that there is an alternative way of arranging women for sex for the visitors. These happen during occasions other than official purposes:

When officials come for archery<sup>28</sup>, they watch women dancers. If they like any woman, the host is asked to bring the woman to them at night (SG, 3/10/12).

With democracy, people's power has increased and an increase in power has enabled people to say 'no' to higher authorities if they feel they are being wronged. Many of the women have learnt to say no knowing that they can seek refuge in stricter new laws that protect vulnerable women. It is possible that the introduction of democracy<sup>29</sup> is the cause for decline because historical men used their hierarchical position and feudal social norms to engage in these sexual practices. A village representative says things are not as 'easy' it used to be some years ago:

Nowadays, girls can opt to refuse because there is law to protect them if they are harassed (KD, 18/9/12).

Some participants stated that the people who used to arrange such meetings were village authorities. These people have become wary of carrying on such activities because they can either be voted in or out of their position by the public if their names are connected to inappropriate behavior, because reputation is an important element for winning an election. For instance, a male participant man says:

It cannot happen like the olden days now. Because of democracy, people have started speaking out. People who used to arrange

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<sup>28</sup> Archery is the national sport of Bhutan and very popular among men.

<sup>29</sup> Democracy here refers to people's right and does not mean about electoral politics.

women are careful about their public image and do not want to be involved in activities that creates a negative image of themselves. Even women now openly talk about how they have been solicited and how they have refused creating embarrassment for the people involved (AP, 20/10/12).

The above statement is testimony that Khig Kelni is on the decline. It also indicates that the introduction of democracy in 2008 has made a significant contribution to slowly ending this practice. As more and more people vie for prestigious public posts, they no longer want to be associated with something that can harm their image. This wish for disassociation also suggests that the local authorities are themselves aware that the practice victimizes women and is unjust. The change in social structure due to modernization has also, in some ways, influenced people's perception of practices that used to be taboo.

While this chapter has examined the general characteristics of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting, the next chapter will examine the evidences of sexual coercion involved in these practices.

## **5 PCHIRU SHELNI AND SEXUAL COERCION**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter will examine the meanings of sexual coercion and the presence of both physical aggression and other methods of sexual coercion employed in the practices of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. This chapter will also discuss the rationale behind sexual perpetration and victimization and the factors responsible for rural Bhutanese women becoming victims of sexual coercion.

### **5.2 What is sexual coercion?**

Male use of sexual coercion against women is widely known to occur in many parts of the world. Many feminist theorists have posited that socialization practices with regard to traditional practices of gender roles and cultural attitudes are responsible for sexual coercion (Jewkes et al., 2005). According to the World Health organization (WHO, 2014) fact sheet, sexual coercion and abuse as being one of the most defining aspects of a woman's life experience with severe health consequences and social and economic costs. Sexual coercion according to Adam-Curtis and Forbes (2004:99) is

any situation in which one party uses verbal or physical means (including administering drugs or alcohol to the other party with or without her consent) to obtain sexual activity against freely given consent.

Sexual coercion includes a range of behaviors from forcible rape to non-physical forms of coercion. Such behavior takes place when women lack the choice to fight back and as a result risk physical as well as social consequences if they resist sexual advances (Heise et al., 2002:56).



There are three primary types of sexual coercion: physical aggression, non-physical and verbal coercion. Physical aggression involves the use of physical force such as sexual penetration without consent, and non-physical aggression and verbal coercion involves manipulative behaviors, most often psychological in nature, such as lying and pleading.

While physical aggression is easy to identify because use of physical force often results in physical harm, non-physical aggression and verbal coercion can be hard to verify because of the presence of many intangible elements such as normalization of deviant behavior, unwillingness on the part of victims to testify because of fear of reprisals and psychological desensitisation. Lyndon et al. (2007) suggest that it is difficult to evaluate if all cases of sexual coercion are victimizing and cause harm because some coerced sex 'appears to be sex-as-usual' in that it involves 'perceived' normal heterosexual behavior and may even be a conventional aspect of dating. Fisher et al. (2000:23) suggest that some forms of coerced sex may not even cause harm to a victim. For example, a 'stolen' kiss is likely to be regarded as a 'prank' especially if it is from a known person who is normally a 'prankster friend'.

O'Sullivan (2005) also argues that identifying non-physical sexual coercion is difficult because even if unwanted sexual activity is taking place, it will not be obvious that the sexual act is non-consensual because the individuals involved might not know that the partner is unwillingly engaging in sex. He cites the example of individuals participating in unwilling sexual acts but not being able to communicate that because of (for example) guilt, a sense of obligation or a desire to please. Sullivan also contends that 'unwanted but consensual' sexual activity occurs when coercions such as begging and other manipulative tactics are included.

In this thesis, the following types of coercions are defined: physical aggression where physical force is used to sexually coerce women, non-physical by the use of threat and intimidation, and verbal coercion where there is evidence of deception, lies or pleading.

All the characteristics of sexual coercion may or may not be present in Pchiru Shelni or a different kind of characteristic may emerge because of the particular cultural and physical environments in which sexual coercion takes place. For instance, much of the research on sexual coercion in other parts of the world is based on university life experiences and health implications and cultural environments which are different from this study (Kalof, 2000; Adam-Curtis and Forbes, 2004). Therefore, sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting will be identified within the context of rural Bhutanese settings shaped by local tradition and beliefs. The presence of sexual coercion will be discussed using interview data from the field work.

### **5.3 Forms of sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni**

#### *5.3.1 Physical violence/aggression*

While violence against women is a common occurrence in many societies, there is particular violence related to specific cultures and coercive traditions that may vary from society to society. Likewise there are some unique types of violence and aggression committed towards women in the practice of Pchiru Shelni.

Physical aggression is present in both Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting practices. During the interviews, some male participants admit to being physically violent and abusive towards women when women refused to have sex during Pchiru Shelni. AP, an influential man, said he resorts to physical violence when the woman is too tough to coerce in other non-physical ways and take revenge for making it difficult:

At one time, a girl scratched me a few times and I had to box her couple of times. By then I had lost interest and I did not want to have sex even if she gave in (AP, 20/10/12).

In AP's statement, it should be noted that the woman's physical resistance is successful in deterring him from continuing to seek to have sex with her.

Women have also recounted facing physical aggression and getting raped when their physical strength could not match that of men. SP's situation is an example of women becoming getting caught in the circle of sexual and domestic violence:

When I was single and studying, men would not leave me alone. I cannot have a peaceful night's sleep. Then I got married and men stopped bothering me. However, I divorced my husband because he beat me all the time after having a child; men have frequented my house at night again. It is a headache, I cannot remain single or I cannot stay married without problems (SP, 7/9/12).

Another example of women experiencing physical violence is CD's story. She speaks of men picking on her moral character and then threatening to refrain from helping her in her times of need:

I did face various types of violence, physical as well as verbal. Some men tried overpowering me using their strength. Some abuse me verbally calling me slut. Some told me that all the penises are same and it should not make any difference to me if I have sex with one man or several men. Men used to say that they will keep the rejection in mind and will not help me in times of need. Of course I did not have to depend on their help but they probably thought I will come to them asking for a helping hand around the farm (CD, 2/2/12).

The fact that men think CD should oblige all men with sexual favors reflects the tendency of developing a pattern of continued victimization for women. This resonates with Susan Brownmiller's argument that men use rape as a weapon to

oppress women by intimidating them into a state of fear (Brownmiller, 1975), a situation similar in Pchiru Shelni where men use violence to coerce women into sexual submission. CD's experience certainly indicates that men use both physical and verbal aggression to intimidate women. Young et al. (2012) reported that among female victims of sexual coercion, the risk of subsequent incidents after the initial experience of sexual coercion increased by more than seven times.

GG, a woman, describes how men become aggressive when they cannot gain access to her house:

I cannot count the number of men who came to my place for Night Hunting. Some men throw stones when they cannot get access to my house. There must have been more than hundred men who tried breaking into my house (GG, 21/10/12).

Further evidence of the physical aggression inherent in Pchiru Shelni is the intention of *Bangchen* sex as stated by rural men participants. *Bangchen* is a Dzongkha<sup>30</sup> term and in general it means use of force, pressure and manipulation including use of wealth, position and power to obtain something. Since there is no specific term for rape and coercion in *Dzongkha*, *Bangchen* is used by Bhutanese society to describe any physical aggression in sexual context. The media usually term rape as *Bangchen gi thole luedrel* meaning forced sex using physical power. Most male participants stated that while they go out at night to search for women at random, their 'Plan A' is to hope for consensual sex. If unsuccessful, then 'Plan B' is *Bangchen* sex.

GG, talks about becoming a victim of physical aggression herself:

I got raped a couple of times. I did not think of reporting to anyone. I was too scared and embarrassed and did not know how to report (GG, 21/10/12).

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<sup>30</sup> National Language of Bhutan

Another woman shares her experience:

Many times men break into my house and force themselves on me and I cannot fight back. But some men are nice and leave when I refuse (DP, 17/9/12).

PD, a man who frequently goes out at night for the purpose of Pchiru Shelni explains how he forces women:

When I have to force a woman, it is usually easier to force a woman who does not wear underwear. Till recently, village women never wore underwear. It is a new trend that some have started wearing it (PD, 15/10/12).

PD's comment about underwear refers to the traditional custom of rural Bhutanese women not wearing undergarments. The long flowing traditional dress (*kira*) covers women's bodies down to their ankles. Speaking to both older and younger women, it seems that the use of underwear is a new trend (likely to be after introduction of roads when women could visit the city more often to buy imported garments).

Even though physical aggression occurs in the practice of Pchiru Shelni, the majority of women and men participants reported that the use of physical force in Pchiru Shelni is less frequent than use of non-physical and verbal coercion.

### *5.3.2 Non-physical and verbal coercion*

Sexual coercion through use of non-physical methods and verbal coercion is a common occurrence in the sexual practice of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. Out of thirty participants, the majority of men (10 confidential male participants) reported using some kind of coercion and the majority of women confirmed experiencing many kinds of coercive behavior in sexual relationships in Pchiru Shelni

and Night Hunting practices.

The use of non-physical methods is another way in which men coerce women into having sex in Pchiru Shelni. Non-physical methods in Pchiru Shelni involve the use of threat, intimidation or withholding favors and rights. For example in Pchiru Shelni, men reported throwing stones at the houses of women if women refused to have sex. A question arises if stone throwing can be regarded as violence. This is an issue of boundary where a direct assault on the intended person is definitely violence but an attack on the property that indirectly harms the intended victim may or may not be understood as violence (Sharp, 1989). This is also an indication that men do acknowledge women have the right to refuse sex yet they express their anger at rejection through aggressive behavior. Therefore, stone throwing is also used as a means of pressuring women to have sex.

Another method of sexual coercion is the use of verbal coercion. The use of threats, intimidation and verbal coercion are part of non-physical strategies, but the difference is that threats and intimidation involve more serious aggression whereas verbal coercion positions the aggressor in a less domineering position and is a mild form of aggression. According to Adam-Curtis and Forbes (2004), verbal coercion includes 'wearing down a person with repeated requests and entreaties' and even gestures that may not seem harmful but amount to sexual harassment. For example, stolen kisses are seen as violating a person's sexual autonomy (Adam-Curtis and Forbes, 2004: 99). This trait is very visible in some of the Pchiru Shelni practices. For instance, RZ says she eventually gives in when the man who has come to sit by her bedside the whole night pleading with her:

I feel sorry for the man. He comes from faraway place and to see him go back without getting what he came for after all the pleading is a sorry sight. So I eventually agree to have sex with him (RZ, 14/10/12).

Manipulative tactics form a part of verbal coercion. Tactics is referred to a broad spectrum of methods used to achieve a desired sexual outcome. Tactics could be physical but can also be non-physical strategies. These methods include any means excluding physical force such as verbal pressure, continuous argument, use of authority and use of substances to reduce a woman's ability to resist (Lyndon, 2007). From these pressures, verbal coercion is a primary method of coercion used by perpetrators (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson and Anderson, 2003). Similarly in Pchiru Shelni, men use range of manipulative tactics to obtain non-consensual sex from the women. DP talks about how she was duped into having sex:

Even though I was studying, he promised that he would marry me. In spite of my fear of leaving school, I did have sex with him. He was never violent towards me but then he was also not with me constantly. Ours was an off and on relationship and he left me after two children. I am angry that I had to leave my education because I became pregnant. But now I can do nothing (DP, 17/9/12).

Even in earlier times, manipulative tactics were used for coerced sex. In fact according to older participants, in earlier times, the only strategy women could use to protect themselves from unwanted sexual advances at night during night halts outside their homes during contribution of compulsory labour was to either sleep with trusted men from their own village or borrow *gho* (men's dress) and cover themselves so that the perpetrators are tricked into believing the women are already taken. Any 'available' women who refused to have sex were threatened with punishment by *lajaps* (work supervisors) the next day by allocating more work or made to carry heavier loads. It could also have meant that women who consented to unwanted sexual advances or women who volunteered sexual favours obtained 'trade-offs' in the form of easier workload. Women in this study have not commented on what strategies they use to protect themselves except for threats to scream if they are not left alone. This can also be included in future study.

Another woman was promised marriage as a manipulative tactic to have sex with a man:

He used flattery and promises to marry me to make me have sex with him. I told him his relatives might not agree with our relationship and he said he will deal with them. Later on, he turned out to be a coward after I became pregnant (NS, 19/9/12).

To make a comparative study, it is interesting to note that in the neighboring country India, there was a contradictory ruling in two cases where the false promise of a marriage was used to have a liaison. While a case in New Delhi was ruled 'rape' by the High Court because a lie was involved to obtain consent (NDTV, 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2013), a similar case was ruled 'not rape' by the Supreme Court. In this case whilst it was agreed that rape involved both physical as well as psychological harm, nonetheless, the false promise of marriage amounted to only cheating and deception (NDTV, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2013). Thus in one country, two distinct judgments are passed on two similar crimes.

A third woman says she was tricked into having sex with a man who came to her house at night:

The guy who slept with me tricked me into believing that he will not release his sperm inside. I was scared of getting pregnant but he convinced me that will not happen. But his withdrawal promise was only a lie. Both of us were embarrassed to go to the hospital to ask for condoms because that was the only source. Other forms of contraception are not available in our village and shops do not sell condom (DC, 4/10/12).



YD, an active participant in Pchiru Shelni talks about the lies he uses to manipulate women into having sex with him:

I had sex with around eleven women during my Pchiru Shelni time. My number is nothing compared to my friends. All sexual relation during Pchiru Shelni was consensual based on my lies. If I don't lie, I don't get women. Sometimes I have to promise the moon just for one casual sex. I never regretted any of my actions. That was an adventure we were expected to have as young men. I think the method I used was a sort of verbal violence. No girls complained because I lied but maybe they talk about my lies behind my back among themselves. The biggest lie women fall for is marriage (YD, 10/9/12).

NT confesses to promising marriage to every sexual partner he had during his Pchiru Shelni:

Some women get flattered easily by promise of marriages and assurances to give them a comfortable life. All the time I know it is a lie. If what I promised were true, I would have twenty wives by now. I know for sure that only around twenty percent of men who go for Pchiru Shelni will have honorable intention. All men go Pchiru Shelni with the hope of having sex (NT, 4/9/14).

During Pchiru Shelni, men can also be seen using verbal coercion such as pleading and begging. Some women are influenced by the Buddhist concept of kindness and compassion and take pity upon the perpetrator like in the case of GG:

It takes couple of nights to get used to the man before we have sex. I feel sorry for men who come to my place again and again travelling long distance with a torch (GG, 21/10/12).

YD, a regular participant in Pchiru Shelni says he has to face disappointment sometimes:

Some men lie like a dog near the woman the whole night pleading and begging and do not get anything. These happen to men who break in and do not have prior consent. The girl does not want to give in but is too kind to chase him away. She lets him lie next to her till daylight (YD, 10/9/12).

SP, a single mother explains why she had sex after repeated persuasion:

I refused to have sex with him for around 4 months. He did everything he could, broke into my house, followed me everywhere, when I went to guard crops at night, and when I went to my friend's house. He used to act so jealous of my relationship with other friends too. He treated me like his wife and never told me he was married. He tricked me into sleeping with him (SP, 7/9/12).

It can now be seen that the most manipulative tactic to obtain sex in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting is the false promise of marriage. In rural Bhutan, farm work depends mostly on manual labor where men take up most of physically challenging work. Without men's contribution, even women who possess large land holdings are not able to obtain the full benefit from the farm. Men take advantage of this situation and are thus able to manipulate women to have sex by falsely promising marriage which women believe solve their farm labor problem and result in having a husband to help with all the work. For women in need, love becomes secondary and necessity becomes practical.

### 5.3.3 *Transactional sex as coercion*

Transactional sex sometimes takes the form of sexual coercion under certain circumstances. Although transactional sex is linked to consumption, there are occasions where transactional sex is linked to survival. Gendered material inequalities and poverty are some other reasons why women get involved in transactional sex (Hunter, 2002).

Transactional sex using money and gifts in some cases is seen as an economic coercive device used to persuade women to have sex regardless of their true wishes (Frost et al., 2011). This is because transactional sex may disempower women who are then unable to negotiate safe sex and protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. Thus, women are sometimes coerced into unprotected sex and also having to become reluctant sexual partners and the consequences may turn out to be risky for women (Chatterji et al., 2005).

Another aspect of transactional sex is that any sexual bargaining between the sexual partners is likely to work in favor of men. However, 'circumstantial factors are also important: material need, the threat of physical force or strong affection reduces a woman's bargaining power, while strong affection or intense sexual desire reduces a man's' (Wamoyi et al., 2010:4).

Transactional sex is often seen to occur within non-prostitute/client relationships where in long-term relationships between same sexual partners and where sex is promised in exchange for regular payment and gifts (Holmes and McRae-Williams, 2011). While such relationships may sound similar to marriage relationships in many cultures, similar relationships outside marriages are not likely to be approved by many conservative societies. Such relationships do exist in rural Bhutan where the wealthy male partner who already has a wife and children keeps a mistress openly with full knowledge of his wife. An example is the relationship between SG and his mistress GG who were both participants in this research. SG is married with four

children with his wife of thirty five years. He is wealthy and controls the household as well as his wife. When he began a relationship with GG, his wife was well aware of the relationship as well as the gifts and money he endowed on his mistress. The relationship eventually led to a child and the wife has accepted the relationship. If the wife opposed her husband's decision, it would mean she would be cut off from the house since she had entered the house as a bride as opposed to normal practice of husband entering a woman's household where the woman has property ownership<sup>31</sup>.

In Bhutan, there is no legalized prostitution however, it is apparent that informal prostitution does exist (Kuensel, 2002; Bhutan observer, 2012). When women engage in transactional sex due to poverty, it can be assumed that men take advantage of the woman's financial needs. In other words, the poverty of the woman is used as an instrument to coerce sex. Even in other countries, transactional sex occurs as a result of poverty. For instance, recent research into poverty in the Northern Territory of Australia found that homeless indigenous women used sexual favors to obtain goods and services for their family. This was largely as a result of extreme poverty which marred the lives of homeless people in multiple ways: poverty, social exclusion, stigma, hunger, trauma, violence, deteriorated health and addiction' (Holmes and McRae-Williams, 2011:9-10).

Dunkle et al. (2010) contend that while some transactional sex is motivated by basic survival and subsistence needs, some others use transactional sex as a means to access resources to advance their future prospects by funding higher education, employment opportunities or even to improve self-status in youth culture by acquiring luxury goods.

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<sup>31</sup> Majority of Bhutan has matrilineal system where inheritance is passed on to daughters instead of sons (NCWC, 2007). When a woman goes out of her matrilineal house as a bride, property ownership is not assured from the husband's house or from her maternal house unless she herself becomes the matriarch in the household of the husband which is usually after years of marriage.

Some of the motivations for women to have sex in Night Hunting concern a need or desire for gifts and money. The desire for monetary gains of women can be used as manipulative tools by men to obtain sex even though it should be recognized that women can be equally manipulative. For instance, RG narrates his experience of Pchiru Shelni where the woman chose an urban man over him because the urban man had more money:

Many rural women face financial problems and some women have sex easily if they are offered money. For instance, if I go out to a woman's place with an urban man who has more money, I do not stand a chance. She would provide some excuses such as 'I am menstruating' or 'Come back tomorrow'. She would say it in such a loving way that I would easily believe her and mean time she would be happily having sex with that urban man who came with me (RG, 6/10/12).

The statement above indicates a 'contract' like agreement that indicates that there are varying forms of transactional sex and whilst most of us would not do it, some women are 'happy' to do it. With the introduction of farm roads connecting rural to urban areas, it has become easier for people to travel around. Rural women come into contact with urban places and see new household appliances that make household work easier. People can now use gas to cook food and rice cookers to cook rice. Previously, women had to spend a lot of time collecting firewood for cooking and most of the cooking involved manual work.

With rural electrification, rural people desire household items such as fridge, rice cookers, curry cookers, gas stoves. Some are able to buy these by selling their surplus crop production. However, many are not in a position to afford expensive electronics. Even though most women do not admit it, my observation of people's conversations suggests that some women realize their desires for consumer goods by accepting money and gifts from men who come for Pchiru Shelni. Thus,

economic development has created disadvantaged circumstances for the poor where some women are forced to resort to transactional sex to improve living standards. Even here, it must be noted that though women have harder life, it should be acknowledged that transactional sex that favors both men and women takes place.

While some feminist perspectives place the exchange of sex for monetary gains as a form of violence, others see it as a legitimate form of work which does not necessarily involve violence. For instance, a *partial decriminalization* regime decriminalizes the activities of the sex workers alone based on 'the assumption that sex workers are vulnerable victims of systematic patriarchal exploitation, and that at the minimum the state should protect them by not criminalizing their sex work activity' (Hally et al., 2006: 338-339). In spite of this decriminalization argument, the fact remains that women who are involved in transactional sex because of poverty remain vulnerable to sexual coercion. When women suffer from poverty, they are forced to resort to every available means to meet the needs in their lives. Besides poverty, desire for better goods and commodities is another factor for women to participate in providing sexual favors in exchange for money and gifts (Frost and Bingenheimer, 2011).

#### **5.4 Who is likely to perpetrate and what are the reasons for victimization and compliance?**

##### *5.4.1 Perpetration*

There are several theories that attempt to explain men's perpetration of sexual violence towards women. Historically, sexual violence research and programs have focused on the protection and support of women and young girls. Research on the importance of educating men in order to prevent aggressive and violent sexual behavior is substantial but comparatively less than the research that understands

the women's plights. A growing body of research has pointed to examine factors that motivate men to engage in aggressive sexual behavior.

Research has recognized four factors that are seen as aggravating the perpetration of sexual aggression against women. They are rape- supporting attitudes, rape- supporting social relationships, hostile and controlling definitions of masculinity and sexual promiscuity (Adam-Curtis, Forbes, 2004). The presence of all four factors cannot be confirmed in Bhutan because of lack of research on sexual violence. However, some factors such as controlling definitions of masculinity and sexual promiscuity have been definitely identified in this research.

According to Burgess (2007:974), rape-supporting attitudes are commonly called rape myth and are defined as 'prejudicial and stereotyped beliefs about rape and situations surrounding rape'. Sexual aggressiveness is justified in this example because of rape-tolerant beliefs that blame the rape victim. Other ideas that support the idea of sexual aggression are peer pressure and distorted beliefs about the behaviors and attitudes of peers (Janice and James, 2003). The idea of peer pressure is evident in the way men talk about their reasons for targeting as many women as possible for sex. TN's narration is a typical example of how men compete with each other to show who is more masculine:

I know many men who go for Pchiru Shelni activities. Most of my friends want to show off and even recommend girls who they think are easy to get. That way, we men are quite bad. Some men keep a count of the number of girls they sleep with. When men get together, they want to compete with each other in number of sexual partners. The higher the number of girls they sleep with, the more masculine they think they are. Some men cut the fringes of their *Kerey* (belt) once they cross 108. I don't know the reason for it (TN, 3/9/12).

TN professes ignorance about the reasons for cutting belt fringes after sexual partners cross 108<sup>32</sup>. But the association of multiple sexual partners with masculinity is unmistakable here. Men possessing a competitive and controlling attitude towards masculinity are believed to have personality characteristics of 'a desire to be in control, to be dominating, particularly in relation to women and an insecure, defensive and distrustful orientation to women' (Malamuth and Thornhill, 1994:186). Such a by-product of such combinations is seen to have hypersensitive reaction to seeming dangers to one's self-worth thereby creating a feeling of dominance and wanting to be in control (Malamuth and Thornhill, 1994).

Rape-supporting social relationships are influenced by organizational cultures and peer group pressures as seen in the study of how aggressive High School sports in the United States shapes College men's attitude towards dating aggression, sexual coercion and aggression supporting attitudes (Forbes et al., 2006). The ideology that perpetrators feel women desire to be raped and women are sexual objects is founded on misconceptions about sexual assault that are interwoven with social norms about male and female relations that directly and indirectly impact the occurrence, prevention and handling of sexual violence. This powerful and pervasive ideology thus has overwhelming impacts on victims of sexual assault (Ward, 1995).

