

## TIBETAN WOMEN: HOMELESS IN THEIR HOMELAND

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### ABSTRACT

*Over the two decades following the Uprising, the Chinese authorities systematically demolished more than 6,000 Tibetan monasteries, nunneries, temples, and sacred sites, resulting in the suppression of extensive traces of Tibetan culture. A comprehensive survey conducted in 1984 by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile revealed that, directly due to the Chinese occupation, an estimated 1.2 million Tibetans had lost their lives due to the ravages of war, famine, forced labor, executions, torture, and suicide. Following a series of pro-independence demonstrations by Tibetans in 1987, the People's Republic of China (PRC) implemented a harsh policy of ruthless repression against the dissenters. In 1989, martial law was declared in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). Tibetans have consistently expressed their opposition to the Chinese occupation of their homeland, periodically staging protests to garner international support for their cause. Numerous Western travelers who bore witness to the oppressive conditions faced by Tibetans within Tibet played a pivotal role in mobilizing an international movement aimed at aiding their non-violent struggle.*

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**Keywords:** *Tibetan Women, TAR, PRC, Violence, Sexual Exploitation.*

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### Introduction

While men and women are born with equal potential, societal norms often privilege men over women. Despite women's essential role in shaping communities, countless instances of injustice and discrimination persist. These can manifest as social biases leading to female foeticide and infanticide, the subjugation of women through sexual exploitation, workplace discrimination, unequal access to education, subtle forms of bias like jokes targeting women, and legal disparities such as restrictive marriage and divorce laws. Most notably, women continue to suffer from various forms of violence.

The Istanbul Convention<sup>1</sup> defines violence against women as:

A violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

While violence is against the law yet sexual and gender-based violence is inevitable in all societies of the world and is to a certain degree acceptable. It is the outcome of gender inequality and a blatant violation of the human rights. The present paper talks about the gender based violence meted out to Tibetan women within Tibet.

Tibet, situated on the Asian plateau to the northeast of the Himalayas and now under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China (PRC), holds significant historical importance as the traditional homeland of the Tibetan people. Renowned as the "Roof of the World" due to its lofty elevation, Tibet faces an intriguing paradox – it lacks official recognition in the world of diplomacy. In

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1951, Tibet was integrated into the PRC, and the former Tibetan government was dissolved in 1959 following an unsuccessful Tibetan uprising. The PRC designates Tibet as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and governs it accordingly. In 1950, the PRC incorporated Tibet and established the Seventeen Point Agreement, which granted Tibet a degree of autonomy while recognizing China's sovereignty over the region. The Dalai Lama retained his role as the religious and spiritual leader, but political authority rested with China. This move by the Chinese government triggered widespread unrest throughout Tibet. Subsequently, open rebellions erupted in Eastern Tibet in 1956 and in Lhasa in 1959. According to official PRC data, 87,000 Tibetans lost their lives during the 16-month period following the 1959 Uprising. Approximately 100,000 Tibetans, including the 14th Dalai Lama, sought refuge in India, and since then, many Tibetans have settled in India and various other nations as refugees. The Tibetan Government-in-Exile, based in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, has been striving to safeguard Tibetan culture and traditions, which face the risk of fading away due to various factors.

Numerous Tibetans have resorted to the ultimate sacrifice by self-immolation in an attempt to stir the world from its indifference and shed light on the suffering of Tibetans. In the contemporary era, China's governance in Tibet is marked by extensively documented instances of human rights violations that pose a significant threat to Tibet's unique national, cultural, and religious identity. Tibetans found themselves compelled into an involuntary exile, forced to flee their homeland due to the oppressive actions of the Chinese government. China's intrusion into Tibet in 1950, under the guise of bringing communism, ultimately led to the looting of ancient monasteries, the persecution of monks and nuns, and the unjust killing of Tibetans who resisted their authority.

