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Immigrant Women Tell Their Stories: Him Thappa and Her journey from Bhutan/ Nepal as Told to Camille MacLean

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Introduction

Him Thapa was born in Bhutan, then lived in a refugee camp in Nepal for eighteen years before emigrating to the United States a little over five years ago with her husband and children. In this interview, Him discusses her life in Southern Asia, her reasons for emigrating to the U.S., and the problems that she encountered along the way, as well as the resources that helped her and her family assimilate in Providence, Rhode Island.

Q. When did you move to the U.S., and what were the reasons?

My family and I moved here a little over 5 years ago. We were living in Nepal, in a refugee camp for eighteen years after being forced to leave Bhutan. I was born in Bhutan, but because my parents were born in Nepal, they could not become citizens of Bhutan, which meant that they could not own property or obtain employment there. We were forced to seek refuge in the camps that Nepal set up. While there I was married and had my first child.

Through the government, United Nations Refugee Program , and the World Bank we had the opportunity to relocate in the U.S.. The process took about eighteen months from the time that we applied.

Q. What was it like living in a refugee camp in Nepal?

Life was extremely difficult. We had no electricity, limited access to all but the most basic healthcare (people had to pay if they needed surgery or extensive care, and many people died as a result), rationed food supplies were distributed on a bi-weekly basis, and crowded living conditions. The extremely hot and cold seasons were difficult without heat or air-conditioning. There were no opportunities for employment.



Q. Please describe your life in Bhutan/Nepal at home and in the community.

In Bhutan and Nepal, women do not work outside of their homes. They remain at home to care for their families, homes and gardens. Bhutan is a largely agrarian country, and most people make money by selling their farm/agricultural goods, such as rice, chicken, vegetables, etc... Extended families live together also. There is a great deal of support within the extended family, as well as the community.

I volunteered as a counselor of domestic issues in my community. We addressed issues including child abandonment by husbands/significant others, domestic violence, mistreatment of women, both psychological and physical. It is common in our culture for members of the community to become involved and assist when such issues arise.

Q. What were the greatest challenges that you faced when you moved to Providence, and how did you overcome them?

The most difficult problem for me was the language barrier and inability to communicate, as I spoke no English. We were the first Bhutanese family to move to Rhode Island, so there were no culturally similar people with whom we could connect in Providence.

The International Institute (I.I.) of R.I. helped me get my Green Card (Permanent Resident Card), and I started taking English classes there. They also helped me to find a job at a local linen supply company. My husband was unable to find employment, so I supported my family, and my husband stayed at home to care for the children and the house. My work was difficult,

and I was not used to working outside of my home, but at least I could support my family. At first I could not understand or speak with anyone at work, and this made me frustrated and very sad, I cried often and felt completely overwhelmed. A Spanish speaking woman at work tried to teach me a little English and to help me. She remembered how hard it was for her when she came to the U.S. and began working there. This meant a lot to me. Eventually, I was able to communicate more, and it became easier.

I had never driven before and did not have a driver's license. The International Institute helped me to obtain my license and after a while I was able to purchase a car. In the meanwhile, they connected me with a person that would drive me to work and take me home at night for twenty dollars a week.

Last year, I took a Citizenship class at The Genesis Center in Providence, and became a U.S. citizen in April of 2014. This was very exciting. I am currently taking ESL classes at The Genesis Center.

Q. What are a few distinguishing factors between opportunities for women in Southern Asia versus the United States?

In Bhutan/Nepal women are unable to financially support themselves or their families. Educational and career opportunities do not exist. Also, marriages in our culture are arranged by consenting families. I would say that freedom of choice is a defining difference.

You have accomplished so much in a short period of time. Since 2008, you found employment and supported your family, received your driver's license, were promoted at work, studied English as a Second Language, took a Citizenship class and in April of 2014, you became a U.S. Citizen. Your son earned full scholarships to study Engineering at several colleges/universities in the fall. And now you help other refugees and immigrants settle into life in Rhode Island. What are your plans for the future?

I will continue taking ESL classes here at The Genesis Center, then get my G. E.D.. I think I might like to own a business in the future, but I am also considering becoming a nurse. A friend of mine is in nursing school, and it interests me. I like to help others.