Societies condoning sexual violence are made worse by the fact that social and cultural context facilitate sexually harassing behavior combined with individual disposition to engage in sexually coercive conduct (Wesselmann and Kelly, 2010). Wesselmann and Kelly contend that such behaviors are present 'where the situational norms are tolerant, ambiguous, or even supportive of such behavior' and men with individual tendencies for sexual harassment take advantage of such context to exhibit sexually coercive behavior (Wesselmann and Kelly, 2010: 451).

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<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, the figure 108 has much religious significance. The number of prayers beads is normally 108. The number of stupas built to subdue demons in Buddhist history is 108. The number of stupas at popular tourist place known as Dochola (3000 meters) in Bhutan is 108. It is believed to denote cleansing of 108 defilements that impede being from attaining enlightenment but I could not figure out the significance in this study.



In this research, none of the rural participants said that women desire to be raped but the older people stated that women in modern times invite men for sex through the way they dress, the way they behave with men and being on mobile phones constantly with men. A statement by Gyeltshen, a 78 year old man reflects this conception:

Times have changed with new ideas from television and movies. Nowadays, men just have to ask once and the girls seem to enjoy it. The wooing part is turning out to be the other way round. Girls invite men to their houses at night in the hope of getting something. Money makes a difference and it does not matter what time of day it is (Gyeltshen, 16/9/12).

Gyeltshen's statement indicates a change of power relation with development but needs more research to discuss this issue.

The presence of domestic violence in a person's family and the circle of friends the person meets at social groups are also seen to be responsible for rape-supporting social relationships (Adam-Curtis, Forbes, 2004). The issue of domestic violence/violence against women in Bhutan and is discussed in chapter eight.

Negative discourses of masculinity have been linked to increased sexual aggression towards women. Theorists and feminist theory have maintained that socialization into traditional gender roles along with cultural attitudes contribute to sexual coercive behavior. Traditional sexual traits have been held responsible for promoting and maintaining sexual coercion by males. Byers (1996) and Jewkes et al. (2011) contend that ideals of men's gender socialization of 'sexual entitlement, gender hierarchy, legitimacy of punishment and use of violence to assert power over women' aggravate sexual perpetration against women. Within the spectrum of male gender socialization, there are certainly privileges that award men who conform to the prevailing norms of masculinity and heterosexuality.

Men's sense of sexual entitlement is also supported by research that suggests that some societies see forced sex as normal. In this research, a rural woman's experience shows this situation:

We grew up thinking that men are allowed to speak, think and engage into sexual activities. It would almost seem unnatural if men did not indulge multiple sexual partners. These men make us feel that we must provide sex for them when their libido is out of control and such thoughts have been engrained in our brain. Therefore, many of the women do talk to each other about sexual harassments but we hardly take any steps to go ahead and report it. Our men thus become bolder and things get worse. (PT, 14/9/12).

Sexual promiscuity by women is known to encourage excessive sexual behavior in men that leads to sexually aggressive perpetration towards women. The idea here is that men see women's promiscuous behavior as signaling to men that they are sexually available. The perception of sexual behavior expressing an addictive sexual behavior is relatively a new concept (Giugliano, 2003:275). Here perpetrators rely on their perception of the victim's behavior such as being flirtatious, having promiscuous friends, wearing revealing clothes, drinking until becoming incapacitated and acting without inhibitions and being reckless. Such states of victims were used to calculate the degree to which a woman is sexually exploitable (Goetz et al., 2012:425). In rural Bhutan, 'to be easy or loose' is one of the characteristics of sexual promiscuity as described by the male participant RG:

Men target houses with women who they think will give in easily and have a loose reputation. Loose in the sense 'women who are known to be quite liberal with sexual activity and who are known to have changed some partners'. Once these girls have sex with few men, then every man thinks that she is easy to target (RG, 6/10/12).

There is no fixed definition in the Bhutanese language to describe a 'loose woman'. However, traditional Bhutanese beliefs indicate the term is used even with single women who have had only two sexual partners. This double standard (that men can have multiple sexual partners but women cannot without being labelled 'loose') points to gender equality in the Bhutanese culture. The term 'loose' is similar to the western term 'easy', which describes women who are known to have multiple sexual partners irrespective of whether the sexual act was consensual or coerced. For example, Castillo (1998) talks about Mexican women who are forced to work in the fields which men take as a sexual opportunity that the women are 'offering' alongside their manual labor. This situation is very similar to Bhutanese rural women who go out at night to guard their crops from wild animals and are forced to spend nights alone in the fields becoming easy targets for wandering men in search of sex.

The notion of loose women seems to be consistent with Robert King Merton's theory of 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. According to Merton (1968:447), 'self-fulfilling prophecy' is a cultural belief that turns out to be true because people act as if it is true. As shown in the interview data, Bhutanese men feel that if some women had sex with few men, then the women must have been having sex with every male partner that crosses the women's path. This erroneous idea serves as a catalyst and a further justification to sexually coerce and is also one dimension of a rape supporting attitude.

One man has this to say about some women:

Sometimes men hear that a girl is very good in bed; everyone wants to experience her irrespective of her looks. Whether she is ugly or pretty does not matter (AP, 20/10/12).

Another participant's comment further reinforces the 'self-fulfilling prophecy':

I do know of girls who agree to have sex with every man who approach them. Men also target such girls because it is very easy. Women believe that every lies men tell them would come true and they tend to have sex with anyone who women think will be useful to them. Many men target women with similar characters (PD, 15/10/12).

Then there are some who think lack of parental supervision is a risk factor for sexual assault. NS, a woman says she has observed men seeking out household with bad reputation to look for sex:

Men target houses with bad reputations. In some houses the parents are active participants and then their children copy their parents. So men take advantages of such households. Parents with bad reputation cannot bring up children in reputable manner (NS, 19/9/12).

NS's explanation can be equated to studies made by Vezina and Herbert (2007:53) where they found that lack of authoritative parents who could set limits is a risk factor for victimization. Such situation also lead to early sexual experiences which is further linked to multiple sexual partners and becomes a cause for sexual coercion (Adam-Curtis, Forbes, 2004).

Traditional gender bias towards women further aggravates sexual oppression of rural Bhutanese women. For example, the opinions of two women below are an example of how traditional ways of thinking oppress women:

In our society, even if men slept with hundred men or had several extra marital affairs, nobody says anything. But for a woman, it is

even difficult to talk to a man if we are alone. So our culture is definitely biased against women (CD, 2/9/12).

Another woman talks about the double standard society has for women and men:

Our culture is definitely biased against women. Men can get away with anything and men are actually expected to indulge into multiple sexual activities whereas women are expected to refrain from it. How can that be because for sex, there is supposed to be equal participation from both genders? So why is one blamed and the other not? (SP, 7/9/12).

The feedback above brings us back to the issue of sexual double standard where sexual behavior is judged based on whether a man or woman engages in sexual acts. While women are under pressure to have sex especially during Pchiru Shelni, they are branded sluts if they consent. I have observed that abusive language such as '*morem, choem, chettom*' literally meaning 'ignorant, madly hysteric and prostitute' are used to distinguish between women who participate in appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior. In the rural areas, the morality of men and women is openly discussed at work time. However, men's sexual adventures are described as sometimes hilarious, indulgent and a stud having the ability to woo many women. In other words, it is a job well done for men. This suggests that multiple sexual behaviors for men are associated with praise and respect for men whereas for women to be involved in the same sexual behavior is deprecating and disgraceful (Milhausen and Herold, 1999).

Strong patriarchal grip in Bhutanese society is another factor for perpetration. It is evident that Bhutanese women live under terms and conditions set by society, namely patriarchy society. This is seen from the way Bhutanese men treat their women. The reaction of society to male and female sexual behavior indicates two sets of rules for women and men. Pchiru Shelni is practiced in the name of culture

but men make feeble attempts to stop the practice. A typical example is found in the frequently used local saying such as '*Mo Khasho Lue sho*' literally translated as 'if a woman makes a promise then she definitely promises her body' whereas for men '*Pho khasho sem sho*' which reads as 'if a man makes a promise it does not go beyond lip service'. However, for men, the saying '*sem shom na lue shom*' is a way of wooing women for a sexual encounter if the woman sounds hesitant to have sex. The saying is translated as 'if a woman can accommodate a man in her heart, then she can surely accommodate his body'. These two sayings are paradox in themselves. While the woman is branded a slut in the first saying, the later directly or indirectly forces the woman to give in to male pressure. Such double standard views render women more vulnerable to sexual violence through disgrace of a woman's reputation. This also corresponds to Lips's theory (1991) that the power of sexuality is determined through social expression of male dominance.

In some cases in rural Bhutan, women judged other women who engaged in multiple sexual relationships more harshly than men did, an interesting situation considering that the sexual double standard is an outcome of assumed patriarchal culture (Milhausen and Herold, 1999:366). For example, see NS, a woman commenting on other women earlier about young women mimicking parent's inappropriate behavior.

#### 5.4.2 *Victimization*

Similar to understanding the characteristics of the male participants in the Pchiru Shelni practice, it is also important to understand the characteristics of the women to find out why particular women have been singled out as an object of sexual aggression/coercion. Understanding the background of those women who have been affected through engaging, willingly or unwillingly, in Pchiru Shelni will be of value to designing prevention programs (Burgess, 2007). Although, substantial amount of information about why men sexually coerce women appears in feminist literature, little is available on the backgrounds of women themselves. This is

because studies on the subject have been discouraged for fear of blaming the victims, thus leading to low level of understanding on victimization (Adam-Curtis and Forbes, 2004).

Most rural women who are likely to be targeted during Pchiru Shelni activities are women who lived in simple houses where it is easy to break in, women who lived with parents who are illiterate and humble because they cannot press charges due to lack of awareness of legal rights, women who are poor, women who are perceived to have a 'loose' reputation, and those who normally sleep alone. These are apparent from some of the interviews I had with both men and women who were involved in Pchiru Shelni.

One woman expresses how men select women for during Pchiru Shelni:

Some men target women who have simple parents because even if the girl gets pregnant, they would not be able to sue the men. Our traditional practice of guarding crops at night necessitate women to go out and sleep alone at night in make shift huts in the middle of the fields. During these times, men can be seen crawling all over the place. Some men target women who are known to sleep with anyone. Some men go to rape and only few go for courtship (DC, 4/10/12).

Woman's behavior also seems to play a role in women becoming a target for Pchiru Shelni. Some of the male participants assume that any friendly gesture by a woman indicates her interest in sex. If a man smiles at a woman and she smiles back, then it is assumed that she is interested in having sex. If the man presses her hands and she presses them back, then this is seen to be a sign that she is available. As long as a man is targeting a particular woman, any sign of friendliness from her is construed as a sign of a positive signal to have sex. Such statements are refuted by women during normal conversations (outside interviews), and they explain such behavior as

trying to be polite which the men misunderstand. These accounts may sound like men are looking for casual sexual encounter but men have indicated that they target these same women for their Pchiru Shelni activities. Some of the examples of how men target women based on behavior are seen below in the following accounts. JS says that to judge the behavior of a girl during day time is important if he is to target the woman at night:

I study the behavior of the girl during day time to see if she would be a potential partner at night. I only decide once I talk to her and convince myself that I will be successful (JS, 15/9/12).

Another man applies his observation talent to look for potential sexual partners for Pchiru Shelni:

It is essential to study the behavior of the girl at day time in secret. Then I can make a judgment as to whether she is the type to give in easily. It is a matter of personal judgment (PD, 15/10/12).

A third man uses social gatherings to pick a woman:

It depends on girls' behavior. For example, while dancing, we hold hands and if we signal with our finger, then I would know whether she will agree or not. She will respond positively, if she wants it. Some would smile, some would get angry just holding hands, I know instinctively (AP, 20/10/12).

#### *5.4.3 Being single*

Being single for women is risk factor for perpetration in Pchiru Shelni and for being selected for both consensual as well as non-consensual sex in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. Continuing to be single seems to contribute significantly for being



pursued by men for sex. Many men think single women are more sexually available than married women. Here the term 'sexually available' relates to unwedded women and women who come from poor backgrounds. This study thus shows that marriage (for women) acts as a deterrent for some men and encourages them to refrain from targeting married women for sexual activities in Pchiru Shelni.

Though women get respite from harassment in Pchiru Shelni from men while being married, she is seen as available once divorced. Several of the female participants in this study provided evidence that being unmarried is a difficult life for them.

LD, a divorcee talks about the harassment she faces after divorcing her husband:

Men in our community know that I am single again and they target me whenever I am alone in the fields guarding crops at night. But because I am fed up of my past experiences, I do not give in. First I try to tell them nicely. If they don't listen and try to force me, then I scream and threaten to tell my parents (LD, 7/10/12).

GZ, a single mother says:

Yes, there must have been more than hundred men who came to look for sex at night at my place when I remained single. I had sex with some men and as a result I have two children without fathers. I did not even think of contraception but the thought of pregnancy bothered me. At the same time we have no access to contraception in the village. I was scared that my parents might scold me and that others might find out (GZ, 16/10/12).

Another divorcee shares a similar experience:

There were a couple of men who tried to break into my house after my relationship with the father of my children broke off. One even

tried convincing me that he will marry me but I knew he was already married and that he was lying to me. I did not give in to their demands. After I rejected them, some even started contacting me by phone but later they gave up (DP, 17/9/12).

This phenomenon of men thinking that women are sexually available to them can be explained by feminist theory that an un-owned woman (women without husbands) are seen as easy pickings by men and women's vulnerability (here without a male to protect her) makes at the very least sexually provocative and at the most more available for casual sex than married women. This concept is possibly because of the premise that because a woman cannot protect herself she is inherently 'available'. Thus 'singleness' for a woman is a state where she is not 'owned' by a man and the very ability to be without men is seen by some men as alluring and enticing and even tempting, and certainly a reason for that particular woman to come to men's attention. The status of who never being married, divorced, separated or widowed does not seem to matter to perpetrators as long as there is an absence of men in women's life. This study indicates that the state of being married and ageing reduce women's vulnerabilities to Pchiru Shelni. However, this certainly is another area to explore in future research.

#### *5.4.4 Labor Shortage*

As discussed briefly earlier, the shortage of male farmhands in the villages also leads to sexual coercion. The matrilineal system of Bhutan allows women to inherit property, including farms, which means there is a need for farmhands. Therefore the most manipulative tactic that men use to coerce women into having sex is the false promise of marriage. Owning a farm is not enough to produce crops. It needs labor: both men and women. Farm work is especially labor intensive where men are

needed<sup>33</sup> for the very physically challenging work such as plowing and digging. Women make up for the shortage of men at home by getting married and having the husband take charge of men's share of work. Thus single women and single mothers comply with men's demand for sex during Pchiru Shelni in the hope of acquiring a husband to be able to help around the farm. RZ's experience is an example of such situation:

I met my husband through Pchiru Shelni. I already had a child from a previous Pchiru Shelni experience and I was reluctant to trust him. We did not have sex for some time. I needed a man at home who could do a man's work in the fields. So I agreed to have sex with him. He stayed on for seven years and left me with three children from him (RZ, 214/10/12).

The evidence of using the word 'marriage' to coerce women into having sex by many men has already been discussed. The line between coercion and compliance is thus a grey area. While men take advantages of women's vulnerabilities, women give in to sexual demands in the hope of a better life. It should be acknowledged that while RZ married her husband under difficult circumstances, she did get 7 years of benefits in the form of helping hand around her farm.

#### *5.4.5 Use of alcohol*

Research has shown that there is a significant association between alcohol consumption and sexual coercion (Palmer et al., 2009). Studies have also shown that alcohol not only contributes to being vulnerable to sexual coercion but is also associated with the perpetration of sexual crimes. This is because alcohol

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<sup>33</sup> It is a taboo for women to plough fields. This is based on a traditional belief that women are inferior to men and do not possess the status to order an Ox. I was told that the bulls will cry out of sadness if they are led by women in the field.

consumption is believed to lead to decreased feelings of responsibility and men who are regularly inebriated often engage in sexually coercive behavior (Tyler et al., 1998). The relationship between alcohol and sexual violence is complex and alcohol may both be a factor and a justification to perpetrate aggressive sexual behavior even though alcohol by itself may not be an underlying cause (Jewkes et al., 2005:1815). Many researchers have however indicated alcohol use as one of the major risk factors for both victimization and perpetration for sexual coercion in other parts of the world (Tyler et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 2002; Zablotska et al., 2009).

In rural Bhutan, many households brew their own alcohol and features prominently in social situations and even at religious rituals (Dorji, 2012). Depending on specific region, the majority of Bhutanese women in the west and south seldom consume alcohol. However, women in the east are known to consume alcohol on a larger scale. Thus, men sometimes take advantage of women's intoxicated state to have coerced sex. For example, CD, a woman from eastern Bhutan blames her drinking habit for her being associated with immoral behavior by her neighbors:

Once I got drunk in the middle of the town. Some men must have carried me to my house and the very next day there was a rumor that I had sex<sup>34</sup> with everyone who carried me home and it did not take long for me after my husband's death to find sexual partners. It is very difficult now (CD, 2/9/12).

One man does not admit to using alcohol himself but says he has seen his friends using alcohol to take advantage of women:

Some of my friends use even drinks to render the women senseless (PD, 15/10/12).

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<sup>34</sup> CD said it was a rumour. However, there was some talk in the village that she was sexually coerced by all the men who carried her in her drunken state.

Because rural Bhutanese women in other regions are known to drink less than women from the east, alcohol consumption cannot be assumed to be a factor in women engaging in Pchiru Shelni.

Thus while being single is the primary cause of victimization as well as perpetration, alcohol is an occasional cause. Exploring other causes in greater detail can be a future area of research.

#### *Other reasons*

One of the reasons women report they get involved in unwanted sexual activities seems to be a sense of guilt and obligation. Uncertainty about having sex includes sense of guilt and obligation and sometimes it seems that women are ambivalent about engaging in sexual activity. Also, a sense of obligation seems to influence women's decision to engage in Pchiru Shelni. For example, I talked about RZ's sense of guilt to have sex above because she felt sorry for the men who had taken the trouble of travelling to her place at night. Women sometimes seem to want to be connected to men for the sake of their old relationships as GG says:

I was targeted many times when I was alone. But at home, if it is an old lover, we end up sleeping. New guys target only when I am alone in the field (GG, 21/10/12).

It can be concluded that the types of sexual coercion in Bhutan are both similar and dissimilar with sexual coercion that exist in other parts of the world. While sexual coercion that are related to economic conditions, manipulative tactics such as pleading, lies and ideals of men's gender socialization are similar, other forms of sexual aggression through use of alcohol is very few and aggression by use of date rape drug is unheard of in rural Bhutan (Girard and Senn, 2007; Munoz et al., 2011).

The next chapter will discuss the impact of sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni and

Night Hunting on women and children.

## **6 GENDERED CONSEQUENCES OF SEXUAL COERCION IN THE PRACTICES OF PCHIRU SHELNI AND NIGHT HUNTING**

### **6.1 Introduction**

While the earlier chapter discussed the presence of sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting, this chapter will examine the various consequences of sexual coercion associated with Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting on both women and men in rural Bhutan. This chapter will also show that the negative consequences of sexual coercion are shaped by different social, cultural, economic and political structures and are dependent on context.

### **6.2 Impact of sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting**

The impacts of sexual coercion vary depending on the social, cultural, economic and political environment of a particular country. Similarly the impacts of sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting vary compared to other parts of the world as the social, economic and political conditions are different. The social environment in Bhutan is shaped by different legal systems, economic and government policies. For example, Bhutan government does not provide unemployment benefits, social welfare to single parents, or foster care system to children without parents. If as a result of rape a woman becomes a single mother, she is responsible for the child, with minimal child support from the father only in few cases where he has been identified and made to take responsibility for his child. Most women do not approach authorities for support and suffer alone. The next option for the woman is to survive on the charity of any relatives.

This study has found that the problems created by Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are numerous even though the types of consequences may differ between consensual and non-consensual sexual activities. While women face direct risks of verbal and physical aggression that can result in psychological trauma, there are

wider implications that can often result in unwanted pregnancies, single motherhood, loss of economic and employment. Every woman interviewed for this research had children from unknown fathers ranging from one to three children. The impact of social coercion in the practice of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting has been reported to be psychological health issues, increase in single motherhood, loss of working opportunities and damage of reputation and marriage opportunities, loss of educational opportunities, marriage break-ups, domestic violence and poverty. Ultimately, the adverse effects of the Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting practices also take away rural women's ability to be self-sufficient and independent.

### *6.2.1 Emotional ill-health*

Although nonphysical tactics for sexual coercion seem less aggressive than those using physical force, studies have widely reported that any type of sexual coercion has a range of lasting effects on the victims (WHO, 2014). Effects include increased anxiety, psychiatric conditions, sexual dysfunction and poorer social adjustment (DeGue and DiLillo, 2005). Sexual victimization has also been linked to lower self-esteem, social isolation, fear of intimate relationships and quality of relationships with long term romantic partners (Zweig et al., 1999). Zweig et al. (1999) suggested that sexual coercion provokes emotional reactions that include anger, sadness, fear and anxiety. Because a major component of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting involves sexual coercion, the impact of these practices on women's emotional well-being is imagined to be high. For example, DC, a single mother of two, complains about her loss of sleep at night, indicating that she also has been psychologically affected. Although it is not overt sexual violence, but these psychological impacts are the more hidden impacts of anticipated sexual coercion faced by women:

I cannot count the number of men who came for sex at my place. Of course I did not have sex with all of them but I did with few of them. Those who I rejected wander around the house throwing stones at my house till dawn and I cannot sleep until they go away. It is very



scary (DC, 4/10/12).

Some of the examples of participants' anger are clear:

I was very angry when these men targeted me. I felt very cheap and had to fight them off (DP, 17/9/12).

DC talks of being terrified:

It is a very scary experience. I am afraid of being targeted again and again (DC, 4/10/12).

Further experiences narrated by some of the women participants bear witness to the psychological impact they experience as a victim of sexual coercion. One woman explains how traumatized she is by men who targeted her many times during Pchiru Shelni

I get angry with men who come to my place without my knowledge. I don't know about other girls. I have to stay alone because I have no choice. After one incident, I get scared even when the wind blows. I fear there must be a man lurking by nearby. It is not a good experience at all (LD, 7/10/12).

Another example of fear the practice of Night Hunting creates for women is found in the Kuensel issue dated October 1, 2008. The national newspaper discussed the darker side of Night Hunting among women and describes with a case study<sup>35</sup>. The entire article is reproduced in the appendix C in order to provide a vivid description of harassment and fears that women have to endure the so called 'traditional' and 'cultural' practice of Night Hunting. Another reason for reproducing is that the

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<sup>35</sup> The article describes the story of a female teacher posted in a rural area of Bhutan who becomes a target of unknown local men who 'terrified' her under the cover of darkness at night (refer appendix C).

article has since been removed from the website.

The 'female teacher' being harassed is in contrast to only rural women becoming either consensual or coerced sexual partners in the practice of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. This could be an isolated case where perhaps men think the remoteness of the place and the darkness can shield them from being recognized. However, it certainly suggests that an area's remoteness is certainly a factor in encouraging Night Hunting.

Another anxiety that the women participants reported is the fear of being named and shamed in front of relatives and within the community for being involved in secretive sexual activities whether or not the encounter was coerced or consensual.

#### *6.2.2 Health issues*

Having multiple sexual partners has been linked to an increased rate of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Yan et al., 2009). Women involved in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting activities not only have sex with men they know from their own village, but many men come from other villages and urban men as well. Because much of this involves coerced sex, the number of sexual partners becomes multiple and as a result some women end up contracting STDs as GZ explains:

I did not think sexual disease was one of the dangers of multiple sexual partners but I did get syphilis once or twice<sup>36</sup> (GZ, 16/10/12).

It is not only the women who are at risk of contracting diseases, some men end up getting STDs from women. Thus this health risk impact is shared among women and men. JS, a male participant talks about his experience:

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<sup>36</sup> She did not mention whether she got syphilis because of coerced or consensual sex but she did say had been harassed many times by men for coerced sex.

I did not think of diseases but I contracted some STDs by having sex with women during my nights out (JS, 15/9/12).

On being asked why protection was not used during Pchiru Shelni activities, one woman said she does not feel scared of STDs because she believes that the close social circle in which she lives provides her with the knowledge to judge which man has the possibility of carrying STD bacteria:

Ours is a small community and most of us believe that we know our men and women better and we tend to believe that our men and women would not have STDs because it is a disease of the town where people have sex with strangers. However, I was wrong (DP, 17/9/12).

Another woman explains her inability to convince her sexual partner to use contraception:

I asked him to use contraception but he refused. I knew there was such a thing as condom for men but I did not know what type existed for women. Looking back, now I know that he intended to make use of me and discard me later. I became a single mother now (GG, 21/10/12).

The narratives above not only show that men and women indulging in unprotected sex that leads to unwanted pregnancies but also illustrate women's ignorance in believing that the men will not have sexual relations outside their own community and thus stop importing STDs, a fact that is proved false by their own experience.