In 2011, the Dalai Lama stepped down from his political role, allowing the Tibetan population in exile to elect a Prime Minister, known as the Kalon Tripa, for the first time. The Dalai Lama advocates for democracy and believes that the Tibetan community should embrace democratic values and a progressive mindset to adapt to the evolving world. In spite of their hopeful resettlement in exile, Tibetans living in Tibet faced severe brutality from Chinese authorities. Those who expressed any form of dissent or showed even the slightest allegiance to the Dalai Lama were subjected to physical abuse, torture, and imprisonment. Women were particularly vulnerable under Chinese rule, with approximately 400 families' women and girls being subjected to public humiliation, torture, and sexual assault. Even nuns were not spared from these atrocities, enduring sexual violence in full view of monks while the Chinese soldiers compelled other Tibetans to witness these heinous acts. Nevertheless, these devoted nuns actively engaged in protests and demonstrations against the Chinese presence in Tibet, leading to their imprisonment and further torture in detention facilities. The year 1959 marked a crucial turning point for Tibetan women as they became actively involved in the resistance movement against the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

Despite their unwavering dedication to their homeland, Tibetans have endured profound hardships. The absence of educational and employment prospects, alongside involuntary relocations, has compelled numerous Tibetan women to engage in the sex trade as a means of supporting both themselves and their families. Tibetan men have also faced significant challenges, grappling with unemployment and residing in refugee camps, leading some to succumb to alcoholism, which regrettably contributes to the perpetration of violence against women.

Approximately 150,000 Tibetans are living in exile across various countries, with a significant majority residing in India. Tibetan women in exile have confronted enduring discrimination within the refugee community in India. They were denied opportunities for higher education and gainful employment, often relegated to the traditional domestic roles of homemakers. Nyima Lhama, who serves as the General Secretary of the Tibetan Women's Association, sheds light on this issue:

The patriarchal nature of the Tibetan society allowed discriminatory attitudes and practices to continue against women for many years.

Over the years, the increasing role of women in politics within Tibet has been affecting their compatriots in exile. In a report, the Special Rapporteur on "Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences"<sup>4</sup>, expressed her concern about the situation of Tibetan women within Tibet. She said,

Women in Tibet continue to undergo hardship and are also subjected to gender-specific crimes, including reproductive rights violations such as forced sterilisation, forced abortion, coercive birth control policies and the monitoring of menstrual cycles. There have been many reports of Tibetan women prisoners facing brutality and torture in custody.

Numerous instances suggest that women and nuns have been subjected to gender-specific violence that is notably more severe than the mistreatment experienced by men. These acts of cruelty

against women include the degrading practice of stripping female prisoners naked, employing electric batons in sensitive areas, using lit cigarettes, and setting dogs upon them. Men, in contrast, do not typically endure such sexual torture. Chinese soldiers have been reported to commit sexual assault against women prisoners using electric cattle prods. Furthermore, an alarming trend of mutilation involving the removal of women's breasts has emerged. Chinese law enforcement agents have been documented forcing women to run continuously while subjecting them to electric cattle prod beatings. In one harrowing account, a female prisoner named Ngawang was bound with an electric cord, beaten with cattle prods, and made to endure dog attacks while electric shocks were administered intermittently through the cord wrapped around her breasts.

Another woman prison-inmate, Nima Tsamchoe, took part in a peaceful demonstration in 1988 when she was merely 19 years old.<sup>5</sup> She narrated her harrowing tale of imprisonment and torture thus:

Dogs were set on us while we were naked. Lit cigarette butts were stubbed on our faces, knitting needles jabbed in our mouths . . . kicked in the breasts and in the genitals until they were bleeding...made to hang from trees and beaten on bare flesh by electric batons. Containers of human urine were poured over heads . . . many were raped. However, even those who were raped were very secretive because they were ashamed and embarrassed . .

I was hung up from the wall with my legs up and beaten with electronic rods in the genitals and in the mouth. After this I could not even go to the toilet.

