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.