Early pre-marital sexual experiences with strangers that sometimes take place during Night Hunting have been a concern for the Bhutanese government. This is because of the increased numbers of sexually transmitted diseases (STD), HIV/AIDS,

and teenage pregnancies (NCWC, 2007). HIV/AIDS once known to be the disease of the urban has crept deep into rural Bhutan (Dorji, 2011). This is concerning because it has become apparent urban men transfer diseases during Night Hunting in rural areas. STDs, HIVs and teenage pregnancies are not the only problems of early pre-marital sexual behavior. A study by Kellogg et al. (1999) has found that early sexual behaviors have led to family dysfunction and violence; the young people affected are more likely to be victims of sexual violence, absconders from homes and have substance abuse issues. Further research is required to confirm if such is the case in Bhutan.

### **6.3 Practical consequences of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting practices**

#### *6.3.1 Increase in single motherhood, loss of working opportunities and jeopardizing marriage prospects*

Increase in single motherhood, loss of working opportunities and in some cases loss of future marriage prospects are some of the interrelated negative outcomes of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. The loss of educational opportunities can often limit access to good jobs. Women who are illiterate are disadvantaged in the first place but many who start education remain semi-literate because they are either manipulated to leave their education because of false promises of marriages or they become single mothers and are unable to continue. Many women already have children to previous partners and the welfare of these children is a big consideration in any future marriage negotiations. SP's experience shows all these problems:

I do regret getting involved in Pchiru Shelni. I had a son and because of him, I cannot go anywhere and look for work. I have to be constantly around my son and even going out of the house is difficult. My other worry is the opportunity to marry again. I cannot

say if the new man in my life will love my son like his own and for now I have stopped thinking about marriage (SP, 7/9/12).

In fact, almost all the women I interviewed had at least one child conceived from such liaisons. Some women have up to three children without legally recognized fathers.

Sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting also increases the gap in gender inequalities which in turn again increases the susceptibilities further. However the impact of gender inequalities and its relation with sexual coercion needs closer examination and is discussed in more detail in chapter nine.

### *6.3.2 Loss of educational opportunities*

Another consequence of absent fathers or men who have not been identified as having children is that women's educational opportunities become limited. Both the illegitimate children and their mothers, primarily through the poverty that caring for children (without the support of a partner) brings are either unable to access or continue further education. The Bhutan government provides free education until year twelve and through to college level if the students are able to secure good grades, but the parents are required to provide school uniforms, miscellaneous fees and stationary which is still a burden for poor families.

A study by the Ministry of Education in Bhutan (2009) showed that many girls withdraw from school due to early marriages and teenage pregnancies. Similarly, this study also found that teenage pregnancy as a result of Pchiru Shelni and other manipulated forms of sexual coercion is one of the main reasons why women lose education opportunities, as one woman explains:

I had to leave my education halfway because by the time I realized, I was four months pregnant. I could not continue with a big tummy and after I had this baby, it was too embarrassing for me to go back to school (DP, 17/9/12).

The loss of education opportunities is not only experienced by women but also by children with non-legitimized fathers:

I have enough to feed my children but I cannot give them good education. I had no money to buy school uniforms and pay fees. My children dropped halfway from school. They have no employment. One son got into drugs. Even if I take fathers to court it costs lot of money. Sometimes, I do not have money even for taxi fare (GG, 21/10/12).

The right to education is one of the basic human rights and is also one of the Millennium Development Goals of which Bhutan is a part. However, if as a result of sexual coercion access to education is denied, then women's potential to fully participate in their society is impacted greatly. By hampering Bhutanese women and children's participation in social and economic development, the quality of a significant portion of population is disadvantaged. Thus, it can be argued that the consequences of Pchiru Shelni affect the objectives of the Bhutanese governmental education and development policies.

It should be acknowledged that many other social issues such as lack of access to birth control, sexual education and unequal distribution of wealth have contributed to illegitimacy and poverty. The fact that the practices of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are also contributing factors add to existing literature (For example, see Calves, 2000). However, Bhutan is yet to conduct research on the extent of illegitimacy in Bhutan and publish statistics on the issue and this opens up the possibility of a new research topic in Bhutanese social studies.

### 6.3.3 *Marriage break-ups, domestic violence and poverty*

Extra marital affairs exist in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. While some extra-marital affairs in Pchiru Shelni may be consensual, there are times when men target married women whose husbands are away and are somehow coerced into having sex. This leads to marital troubles when the husbands hear about it later as CD explains:

I have a friend who was married but had sex when someone came to her place at night in her husband's absence. She became pregnant and her husband left her. Even court and police could not find the father of the child. If she did not have strong parental support, she would be in a terrible position with her child with no support from a father (CD, 2/9/12).

Not only do women lose their husbands through Pchiru Shelni, but some participants reported that women also become victims of domestic violence where divorce is not an option. The husbands irrespective of whether sexual relation outside marriage is consensual or coerced, doubt their wives' fidelity and loyalty and subject their wives to both physical and emotional violence at home. Bhutanese culture dictates that the feminine code of conduct is centered on modesty and sexual shame and some men resort to violence to reinforce compliance and submissiveness from women, who, through engaging in sexual activities outside the marriage (whether consensual or not) are seen as challenging men's dominant role in the home. Studies have shown that men use violence and aggression to correct situations that harm a family's image in public and to reaffirm their own authority over women (Dietrich and Schuett, 2013).

#### 6.3.4 Citizenship Problems

Many women are left with children without a legally identified father as a result of coerced and uncommitted sexual relationships. This became a real problem when in 1977; the Bhutanese Citizenship Act of 1977 required the identity of the father for a child be declared for the child to be included in census for citizenship. The act stated that if the father of the child was not a Bhutanese citizen, then the child will not be entitled for Bhutanese citizenship even if the mother is a Bhutanese. The act is reproduced here for more clarity;

##### *Procedure for acquisition of Citizenship:*

Cha<sup>37</sup> 1. When a Bhutanese woman is married to a foreigner, only she is a citizen, her husband and their children will not be considered as Bhutanese citizens. If they desire Bhutanese citizenship, such cases will be considered in conformity with the procedure laid down in this Act applicable to foreigners applying for citizenship.

2. When a Bhutanese man is married to a foreign woman their children will be considered Bhutanese.

The Citizenship Act of 1977 has since been amended in 1985 with the removal of both the sections above and since been replaced by section 4 clause a) as reproduced below:

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<sup>37</sup> Cha here is the equivalent of alphabet letter 'e'. It is used to specify a sub-section in the Act



- a) The person must have attained the age of 21 years, and 15 years in the case of a person either of whose parents is a citizen of Bhutan (for naturalization process of obtaining citizenship).

It should be noted that the gender-biased clause (Cha 1) has been changed so that the child can gain citizenship irrespective of the one of the parents being foreigners provided other set criteria are met. This is not to say that untraceable fathers of children in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are foreigners. In fact, there are no evidences to suggest that any foreigners participate in Night Hunting. However the idea that the identity of the father should be known to register the child as a citizenship of Bhutan remains same. This is perhaps a method of establishing that the father of a child is hundred percent Bhutanese origins as indicated by the Act. The rationale behind the criteria is unclear but it is a known fact that even now children cannot be registered for citizenship without proper names of the fathers. The interviews provide evidence of this. One woman talks about the problems in her village:

When children do not have fathers, then census registration becomes the biggest problem. Feeding the children is no problem. I wish there are some sort of welfare for suffering mothers and children (RZ, 14/10/12).

Another woman offers a similar story:

There are women in my neighborhoods that had sex with men who came from both rural and urban places. They could not trace the whereabouts of men afterwards and women are suffering. Some women have sex with two or three men over a span of few days and are unsure about whom the father of the child is and then the men

quarrel among themselves blaming the other one. All these eventually lead to census problems (PT, 14/9/12).

Two women who were both participants in Pchiru Shelni sexual activities speak of the hardships women face in situations where they have borne children but have been disowned by the fathers. DC made a general observation about the women in her village:

Our village and neighboring villages have many women who have children without traceable fathers and without child support. Some cannot register their child in census without the proper name of the father. Women face all kinds of problems. Some are unable to educate their children because they cannot buy school uniforms. Some mothers use rope as belts [known as *kerey* in Bhutanese to hold dresses] and live in miserable conditions (DC, 4/10/12).

Another woman shares her personal experiences:

Look at me, I have three fatherless [sic] children. I have to sell vegetables and work for wages to feed my children and educate them. Sometimes I spend sleepless night thinking about their welfare. What will I do once they grow up and get higher education? It is even more expensive. I have no rich relatives to support me. If I buy shoes for them, I do not have money to buy dress and books (LD, 7/10/12).

In many cases where children are born as a result of physical aggression or other coerced methods in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting, the relationships are either one time or short time. Many men involved in coerced sex disappear from women's lives as soon as women become pregnant. In the process many women end up seeking the help of relatives and legal support to track down the father of the child.

In many cases, when the legal authorities are unable to trace the fathers, the women use bogus names, even those of their blood relatives, which technically is incest. Another problem that this deliberate dishonesty creates is the probability of future inheritance disputes based on the names of the father.

The problem in getting citizenship in the absence of a father is illustrated in figure 6.1 in the national newspaper, Kuensel (12<sup>th</sup> September 2012) highlighting the plight of women and children.



Figure 6.1: Cartoon depicting citizenship problems in Bhutan

One more example is the case of a single mother known as Sithar Lhazom mentioned in Kuensel (National Newspaper). Sithar was exploited and deserted by

Jigme after she became pregnant. Sithar now has a daughter and is seeking justice for her daughter and trying to get the baby's citizenship by trying to locate the father through the court which had been unsuccessful (Kuensel<sup>38</sup>, 2011). To date there are several similar cases that are discussed informally but are not addressed in the media.

#### **6.4 Impacts of sexual coercion on men in Pchiru Shelni**

There is lack of empirical research on the impact of sexual coercion on men and this could be due to cultural glorification of masculinity, or an entrenched victim-blaming mentality. In the case of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting, there are consequences for men too.

##### *6.4.1 Mental stress*

The first impact on men is the resultant mental stress when men are unable to pay child support and therefore face possible legal consequences such as going to jail. A study in Britain by Fitch et al. (2007) reported that the level of anxiety increased with the ratio of credit card debt to personal income, indicating a strong association between financial concerns and anxiety problems. Most of the participants in this study in fact identified mental stress as the biggest issue for men when they are identified as the fathers of children from women they do not want to marry. When they are unable to pay child support, their worries increase. Men also face the probability of being incarcerated if the financial support is not paid on time. An additional responsibility is ensuring the welfare of the pregnant woman, including making sure she delivers safely. This is explained by KD:

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<sup>38</sup> The actual url link has been taken off but a further link is found in <http://www.bhutan2008.bt/en/aggregator/sources/4?page=8> regarding the same article under the topic 'The case of the fugitive father'. Hence I cannot provide a proper webpage reference for this. However, the whole story will be shown in an appendix.

Men worry because if they impregnate woman they will be held responsible for the woman's safety until she gives birth safely (KD, 18/9/12).

In comparison to their rural counterparts, urban men have increased financial resources so that any financial consequences from engaging in Night Hunting have less of an impact on them, both in terms of economic and emotional stress. In some cases, jail terms can be avoided by paying *Thrimthue* (money paid in lieu of imprisonment) which again, urban men can pay more easily.

#### *6.4.2 Inability to pay child support*

Inability of errant fathers to pay child support especially is another problem faced by men who have no stable income. Most men who engage in Pchiru Shelni are farmers who live on subsistence farming and many do not have other source of cash income. Except for fewer wealthy farmers, majority of the land holdings are small and do not have enough area to produce cash crops<sup>39</sup>. To supplement household income, farmers rely on the sale of vegetables to buy daily necessities that cannot be obtained from their land such as cooking oil, salt, and tea. Most of the young men who are single live with their parents until they get married and move out of the house to live with their wives as is the custom in the traditional in Bhutanese matrilineal society. Any extra wages they earn are normally handed over to the matriarch of the family, leaving very little discretionary pocket money for themselves. If men engage in Pchiru Shelni and impregnate women as a result, they are liable to pay child support which can be either paid in instalments or lump sum. The amount has increased significant from Nu. 500<sup>40</sup> (as per Marriage Act of 1980) to twenty percent of an average monthly income in the amended version in 2009. In the case of farmers, the amount of child support is determined by the minimum working wage which is Nu. 125 a day (Marriage Act 1980 and Marriage Act 2009).

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<sup>39</sup> The average land holding in Bhutan is 2.10 acres per household (Asian Development Bank, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Current exchange rate of Ngultrum, Bhutanese currency (Nu.) to AUD is \$1= Nu. 52

The ability of urban and rural men to pay any child support ordered by the government is different because of their different economic resources. Many urban men are wealthier than their rural counterparts because of stable source of income through employment which in turn, affords them better income. However, some urban men do not have stable income which inhibits their ability to pay child support. Since many of the men engaging in Night Hunting also use deception to coerce women, it is likely that they have their own family in the city and not able to make extra payments on the side. Even men who have child out of consensual sex but do not want to remain in relationship have to pay child support. However, in such cases, the payment is usually settled between the parties involved.

#### *6.4.3 Forced marriage*

Another dimension of mental stress for men in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting is forced marriages in some instances. The first method of forced marriage occurs when the man is not able to pay child support and has no other option of resolving a child support issue except to marry the mother of the child irrespective of the presence or absence of love and affection. KD, as a person of some authority in one of the villages where some interviews took place has mediated many such cases:

Men who have no money to pay child support are forced to marry the girls even if they don't love them (KD, 18/9/12).

The second method of forced marriages occurs when coerced sex is mistakenly perceived by others as consensual or as courtship sex. This is because some men after having sneaked into a women's bed and having coerced a woman into having sex fall asleep and are not able to leave the house before the relatives of the woman wake up in the morning. The oversleeping men are then sometimes confronted by the parents and asked sternly if they had come with the intention of staying on as a husband. If the parents are strict and the woman has not been able

to tell her relatives that the sex was coerced because of embarrassment, then the men sometimes stay on as husbands. While some relationships formed through such circumstances are known to last, others are broken off shortly after. Forced marriage can even be advantageous for women in cases where the need for labor in a household is primary and love secondary. The preceding chapter discussed the incidents of women agreeing to be coerced into having sex in the hope that they could find husbands to work on the farm.

#### *6.4.4 Physical risks consequences*

The other consequences that men face because they engage in Pchiru Shelni are personal risks to their own health and life. This is especially the case with non-consensual sex where break-ins through windows are involved. Whether the men are able to have sex depends on the willingness of the woman to remain silent and have sex quietly. At every break-in, men are not always assured of success (sex) because most of the time, Pchiru Shelni is conducted without prior agreement. In the absence of prior agreement, women are sometimes surprised in their beds and then start screaming or shouting. The noise wakes up the other members of the family and the men try to get away quickly. If the men are lucky, they can escape safely but if they had a difficult time breaking in, then running out in haste poses several problems. Sometimes the houses are two or three storeys high. After the hard work of finding a proper entrance to break in, the men sometimes hit their head, jump from the windows and get chased by relatives and some even get beaten when they are caught. Some injure themselves jumping from heights and landing on rocks and hard ground. Without prior agreement, they could sometimes be mistaken for burglars or risk being chased by male relatives if caught. There is every risk of being caught because the Pchiru Shelni is unplanned and the women are caught unawares.

Several male participants talked about the risk:

Several fears follow Pchiru Shelni. I feel scared that the girl might not agree; whether the parents will wake up; or whether I will meet wild animals on the way. We have a belief that if men are unsuccessful in Pchiru Shelni, then wild animals follow you on your way back. Once I experience success a couple of times, then the fear goes away. The thought of getting a woman washes away all the fear. The first time with a new woman is always a scary experience especially when she is not aware I am coming. (PD, 15/10/12).

Another man narrates his experiences:

Looking back on my Pchiru Shelni experiences, it is very scary. I risked my life to climb tall houses. I could have easily fallen down and broke my legs or something else happened to me. (YL, 11/10/12).

Risks seem to be involved even when prior approval from the woman is sought.

I always have to go with a certain amount of doubt in my mind because even if I get consent during day time, women sometimes do not allow us even to be near them at night. It is a risk taking business. (JS, 15/9/12).

The fear of rejection may sound like a mental stress. However in this case, the rejection stress is likely to be momentary as men are known to target several women before they find someone to coerce or consent. In case of failure to succeed in one night, men always try the other nights as we have seen with the interviews in chapter 5 where men often wear down women by repeated visits.



One man's experience confirms the risk of not being able to have sex even with what seems like consent, as some women set the men up with a trap, offended by the presumption that they will consent:

One day, I went to look for my bull. On the way, I met two young women. I started talking to them and asked them if I could visit them at night and they agreed. I asked them where they lived and where I could find them at night. They gave me a direction to a place where they slept at night. It was not their house but a shack in the middle of a wheat field. I went to the directed place at night and found a wooden ladder leading to the hut. As I climbed up the ladder, I realized I had been tricked. The girls were not there and had gone out somewhere else. Instead, they had tied a dog and as soon as I reached the top of the ladder, a dog charged at me with such ferocity that I fell down the ladder on a pile of stinging nettle and stones. Next day I could not go anywhere because I was bruised and my bottom was swollen. The girls had left the dog to welcome me (SG, 3/10/12).

Physical risk is not the only risk men take; men sometimes would have to be mentally prepared for rejection even though these rejections could be seen as a reflection of their sense of masculinity and sexual entitlement:

Men always go Pchiru Shelni with the hope of success. But we also have to be prepared to be unsuccessful. There is always doubt and many times we have to come back empty handed (YD, 10/9/12).

Another man expresses his uncertainty about women's willingness during his Pchiru Shelni experience:

I go with a doubt in the beginning and then try it only when I am

confident that I will be successful (KD, 18/9/12).

One man says he experienced physical violence from the male relatives of the women's houses he was hoping to break in:

I don't go to household with strict discipline and *Khamtey* women's place. I usually go to women who are gentle. Strict parents are a deterrent. I got beaten up few times even before I reached the house (KD, 18/9/12).

Male participants reported that some women who refuse to have sex in spite of repeated pleading and verbal coercion are labelled *Khamtey* which has the literal 'arrogant'. Use of the term 'arrogant' is clearly an indication that men find it difficult to be sexually rejected. Here, men struggle to see that women's rejections are simply an expression of women's absence of interest in these men. This reflects feminist theoretical perspectives that in a patriarchal society, men's social and institutional power over women privileges men's ability to withhold benefits to women who refuse sex. It appears from analysis of the interview data that men who have been sexually rejected whilst attempting to engage in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting react most often by insulting the woman's character. Some men do not understand that rejection is an indication of women's good character by refusing to have sex with multiple men, the very thing that the men accuse women of.

The next chapter discusses the social structures and cultural norms that shape Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

## **7 PCHIRU SHELNI AS DIFFERENT FORMS OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOR**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter will examine the different ways that sexual behavior is expressed as part of the practice of Pchiru Shelni. This chapter also examines Pchiru Shelni as a pattern of secretive sexual meetings.

### **7.2 Pchiru Shelni as Courtship**

Courtship is described as a continuum of behavior that has permanent partnership (traditionally marriage) as the ultimate goal (Jackson et al., 2011). Jackson et al. further suggest that dating and courtship are co-related and that dating is:

a form of courtship, in that it encompasses social activities between two people assessing the possibility of deepening the relationship over time. Such relationship progressions may take the form of loosely defined stages not marked by deliberate decisions, but by various actions taken by the couple. Thus, dating can be viewed as a ritual activity, entailing multiple actions with underlying symbolic meaning, repeated over time in various forms as the relationship progresses in seriousness, or breaks off (Jackson, et al., 2011: 630).

A significant part of courtship has already been discussed as often compromising consensual sex and this section discuss courtships in the context of marriages that evolve as a result of Pchiru Shelni.

Courtships in Pchiru Shelni and Night hunting may or may not lead to marriages. The process of marriages that result from Pchiru Shelni is described as 'a matter of the young with little regulations exercised by the parents' (Barth and Wikan, 2006).

Barth and Wikan describe Pchiru Shelni as a way of courtship among the youth with the traditional practice of men sneaking into the house after the parents have fallen asleep (ibid).

The majority of marriages in rural Bhutan are preceded by courtships initiated during Pchiru Shelni activities. Almost all the married participants in this study reported having met their spouses through Pchiru Shelni. This conclusion may sound contradictory since prior discussion has reported that majority of Pchiru Shelni involves sexual coercion. It should be noted that however, that the majority of the coercion takes place before the women finally settles down in a marriage. Hence many of the women have reported that they had been harassed numerous times while they remained single. It must also be understood that while courtship takes place between two people for a longer duration, coerced sexual activities take place between strangers as well as among acquaintances often leading to unstable relationships.

This research documents several examples of marriages that take place as a result of Pchiru Shelni activities. The following participants said that their marriages were a result of courtship during Pchiru Shelni. PT is one woman who was courted by her future husband:

I met my husband through Pchiru Shelni. I was a day scholar in my village school and he was my four years senior. We were in the same school. He used to break into my house at night to court me (PT, 14/9/12).

Another woman also spoke about how she met her husband through Pchiru Shelni:

I met my husband through Pchiru Shelni. He was from X village and came to our village for some contract work. After repeated visits

from him, I grew to like him and we eventually got married (CD, 2/9/12).

A man also says Pchiru Shelni was how he met his wife:

I met my wife through consensual Pchiru Shelni. My friend introduced me to her and I got her permission to go and visit her at night (NT, 4/9/12).

Another man explains how his Pchiru Shelni courtship led to his marriage:

I met my wife through Pchiru Shelni. I have a friend who told me there is a girl in a particular house. I went to her place and she did not get angry because both of us were young. I promised her marriage the first time I went to her place. We did not have sex for a couple of weeks because she was only sixteen (YD, 10/9/12).

When Pchiru Shelni is practised for the purpose of courtship, it gives the participants an opportunity to get to know each other and maintain control over their own sexuality. Thus, to some extent Bhutanese women have more liberty to explore their sexuality before marriages compared to other countries within the same Asian region. For example, in neighbouring northern India, young girls with low literacy rate are denied the opportunity to explore their own sexuality and are married in their early years, with control over their own sexuality transferred from their fathers to their husbands<sup>41</sup> (Avasti et al., 2008).

It must be noted that courtship does not occur only in Pchiru Shelni. Another possible area where men can meet women for courtship is when they go out together during weekends to the market place in order to sell their farm products. It is also possible to meet during social gatherings where yearly rituals are performed,

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<sup>41</sup> The authors do not specify the name of the place where the research took place.

social gatherings such as funerals and house constructions. Besides these occasional activities, during the night is the only time where men and women have private time for themselves.

Other times where courtships can take place are during yearly festival times where the aged (who are incapable of travelling) stay back to look after the house and the young people can take two to three days off to attend festivals dressed in their finery. Meetings for romance can also occur when the men and women happen to work at the same place; this is possible when there is an exchange of labour as well as working for wages: often in this situation men and women have to work away from their villages for days on end.

While Pchiru Shelni maybe one method of conducting courtships for marriages, there are other ways through which marriages are solemnised. While Penjore (2007) argued that *Bomena* (a local word for Pchiru Shelni) is the only normal way for rural people to conduct courtship in Wamling village in Zhemgang district, Dorji (2003) writes about three types of marriage customs in Bhutan. The first one is known as *Kheng* custom and takes place in the same place of Zhemgang district. In Dorji's account, during an arranged marriage, courtship in private time was deemed impossible when the groom is required to contribute three years of labour as a bride payment. The hopeful groom was required to live with the bride's family without any sexual contact under the watchful eyes of the parent, which did not allow for private time alone with his 'intended'. The *Kheng* custom is described as a marriage arranged by parents where the girl has the option of rejecting the boy if she does not like him. (Dorji, 2003:6). The fact that a woman is betrothed to someone and is known by everyone in small communities such as the ones in small countries like Bhutan is likely to deter men from harassing the women (unbetrothed and unmarried) who are singled out for Pchiru Shelni.

The second marriage custom is the *Merak Sakten* marriage custom. This takes place in *Brokpa* (Yak Herder) community under Trashigang district in the east of Bhutan.

In this custom, there is a swift (a few weeks or even days) transition into marriage following a matchmaking session by the parents and relatives of the bride and the groom (Dorji, 2003).

A third marriage culture without courtship that Dorji presents in his paper is the marriage between cousins that was popular in the past and is occasionally still practised in eastern Bhutan. This practice is said to be fast retreating because of modern legal concepts of incestuous relationships and medical beliefs<sup>42</sup> that children borne out of such relationships are more likely to have some form of disability. Cousin marriages were held for the purpose of strengthening family ties and holding family property within a family. A similar form of cousin marriage takes place in the *Brokpa* (Yak Herders) community of Far East Bhutan in Merak Sakten under the Trashigang District (Dorji, 2003).

Fraternal polyandry, in which a number of brothers share a common wife, is also practised. Because people who live in northern region are primarily pastoral, men are required to leave for the highlands with the yaks and sheep and while the eldest brother may dominate the house, other brothers receive the wife's attention and participate as sexual partners (Dorji, 2003). Dorji attributes these fraternal polyandry arrangements to economic advantages such as internal division of adult labour and avoiding fragmentation of land and animals. Contrary to practices in western Bhutan, women live at their husbands' houses and not vice versa<sup>43</sup>.