The sexual abuse inflicted by PRC officials on Tibetan nuns is characterized by a level of humiliation, cruelty, and sadism that exceeds that experienced by monks. When nuns are subjected to sexual assault, they are burdened with feelings of guilt for allegedly breaking their vows of celibacy. This often leads to a sense of unworthiness to continue their lives as nuns, and they experience deep shame, preventing them from returning to their religious calling. Soldiers compel the nuns to touch and fondle their private parts, using physical violence as punishment if they resist. Furthermore, these soldiers force the nuns to disrobe in the presence of monks, intensifying the humiliation they endure.

A young Tibetan protestor in her twenties was taken into custody by the PRC soldiers for peacefully protesting in Lhasa. She was made to undress in front of thirty male prisoners and was beaten up during the interrogation. The three policewomen interrogating her crossed all limits of barbarity when they tortured her with not one but two electric batons.

Before I could comprehend what was happening to me, the electric baton was mercilessly rammed into my vagina ... in and out, in and out, in and out.... It was no less than being brutally raped. I thought I was dying. Then the same stick was forcefully shoved into my mouth. Horrified, I vomited out something – thickened blood mixed with saliva. I couldn't think of anything ... nothing mattered any longer. I prayed that I would just die, there and then.... As I groaned in pain and humiliation, I could hear the taunting laughter of the Chinese: 'Have you got freedom? Have you got independence? How does it taste?' (Vahali, 223)

The political unrest has taken a toll on both men and women, along with children, in Tibet. Tibetan women, much like their male counterparts, have borne a heavy burden as a consequence of the political turmoil in their homeland. Within the traditional Tibetan social, cultural, religious, and political framework, women were historically relegated to a secondary role compared to men, with fewer freedoms and privileges. For the past 57 years, Tibetans have been living in exile, a state of displacement despite the presence of their ancestral homeland. Tibetan women, who were typically reserved in their roles back in Tibet, have now found themselves thrust into a new and entirely different environment in exile. In this transition, they are emerging as independent and dynamic individuals, demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of displacement and violence. They are actively assisting their male counterparts in adapting to life in exile. The hardships and exploitation suffered at the hands of the Chinese authorities have transformed them into fiercely independent women who are prepared to confront the challenges that life presents. The growing presence of Tibetan women writers reflects the newfound freedom of expression exercised by cosmopolitan Tibetan women. Exile has afforded them a sense of liberation, leading to the emergence and reshaping of new identities. Tibetan women have evolved into resilient individuals who have confronted their traumas with remarkable determination. Their unwavering commitment to the Tibetan cause is truly inspiring. On March 13, 2013, the Tibetan Women's Association organized a protest march in Mcleodganj, Dharamshala, to condemn the brutality and atrocities committed by the Chinese government against the Tibetan people. The extent of this violence has resulted in over a hundred Tibetans resorting to self-immolation as a desperate form of protest. Tibetan women have been vocal in their opposition to Chinese oppression through various means,

rallying international support. Those in exile have become the voices of their compatriots in Tibet. Their tenacity and collective efforts have had a significant impact on the global stage, raising awareness about the dire situation in Tibet and the harsh treatment inflicted upon its native population.

The annual Miss Tibet pageant, held in McLeodganj, is a significant source of optimism for Tibetan women. It provides them with a distinctive platform to exhibit their talents while also garnering global attention for their cause. In the words of the renowned American actress and singer Beyoncé Knowles, "Power's not given to you. You have to take it." This emphasizes the idea that women must actively advocate for their own rights and empower themselves, rather than relying on external validation to justify their existence.

#### Notes

- Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, 2011
- According to Radio Lhasa broadcast of Oct.1, 1960
- In an interview to Deutsche Welle on Jan.1, 2014 talking about India's Tibetan women assuming bigger roles
- United Nations Commission on Human Rights in resolution 1994/45, adopted on March 4, 1994
- Gender specific torture and sex crimes against Tibet women within Tibet

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