With the exception of fraternal polyandry, most marriages in the urban areas either arranged by parents with the consent of the couples or are court recognized marriages. The arranged marriages usually happen between children of the wealthy, and those with higher social standing who are in senior official positions. The marriage ceremonies with these people are elaborate and expensive affairs but

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<sup>42</sup> Bhutanese society believes that incest will produce children with disabilities.

<sup>43</sup> Nothing is mentioned about how husbands identify their children.

for the middle income couples, court marriages are normally a simple signing procedure in court in front of witnesses costing a few Ngultrums<sup>44</sup>.

### 7.3 Pchiru Shelni as casual sex

One purpose that the practices of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting serve is casual sex. Many men participants have said that they engage in Pchiru Shelni activities because they just want casual sex. Casual sex here is defined as ‘sexual encounters outside committed relationships’ (Wentland and Reissing, 2011:75). Terms such as ‘permissiveness without affection’, ‘premarital sex’, ‘non-relational sex’, ‘one night stands’ and more recently ‘hook-up’ ‘have been variously used to describe casual sex. Hookups are defined as a sexual encounter between two people who are brief acquaintances or strangers, usually lasting only one night without the expectation of developing a relationship (Paul and Hayes, 2002) and (Reiber and Garcia, 2010). However, there are no equivalent terms in *Dzongkha* (Bhutanese language) but these English words are sometimes used by the literate to describe casual sex.

It is not surprising that casual sex occurs in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting considering that male participants often use lies to obtain trust of rural women as seen in the preceding chapter. While this was reported as a form of verbal coercion for women, male participants have reported that these lies were used to obtain casual sex. Following are some of the examples of how men regard most sexual activities during Pchiru Shelni as casual sex. GZ, a woman says changing sexual partners is quite common in Pchiru Shelni:

Many have casual sex and do not care about long term relationships.  
Many men and women change many sexual partners. Therefore,  
casual sex is quite common (GZ, 16/10/12).

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<sup>44</sup> Bhutanese currency



TN, a man does not admit that he himself looks for casual sex but points out that many of his friends search for casual sex encouraged by a false sense of confidence triggered by alcohol:

Many of my friends get drunk and go out at night to look for casual sex. They are not in proper sense. I tell them not to do it when they are drunk since they will not remember what they did at night and get into problem later on (meaning they get women pregnant and having to pay child support) (TN, 3/9/12).

Some of the women participants mentioned that looking for casual sex is a form of entertainment for rural men. This could be attributed to lack of entertainment facilities in the villages; prostitution for example is not known to exist in rural Bhutan and is deemed illegal by law. Electricity has been introduced late (1960s) and television (introduced in 1999 but only in cities. Television in rural areas is known to have not so long ago) is a new form of entertainment. Television programs in rural village have only the national channel which occasionally airs singing competitions and new Bhutanese movies on the weekends. Other than this there are very few programs that are for entertainment purposes. Besides television the only other entertainments are yearly festivals and archery competitions. It could be argued that because of this lack of entertainment, young men go out in search of sexual encounters in the evenings after a day's work. This does not mean that a search for casual sex is solely a male activity, some women also take part. It is possible that some women look forward to casual sex. However, rural women are not known to wander out looking for sex at night and any casual sexual activity is likely to be consensual and a part of practice of Pchiru Shelni.

#### **7.4 Pchiru Shelni as Pre-marital sex**

While casual sex and pre-marital sex may appear similar, casual sex can occur both before and after marriage whereas pre-marital sex takes place strictly before

marriage. Other than the people living in the Hindu dominated region in the south, the Bhutanese have fairly liberal attitudes towards sexual behavior and pre-marital sex (sex before marriage) is no exception and is quite common. It is therefore not surprising that much of the Pchiru Shelni activities also involve pre-marital sex.

One explanation of Pchiru Shelni being a pre-marital sexual behavior is provided by a key informant. According to her, Pchiru Shelni is a way of experiencing the first sexual act. This means that for young men to prove their masculinity they must have their first sexual experience before marriage and *Yamlang*<sup>45</sup> is one way of doing it. In other words, young men must have their virginity broken to be considered an adult. The involvement of young men and women having pre-marital sex at early ages is evident in the way some participants talked about the age at which they had their first sexual experience. Men had their first sexual experience as early as thirteen teenage years as YL, a man, reports:

I was around 13 years old when I had my first sexual experience. I was young but my friends pressured me to have sex so that I will not be left out of conversation when they talk about girls. The only way for me to approach a woman was through Pchiru Shelni and I was successful after a few tries (YL, 11/10/12).

Another man, TN also had early sexual experience:

I was around 15 when I had my first sexual experience. All my friends were showing off that they have become men and that I am old enough to prove my manhood too. So I accompanied them on one of the Pchiru Shelni episodes and got my virginity broken (TN, 3/9/12).

In contrast to men's statements, women reported that the age of their first sexual experience ranged from seventeen to nineteen, again mostly through Pchiru Shelni

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<sup>45</sup> Yamlang in eastern Bhutan literally means 'reaching adulthood'.

activities. However, male participants said that the first sexual experiences for women is normally earlier than men and they thought that maybe women do not admit to having sex very early because they feel embarrassed. One woman recounts her sexual experience:

I was around 18 when I had my first sex. It was with the father of my first child, a man who was married (GZ, 16/10/12).

## **7.5 Pchiru Shelni as Transactional Sex**

Another form of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting is transactional sex. The meaning and explanation of transaction sex has previously been discussed in chapter 4 where it is argued that transactional sex takes the form of sexual coercion under certain circumstances. However, some transactional sex that takes place outside of sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni where it involves the exchange of money and gifts. This is not for economic reasons but for hopes of acquiring something favourable in return. Whilst poverty forces some women to engage in unwanted transactional sex, those who are not poor still have the option not to engage in it. In a recent case study of youth in Madagascar by Stoebenau<sup>46</sup> et al. (2013) women were found to exchange sex so that they could buy good to keep up with fashion. In a similar way, some rural Bhutanese women were willing to have sex for luxury items even though they seemingly had enough property and lead a comfortable life. AP, a man explains that some women participate willingly in exchange for money to buy items which otherwise are unnecessary given the busy rural work schedule:

There are also many girls who do it for money. These days if one household brings in a television, everyone wants one. It is not a necessity because we do not have time to watch television and stay at home. These self-forced expenditures make women have sex

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<sup>46</sup> The study was based on a survey of 2,255 youth aged from 15 to 24.

with men who are able to give them lots of money. I think these modern electronics have become a culprit for the increasing number of women having sex with men who they hardly know (AP, 20/10/12).

There is little doubt that AP's account indicates some sort of informal prostitution. However, AP regarded it as transactional sex and none of the other participants who referred to transactional sex used the term 'prostitution'. This is perhaps to present a polite representation of what the participants seem to feel is 'inappropriate' sexual behaviour in front of a researcher.

Another example of transactional sex not motivated by poverty is KD's statement about the young women in his village:

Nowadays, if a man gave a large sum of money to a girl, other girls would give in hoping for the same too (KD, 18/9/12).

Some women do not have sex for money but it is transactional sex nevertheless because there is an exchange of gifts and favours (or at least the hope of getting some favours in return). YL, a man, thinks transactional sex is engaged in by women for a better life:

Girls look for possibilities of a better future in the city and women have sex with urban men hoping they too could have a life in the city. Of course it remains a dream for most of the women (YL, 11/10/12).

Another example is mentioned by RZ where she talks about her friends having sex with men who seem wealthy:

Some of my friends agree to sleep for favours. Some have sex with

smartly dressed men in the hope of obtaining something in return (RZ, 14/10/12).

From the above, it is thus clear that though some transactional sex takes the form of sexual coercion as seen in chapter 4, there are some transactional sex that are purely consensual driven by motives other than poverty and necessities.

## **7.6 Pchiru Shelni as extra-marital affair**

Extramarital affairs are sexual relationships that occur outside a marriage (Nath, 2011). As evidenced by the interview data, extramarital affairs are a frequent occurrence in rural areas and Pchiru Shelni has been used as a means by which these affairs can be carried out. For instance, SP, who herself had experienced married men wanting to have sex with her during Pchiru Shelni, has this to say about her married friends:

When extramarital affairs are involved in Pchiru Shelni, it is usually the middle aged married people. Young people are mostly single so the attraction of an affair with married people is low for them. However, people cannot keep it secret for long and it is known very quickly because children witness such incidents and in their innocence tell their fathers on their return from trips outside the villages and then there is problem between the married couple (SP, 7/9/12).

LD's experience is another example of where men try to get involved in marital affairs through Pchiru Shelni:

I know many married men go for Pchiru Shelni because many have come to my house at night. They use lines like 'You won't get pregnant because I had vasectomy' or 'my wife will never find out' (LD, 7/10/12).

Extramarital affairs during Pchiru Shelni also cause marital disturbances and gender violence as JS explains:

Extra marital affairs sometimes do take place during day time but mostly at night in the absence of their spouses. It is a common practice and we hear about them all the time. Extra marital affairs have become rampant. For both men and women, extra marital affairs have become like a fashion. Some married women get involved in Pchiru Shelni and when their husbands hear about it, they tend to check the paternity of their children. Sometimes, husbands leave them, there is divorce and children suffer in the process. When it is the women who are unfaithful, they have to suffer the consequences (JS, 15/9/12).

Note that JS, blames the women for being unfaithful even though both men and women are equally involved, a male perspective that conforms to feminist theories that patriarchal conditions subjugate women. However, it also shows that some women actively participate in extra-marital sex.

From ten women interviewed only one woman admitted to having an extra marital affair in the process of Pchiru Shelni even though this question was asked of all the women participants. From her perspective it was justified as she was single and was not cheating on a husband and also she said the man's wife who knew of the affair and did not really care. GG's affair with the man served another purpose. According

to her:

Initially I was afraid his wife might find out and do something to me. Eventually she found out and said nothing. I had a man missing in my life and he fulfilled all the needs of a man. He is rich and he could afford to provide me with more than what a real husband can provide. Even though he could not be physically present during farm work, he gave me enough money to hire help around the farm, took care of me and eventually we had a daughter and even his family is affectionate towards her (GG, 21/10/12).

It must be noted that such arrangements are rare. Most of the men interviewed admitted that they would not forgive their wives if the wives were involved in extra marital affairs. However, some men spoke of their own affairs as being perfectly normal and a part of being a man. PD did say that even though many men were involved in extramarital affairs, they should be more understanding because:

If we let our wives have affairs with other men, then we will feel the pain that women feel when men engage in adulterous affairs. The only way we would be able to judge if it is all right for men to have extramarital affair. Maybe it is the ego problem, we men find it difficult to cope that our women have cheated on us (PD, 15/10/12).

This attitude is similar to those found in a study by Harris and Lihn (2009) in Vietnam. According to Harris and Lihn, Vietnamese men perceive their own infidelity as a sign of male privileges and power. This trend is slowly is challenged by more and more educated women who are able to recognize their own rights.

Except for one woman who mentioned economic motives for having an affair, the analysis of the interview data did not reveal and there are no other resources in Bhutan that can explain causes of infidelity. In the United States, a study conducted

by Tsapelas et al. (2010)<sup>47</sup>, about infidelity showed that people resort to extramarital affair when people experienced marital dissatisfaction. Tsapelas et al. suggest that piousness, advanced age and long term marriage relationship were likely to decrease the number of affairs. Surprisingly, Tsapelas et al.'s study also showed that people with higher ranked job were likely to have more affairs. Men and women who worked in together in same occupation allowed increased number of affairs as the workplace became an important venue for extramarital affairs (Tsapelas et al., 2010). Stefano and Oala (2008) implied that number of women involved in extramarital affairs is likely to be equal to or greater than that of men but observation is not corroborated in research, as it has been found that, when being interviewed, men are generally more forthcoming than women. Stefano and Oala (2008) contend that this is because men's candid admissions of sexual behaviour are looked on more favourably by society whereas the social consequences of cheating on spouses are greater for women. This in turn could be seen to encourage men to engage in more casual affairs and in turn, culturally and socially normalize women to invest in committed relationships (Stefano and Oala, 2008).

### **7.7 Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting as a pattern of secretive meeting**

Depending on the social norms of a particular country, some sexual activities are regarded as a matter of private affairs between the people involved. In Bhutan, some people engaging in sexual acts (such as those within marriage and between couples in open relationship) do not need to be secretive about their sexual activities. It is interesting to note that in rural Bhutan a public show of affection between couples is rarely seen either because of lack of time during the day or because of the conservative nature of people regarding public sexual behavior. Moreover, there are other relationships that are hidden from public, friends and parents. This is because the people involved in sexual relationships may fear

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<sup>47</sup> This study was conducted in the United States based on 30 years of research why infidelity takes place. This research involved thousands of participants.



rejection from Bhutanese society because of differences in social statuses or from parents who feel that the partner is not suitable for their children. In the case of Pchiru Shelni, analysis of the interview data for this research suggests that a majority of Pchiru Shelni involves sexual coercion and the male participants want to avoid being seen, either for fear of legal consequences or to avoid paying child support. Another possible reason is that couples in rural areas are rarely open about romantic relationships. Thus, even consensual sex is conducted through secretive meetings.

These kinds of secret meetings between men and women are not unique to Bhutan. In other parts of Asia, there is a prevalence of secret meetings for sexual relationships. For example, in Mataram, eastern Indonesia, Benett (2002) describes three types of common courtship practices that take place before a marriage is secured: *Midang* (customary courtship in a woman's natal home), *Pacaran modern* (modern courtship practices) and *Pacaran backstreet* (secret courtship). In the *Midang* practice of courtship, because the courtship takes place under the watchful eyes of the girl's parents, the parents have the opportunity of observing the boy's manners, and his ability to adapt to the family's way of life. Parents also prefer *Midang* because it is considered to reduce risk of unsanctioned physical relationship between the couples.

While *Pacaran modern* courtship lacks the supervision of parents and takes place in public places such as cinemas, parks, movie theatres and bars, *Pacaran backstreet* involves a greater amount of secrecy and even close friends and relatives can be unaware of the liaisons. In an interesting similarity to Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting, *Pacaran backstreet* involves dating more than one person and is thought to be more risky because of the possible multiple suitors. Contrary to Pchiru Shelni, which takes place at night, *Pacaran backstreet* takes place during the day time in the privacy of the suitor's house. The motive of having a *Pacaran backstreet* is seen as wanting to hide an advanced premarital sexual relationship, extra marital affair or hide the fact that the woman is entertaining more than one partner. This practice

allows women to remain within the cultural boundaries of maintaining social harmony and ensuring a good reputation by appearing to comply with their parent's expectation. It also allows women to conduct sexual relationship away from public scrutiny.

Another interesting comparative study is the practice of *tisese* in neighbouring China. The matrilineal Moso community at the provincial border in Sichuan in China not only has a fascinating marriage arrangement but the maternal family has the sole custody of all children. The term *tisese* means 'walking back and forth' (Stacy, 2009) and describes a 'visitation type' of sexual relationship that takes place between men and women in Moso community. What is so unique about *tisese* is that there is mutual agreement between men and women to have sexual access to each other. Shih (2000) describes the working relationship of *tisese* in this way: two partners spend the night together but during day time go back to their respective houses to work. The man may sometimes help the women with fieldwork but is not a requirement and there is no legal obligation binding them in any way. The man can walk away from the relationship of his free will since there is no binding contract to impel him to do so. The children born from any sexual union belong to the mother's household and in no way are they considered illegitimate. This is in contrast with some of the cases of Pchiru Shelni where sexual activities may be consensual but many women eventually end up caring for the children as single mothers and the fathers avoid taking responsibility. The practice of *tisese* came under threat during the Chinese government enforcement of 'one husband one wife' in 1975-1976 (Shih, 2000). *Tisese* was exaggerated by tourism companies as an exotic attraction to attract visitors and prolong their stay by suggesting the chance of an exciting encounter (Shih, 2000).

One interesting feature in the Moso culture is the process whereby the girl becomes a woman. Once the girl turns thirteen, she is given a private sleeping room known as the 'flower chamber' where she can freely receive or rebuff any nocturnal males who come to call upon her. A unique advantage of *tisese* is that women are allowed

to have complete freedom over their choice of sexual partners and women's chastity was not venerated and their sexual behaviors not judged (Stacy, 2009). This is extraordinary situation for women where they have been given complete control over their sexuality. This is in stark contrast to prevailing feminist theory which argues that women have been subordinated by men who control women's sexuality and subjugate women to follow social expected social norms. In the practice of Pchiru Shelni, women are not only intentionally harassed during Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting but risk being negatively labelled as having loose morals irrespective of whether the sexual activities are consensual or nonconsensual.

The next chapter will examine the social structures and cultural norms that shape Pchiru Shelni.

## **8 SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND CULTURAL NORMS THAT SHAPE PCHIRU SHELNI**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the social structures that influence the practice of Pchiru Shelni. It discusses how the geographical terrains, physical structures of Bhutanese houses, and social behavior in rural Bhutan shape the Pchiru Shelni practice. The impact of Gross National Happiness (GNH) development concept on people's behavior is also discussed.

### **8.2 Geographical and social structures in rural Bhutan**

The rugged terrains of Bhutan, village and house, working pattern and sleeping behaviors of people play an important role in shaping the practice of Pchiru Shelni. Understanding these structures is important because it characterizes how sexual relationships in Pchiru Shelni are formed in rural Bhutan. As in other countries where sexual relationships among 'high school sweethearts', 'lovers', 'boyfriends and girlfriends' are socially defined and perceived by participants (Laumann, 1994: 20), the sexual relationships in Pchiru Shelni are practiced between *aro garo* and *gao thuem* (Bhutanese terms for lovers, boyfriends and girlfriends) and are shaped by various structures of Bhutanese rural society.

#### ***8.2.1 Geographical location***

As mentioned briefly in the introductory chapter, Bhutan lies in a mountainous region. The country is linked by national highway crossing through major cities and travelling between villages takes from hours to days and weeks depending on the route. Farm roads have been developed only recently and old traditional routes are still followed to travel from one place to another. This explains why men sometimes have to walk long distance at night in search of women for sex.

### 8.2.2 *Rural working patterns*

Rural Bhutanese who solely depend on their farms for living comprise 69.9% of the total population (GNHC, 2005). Young children who are old enough to carry a stick will be given the responsibility of herding cattle, and in the absence of children, old people are given the task. Only death and illness seems to release the farmers from work. Compared to women, men have more spare time because of the way work is divided in rural Bhutan. Social beliefs that men are superior to women by 'nine noble births'<sup>48</sup> play a role in the division of labor between men and women. Because much of the work involves manual labor, work that seems menial and dirty is handled by women and this increases women's responsibilities (NCWC, 2007:153). Men are normally entrusted with labor that needs physical strength such as ploughing and digging (Kinga, 2002), but once the men's share of work is done for the day (usually by sunset); they are free to engage in other activities. Older married men tend to be more helpful inside the home and contribute to cooking and child care. Conversely, women have very little free time. With the exception of ploughing, women are expected to help with every aspect of not only their work but also contribute to helping in the men's work as well which includes digging.<sup>49</sup> Women are also expected to perform other household-related work such as collecting firewood, water, tending the kitchen garden, feeding cattle, rearing children, cooking and caring for parents (Black and Stalker, 2006). This intensive work load makes it almost impossible for women to have time for any personal activities and the only time women have for themselves is when they go to sleep.

It is not surprising therefore that, with the busy work schedule of both genders, men and women find it difficult to make time for courtship or any other form of sexual relationships during the day time. Women are occupied with household work from morning to evening and then until bed time. It is the men who after their day's work have enough time to gather in groups and discuss about their plans for the

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<sup>48</sup> Beliefs that women must be born nine times to be born as a man

<sup>49</sup> The corners of the rice fields where the plough cannot reach are dug manually, using spades.

evening. Since there is lack of entertainment facilities in rural areas, Pchiru Shelni is seen as an attractive alternative. This most often involves single young men and occasionally those men with a predilection for extramarital affairs. These incidents take place mostly in winter (the 'lean' season) when the harvestings are completed and the weather is dry. In summers, most of the farmers, especially those whose farms produce rice, are too exhausted with the day's work to engage in any 'extra' activities after a hard day's labor. In the wet weather, even the insect infested paths and muddy roads are not a deterrent for some young men and so Pchiru Shelni continues to take place even though the frequency may be reduced.

### *8.2.3 Village structure*

Typical Bhutanese villages have houses scattered between a few minutes to hours of walking distance within the same village. For instance, the most concentrated villages have houses located within minutes of walking distance to each other. A large cluster of village will have around twenty households or less but such areas with large number of households concentrated in one area are few in number. Other areas have two or three houses in close proximity. This distance allows men to easily visit from one place to another during Pchiru Shelni until they find a woman. It is not unusual for men to walk from one end of the valley, cross a river and go to the other side of a valley in search of women. The following photo is a typical example of a village cluster in rural Bhutan.



Figure 8.1: A village in rural Bhutan, photo from Google

#### 8.2.4 House Structure

It is mandatory for Bhutanese to build houses using Bhutanese architecture as a way of preserving the country's art and culture. Even modern houses built with concrete must adhere to strict building rules and regulations. The majority of Bhutanese rural houses are two storied. In the East, both the floors are used for living. In western Bhutan, many houses have cattle living in the ground floor and people dwelling in the first floor. Many of the traditional houses are built of pounded mud wall, wood and stones. It is important for the men to find out if the room in which the women sleep has windows because it makes getting into the room easier without waking the rest of the family. When it is consensual, women themselves may help open the windows for their lovers. Sometimes, men attempt to make small holes in the walls so that it is easier for them to climb up to the women's room. Traditional windows are made of wood with small frames set apart and wide enough for average size men to pass through. Interestingly, even though the shapes of windows are same everywhere, some houses in Paro (western Bhutan) villages in particular have three storied windows whereas the rest of the country excluding the southern region has two storied windows. The windows are made from short wooden poles set apart and wide enough for a person to pass

through. The recent use of modern materials to build houses using iron bars, concrete and glass is making it harder for easy passage through the windows. The windows are shut and opened by sliding and is easier for somebody to get through without making much noise. Burglaries are rare in the villages and the matriarch is almost always at home taking care of household work. Therefore, no attempts to secure the windows are made.

In villages in western Bhutan, one can make out the prosperity of the household by looking at the number of storey of the houses. Not so long ago, wealthy families built three storied houses. The ground floor was used for housing cattle, the middle floor for storing grain and the top floor reserved for living quarters. Each house will normally have a kitchen cum dining room, a bedroom, and an altar devoted to carrying out daily religious activities. The majority of the rural houses do not have toilets inside the house. Improvised toilets are built some distance away from the house. This makes it easy for some men to ambush women visiting the toilet at night.



Figure 8.2: A typical traditional Bhutanese house, photo from Google



### 8.2.5 Sleeping structure

For men who plan to engage in Pchiru Shelni, it is important to find out if the women sleep next to the parents or male relatives. The first floor is normally where the bedrooms are located. Women mostly sleep in the kitchen so that they can get up early to cook. If the women sleep in a separate room, it makes it easier for the men to break in with less fear of being chased out by the women's male relatives. Kitchens in Bhutanese homes do not have modern ovens and the majority still uses firewood for cooking. Therefore, starting a fire and cooking for the whole family as well as cooking food for the cattle is a lengthy process usually performed by the older women in the family. If there are no older women, then younger women take up the responsibility. Women have to get up early to have all the household chores done before breakfast so that everybody can depart for farm work together. Beside the woman who takes care of the household chores, all people in the house who are capable of working are given household responsibilities by the head of the household; this work usually requires stacking firewood or other errands that cannot be done during day time.

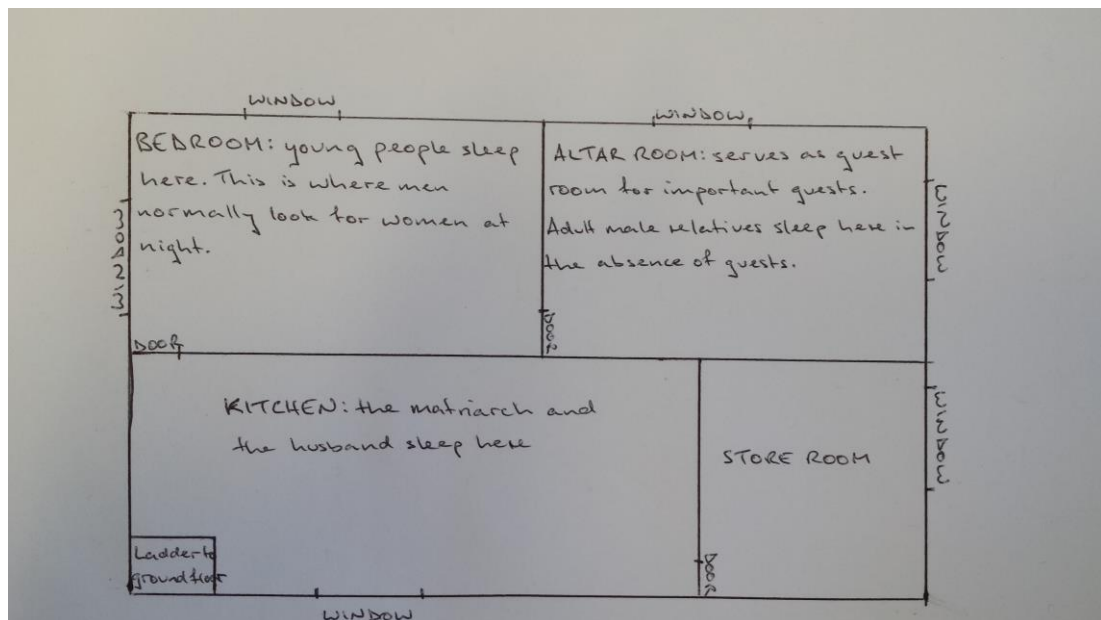


Figure 8.3: Drawing of sleeping arrangements in rural Bhutanese houses<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> In many cases, due to limited rooms, the bedroom where young people sleep is also the same room where married couples also sleep. The trick is to have the expertise to be as secretive as possible.

It has been observed both in the eastern and western part of Bhutan that some houses have matriarchs taking care of household responsibilities. In these cases, the matriarch of the house along with her husband sleeps near the fireplace in the kitchen. This is because she is responsible for taking charge of the household work. She is the one who is responsible for getting breakfast ready for the whole family and, assigning work to the household members for the day. Even though the matriarch is on her feet the whole day, she sets aside her own needs and then goes about taking care of other members who had been out in the field doing hard physical work. So she gives priority to the younger members to have more free time. She gets up the earliest in the morning and is the last one to go to bed after putting out the kitchen fire. Therefore, the youths usually sleep in the bedroom. Any important guests are invited to sleep in the Altar room. However, there are instances where poor families live in two-room houses and the men would take a risk to enter houses where many members may be sleeping in the same room even at the risk of being chased out which may or may not involve violence.

### **8.3 Social conditions and norms that shape Pchiru Shelni in rural Bhutan**

Other than physical structures, social conditions and social norms play an important role in the reasons that rural men and women participate in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. The question that needs to be asked is why Pchiru Shelni is only applied practice with rural and not urban women. It would seem logical that men and women who grow up within the same community date each other and even end up marrying within the same community. But from limited research and anecdotal reports it appears that while men who engage in Pchiru Shelni can be both from urban and rural area, the women involved are always from rural areas. Chapter six discusses why men do not pursue urban women in the same manner as they pursue rural women. How and why the practice of Pchiru Shelni began is not very clear but the following interviews with the rural older participants throw some light on this conundrum.

According to the older rural participants, determining the exact time when Pchiru

Shelni began was not possible. All the participants are aged in their 70s and 80s and as long as they could remember Pchiru Shelni is known to have been practiced during their parents' and grandparents' time. It should be noted that from the participants' descriptions of olden Bhutan, before 1930s, showed that there was not much difference between what villages or a city looked like. Except for the imposing structures of fortresses in each district in the 'city', the structure of a village and a city was known to be similar with scattered houses and low population.

The fact that women lived in rural areas even when the husbands were posted in urban areas during the 1650s to 1907 when temporal rulers known as *Desi* governed meant that more women lived in rural areas. This is evident from the popular ballad of *Pelmi Tshewang Tashi*<sup>51</sup> where the main character talks about not meeting his wife, mother and sister who lived in the village in Wangdue district in western Bhutan on his way to war in Trongsa in central Bhutan. According to Bhutan history and informal oral traditions, this took place sometime after 1850. Women who had the privilege of living in urban areas were mostly wives, daughters and relatives of high ranking officials. Thus the origin of Pchiru Shelni points to rural areas as men were unlikely to attempt any such sexual activities with women deemed to be 'upper class'.

It is interesting to note that nobody commented about the practice of Pchiru Shelni within the context of religious beliefs. It is certain that Buddhism does have its rules and regulations about appropriate sexual behavior since human relationships become the basis of many teachings but to explore it in detail is beyond the scope of this research.

#### **8.4 Gross National Happiness development concept and its influence on people's behavior**

As seen in the introductory chapter, Bhutan's economic development policy is guided by the principles of Gross National Happiness (GNH) which has four pillars.

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<sup>51</sup> The author and date of the document is not mentioned.

The four pillars are preservation of culture, conservation of environment, socio-economic development and good governance. From the four pillars, good governance has the least impact on people's daily lives because it is more to do with transparency about the administrative affairs of the government. It is the preservation of culture, conservation of nature and socio-economic development that are seen to influence people's behavior more directly.

Of the four pillars of GNH, the Bhutanese government places great emphasis on preservation of culture as a source of Bhutanese identity (Chophel, 2011). This assumed to be because Bhutan is located between two giant countries with influential cultures, China to the North and India to the South. The size of the neighbors and the smallness of the kingdom necessitates that Bhutan maintain and preserve its own culture and traditions if it is to preserve its own identity in the world. According to Chophel (2011:83) 'Bhutanese tradition is a broad term that includes rituals, customs, dress, code of etiquette, religious ceremonies, and customs, among others'. Moreover, in the name of preservation of culture, the government's policies are seen as preserving both positive and negative aspects of culture. While the government likes to emphasize the positive aspects of culture, in practice the negative aspects of traditional practices and beliefs are still followed by people and indirectly advocated by the government (Yangden, 2009:8). The features of tradition and culture become so influential and are so taken for granted that they become normalized (Kabeer, 2005). An example in Bhutan is the normalization of the practice of Pchiru Shelni by men in general and the reluctance on the part of the government to discuss the problems created by Pchiru Shelni or legally classifies it as a sexual crime against women.

One of the traditions that plays an important role in Pchiru Shelni is the practice of offering *Dhoma* (a combination of areca nut, leaf and lime). *Dhoma* is used in every important occasion, including weddings, religious rituals, and promotions. During these elaborate occasions, the guests are greeted by an offer of *dhoma* and often are fare welled with another offer of *dhoma*. *Dhoma* was considered a sign of

wealth especially before the 1960s when trading across the Indian border in the south of Bhutan meant it took days of walking to obtain these goods. *Dhoma* offering to women is also used as an excuse to flirt. *Dhoma* is used as a mark of friendship and even a symbol of intimacy (Pommaret, 2003). The importance in the practice of Pchiru Shelni arises from the fact that *dhoma* is served as a precious gift. Many Bhutanese are addicted to chewing *dhoma* and it is mostly imported from India and some parts of southern Bhutan. In rural Bhutan, people can buy in stock only when they visit the city on their weekly market fairs and at times it is too expensive for many families to have it in stock. Men who intend to pursue a serious relationship also may take *dhoma* as a gift on their first visit. If a woman is offered money on a man's first visit, the woman may take offence because some women equate it to prostitution (as is evident from some of the interview feedbacks). SP thinks that the gesture of offering money shows men's lack of affection for women:

Men who offer money are only interested in sex and not in the girls.

So it is not a good signal (SP, 7/9/12).

DP, another woman participant considers the very act of offering money as demeaning:

I get angry with men who offer money for sex when they visit. These men treat women like prostitutes. I am happier to receive *dhoma* (DP, 17/9/12).

Some men are careful not to offer money least women take offence and reject them as RG explains:

I am afraid of taking money. We carry small packets of *dhoma* as gifts and that is the normal practice. There is a chance of women rejecting us if we offer money (RG, 6/10/12).

The conservation of environment, another pillar of GNH, also impacts on women's vulnerability to Pchiru Shelni activities. As a result of the strict conservation programme both endangered as well common animals are protected by the government even though wild animals such as wild boars, monkeys and bears are a source of constant annoyance to the farmers. Before the harvesting season and until crops are safely harvested, people spend sleepless nights guarding their crops from the animals (Tshering, 2013). Some households are forced to send their young women alone at night to guard crops and spend nights in makeshift huts where they become easy targets of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. In recent times, elephants have started invading farms (Rinzin, 2013). The environment conservation regulations have been hailed a major success in Bhutan but have been criticized for endangering the livelihood of local farmers as illustrated in Penjore's (2008) words: 'Today, the government extends a legal protection to wild animals, while our farmers remain exposed to the mercy of wildlife and the long arms of national conservation laws' (Penjore, 2008:68). It is clear that the conservation policies of the government have sexually negative consequences for women way beyond what could be imagined was overlooked when they were created.

Socio-economic development policies have played an important role in reducing the gender disparities. Even though the earlier development policies of 1960s were gender neutral, more and more emphasis has been placed on women's welfare in the subsequent policies. The government's attempt to provide equal opportunities for men and women has led to increasing number of girls in schools even though many girls leave high school before they finish their education. There are an increasing number of women working in the urban sector and who identify as financially independent.

However, development has created discontentment and problems for people who are not able to acquire good education and employment. This has resulted in a large number of individuals who pick up any kind of job for survival. Rural urban migration has increased and many households in rural Bhutan are either deserted

or only the old and the weak are left behind to fend for themselves. Many young people have moved to the city in search of a better and easier life thereby decreasing the number of rural young men and women in rural Bhutan (Sharma et al., 2012). Bars and pubs known as 'Drayangs' have mushroomed everywhere in the urban areas attracting illiterate and semi-literate rural women who earn their living as dancing girls (Dema, 2012). This in turn has influenced the sexual behavior of the youth. Rural women, having previously been subjects of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting, are now also vulnerable to sexual exploitation in the city.

For the government it is relatively easy to impose any rules and regulations that are in line with GNH policy. This is because the GNH concept itself is guided by Buddhist philosophies that emphasize spiritual well-being and happiness and not economic growth alone, a philosophy with which Bhutanese people are familiar (Yangden, 2009). The majority of Bhutanese being Buddhists are easy to be convinced if policies and plans were formulated in the name of spiritual well-being. For example, the local belief that lakes, mountains and forests are sacred abodes of gods and goddesses is used to convince people of the value of environmental conservation (Ueda, 2003). However, the negative implications of such policies do not seem to be considered, and as subsequent discussion will show, have negative consequences, especially for women who live in the rural areas of Bhutan.

The next chapter will examine gender inequalities related to government policies and traditional beliefs that structure Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

## 9 PCHIRU SHELNI, NIGHT HUNTING AND GENDER INEQUALITIES

*No society treats its women as well as its men* (UNDP, 1997:39)

### 9.1 Introduction

This chapter will examine the general perception of the Bhutanese people that gender inequality is almost nonexistent in Bhutan. This section will discuss gender inequality and the ways in which it shapes the practices of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. It will also discuss how gender inequality has increased the vulnerability of women to sexual exploitations in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

### 9.2 Gender inequality in Bhutan

The general assumption in Bhutan is that gender inequality is almost nonexistent. Several national reports such as NCWC<sup>52</sup> (2007), CEDAW<sup>53</sup> (2006), and Tarayana (2009) provide evidences of this perception. In reality, gender inequality exists in almost all spheres of Bhutanese life creating women's dependency on men in various ways. Bhutanese women thus become vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Violence against women has far reaching social and economic consequences: it creates gender power imbalances and gender inequalities and is a barrier to women's full participation in all spheres of life. It is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality and exacerbates the power imbalance between women and men. This in turn leads to a form of social control that creates a power imbalance and reinforces women's subordinate position. Violence against women is also used to enforce gender roles and creates social norms that reinforce the idea that women are inferior to men and that men have the right to control women. In

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<sup>52</sup> National Commission for Women and Children, Bhutan

<sup>53</sup> Convention for Elimination of Gender Discrimination Against Women



the process, this renders women vulnerable to violence including sexual violence (Economic and Social Development Department, 2001; Lorber, 2010). Gender inequalities and violence against women thus feed each other making it a two way relationship. Similarly, gender inequalities in Bhutan structure violence against women and increase their vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

Bhutan's early development policies were mostly gender neutral. They concentrated on improving the infrastructure of the country and it was only in the 1980s that the development policies started to include women's welfare. These included providing reproductive health care facilities for women, income generating activities and increasing their participation in the education sector. The five-year plans continued to include women's welfare with no special emphasis on any particular gender mainstreaming strategy. The ninth five-year plan (2002-2007) focused on an 'empowerment approach' that specifically targeted women's needs such as addressing reproductive health issues and providing equal opportunity in public life (Yangden, 2009).

In recent times, several reports (NCWC, CEDAW and TARAYANA) have stated that there was no overt gender discrimination in Bhutan with the exception of some subtle forms<sup>54</sup> of inequality. However, this thesis argues that these conclusions are an overstatement and does not reflect the prevailing conditions of women both in the urban and rural areas. Except for the afore-mentioned documents on the situation of women in Bhutan, there are no other detailed studies conducted on any topics related to gender issues<sup>55</sup>. On a larger scale, a study on Bhutanese women's participation in politics was supported by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and commissioned by the National Commission for Women and Children (United Nations and NCWC, 2011).

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<sup>54</sup> The reports do not specify the types of 'subtle forms'

<sup>55</sup> Even the reports in all the three mentioned documents seem to draw from each other stating more or less the same thing.

An earlier study by Yangden (2009) found that gender inequalities exist to a large extent than what is previously thought. Rural men and women follow gender roles prescribed by tradition and culture and do not even think about the meaning or impact of gender equality.

The government of Bhutan has declared that discrimination based on gender is illegal through the introduction of its Constitution (2008) as seen in the introductory chapter.

The feedback from some of the rural participants suggests that the idea of gender inequality is a new idea and was only once the Government started to address the issue through the Constitution and policies that people have started to think about it, and what it might mean for them. JS, a rural man, feels that women still lag behind in spite of government's effort to reduce the gender gap:

I had no idea what gender equality meant until I heard people talking about *Drangyam Drangten* [equality]. Now everyone talks about it. I still feel things have not improved much. Women still lag behind in education. For instance, in our village there are some girls who dropped out because they became pregnant. They are too embarrassed to go back to school. Even for me, if I have to choose, I will keep my daughter at home and send the son to school. So we have to change our mentality before equality can be ensured. In reality, women have lots of catching up to do (JS, 15/9/12).

Another female participant questions about what gender equality means:

I cannot say much about gender equality because I am uneducated and I grew up in a family with a male adult. I live with my mother and two children. My husband died nine months ago and while he was alive we made joint decisions. He gave me all his earnings and I

could use it in whatever I think was right. Does that mean there was equality between husband and me? I don't know (CD, 2/9/12).

A second female participant feels there is no gender equality when it comes to sexual behavior:

I don't know much about gender equality but I have been told that as long as one is capable, everyone has equal opportunity. However, it seems that women get blamed for everything when it comes to sexual activities. If they get pregnant, it is their fault. If they slept with multiple men, they are blamed even though men took part equally. At home, I take charge of finance. All important decisions are taken jointly. I prefer to educate my son over my daughter. In order to have full equality, we have to change our traditional way of thinking that boys are better and superior over girls (GZ, 16/10/12).

Other evidence of a recognition of gender inequality is recent in relevant legislation: Election Act (2008) and the Bhutan Civil Service Rules and Regulations (2010). The Election Bill does not differentiate between women and men to acquire a seat in the National Assembly. And the '*Chathrim*<sup>56</sup> advocates for the equal opportunity for women and men to take part in local elections. Both women and men are eligible to stand as candidates for local governance. Civil service rules and regulations accord equal status when candidates stand based on their merits and qualifications for selections, appointments, upgrading, promotion and transfers (NCWC, 2007).

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<sup>56</sup> district level rules and regulations

### **9.3 General perception about gender equality in rural areas**

In rural Bhutan, some views are that gender gaps remain wide open and it will be so for some time before significant changes can be observed. Some participants actually expressed the view that current existing gender inequality should be attributed to not only Bhutan's late introduction of modern education but also to the delay in formulating policies that advocate gender equality in every field. As such, women have remained behind in all the development processes. The following interview feedback provides evidence these observations.

YL, a rural man, feels that the current gender gap is due to government not taking up the issue earlier:

These days, women have caught up with men because of government campaigns. Now we have women officials all over the place. We have women in the army, police and government (YL, 11/10/12).

YL's view is supported by another man:

Given the opportunity, girls have proved to be much better than men. Everyone carries equal responsibilities now. Whatever differences that exist now are because of past beliefs that women and men are unequal in many ways. The concept of equality has been introduced only recently, hence the gender gap. The gap will be closed soon. Now education has become more important so I would not differentiate between sons and daughters. If I were to make a choice, I would see who is more intelligent rather than gender (PD, 15/10/12).

Another man blames Bhutanese culture for the gender difference:

Because the country was underdeveloped, women were left behind culturally and socially. There is a difference in present opportunities. Because of new government policies, women have become more courageous, capable and the gap is closing on. The term inequality is a thing of our older generations. It is no longer the case with the younger generations. With technology, physical requirement has become less necessary (AP, 20/10/12).

All three participants point out that the government provides equal opportunity for both women and men. What they do not mention however are the social barriers that women have to overcome to avail themselves of those opportunities. However, there are others who have been quick to pick on these points.

DP, a woman, differentiates between private and public spaces:

My parents get along very well. However, in public space, there is no gender equality. All important posts are held by men and all insignificant posts are held by women. When it comes to physical abuse, women always suffer and I blame alcohol for most of the abuses (DP, 17/9/12).

DP's narration shows that gender inequality at home does not necessarily guarantee equality in public space because at home it is just the family that the woman has to overcome but in public the hierarchical power of men socially, economically and politically has to be overcome one step at a time.

Rural people's perception of gender equality seems to be based on what they observe around them rather than deriving meanings from their own life

experiences. They do not appear to reflect on why and how things happen but seem to accept things as they are. For examples, JS, a man thinks men fare better both in politics and employment because women revert easily to traditional gender roles and are not able to advance their education:

Politically men are more dominant. Employment wise, men are dominant. Girls have to drop out of school because they get carried away by attractive men and then drop schools. In a way, men are to blame because we create all these problems for women (JS, 15/9/12).

JS implies women are to blame for their condition but at the same time acknowledges that in some ways men are also responsible for taking away women's opportunities.

DC blames herself for her own inability to continue with education. In her opinion women and men seem to be working equally hard. Nonetheless, she seems to be satisfied with her own life in the village:

I have been out in the city and as far as I can see I see equal number of men and women going to offices. I don't know what positions they hold but sometimes it looked like more women are working. At home, I have no husband and I let my brother be the head of the family. My grandma has become invalid. But in general, women are free to do what they like and there is a fair amount of equality. I was not so bright and I dropped out of school half way. I became a semi-literate village woman. My friends have advanced in their lives with good jobs. Since I blame myself for not being bright, I don't regret leaving school. I thought I was not good enough for school. I am happy as I am because I do not have to worry about big responsibilities and promotions. I work on my land and get what I

need from it. It is not a luxurious life though (DC, 4/10/12).

DC's case is a classic example of women internalizing their own problems and resigning themselves to the life they have. In such cases, unless some advocacy<sup>57</sup> for improving women's lives is put in place, women will continue to view their lives as they have always been. This attitude is then passed on to their own daughters continuing the circle.

#### **9.4 Gender inequalities that shape Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting**

Gender inequalities play a significant role in increasing the vulnerability of Bhutanese rural women to the practice of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. This thesis focuses on two types of structures that create gender inequalities in Bhutan; the political and economic structure and the social/cultural structure involving traditional beliefs and practices.

At the political and economic level, there are four sub-structures that shape gender inequalities: decision-making power, the judiciary, employment and education. While women's role in decision-making in both local and government level and women's presence in the judiciary are seen to reduce the power imbalance between women and men, education and employment are known to help women contribute socially and economically (Eastin and Prakash, 2013). Agency and power relations, decision-making and the judiciary are discussed in the following section in the context of how these things increase or reduce Bhutanese rural vulnerability to sexual coercion.

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<sup>57</sup> NCWC, NWAB and RENEW have started talking about it but is yet to make an impact. For full form see appendix B

#### 9.4.1 Gender inequality in decision-making role

Political gender inequalities are created when there is lower participation by women at the decision-making level of government policies. When women take up decision-making roles, men's authority in public spaces are challenged. Women's representation in decision-making role can empower women in two ways when it comes to Pchiru Shelni. Firstly, a stronger representation of women in decision-making process means tougher policies that protect women's rights which in turn deter men from making unwanted sexual advances towards women. For example, a report by DAW<sup>58</sup>, DESA<sup>59</sup>, ECA<sup>60</sup> and IPU<sup>61</sup> (2005) showed that globally 'women have played an important role in writing and amending constitutions that address the issues of gender inequality' and as a result of women taking part in decision making 'the eradication of violence against women in both the domestic and the public sphere has gained momentum as a global movement' (ibid: 23). Secondly, women who hold important positions of influence will have more agency, control and autonomy and as research has shown these results in less sexual violence towards women. For instance, Raj Silverman JG's study (2014) involving multiple nations, showed that women who had more control over reproductive health were less likely to go through unintended pregnancies.

In Bhutan, women continue to be underrepresented in all spheres of public decision-making. At the community level, local governance positions holders known as *Gups*, *Mangmis* and *Tsogpas* are responsible for making community decisions and the gender representation for these positions is heavily weighted against women. Consequently, important community issues that are women and children specific are ignored. The following table shows the proportions of women in decision-making at the local level:

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<sup>58</sup> United nations Division for Advancement of Women

<sup>59</sup> Department of Economic and Social Affairs

<sup>60</sup> Economic Commission for Africa

<sup>61</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union



Table 1: Percentage of elected representatives in local governance by gender

Position	Female: Male ratio	Proportion of elected members who are female
Gups	0.01	1.0%
Chimis	0.04	4.0%
Mangmis	0.03	2.5%
Tshogpas	0.04	4.2%

Source: (NCWC<sup>62</sup>, 2007).

Women's representation at the District levels known as *Dzongkhag Yargye Tsogchung* (DYT) is even lower, amounting to 2% of the DYT total members<sup>63</sup> (NCWC, 2007). At the national level, women's representation amounts to only 3% (NCWC, 2007). Another report on women's political participation in Asia and the Pacific showed that Bhutan has one of the lowest levels of female representations in decision making (True et al., 2012: 8).

A report by the United Nations on Bhutanese women (UN Women, 2011) explains the low level of Bhutanese women's representation in governance. Culturally and socially, women are perceived as being less capable than men and the majority of women acquiesce to this perception. This leads to women themselves feeling inferior and less capable, characteristics which are reinforced by the pervasive beliefs that leadership and politics is solely the domain of men. Such social beliefs are also known to potentially discourage women from participating in the public sphere (United Nations and NCWC, 2011:48). This consequently leads to women's lack of experience in public space and a decrease in self-confidence. In Bhutan, it was found that women's roles were limited to making minor household decisions whereas men took responsibility for the major household decisions such as sale of land, or purchasing tractors.

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<sup>62</sup> National Commission for Women and Children of Bhutan

<sup>63</sup> The total number is not specified in the report

The NCWC had wanted to highlight the issue of Night Hunting as a form of gender violence against women. Based on informal conversation with some key informants for this research, the issue never made to the parliament because the majority of decision-making members were men and the assumption that was made that the issue would never make it even into the discussion phase of government debate because of the ingrained stereotypical attitudes of the majority of the male members.

#### *9.4.2 Importance of women in the judiciary*

At the International Association of Women's Judges (IAWJ) conference (IAWJ Organization, 2010), the Chief Justice of Canada, Honorable Beverley McLachlan gave four reasons for why female judges are needed:

- to ensure that courts are representative of the societies they serve and, hence, preserve their legitimacy;
- to reflect society's commitment to equality;
- to best use available human resources; and
- to bring new perspectives and rout clichéd stereotypes.

Honorable Mclachlan pointed out that the fourth reason was the most important because the justice system needed the perspectives of women while judging and that true views of women's experiences were essential for moving beyond clichéd and distorted stereotypes. Another reason is how daunting the experience for women when they deal with law in case of sexual assaults. A study conducted in the fifteen states of European Union shows that, when reporting sexual violence, women showed a preference for female legal officers but that the gender of the

dealing officer did not make a significant difference to the number of women reporting sexual violence (Bacik et al., 1998). Informal conversations with women during the field work for this study indicated that when the first female judge was appointed in Bhutan in 2003, women reported feeling more comfortable having a female judge listening to their issues that included domestic violence as well as sexual assaults. Naturally, this could mean that victims of sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting would be more willing to seek justice when a female judge presided over a case. This could also mean a woman would be empowered to refuse coerced sex when she has confidence that there is a place where she can seek justice.

Another factor highlighted by Flory (2012) is that when women are unable to access legal support, they often end up with long delays in justice or even having their access to justice being denied altogether. Figure 5 shows the low representation of women in Bhutanese judiciary.

Table 2: Judiciary representation of women

<b>Positions</b>	<b>Female: Male ratio</b>
Drangpoen (Judges)	0.03
Drangpoen Rabjam (Assistant Judge)	0.04
Registrars (Includes Registrar General and Deputy Registrar General)	0.3

Source: NCWC, 2007

The importance of legal support to women and children is evident in the Royal Bhutan Police's establishment of a separate unit known as WCPD (Women and Child Protection Division) in 2007. The objectives of the WCPD unit are to;

- Intervene and encourage reporting of abuses, promote easy transport dialogue between victims and vulnerable sections of the populations.

- Educate and inform vulnerable sections of the mass on their rights and opportunities available from the unit in confronting violence and abuses in various forms.
- Help curtail domestic violence through effective policing and one-on-one counselling/support session.
- Closely guard the identities of victims from the media and other forces in order to prevent social stigmatization and other associated implications (Royal Bhutan Police, 2012).

The establishment of WCPD is an indication of the determination of NCWC and RENEW to protect women and children from both sexual as well as domestic violence; this process is gaining momentum, and was largely seen as an internal process until NCWC and RENEW came into the picture. There is limited information on the success of WCPD but the agency is known to provide counseling services and refers victims to RENEW and NCWC as well as providing legal assistance (United Nations Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2012:2).

#### *9.4.3 Gender inequality in employment*

Economically, feminist theory assumes that the vulnerability of women stems from the fact that women have been marginalized from all activities that could enhance their development, from the household gender division of labor to participation at the decision-making level. As such many women are dependent on men for survival. All these marginalizing factors can be categorized as gender inequality. In the words of Krishnan et al. (2008)

Poverty and gender inequities operate cyclically: the myriad manifestations of poverty—insufficient income, restrictions in

educational attainment and access to labor markets, and minimized decision-making autonomy—are fueled by inequities in gender-based norms and values and thus reinforce women’s lower social and economic status (Krishnan et al, 2008: 2)

Women need economic security to live independent lives. Economic security assures a steady and reliable source of income to sustain for oneself, one’s family and allows for opportunities. Economic security not only provides physical survival but it also provides women with the means to maintain their own dignity in society. The more financially independent a woman is, the less vulnerable she is to gender violence because of the negotiating power she holds. For instance, Keating et al. (2010) suggests that economic empowerment of women (as economic actors) enhance women’s economic and political power thereby creating a more equitable society and political arena (Keating et al., 2010:153). This empowerment is applicable to women in the context of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting, because financially stable women will have the confidence to refuse to have sex for financial reasons. However, in order to achieve economic security, women must be able to be financially independent through earning a good wage or, if in a rural area, to be able to access resources and property. This is not the case in Bhutan as the following tables show. The overall female/male participation in the labor force is as below:

Table 3: Labour participation by gender

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Urban</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Bhutan overall</b>
Female	41.5%	67.3%	60.6%
Male	76.8%	73.6%	74.4%
All	58.6%	70.4%	67.3%

Source: Bhutan Living Standard Survey (National Statistic Bureau (NSB), 2007).

In Bhutan, people who have performed some form of paid work either in cash or kind are considered employed (NSB, 2010A). As shown in the table, both in urban

and rural areas (but particularly in urban areas), women's participation in the labor force is less than men's. The figure of labor participation does not include the women's homemaking role and if the women were not paid in cash, the numbers were not included in the overall participation statistics (Boserup, 2007). The invisible labor contributed to the Bhutanese way of life is child care, aged care and domestic work. With traditional social norms dictating that it is the duty of women to provide service care, poor women feel it is their duty to take care of families (True, 2010:44).

Earlier research (Yangden, 2009) found that there are many reasons for women's exclusion from seeking employment. Sexual harassment at work, cultural influences, traditional practices and perceptions that women are not technologically capable and that women are best suited to care-giving and housekeeping type roles are some of the reasons women do not from seek employment. Furthermore, the lack of role models of women in higher positions was cited as another reason that reinforced the idea that women do not need a higher level of education or that they can do just as well if they stay at home as homemakers.

Women in the civil service sector are even lower in numbers than in the national or local government. The employment level of women in the civil service is important to note because people working in the civil service are assumed to be academically more advanced and enjoy a certain level of prestige over employees in the private sector. The jobs in the civil sector are also more secure and being employed in the government offices assures financial stability (Rai, 2013A; Rai, 2013B). The table below shows that a negligible number of women occupy important positions in the civil service. As of 2012, the gender distribution of employment in the civil service is as follows:

Table 4: Percentage of civil servants by gender and position

Position category	Female	Male
Executive	5.8 %	94.2%
Specialist	10.0 %	90.0%
Professional & Management	32.3 %	67.7%
Supervisory & Support	36.5 %	63.5%
Operational	19.8 %	80.2%

Source: Royal Civil Service Commission, 2012

The following figure shows the increasing number of women in the civil service. However, women comprises of only 33% of the total civil servants.

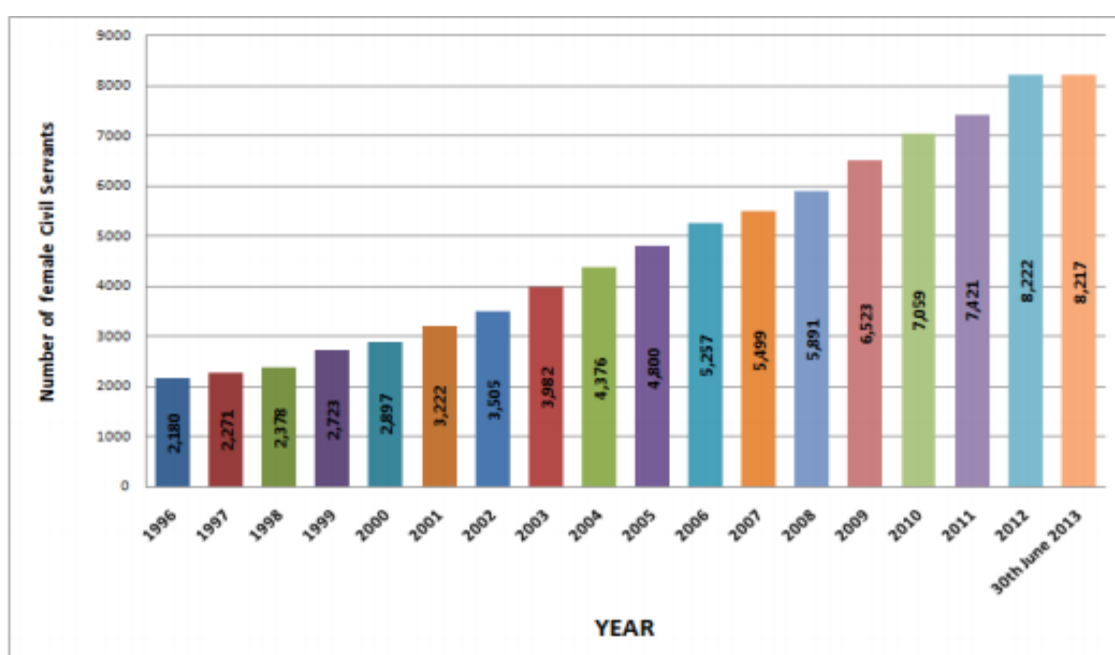


Figure 9.1: Number of female civil servants from 1996 to 2013

Source: Royal Civil Service Commission, 2013

Financial independence is another factor (apart from job securities) which helps women protects themselves from domestic violence. For example, in a study about changing gender roles among African refugees in Australia, when welfare money

was paid directly to the woman's bank account, men felt the loss of their traditional role as provider for, and head of their household. This change in gender roles often led to domestic violence (Fisher, 2013:840). In Bangladesh, establishment of microfinance by providing small loans to enable women to participate in income-generating projects did appear to reduce intimate partner violence to some extent. However, in Bangladesh and other countries that used this scheme, disagreement over ownership of the newly acquired assets and change in women's attitudes along with an increase in confidence, has led to marital conflicts and violence perpetrated against women (Bajracharya et al., 2010).

In rural Bhutan at the household level, almost every one of the rural participants felt that even though rural Bhutanese women had a financial advantage in terms of taking care of family earnings, holding the purse strings in the house did not seem to protect women from physical abuse at the hands of their spouses as some of the interviews below show. The use of violence to keep a woman in control is evident in what NT, a man, says:

I think there is equality as long as women are capable. However, I have problems with my wife. She drinks a lot and I drink too. When one of us gets drunk, she pushes me to my limit and then I have to beat her up a little to show her place. Then there are other reasons that we fight, children and money (NT, 4/9/12).

YD's explanation further reinforces that acting as a safe for family earnings does not guarantee women freedom from violence:

At home, my wife and I have equal power but I have to depend on her for my food (laughs). I give her all my savings and she gives me money when I need it. She takes good care of money so I give it to her. If she was not good at handling money, I would not give her my money. But she also has to give me when I ask because she gets scared I might get violent. I do get violent when I am drunk but she



never answers back and it amounts to nothing. We take joint decisions on important matters (YD, 10/9/12).

Unlike the women mentioned above who take care of financial affairs at home but give money to their husbands when faced threatened with physical violence, there are some women who not only take control of finances but also are manage their husbands lead a life relatively free from physical violence. The case of NS below is a good example but relatively rare:

My husband gives me all his earnings. If he wants money, I ask him for what purpose and then only I give. He doesn't know how to take care of money (NS, 19/9/12).

In this example there is a notable absence of any sort of violence, unlike instances where women do have control over the finances but are coerced and threatened. Another example is LD:

I feel women have more power at home. I do not know about urban areas because I am illiterate and do not go anywhere. In my house, the head of the house is my mother and everything has to pass through her hand. Only major decisions are taken jointly (LD, 7/10/12).

It can now be seen that domestic violence is not determined only by financial independence even though it empowers to women to some degree. Other factors such as such as alcohol and men's attitude towards women must also be considered.

#### *9.4.4 Gender equality in education*

The issues of sexism, power and gender inequality are difficult to challenge unless

people become educated. Education has a pivotal role to play in addressing attitudes and behaviors and women are taught from a young age that sexual violence is unacceptable (Tomaszewski, 2013). Tomaszewski suggests women can learn to recognize sexism, power and gender inequality by being taught these things at school and in an environment that reinforces that violence for any reason is unacceptable (Tomaszewski, 2013). Such education is likely to equip women to deal with any future sexual violence.

There are other ways in which education empowers women and the impact of education on women is multifaceted. Education provides access to knowledge, ways to use knowledge more effectively as well as improving self-esteem and confidence (Kabeer, 2003). According to the World Bank website,

More educated women tend to be healthier, participate more in the formal labor market, earn more income, have fewer children, and provide better health care and education to their children, all of which eventually improve the well-being of all individuals and can lift households out of poverty. These benefits also transmit across generations, as well as to communities at large (World Bank, 2013).

The benefits of educating girls are immense. From a health perspective, children born to literate mothers tend to have fifty percent more chance of survival than children of illiterate mothers. Moreover, children of literate mothers are more likely to be immunized against diseases, have less susceptibility to HIV Aids, and end up having fewer children themselves. Economically, the economic, social, health and wealth dividends for educating girls are higher than that of boys (USAID, 2008, 1-2). With education, a woman is more likely to educate her children. The integration of educated women into a society has even been shown to reduce extremism and terrorism (Olmos, 2011:10-13). This confidence could be translated into women's ability to stand up for what they believe and refuse to be coerced because they have learned about the legality of practices such as Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

An educated woman can also act as a deterrent to men considering engaging in Pchiru Shelni as the men are from rural areas and are more likely to be illiterate. Analysis from research data for this research shows that men are wary of educated women because educated women are seen to possess more knowledge about legal rights and are more confident of defending themselves against unwanted sexual advances. This is evident in some of the comments where some men describe their fear of approaching well-educated women. PD, a rural man likens approaching educated women as 'asking for trouble':

We rural men would not dare to go to a house where there are well-qualified women. Firstly we do not know what they think. Secondly, they are educated and we feel they are superior not only to rural illiterate women but also to the men who are illiterate. Thirdly, these women have more knowledge about laws than rural people and there is every possibility we will be reported to higher authorities on charges of burglary or sexual harassment and then later on when everybody hears about it, we will not only be embarrassed that we failed in obtaining sex but will also be looked down for not knowing our own place (PD, 15/10/12).

As seen in chapter two, the education previously available was monastic education and only men had access to it. Every household with three or more sons was required by law to send a boy to a monastery as a monk (Dargye, 2010). Thus, from early days, women were left out of the education programme leading to a wide gap between male and female.

However, the educational gap between male and females still remains wide and even though the government has offered equal opportunities for boys and girl, the traditional perception that educating women is a 'wasted effort'. This tendency to give preference to boys over girls in education is clear in the narratives below.

KD says that parents prefer dropping daughters out of school to help them at home rather than the sons:

With democracy, now everyone is given equal opportunity as long as they are capable. Between boys and girls, more sons are educated than girls. Even if girls go to school, many are made to drop out halfway by their parents (KD, 18/9/12).

An alternative way of being educated is through Non-Formal Education (NFE). NFE is available to individuals who are unable to make use of education through the formal system of schooling. It was started in 1992 by the Ministry of Education in Bhutan to provide learning basic literacy skills, reading, writing and numeric skills (NSB, 2010A).

The Non-Formal Education (NFE) system of education seemed to have proved beneficial for women, as RZ explains:

In our village, girls still lag behind because parents tend to educate boys and leave the girls out of education. With introduction of non-formal education, our women have benefitted a lot because majority of students are women. Many are able to read and write. Men are already educated in their younger age and there are only few men who join Non Formal Education (RZ, 14/10/12).

RZ's interest in educating her son and not her daughter can again be attributed to women's role as care givers to parents in their old age. She goes on to say that boys should be given education because they prove to be of little use to parents in their old age and education is a means to sustain themselves in their future lives:

Earlier, men had more privileges. Nowadays, as long as one is capable, it seems there is equality. Even in some villages, the village

heads are women. However, if I am in a tight position and had to choose between educating my son and daughter, I would still send the son to school. Boys will never care for their parents and to be able to support themselves, give them some education. I would keep my daughter at home. Boys are do not care for much parents later on and education will give them something to fall back on (RZ, 14/10/12).

RZ's explanation is an indication that withholding education facilities from daughters is a means of ensuring the parent's care in their old ages. As of 2005, in the urban area, 83.1 % of men are literate compared to 67.5 % of women and 62.6% of rural men are literate compared to 40.6 % of women (GNHC, 2005).

While the above section has discussed how women's lack of access to opportunities shape women's vulnerabilities to sexual coercion, the following section examines how violence against women feed and how it exacerbates the sexual exploitation inherent in the practices of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

## **9.5 Violence against women**

Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting practices that involve violence are also shaped by other forms of violence against women. However, the forms of violence in this research can be categorized under two classifications, general patterns of violence that exist alongside Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting and violence that is uniquely a part of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting practices. The involvement of various forms of violence that exist as a part of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting has already been discussed in chapter 5. Discussed in this section is the general form of violence against women that particularly disadvantages women and makes women vulnerable to sexual coercion.

## **9.6 Gender violence against women in Bhutan**

In many regions, domestic violence against women is justified in the name of culture. Meeto and Mirza (2007) argue that domestic violence is a world-wide phenomenon and is ubiquitous regardless of race, class and age. Patriarchal cultures in particular use violence to control the weaker and vulnerable members of its communities, a control that is economic, political and social. In Bhutan, the general assumption is that there is low-violence culture as shown by CEDAW (2006) and NCWC (2007) reports. Low-violence cultures are supposed to grant a higher degree of autonomy for women outside their homes as well as within the households. Such a culture is also assumed to impose strong sanctions against interpersonal violence and does not define masculinity in terms of male dominance and ensures equality across the genders. These progressive qualities are seen to be absent in societies where female honor is linked to family status and, community dignity and in communities where male is seen as the defender of that honor (Meeto and Mirza, 2007). The recent Domestic Violence Prevention Bill (2012) introduced in Bhutan may not necessarily be evidence that Bhutan is a 'low violence culture', but it does demonstrate that the government wants to address the issues arising from violent interpersonal relationships within the family.

In Bhutan, violence against women rarely is reported to authorities and is accepted as an internal family matter that needs no outside intervention (Bhutan News Service, 2014). Below is an example of a domestic violence case which shows the lack of support for the victim from community as well as relevant agencies (in this case, the hospital).

During my field trip in one of the rural areas, a woman was repeatedly beaten by her husband outside her home and the neighbors stood watching. When I asked why the wife was subjected to such violence, one of the women who was a part of the crowd responded:

She deserves it in a way, she drinks every day. She already lost one of her eyesight from previous beatings. We do not intervene. It is their personal problem but I know she will die soon if this keeps on. She had already been hospitalized once.

From this observation it cannot be denied that perceptions that a man has the right to do what he wants to his wife still exists in some places as does the lack of a report to authorities by the treating doctor.

Few days later I met the husband and asked him why he beat his wife in such a manner. He said:

I told her to stop drinking and she tried for two weeks but then she started going crazy and I beat her in frustration. I am trying to instill some fear into her. When she is drunk and I am away, I heard some men forcefully had sex with her but she was unable to tell me who because she was so drunk.

Here it is evident that women even as onlookers sometimes support domestic violence if they felt the woman were at fault. This is a clear case of victimization. Such victimization from society and lack of strong acknowledgement from authorities that violence against women is a serious issue encourages these negative attitudes against women to persist.

A majority of crimes against women go unreported in Bhutan and sexual crimes against women have often been dubbed the 'silent crime'. The Bhutanese National Statistics Bureau (NSB) report (2010B:232) on sexual offences against women and children show that only a few of the cases are reported. The document shows a total of 50 recorded sexual crimes in 2009 yet sexual assaults against women on daily and weekly basis are reported in the media (Drukpa, 2013). The figure below is another example indicating the low level of reported crimes against women.

## Domestic violence, 2008-2011



## Breakdown of types of abuse

2008 - July 2012

Assault	1%
Sexual harassment	1%
Mental health	1%
Alcohol & Drug abuse	3%
Denial of Resources Opportunities & Services	30%
Child labour	1%
Sexual exploitation	1%
Rape	2%
Alcohol & Drug Abuse	3%
Physical abuse	49%

Data: RENEW, 2008-2011

Figure 9.2: Number of reported crimes committed against women from 2008 to 2011



The passing of the Domestic Violence Prevention Bill (2012) by the parliament is also another indication that the government is becoming aware of the growing problems of domestic violence.

### **9.7 Wider social norms and social structures that shape Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting**

Another dimension that shape Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are wider traditional practices and cultural beliefs, family structures, and prejudices and stereotypes. Such inequalities take away power from women and increase the power of men increasing the likelihood of perpetration. This in turn intensifies women's vulnerabilities to Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

#### *9.7.1 Traditional practices and cultural beliefs*

There are several bodies of scholarship that point to social norms determining gender roles, beliefs and practices. Misogynistic cultural norms are produced by gendered social, political and economic hierarchies (Alexandra, 2010: 17). Social norms such as traditional beliefs that women should fulfill the sexual desires of men and the association of sexual act as a conquest through heterosexual performance allow society to normalize practices such as sexual coercion (Jewkes, et al., 2011).

Cultural views about women, ethnicity, race and other social constructions of sexuality further weaken women's ability to confront and prevent sexual crimes. For example, Flood and Pease (2006) suggest that sexist and patriarchal views are responsible for attitudes towards violence. They contend that Asian cultural attitudes emphasizing female chastity and keeping sexual matters just between the partners could be seen as responsible for creating a pattern of believing that women are responsible for sexual rape and coercion. Even among Asian

communities, inter-ethnic differences played a role in shaping attitudes towards sexual coercion (Flood and Pease, 2006).

Similarly, Bhutanese culture is known to subjugate and position women in an inferior position to men (NCWC, 2007) and this has been accepted by many rural women as a part of their lives. The majority of rural women participants interviewed saw themselves as being in a much inferior position to men, were envious of men, and lamented about their own sufferings, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Many said they would prefer to be a man rather than a woman, which perhaps is also an indication of recognition of men's advantages. This is very obvious from the way women describe their own position and compare it to men in their communities. For instance, SP, a woman, talks about her woes in being a woman:

I wish I was born a man. For a woman, when she is uneducated she has to rely on her physical strength to earn her livelihood and we cannot compete with men physically and we cannot move anywhere outside our village for work. Men can do whatever they want. Even strangers come to our place looking for sex and get women pregnant (SP, 7/9/12).

A second woman complains about her restriction as a woman:

I wish I was not born a woman. We have to go through all kinds of problems, physical as well as emotional. Our movements are restricted by children. We have to worry about our home all the time. Men have less worry and they can do what they want (PT, 14/9/12).

A third woman also talks about the advantages of being a man:

I see that men have more opportunities to do anything they like. Even though men have to pay child support, it is easy to solve problems with money. Men do not have to go through other problems faced by women. Therefore, even I wish I was born a man sometimes (GZ, 16/10/12).

The problems faced by the women above conform to feminist theories that women's roles as care givers and their sexual vulnerabilities deprive them of many opportunities.

Prejudices and stereotypes sometimes overlap with religious beliefs and traditional practices since many cultures originate from religion. In Bhutan Buddhism is the state religion and as seen in the preceding chapter, it plays a very significant role in shaping social structures in Bhutan which in turn creates prejudices and stereotypes where women are seen as less capable than men. Bhutanese Buddhists believe that a better rebirth will be ensured if they are able to partake in any kind of religious activities. Joining a monastery or nunnery is one way of achieving that objective. However, even here, women's role as caregivers seems to hinder women's participation in religious activities thereby depriving them of a better 'afterlife' but at the same time denying them opportunities in the present. Two women's feedback provides evidence of this:

I think men are in a better position. If I had been a man, I would have the opportunity of joining monkhood. Men do not have to face any women's problems such as giving birth and minding houses. From time to time, I do wish I was a man (DC, 4/10/12).

RZ shares a similar story:

I feel men are in a better position. They have nothing to hold them back. We have children, parents, household to take care of. If a woman has an illegitimate child, it is very difficult for her to find a husband. I too wish I was a man sometimes. I regret not being able to attend religious sermons (RZ, 14/10/12).

Even men support the notion that women have less opportunity to join a religious order because of their nurturing role:

Physically, if women want to join the religious order, their nurturing roles attach them to too many materialistic things and cannot join nunnery or be free of any attachment (JS, 15/9/12).

As a result, even these factors eventually lead to women becoming victims of sexual violence. The existence of prejudices is expressed in YD's opinion:

I am happy to be born as a man. I think people take women's form because of their bad karma. I am scared of all the problems borne by women especially illegitimate babies (TN, 3/9/12).

This idea is supported by another man:

I consider myself lucky to be a man because women face many physical as well as emotional problems. Women are born women because they have accumulated bad karma in their past lives and hence they always suffer (YD, 10/10/12).

In this research, almost all the male participants used religious and cultural beliefs to justify their superiority over women. For example, NT uses a Bhutanese saying:

I am lucky being a man. Culturally, we have lots of differences. We have a saying 'a woman is like a thumb and a man like an arm' which itself creates the difference in significance (NT, 4/10/12).

Another man also expresses this idea similarly:

Even from our religious point of view, women are supposed to be *Kerab gu* [nine generations sometimes known as nine noble births] inferior to men. So I am happy as a man. I do feel women are inferior in many ways (JS, 15/9/12).

Both NT's and JS's attitude are similar to Christian beliefs that a woman is created out of a man's rib (which is located under a man's arm, therefore symbolically under his protection, but also his authority). This therefore sets up a social relationship in which one gender (the woman) is positioned as inferior.

Women are not only disadvantaged by religious and cultural beliefs. The very fact physiology of a woman's body is seen to encourage sexual advances as PD, a rural man, explains:

I do not like the position of women at all. Women carry their own enemy<sup>64</sup> [meaning vagina] within their body. I would not want to suffer what they suffer. I am lucky to be a man (PD, 15/10/12).

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<sup>64</sup> There is a Bhutanese saying that women carry their own enemy i.e. by virtue of being born a woman, a woman's vagina invites men's attention.

This statement is further supported by another participant AP:

I do not envy women's position. They get raped, pregnant and have many sufferings. So I feel I am in a much better position (AP, 20/10/12).

In recent times, men have even expressed resentment over the recent involvement by women in the field of men's sports. Women have started playing a traditional dart game known as *Khuru*. *Khuru* was an exclusively male game and in the past, women have even been banned from touching the darts before a major tournament lest it passes on bad luck and diminish the chance of winning. A typical response from a rural man shows his reluctance to let women be involved in the game and his unhappiness at the turn of events in recent times:

With the new rules and campaign by the government, there seems to be more equality. The olden days of saying that there is a difference of nine noble births between men and women seem to be disappearing. However, I cannot help thinking that men should do their own work and women should do women's work and these two should not be mixed. With office work it is all right but with farm work, I think it is not right. A woman plowing a field is unthinkable. Even in sports, women have started playing men's sports. For example, women have started playing men's game *Khuru* which does not suit women at all (RG, 6/10/12).

A few women however seem to be satisfied to be women but those who did were women who faced little hardships in their lives. For example, two women talk about being happy being women:

I never wished I was a man and I am happy as I am. If we are not able to earn also, husbands support us. I know many women face physical

abuse but I have never experienced that. Somehow I am happy with my position and have enjoyed myself being a woman. Maybe it is because I am in a good position and have no husband to abuse me. My family support me in bringing up my children and I do face some financial problems but it is not much (DP, 17/9/12).

Another woman who does not mind being a woman is NS:

I feel lucky to be born as a woman. We have more mental peace. I just have to worry about household work and my husband earns for the family. Maybe because I am more dominant and there is no violence between us. Even if I pick up a fight, he doesn't answer back. Even though I am a woman and did face all kinds of problems in the past, I never envied men. I am happy as myself. Men go around making [illegitimate] babies everywhere (NS, 19/9/12).

There is no doubt that both these women enjoy a considerable amount of agency, autonomy and family support.

The narratives above clearly show a sense of women suffering from inferiority just by virtue of being a woman. However, it must not be forgotten that limited research into the experiences of men cannot provide a clear analysis of gender discrimination. Women may see men as having lesser problems but without more research is hard to verify.

### *9.7.2 Family structures*

In Bhutan, gender inequality stems from socially constructed structures such as gender roles that start right from the birth. Birth inequality, a preference for boys over girls at birth, characterizes many male dominated societies (Sen, 2001). In contrast, in Bhutan, many families rejoice over a birth of a girl. In rural Bhutan

where majority of Bhutanese live, many parents see the birth of a girl as a means to secure a future care giver in times of old age. This is because rural Bhutanese traditions see women as the lifelong care givers of older people within a household. Because property is passed down to the women, women's mobility is even more restricted as they are tied to their ancestral land. While inheritance may seem like empowering women in many parts of the world, Pain and Pema (2004) argue that it may not be the case in Bhutan where:

matrilineal systems that are culture specific rather than generalised may have acted to keep women in an inferior position, reflecting both the weak institution of marriage and the locus of power within the monastic establishments in a theocratic state. Since the 1950s and land legislation that has increasingly commoditized land, the ownership of land by women may have worked to their economic advantage. However, this would be most strongly felt in areas with good market access, which many parts of Bhutan do not have. Ownership of land in the remoter parts of the country may do little to enhance the position of women, given their limited visibility in public arenas and the need to maintain the subsistence dimension of their livelihood (Pain and Pema, 2004: 421).

It is evident that even traditions that are supposed to empower women can in fact disempower women if the right conditions are not met. As a result of a traditional care giving role and inheritance system, many unmarried women consent to have sex during Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting in the hope of either obtaining a husband to help around the farm or to have children so that their own future is ensured. The evidence of such dynamics is provided in chapter 5 (see section on labour shortage).

Steger et al. (2008) argue that in other previously matrilineal societies such as the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, women held



significant more control over their husbands in their role as *giagia* (meaning giver) and even more so women's position appeared stronger when the post-marital residence was matrilineal. However, several factors have led to a decline in recent years of this matrilineal system including: colonial-era alienation, patriarchal land laws, promotion of male education, women's exclusion from public office and politics, and increasing population (Steger et al., 2008: viii-x). It could be imagined that it may not be long before the matrilineal system declines also in Bhutan because as the government advocates more and more for gender equality, men may start to demand their share in the family property. However, this could also mean that if properties are to be shared between sons and daughters, then the role of care giver and provider of care for aging parents may also begin to be shared.

The next chapter will examine the changes in the practice of Pchiru Shelni over the years and discuss the future of both Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting.

## **10 CHANGES IN PCHIRU SHELNI**

### **10.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines how development processes such as introduction of electricity, communication and transport infrastructures and changes in construction styles in Bhutan have impacted the practice of Pchiru Shelni. It also discusses the effect of amendments to the laws on sexual coercion and child support on Pchiru Shelni. Finally, this chapter discusses the future of Pchiru Shelni.

### **10.2 Impact of development on the practice of Pchiru Shelni**

The effects of modernization are roughly predictable because they are closely linked with socioeconomic changes leading to visible consequences. Changes in modernization and the resultant socioeconomic changes are reflected in changing values that reshape religious beliefs, gender roles and sexual norms (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). For instance, in Bolivia<sup>65</sup>, the impact of modernization on sexuality is associated with accelerated rate of sexual maturity, increased access to money leading to an increase in transactional sex and a decline in societal sanctions against unapproved sexual behavior (Stieglitz et al., 2012).

Just as modernization affects social values, there is no doubt that inventions and technological advances (such as the introduction of electricity, motor vehicles and even the advances in household appliances) have brought about social changes. One illustration of social change is the sexual revolution. For example, in a separate study by Greenwood and Guner (2009), in 1900, only six percent of teenage unmarried girls engaged in premarital sex whereas by 2002, 75% experienced pre-

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<sup>65</sup> Bolivia study is used because similar studies from other countries could not be found for reference.

marital sex<sup>66</sup>. This is in a large part attributable to availability of reliable contraception. Similarly, development processes in Bhutan has similar impacts on social behavior. For instance, the introduction of electricity, mobile phones and television is changing how the practice of Pchiru Shelni is being carried out.

### *10.2.1 Electricity*

As a result of electrification, the overall workload of rural Bhutanese people has reduced and there was a corresponding improvement in health (Obrechtis, 2010). The introduction of electricity into rural Bhutan has enabled rural people to protect their domestic animals from wild life but also from men who attempt to break into windows. Male participants in this study complained that because of lights placed outside homes, they could be spotted from a distance and have to take refuge behind bushes to wait for the right time whereas earlier they could approach the house itself and hide behind the wall or other available spaces and climb windows directly once everyone goes to sleep. Thus, some degree of inconvenience for those wanting to engage in the practice of in Pchiru Shelni has already been created by the introduction of electricity.

Two male rural participants explain what it meant for them:

We have to watch the house from far and if we are lucky the people in the houses will put off the light around the houses too when they go to sleep (RG, 6/10/12).

JS, another man, talks about the 'risks' men face at night because of electricity:

There are no hiding places near the houses. We are afraid we might be caught even before we are able to touch the women. Instead of

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<sup>66</sup> The place of this study is not specified.

having sex, we might end up getting beaten (JS, 15/9/12).

It is possible that the introduction of electricity has decreased the practice as secretly accessing through the windows is proving to be increasingly difficult.

### *10.2.2 Mobile Phones and Internet*

In Bhutan the association of internet and mobile with sexual predators is not known due to lack of empirical data. However, mobile phones have changed the sexual behavior of rural men and women to a great extent. The utility of mobile technology has grown at a rapid rate and not only is it used for conducting business but also for interpersonal communication and it is easily imagined that mobile phones play a role in Pchiru Shelni.

The telecom company of Bhutan reported that 590,000 people subscribed to mobile phone connection in 2013 while Bhutan's population is less than 700,000 (GNHC, 2005), mobile phone use therefore seems ubiquitous. During the field work for this study, it was observed that there are some illiterate people who use mobile phones but many of them ask someone else to make a call on their behalf as they could not operate the phones themselves.

Access to and use of the internet is increasing at a corresponding level however, whilst it is necessary to at least be semiliterate to use the internet, no such limitation exists for using a mobile phone. While the urban literate may use mobiles both for texting and conversation, it is more likely that rural people use them mostly for conversations.

Besides other uses, mobile phones seem to have made meetings easier for both men and women to fix dates for sexual activities a 'fact' borne out by observations that older people blame mobile phones for the increasing 'immoral' behavior of young women. One 89 year-old man questions the carefree sexual behavior of

modern young women:

These days, young girls have become so shameless. They seem to be on the phone all the time and meeting strangers that they have not even met before and then having sexual relationship. These girls do not care whether the men are from east west or south. Whether they are our own people or outsiders, whether they are criminals, alcoholics or druggies they [women] do not care (Sigay, 15/9/12).

The opinion that young women are involved in immoral behavior is shared by an 88 year-old woman:

When I was young, I knew how to act like a lady. These days, young girls have become so confident that they themselves chase young men using mobile phones. Even parents cannot control them now (Pem, 17/10/12).

A similar opinion is communicated by another sixty five year old man:

The biggest culprit these days are the mobile phones. It seems like young women do not need to know the background of unknown strangers as long as they [strangers]) respond charmingly and a few gifts are given after meeting one or two times. Young men and women use mobile phones to arrange time for sexual activities (Gem, 18/10/12).

For some men, mobile phones seem to have made arranging sexual activities during Pchiru Shelni easier, as a forty nine year old man describes:

Mobile phone has made it even easier. We can find out where the girl is sleeping in case of consensual arrangements and we can plan

how to avoid relatives during break ins. In fact it has become more interesting and enjoyable (AP, 20/1012).

Note that all three of the older participants blame the women for engaging in 'inappropriate' sexual activities even though men were equally involved. The changes in the women's behavior also reflect the changing attitudes of the young which are more liberal and the deviation from the traditional conservative perceptions towards sexual behavior.

### *10.2.3 Change in construction style*

Modernization has also impacted the way constructions are carried out in Bhutan thereby influencing how Pchiru Shelni practice is carried out. There are two types of traditional construction in Bhutan. While the eastern part of the country has constructions based on unreinforced masonry-bearing timber floors that are sometimes shaped by roughly shaped stones set in a mud mortar, the western part of Bhutan has earthen constructions. The windows known as *Rabsel* are the most prominent feature of Bhutanese architecture, and are prominent in both private and official buildings (Langenbach, 2010: 19-22). The windows are shaped in the same design throughout the country. With development and modernization, there have been drastic changes in the material used to construct houses. The exceptionally low cost of building a rammed earth house has significant advantages over the use of other materials such as bricks, stones and cement and despite their advantages, traditional methods of building have been declining at a rapid pace (Sethna, 2008). The easy sliding wooden windows of earlier days are slowly being replaced by using concrete and steel to strengthen the security and improve the quality of their houses. Such windows are secured even further by bolts, and men simply have no opportunity to break into such houses at night. Such experiences are confirmed by three rural male participants who have participated in Pchiru Shelni.

YL talks about the difficulty in opening windows:

These days, change in structure of houses make it difficult to break in at night. We have to use mobile phones to call women outside their homes. This is possible only when it is pre-arranged (YL, 11/10/12).

GZ explains that even improvements in doors hamper Pchiru Shelni:

Modern doors have provided more protection. Before, all doors can easily be opened because the bolts are made of block of wood that can be easily opened using a piece of stick. Now people use iron bolts and they are firmly shut (GZ, 16/10/12).

Even toilet access within the house seems to have become an obstacle for Pchiru Shelni:

Some houses have toilets built inside and women no longer have excuse to go outside at night. Ambushing women on their way to toilet was one way of trying to convince them to have sex with men (RZ, 14/10/12).

Even today, the majority of the houses in the villages have simple toilets built outside and only a few wealthy families have inbuilt toilet access. This suggests that women are safer inside their homes at night.

#### *10.2.4 Media*

In recent times, the influence of peers and media on sexuality has come to play a major role in changing the perception that sexual intercourse is for procreation (Potard et al., 2008). For instance, a study by Collins et al. (2004) found that

repeated exposure to sexual content on television hastened sexual initiation in youths. The study also argues that high exposure to sexual content in the media affects youth's beliefs in cultural sexual values and that most youths have regretted early sexual initiation and indicating their unpreparedness for its consequences (ibid:e28-e281).

It is possible that the same media effects are influencing sexual attitudes in Bhutan. For example, dating behavior have become more obvious in Bhutan where previously even holding hands between couples in public was a taboo especially in rural areas. After many rural areas were given access to electricity, some of the rural households have started using television at home. Rural people can now watch romantic movies on television on weekends as explained earlier (see chapter 7) and those who do not own a television go to a house with television to watch them. Through new Bhutanese movies, youths get new ideas about the concept of dating that differs from what they used to practice. Scholars have pointed out that romances on television appeal to youths because they foster hope about the possibilities of real life romance and break down taboos around love and romance (Hefner, 2011). According to my older rural participants, sexual intercourse was exclusively a night routine and day time sex was considered unlucky<sup>67</sup> for anyone who happened to witness it. With media influence, people have changed their perception towards usual sexual activities and people have begun to participate in sexual activities even in between working hours during the day time. The influence of media on the behavior of young people in the village is described by some of the older participants. Pem, an 88 year old woman says:

Young women in the villages are crazy about movies. When movies are brought to schools halls because we have no theatres in our villages, our women drop all their household work and rush to watch the movies irrespective of what time it is at night. In the process they

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<sup>67</sup> This is a superstition in the rural area that the life of the person who witnesses a sexual act during daytime is at risk.



meet men and then get into sexual relationships (Pem, 17/10/12).

It is likely that older people have more conservative ways of thinking and tend to take a negative view of liberal behavior exhibited by the younger generation of men and women. The behavior mentioned by Pem is not about influence of media content, however, media is used an opportunity for meetings between young people.

### **10.3 What is the government's view on the practice of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting?**

In rural Bhutan, people expressed mixed opinions about how the government is dealing with Pchiru Shelni issues. Some participants feel that the government is taking slow steps to curb the problems of Pchiru Shelni through changes in laws and more 'approachable' legal system. At the village level, women can now lodge complaints to village heads without having to travel to the city to a police station which was always a deterrent for rural women. Some participants thought that creating awareness about sexually transmitted diseases by the government was an indirect way of warning people about the risks of having too many sexual partners. This is an indication that the government's effort in informing people about the consequences of sexual crimes is having some impact. This is also an indication that people are becoming aware that coerced sex during Pchiru Shelni is similar to other sexual crimes and with similar legal ramifications. The following feedback from the participants provides an insight into what some rural participants think of the government's role in dealing with negative sides of Pchiru Shelni.

TN, a rural male participant says:

Our government may not talk directly about Pchiru Shelni but they do it indirectly by creating awareness about sexually transmitted diseases and the dangerous of having too many sexual partners (TN,

3/9/12).

Another man said:

I cannot say government does not take notice of Pchiru Shelni. That's why there is stronger law and larger compensation to protect women now (SG, 3/10/12).

A rural woman also thinks that stronger laws are a sign of concern shown by the government about Pchiru Shelni complications:

If a girl complains, she can go directly to the village head and sometimes the case does not go beyond the *Gup* [village head]. Our *Gups* scold those girls who become mistresses and tell them they will be losers in the end. Our village head has to deal with many cases of Pchiru Shelni (CD, 2/9/12).

Then there are others who think that the government does not care much about the negative impacts created Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting practices. Specifically, participants provided two main reasons for why they thought the government did not care much about the situation. One reason is that most of the people responsible for making policies are men and the practices of Pchiru Shelni work in favor of men. The participants also believed that men are not subjected to negative impacts of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting and thus do not bother much about problems created by the practices.

KD, a man, confirms these ideas:

Most of the decision makers are men. If they do away with Pchiru Shelni, they will miss their opportunity when they visit rural areas. Maybe that's why government is keeping silent about the issues of

Night Hunting (KD, 18/9/12).

A woman participant's thoughts are similar:

I think many government officials are involved in Pchiru Shelni [probably meaning Night Hunting since officials are normally visiting people from urban areas] and they enjoy it. So they do not want to put a stop to it either. If they stop it, they will miss the enjoyment when they visit villages. I know some officials come to the village for archery competition but their real intention is to have sex with the rural women at night (RZ, 14/10/12).

The second reason is that why the government does not discuss problems of Pchiru Shelni is that because of lack of research, the government is not fully aware of rural women's sufferings. This is also seen as an indication of the government's lack of interest in seriously improving women's welfare, as the responses of YD, a male participant shows:

I don't think our government considers Pchiru Shelni a part of problematic tradition so they don't talk about it. It is confusing because our government does not talk about Pchiru Shelni problems which make it look like they have no interest in women welfare while at the same time they talk a lot about gender equality. I feel our Government is not aware of inconveniences faced by women and they leave it as traditional practices. There is lack of research and evidences. Also most of the government officials are men and if they stop it, they will miss their chance of having sex with rural women when they visit villages (YD, 10/9/12).

Concern about lack of research is shown by another male participant:

I feel government is not aware of how much problem Night Hunting creates. They have not done any research on it. So government must be thinking there is no harm done and does not talk about it (YL, 11/10/12).

There were also some other participants, both men and women, who expressed their concerns that publicity about Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. This also suggests that people acknowledge that Pchiru Shelni is not a positive practice indicating that people do view Pchiru Shelni in a negative light.

#### **10.4 How have changes in law affected Pchiru Shelni?**

The analysis of interview data from older participants<sup>68</sup> shows that there is no doubt that previous law did not protect women from sexual crimes. Older women talk about how they were sexually coerced by the work supervisors during compulsory labor contribution known as *Goongdra Woola*<sup>69</sup>.

The older women and men provide accounts of depressing situations for women when they were young. According to the participants, the places where these *Goongdra Woola* occurred were modern equivalent of urban areas. Women and men from different parts of the country met in one place especially during construction of fortresses, and government buildings and as contribution of tax in kind, people were required to carry loads on their backs due to absence of motor roads and vehicles. During these times women were subjected to all kinds of sexual crimes and had nowhere to turn to as the existing laws did little to help women.

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<sup>68</sup> As mentioned earlier, these older participants are aged in their 60s and 80s and the period they refer to is before early 1960s when development programmes had not started.

<sup>69</sup> *Goongdra Woola* is a labour recruitment that a household was required to contribute in different forms throughout Bhutanese history. In the absence of male members in a family, women were forced to replace men workers. This was phased out in 1996.

Pem, an eighty eight year old woman, recounts how she was sexually harassed regularly by the work Supervisor. Other older participants spoke about how every household would be worried every time their women went out of the house on long distance trips. 'Women went out as one and came back as two', Sigay, an eighty nine year old man, says (referring to women becoming pregnant to men who are untraceable later on). He further adds:

If a father is known, then his responsibility is to bring a small bunch of dried meat, a *Sang* [one and half *Sang* is supposed to be equivalent to one kilogram] of butter and some pieces of clothes as baby's nappies. Then his responsibility is over. If the woman dies as a result of child birth, the father of the child is required to bear the cost of her funeral. Other than that I have never known a man being held responsible for the sexual harassment, rape or child support when I was younger. In fact, the woman is blamed for being becoming pregnant even though it was not her fault. Some families even used to punish the woman for bringing shame at home. So women suffer both ways, at home as well as outside (Sigay, 15/9/12).

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the changes in the laws for better protection of women came about as a result of Bhutan joining international organizations, namely, United Nations, World Bank, Asian Development Bank; these organizations required gender equality if grants and aid was to be obtained (see chapter 1). Soon after, two significant laws relating to women and children's protection were amended: The Marriage Act, 1980 and the Penal Code, 1995. The Marriage Act 1980 was amended in 1995 and the Penal Code 2004 amended in 2011 and illustrates a difference in the manner in which sexual crimes are handled under the new laws. The increase in penalties and punishments seem to have deterred some men from participating in Pchiru Shelni activities as seen below.

These days I have stopped going but feel scared for my friends. The law has become stronger and they have possibility of getting in problem with the law. But this is such an addictive practice that once you start it, it cannot be stopped even though it is considered sinful from religious point of view also (JS, 15/9/12).

JS's comment shows that he is aware that he is doing something wrong that is deemed sinful from a Buddhist point of view and but at the same time he is fearful of legal repercussions and as a result has changed his behavior. Another man who is also an influential man in the village makes this observation:

Because of stronger law, Pchiru Shelni instances have decreased and I think it will decrease further (KD, 18/10/12).

The two men's feedback may not be substantial evidence that Pchiru Shelni has decreased but it gives some insight into how the amendment in laws have impacted on some men's attitude towards sexual crimes.

### **10.5 Changes in Marriage Act**

Bhutan became a member of the United Nations in 1971 yet patriarchy is obvious in the wording of the Marriage Act of 1980. In fact it seemed to condone sexual crimes against women. The law made it difficult to gain a conviction against men engaging in harmful sexual behavior against women. For example, a woman had to prove that she was 'moral' to be able to pursue legal actions against men who engaged in harmful sexual behavior towards her. The use of the term 'immoral and loose' is not only humiliating but derogatory and the amended 1995 Act has removed the section questioning the morality of women victims. In addition, child support payment has been increased considerably. In the 1980 Marriage Act, if a child was born out of wedlock, the father was liable to pay only Nu. 500 (AUD \$10) for the mother's care as well as for the 'illegitimate' child'. The custody of the child below the age of nine was awarded to the mother irrespective of her financial conditions

thereby increasing her responsibility and restricting women's ability to seek opportunities in employment and further education.

The amended Act in 1995 requires that a man pays the equivalent of ten months of his wages calculated on the basis of national daily wage towards the cost of her medical treatment. Moreover, (and in the absence of a mutually settled agreement), the father is required to pay between 20 and 40 % of his monthly gross income as child support until the child reaches the age of eighteen.

There are some debates about the effectiveness of tougher sexual laws on crimes (Trotter and Hobbs, 2014), but the changes in the marriage Act in Bhutan has made Bhutanese men think twice before committing sexual crimes as discussed in chapter 5 where men have expressed their fear about serving jail time, paying penalties and having to pay child support.

#### **10.6 Changes in penal code**

While the Marriage Act deals with the amount of child support payments, the penal code deals with the punishment to be given to perpetrators in terms of jail term. Accordingly, the amendments in the existing laws seem to have acted as a restraining measure for many young men in the villages.

Of significance to this study are the changes in the degree of penalty imposed on any type of sexual crimes that are reported to authorities. In the penal code under sexual offences, the grading of statutory rape in 2004 was felony of second degree. This has been amended to a first degree felony in 2011. The offence of gang rape of a child below the age of twelve was a felony of first degree in 2004, amended to an offence punishable with life imprisonment in 2011.

This is a significant change in the law that has impacted men's attitude towards Pchiru Shelni. It remains to be seen whether there will be a corresponding change in men's attitude that women are still expected to provide sexual services but it is the

fear of significant penalties as well as the risk of having to go to jail. An example of such cases is seen in the preceding chapter where men talk about their reluctance to sexually coerce urban women who had more knowledge of the law.

The effectiveness of tougher enforcement has yet to be empirically proven to be an effective deterrent. For example, in USA, while some advocated for tougher laws arguing that prosecuting a larger number of sex crimes could act as a deterrent, there were others who suggested that such an approach could create more problems (Donovan, 1996: 32-33). However, it cannot be denied that introduction of new and stringent laws have decreased crimes against women all over the world. For instance, Jordanian journalist Hussein (2011) notes that new laws for crimes against women have encouraged people to discuss sensitive issues such as honour killing in the press, television and even movies. In Bhutan, judging from the feedback from the participants, the new laws seem to have some sort of positive impact in curbing non-consensual sex in Pchiru Shelni.

### **10.7 What is the future for Pchiru Shelni?**

Traditional harmful practices are a manifestation of gender inequalities that are embedded in social, economic and political structures (WHO, 2008). Pchiru Shelni is certainly a traditional practice that involves to a large extent; harmful aspect. There are other harmful practices such as dowry, child marriages and female genital mutilation and are in many cases supported by both men and women and anyone departing from such norms are often ostracised and condemned. This is because social benefits are deemed higher than its disadvantages (UNICEF, 2005). Traditional practices that have existed for a long time are difficult to eradicate from the culture altogether. Such practices are regarded as being part of the 'natural order of things' (UNFPA, 2013). Pchiru Shelni is no different and it has evolved over time as a part of rural Bhutanese traditional practices.

Traditionally accepted forms of discrimination and violence against women have



shown to be detrimental for everyone in the society in which it is practiced because of adverse effects on the vulnerable. For instance, other forms of traditionally accepted discrimination such as son preference, early and forced marriages, and female genital mutilation are known to be abusive acts against girls, they affect women's health and are responsible for maintaining a patriarchal system (Ras-Work, 2006: 2). The United Nations has argued that the process of eradicating these harmful and abusive practices should begin by educating the society, advocating for the vulnerable and raising awareness in order to change public opinion (UNFPA<sup>70</sup>, 2013).

It should also be noted that education and awareness for a reframing and fundamental change to cultural norms that act against the interest of women have not always been successful as seen in Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the feminist Subject* (2005). Mahmood argues that the mass appeal of "Islamic forms of sociability" is increasing in Egypt in spite of Muslim cultural norms that seem to act against the 'interests and agendas' of Muslim women. This is seen as especially perplexing when women seem to have emancipatory opportunities presented before them. The reason for women refraining from taking advantages of emancipatory opportunities is attributed to the growing dissatisfaction with Egypt's growing association with secularization and 'westernization' and women being able to negotiate their own space through embodied ethical practice that transcends western liberal distinctions of public and private. Bhutan on the other hand is not at war with the politics of western world and has no reason to resist ideas that promote gender equality that could eventually lead to the overall development of Bhutanese human resources.

Because of many problems arising out of negative impacts of Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting practices, there is stronger support from society as well as agencies to put an end to it. This thesis has argued and the interview data confirmed that

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<sup>70</sup><http://www.unfpa.org/gender/practices.htm> (I could not put it in the main reference since the url could not be retrieved when I tried again).

majority of people as well as agencies perceive it as involving sexual coercion that impacts women and children and prevents women's development in many ways. However, the practice of Pchiru Shelni serves some social purposes which need to be acknowledged. In rural areas, Pchiru Shelni is the most common way of conducting courtship, providing a path that leads to marriage and opportunities for consenting casual sex. There should be a way to 'rework' or 'reframe' Pchiru Shelni to remove the elements of sexual coercion and limit the harmful consequences while keeping the positive aspects of this sexual practice. This is an important objective that can only be answered by further research.

Those who felt that the changing practice of Pchiru Shelni will take time and may be difficult to stop base this on their beliefs that Pchiru Shelni as a part of culture will be hard to eradicate completely. It is not only some urban men who associate Pchiru Shelni with tradition and culture. Many of the participants, both men and women, expressed their opinion that because Pchiru Shelni has been part of culture as long as they can remember, it will be difficult to put an immediate end to it. One participant provides another reason on why it would be difficult to stop the practice of Pchiru Shelni:

Our society accepts this practice because it existed for a long time. The other reason could be that men have more to gain and do not want this practice to stop. Men actually are seen enjoying it. If it is stopped, men will lose some sort of entertainment (DP, 17/9/12).

The overwhelming opinion expressed by most of the participants was that even though many expressed their wish for an end to Pchiru Shelni, the practice is an intrinsic part of the Bhutanese culture as another man adds:

This is an age old tradition and there is no right or wrong about culture. We follow our forefathers. So we accept it (JS, 15/9/12).

And CD also observes:

Personally I do not like Pchiru Shelni. But it has always been part of our accepted culture and cannot be wiped out just like that. It is like wearing our clothes every day and suddenly asking to remain naked (CD, 2/9/12).

Another factor that might act as an obstacle in ending Pchiru Shelni is that the practice provides an alternative to courtship and rural people still resort to it. Thus we can see there are three reasons on why Pchiru Shelni may be encouraged to continue: tradition, sexual entertainment, and alternative courtship purposes.

It is not only women who feel that the government needs to take steps to stop such practices but even men support elimination of the practice of such sexual practices. Such a thought from men definitely will serve as a source of encouragement for all responsible agencies to take steps to fight the harmful aspects of Pchiru Shelni.

As far as the future for Pchiru Shelni is concerned, interviews with both rural and urban people, indicate that it is unlikely that there will be an end to the practice as long as the Bhutanese and society condones it. Even legal actions may be ineffective if women are not made aware of their rights especially in the rural areas of Bhutan where majority of the women are illiterate. Women should be educated to understand that the culture of male domination imprisons them. In such a case, public information campaigns and counselling of women may be more effective. Thus, a focus on behavioural change may prove more effective than advocating for changes in cultural norms and practices. There should also be political will to involve people from rural areas including encouraging women to take ownership of new laws and to perceive themselves as having the rights to do so.

The next chapter discusses the major findings of this thesis, the recommendations and opportunities for further research that have come out of the findings.

## 11 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main purpose of this research has been to explore what is and constitutes Pchiru Shelni. This thesis has examined the 'why', 'how', 'who' and for 'what' purposes Pchiru Shelni has persisted across time as such a predominant aspect of rural Bhutanese life.

I have started the research with an open mind about what constitutes Pchiru Shelni. In the process of this study, the findings from my research has found that a major component of the sexual activities in Pchiru Shelni is coerced and non-consensual even though other aspects such as courtship, casual sex, transactional sex, pre-marital sex and extramarital affairs can be observed in the practice of Pchiru Shelni. In this thesis, the origin of Pchiru Shelni has been traced through oral narrations, songs, poems and discussions online in the Bhutanese social media. This research has shown that a definite time in history cannot be pinpointed but that the practice of Pchiru Shelni has been documented in the eighteenth century and only recently (after the year 2000), has been referenced in literature, albeit rarely.

There is reason to believe that Pchiru Shelni originated in the rural areas. This is evidenced by the fact that before the development activities that started in the 1960s, there was not much difference between rural and urban areas. According to the oral narrations, the administrative affairs were largely dependent on rural support even for administrative human resources. Thus it is not surprising that a major portion of the population was and is still based in rural areas and Pchiru Shelni remains a distinctly rural practice.

The practice of Pchiru Shelni is not known to take place in southern parts of Bhutan where culture and religion is different from rest of the country. This research has shown that conservative notions about sexual behaviour of the south is likely to be the cause of the Pchiru Shelni practice being absent in the south. To confirm the assumption, further research needs to be conducted.

This thesis contends that initially Pchiru Shelni started as a courtship practice at night in rural Bhutan because of lack of leisure time during day in rural Bhutan. This is because lifestyle in rural Bhutan is based on subsistence farming and every little time people can spare is spent on their farm and household works. However, based on the analysis of the older participant's interviews, it was evident that some sexual coercion was part of the Pchiru Shelni practice from the beginning. I suggest that over time, this coercion increased when the practice was taken advantage of by men looking for sex as a form of entertainment and women, for the many reasons discussed in previous chapters, felt that they had no voice or agency or even choice to refuse those sexual advances which they did not invite. This perception was supported by the lack of legal protection from sexual crimes against women in olden days. I suggest that men were well aware of women's helplessness and they took advantage of it.

This research shows that Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are assumed to be the one and the same practice. I have shown that these two are overlapping practices and are thus different in some ways because of the fact that men from different backgrounds (rural and urban) are involved while women rare only from the rural areas.

I argue that the popular term for Pchiru Shelni in the literate world, 'Night Hunting', evolved as a result of urban men taking advantage of rural women in the name of culture. I suggest that the country's start of development in the 1960s is the cause of the emergence of Night Hunting. This is because with development, there was more division between the urban and the rural with urban population becoming more literate and rural population lagging behind. Pchiru Shelni is associated with the rurality and illiteracy and because the majority of rural people are illiterate, the practice flourished in rural areas. However, urban men on their visits to rural areas started taking advantage of the prevailing situation and saw themselves as adopting a traditional form of practice by participating. Thus, the 'invention' of the term

'Night Hunting' in English can be attributed to the literate Bhutanese who participated in the practice.

I contend that the idea that Pchiru Shelni is a traditional practice but it is used by men to justify the continuation of the Night Hunting practice with the argument that they are both one and the same practice. Urban men have now staked their claim on what was once distinctly rural for the rural.

The idea that Pchiru Shelni needs to be examined in the context of sexual coercion has been borne out by the findings of this research. I have shown that a major portion of this sexual activity involves sexual coercion against women which disadvantages women in many ways.

As we have seen, the negative consequences of Pchiru Shelni extend not only to verbal and physical sexual aggression but also leaves both short term and long term negative impacts. The obvious risks from non-consensual engagement in Pchiru Shelni for women are sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, single motherhood and illegitimate children problems. When women are involved in manipulated sexual coercion and are unable to trace the father of their children, it creates tremendous hardships for both women and children. As previously discussed these hardships include lack of participation in education, decreased employment opportunities and increased poverty.

While the extent of direct impacts such as verbal and physical aggression and compromised emotional well-being is determined by the degree of sexual coercion involved in Pchiru Shelni, the extent of other negative impacts can be lessened if the government provides better support for single parents (who are mostly women in case of Bhutan), better enforcement of court ordered child support, and more awareness of sexually transmitted diseases.

This thesis argues that the impact of sexual coercion is not just only on women but also on men by way of the financial burden of paying child support, associated psychological and the obvious physical risks.

This research also found that most of the male participants felt that the practice of Pchiru Shelni impacted women in various negative ways but men continued participating in it regardless. The continued participation was based on the argument that men found the practice thrilling, entertaining and were unable to stop a practice to which they have become accustomed.

There is no doubt that education has had an empowering effect on women in Pchiru Shelni. It improves bargaining power with men, improves access to knowledge, increased earning power and has an overall positive effect on the well-being of the family. Rural men refrained from targeting educated women for Pchiru Shelni for fear of being reported to higher authorities.

The consequences of sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni shape gender inequalities in Bhutan; women's status as single mothers and their vulnerability to sexual violence creates a barrier to women's development. Bhutan's official stance, as presented in the report to CEDAW (2006), that gender inequality is an insignificant if not a non-existent issue, is one that requires serious reconsideration. The growing concern from RENEW<sup>71</sup>, NCWC<sup>72</sup> and establishment of a separate unit for women's protection by the police is evidence that gender inequality and violence against women is much more than a subtle discrimination.

This research has shown that sexual coercion and power inequalities in Pchiru Shelni interact with wider gender inequalities. It has also shown that women's representation at the decision-making level is critical at the decision-making level

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<sup>71</sup> Respect, educate, nurture and empower women, an NGO in Bhutan that works for the welfare of victims of domestic violence.

<sup>72</sup> National Commission for women and children, a Bhutan government department is responsible for formulating plans and policies for women and children's development.

since representation denies women's voice in formulating policies that will represent women's interests. In the employment sector, this thesis showed that women occupied less important and low paying jobs again hampering women's power of negotiation with men by increasing women's financial dependence on men. Even in the judiciary, there were fewer women in higher positions, thereby deterring women from reporting sexual crimes. This supplements a similar finding made by NCWC (2007).

While matrilineal practice empowered women in terms of property inheritance, it also acted as a contributing factor in sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni. Women are empowered in terms of inheritance of property but their ability to leave their homes and search for better opportunities is restrained by their ties to their land and their reliance on men to help work their land. Many women participants reported that they gave in to sexual coercion in the hope of getting husbands to work on the farm. I contend that in this way, the matrilineal system withholds education for women so that their future can be devoted to aged care for the elderly in the family. This argument is validated by "Bhutan Gender Equality Diagnostic of Selected Sectors" report conducted by the Asian Development Bank, United Nations in Bhutan and the National Commission for Women and Children (2014) where it argues that women benefiting from inheritance need further validation. The report states that:

Where land has not been commodified and its value is primarily for subsistence, women who inherited could be seen as inheriting a set of management responsibilities on behalf of the family, including the well-being of their parents (Asian Development Bank, 2014:20).

It is possible that in the past traditional beliefs and cultural practices may have played a role in creating gender gaps in Bhutan and the belief that men were superior to women has been used to establish and maintain male dominance over women. Participants' quotes reported in chapter 9 show men certainly believe that



being born as a woman was a divine punishment for their past bad karma. Sexually, it appears that men felt that it was the duty of women to provide sex for women and some women internalised their own problems by blaming themselves that because they were born a woman, sexual coercion was something they had to accept.

This study has shown that both rural and urban men who were involved only in consensual sex exhibited characteristics such as knowledge about women's rights, legal implications of coerced sex, concern for women and their children and most importantly recognized the importance of obtaining women's consent in sex. On the other hand, urban men who pursued coerced sex in Pchiru Shelni and Khig kelni are seen as men with money, power and position. Rural men who participated in coerced sex did it under peer pressure, for entertainment and to fulfill the idea of being 'masculine' which in their description is by maximizing the number of sexual partners. However, no women participants mentioned about multiple sexual partners in one night and it did not strike me to ask that specific question during this study. It is an important point to be considered in future studies since it could mean understanding the situation from a victim's point.

Women continue to be subjected to sexual violence because of women's inability to seek support from authorities and many cases are not reported to authorities leading to low crime rates for sexual offences. Night Hunting was considered as a sexual violence against women by some agencies in Bhutan but so far the issue could not be debated at the national level because of lack of support in decision making level which is dominated by men.

This thesis argues that the traditional concept of Pchiru Shelni as a part of culture started to change when Bhutan became a member of international organizations such as World Bank, United Nations and ADB. Bhutan faced pressure from these organizations to meet the requirements of providing basic human rights, of which gender equality is a part. Pchiru Shelni is viewed as a form of sexual coercion by

Non-Governmental organizations in Bhutan, governmental organization of Bhutan and the United Nations of which Bhutan is a member. Even though there has been no detailed study of Night Hunting, the graphic stories by women in the media and the hardships that women have reported demand a scrutiny of the practice both by the Bhutanese organizations and agencies which purport to advocate for women's rights and by the international organisations with which Bhutan works closely.

This thesis argues that progress in the way buildings were constructed in Bhutan has affected the way in which the practice of Pchiru Shelni is carried out. Secure windows and electricity have made it more difficult for men to break in while the introduction of telecommunication technology, namely the advent of the mobile phone, has made it easier to arrange consensual sexual activities.

In other parts of the world, the effectiveness of interventional, regional and domestic measures put in place to address harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, dowry (bride price), child marriages, and female foeticides, have been severely compromised because of these traditional practices which are grounded in widely accepted cultural and religious norms (The advocates for Human Rights, 2010). Similar challenges arise for Bhutan. How long Pchiru Shelni can be carried out in the name of tradition and culture? This question needs to be addressed in future research.

Any future research needs to take into account people's willingness or unwillingness to associate Pchiru Shelni with traditional practices. As more and more people become educated, many are becoming aware of the difference between useful and harmful traditions. The good thing is that the first steps have already been taken in the form of new laws that are able to call to account those people who have previously been able to get away with breaking the law. There is pressure from agencies that work for women's welfare to segregate sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni from other sexual crimes. Women have started reporting sexual crimes more

often than before and most importantly, men are also showing their support for the new laws that criminalize violence against women.

As long as Pchiru Shelni continues to be associated with culture, it looks like there will be no dearth of men taking advantage of the cultural association. As argued online in Kuensel online:

It is food for thought that this practice is found in societies, that are at the tail end of the so-called development process. We need to look at this debate today in the context of evolution and changing social norms. Bhutan is going through the process of democratisation. Democracy is not elections. It is a culture for civilised human existence. The interpretations of the term Night Hunting contradict the basic elements of a democratic culture - the concepts of rights, privacy, and rule of law. Meanwhile, we cannot outlaw a term, that can be only vaguely interpreted, but crime that is committed in the name of culture must be stopped' (Kuenselonline, October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

The fact that 'crime' is mentioned in the quote suggests that there is an acknowledgment of sexual coercion or sexual exploitation is part of the practice of Night Hunting.

## **Recommendations**

One of the biggest problems that this research has revealed is that the practice of Pchiru Shelni has always been associated with cultural practices. This association has many of the rural women believing that as a part of that tradition they cannot avoid consensual or non-consensual participation and must allow men to continue to engage in Pchiru Shelni. The first step that women and men must take is to disassociate Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting with cultural practices. This is where concerned agencies can step in to create awareness among rural women that sexual coercion in the name of culture is not right. While stringent laws have been

introduced to deal with sexual crimes, many perpetrators of sexual coercion in Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are known to avoid legal repercussions because they cannot be identified under the cover of darkness when they are strangers to the women they target. Therefore, categorizing sexual coercion in these practices as rape should serve two purposes. Firstly, it should deter men from sexual crimes in the name of culture and women can even help convict offenders by seeking help during intrusions. Secondly, the practice can be separated from tradition.

Another troubling issue that needs to be addressed is the men involved in Night Hunting. Some of these urban men occupy important positions in the community and are 'held up' as role models. Even though it is widely known who are involved, no one is known to be reported either for fear of reprisal or because of the notion that it is a social norm for men to participate in such activities. These men however, are known to engage in Night Hunting and demand or accept the sexual favours 'on offer'. Other than consensual sexual arrangements, it should be deemed illegal that men of authority demand sexual favours and also deemed illegal to offer women as a part of the entertainment to visiting officials. Since sexual favours on visits to rural areas are sought through or offered by middlemen, there should be additional harsher provision in the law for such men to wilfully and knowingly engaging in sexual coercion. For this, it is necessary that women must be made aware that it is their right to refuse to provide sexual favours and it should also be made clear that there will be no ramifications if they report it to authorities. For some, there may even be a facility to file anonymous complains so that women and whistle blowers do not fear repercussions.

The most important change that needs to be made in the citizenship law is the need to have the father's name in order for a child to be registered in the census. Irrespective of whether women are victims of sexually coerced relationships in Pchiru Shelni or victims of other sexual crimes, women should not be made to go through the hardship of tracking down missing fathers of their children. Women as a citizen of Bhutan should have the right to register their children as citizens

irrespective of who the father or whether they can be identified, as long as they are born in Bhutan. Bhutan- known for its Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy that places people's well-being before everything and claims that gender discriminations are subtle- fails in its very principle if children cannot enjoy this as a birthright and women cannot have the peace of mind knowing their children are not legitimately part of their family.

There is also a need for the government to introduce social welfare system especially for struggling single mothers whose sexual partners have abandoned them and who do not have reliable relatives to support them as is the custom in Bhutan.

### **Future Research**

Because of several factors such as the remoteness of the interview areas, time taken to cultivate relationship with participants, and transcription of interviews because of mistrust of technology, there was time constraint to carry out the interviews. This meant only rural people could be interviewed as participants. In future research, interviewing urban participants in Night Hunting is recommended. They could provide a wider understanding about these practices. Interviewing urban women is also recommended for their views about both Night Hunting and Pchiru Shelni and to find out what they feel about how men and society treat their counterparts in the rural areas.

This research does not include southern part of Bhutan because sexual topics are sensitive issues to discuss. This is because southern Bhutan is largely a Hindu dominated area and both Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting are not known to be practised because of the conservative nature of their culture. How much of this assumption is true is not known. Therefore, a separate study in the southern part of Bhutan is desired. Though there may be cultural difference, a research on their sexual behaviour could provide a comparative study to the rest of the country.

This study is a qualitative study and thus only a small sample of participants could be accommodated in the research. The area of research is also concentrated only in two places. Though Buddhism is followed in most part of the country, it is likely that there could be minor cultural differences of which I am not aware. Depending on areas, the perception of Pchiru Shelni could be different. Thus a larger area of research is recommended for the future.

More research is needed to conclude the systematic determination of the extent of coercion and the degrees of consent involved in both Pchiru Shelni and Night Hunting. This might involve a nationally representative household survey of sexual (and physical) violence in Bhutan, similar to those conducted in other countries by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002).

This research did not explore if women had strategies to protect themselves from unwanted sexual attention from men during Pchiru Shelni. This could be another area of future research.

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## APPENDIX A: GLOSSARIES

Acho	Elder brother
Agay	Grandfather
Ama	Mother
Angay	Grandmother
Apa	Father
Aro garo	Lovers
Ashim	Elder sister
Bangchen	Bully or force
Chathrim	Rules and regulations
Choekyed	Language of the dharma
Dhoma	Areca nuts
Dhuezang	Sacred days
Drang	Illegitimate child
Dranyam drangten	Equality
Dzong	Fort
Dzongkha	National language
Goongdra Woola	Labor Contribution
Gup	Head for blocks of villages
Gyalrab	History
Khamtey	Arrogant
Kokti	Bastard (local dialect)
Kuensel	National Newspaper
Lengo	Person with verbal disabilities
Mangmi	Village authority
Ngenzhung	Betrothed
Pchimi	Assistant to head of villages
Tseri	Shifting cultivation
Sega mathang	Golden-cross-cousin



## **APPENDIX B: ACRONYM**

GNHC	Gross National Happiness Commission
NCWC	National Commission for Women and Children
NSB	National Statistics Bureau
RENEW	Respect, Educate, Nurture
RGOB	Royal Government of Bhutan
RCSC	Royal Civil Service Commission

## APPENDIX C: KUENSEL STORY THAT HAS BEEN REMOVED FROM THE WEBSITE

### The dark side of night hunting

*Male chauvinism poses as culture in this still prevailing practice*



**1 October, 2008** - She is frightened of the night. Not because of ghosts. She has never really believed in it anyway.

Since being posted as a teacher in a remote school in Trongsa dzongkhag, Zangmo (name changed on request) has become the target of unknown local men who come under the protection of darkness to “trouble” her- frequently. She has become terrified of them.

“I wake up in the middle of the night distressed to hear intruders climbing my window, trying to open it,” Zangmo told Kuensel.

At another time, intruders, unable to open her window, walked around her house, knocking at her door, trying to force it open, rattling it, and calling her out.

The first time she heard somebody trying to open her window she broke down with panic and “cried the whole night”. That was a few months ago, barely a few days after her posting to the place.

“I didn’t know how to react,” said Zangmo. “It made me feel so low and unhappy with life.”

A female colleague told her that it was “night hunting” and that it was the village norm. It was not that Zangmo had not heard the term before. The idea sickened her. But facing this so called culture at such close quarters filled her mind with fear and loathing.

There is no electricity in the village. So the 27-year old teacher, whose house is next to the school, keeps her kerosene lamp burning the entire night, just in case. She checks her doors and windows are shut properly before dark. As a companion, she keeps with her a class VII schoolgirl, whom she also looks after.

When noises at night outside her house persist, she wakes up the girl and waits in a corner for the sound to go away. There is no telephone.

“I got to bed prepared to wake up anytime I hear some noises,” said Zangmo.

She has not made official complaints to any authority.

“Whom should we complain to?” said Zangmo.

“I can’t complain because I’m worried that people will make fun of me,” said Zangmo. “I told a male colleague about my predicament the other day and he had a nice laugh out of it.”

So far Zangmo has managed to keep herself safe.

Some village girls say that most night-hunting was not consensual in the least. And the men were complete strangers - nameless and faceless. Sometimes they came from town. Girls sound asleep after a day’s farm labour had hardly any time to protest before it was too late. The stranger would have crept through the open attic or forced open the poorly shut door or window with a knife to squirm in. The entire business was forced entry, they said. Some became pregnant as a result. Since it was deemed a norm, most rural girls accepted the practice. No one usually ever went anywhere to complain.

But Zangmo is a teacher. And she knows. She says she won’t accept it.

Zangmo, however, is not alone in her predicament. Other female teachers posted in remote schools share her experience.

In Langthel lower secondary school (Trongsa), where most teachers live in traditional Bhutanese houses with no attached bathrooms, female teachers told Kuensel that it was unsafe to go to toilets at night.

In Tangsibji lower secondary school (Trongsa), drunken men tormented female teachers living in empty classrooms. Men knocked on their doors and tried to break their windows open.

“A person kept walking on the class ceiling,” said a teacher.

When teachers complained about the incident to the locals the next day, a few men charged them. It took the village tshogpa’s intervention to calm things down then and later resolve the issue.

A female health worker posted at the place told Kuensel: “The men keep climbing my window and calling my name out. But I’ve iron grill windows so I feel safe. But you never know. People drink and they can do anything.”

**By Tashi Dema**  
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## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR RURAL PARTICIPANTS**

1. Do you think there is gender equality in Bhutan?
2. Do you think Bhutanese women are better off than other countries in terms of gender equality?
3. What do you think of your position in Bhutanese society in relation to the opposite sex?
4. What do you know about the sexual behaviour in our country?
5. Do you know what night hunting is? Can you describe in your own words?
6. How do you think the practice began?
7. Some people see night hunting as good thing and some other see it as problematic, what is your personal opinion on it?
8. Do you know any men who participated in night hunting?
9. How did you meet your wife/husband? Through night hunting?
10. How old were you when you had your first sexual experience?
11. Does sexual activity occur at the first meeting?
12. Did you experience any form of violence during night hunting?
13. Have you ever hunted (for men) been hunted (for women)?
14. If yes, what do you think of the experience?
15. If no, what do you think of others doing it?
16. What type of households and women do you think are targeted?
17. How do you know if you will be successful?
18. How is it achieved? Pleading or persuasion?
19. I can understand when Night Hunting taking place between men and women from the same area? How do women accept men from outside their community when some don't even know who they are?
20. It is speculated that sometimes, village heads and important people within the village are involved in introducing the urban visitors to the village girls through use of their authority; does it happen in your place?
21. Other than that, do you know how the men figure out which house to visit?
22. Do you use contraception during night hunting?
23. Besides night hunting, do you know of other forms of sexual behaviour? For

example, making arrangements to meet for sexual activities intentionally in between work?

24. Are you aware that night hunting practice is rare in our southern region?  
Why do you think this is so?
25. Do you think Night Hunting could be taking place in urban areas too?
26. Why do you think many of us accept night hunting as a normal practice?
27. Do you think our culture is biased against women?
28. What do you think is the difference between urban and rural people in terms of sexual behaviour?
29. What do you think of night hunting when men offer money?
30. Do you know anyone who has been affected by night hunting?
31. Have you been affected in any way as a result of night hunting?
32. Do you feel the participating partner has been affected by it negatively or positively?
33. Are there instances where you do not want to have sex but end up giving in to a Night Hunter?
34. What factors are involved in making to agree to sleep with a Night Hunter?
35. Does night hunting occur with more than one partner?
36. Why do you think our society accepts this practice?
37. Do you think the practice will ever be stopped? If yes, how do you think this can be achieved? If no, why do you think it will be so?
38. Why do you think the government is reluctant to discuss this issue?
39. Do you wish if the practice never existed?
40. Do you compare your situation to the urban people and think why Night Hunting is a takes place in rural areas and not the urban areas?

## **APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR KEY INFORMANTS**

1. What was your perception of gender equality in Bhutan before you joined this profession?
2. Have your perceptions changed afterwards?
3. What do you think of women's position in Bhutanese society?
4. Do you think they differ between the rural and the urban women? Or between the literate and the illiterate?
5. What are the key concerns Bhutanese women faces in Bhutan?
6. What are the key needs that Bhutan government has to address for women?
7. Do you think violence against women is a major issue in Bhutan?
8. What kinds of violence against women exist in Bhutan?
9. What do you think are the causes?
10. How about sexual violence? Is it a major concern?
11. What would be the definition of sexual coercion in your opinion?
12. What do you think of Night Hunting?
13. How do you think it started?
14. What would be your definition of Night Hunting?
15. Do you feel our rural women are being taken advantage of by the urban men?
16. Night Hunting is supposed to be distinctively rural, however do you think Night Hunting occurs in the urban area too?
17. Do you think Night Hunting has many purposes to serve? For example, sex, courtship?
18. What is your opinion on the practice? Problem or part of culture?
19. Why do you think some women agree to participate?
20. How do you think urban men get access to these girls on their short visits?

21. Many think it is a bad thing to happen for women but why do you think no rural woman makes an issue out of it?
22. Do you think that the practice needs to be classified into coerced and consensual?
23. Do you think the government should do anything about Night Hunting?
24. In your opinion, is there any good or bad about Night Hunting?
25. Do you think the government is doing enough to address women and children's needs?
26. What are the strengths of Bhutanese culture that women can rely on to empower themselves?
27. What is your idea of masculinity? What type of man would be considered a good family man?
28. What do you think of educated men who indulge into such practices?
29. It is known that many of the government officials take part into such activities on their visits to rural areas, in your opinion, what makes them think that it is all right for them?
30. Do you think education plays a role in how men and women perceive Night Hunting to be?