



Migration Profile

BHUTAN

A. Executive Summary

The Kingdom of Bhutan, located between China and India, is one of the most geographically isolated countries in the world.ⁱ Its capital is Thimpu. Bhutan is a constitutional monarchy, and its Constitution was adopted in 2008. The National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, exercises the legislative power, while the executive power rests in the hands of the government. The head of state is the King, but his succession is governed by the Constitution, which requires the ruler to abdicate at the age of 65.ⁱⁱ

Bhutan's economy is based on the hydroelectric industry, which is the main resource exported to India. Since 2004, Bhutan has been a member of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Through this initiative, the country has found partners (especially India) to finalise agreements on energy, trade and transport interconnection.

At mid-year 2020, the international migrant stock in Bhutan counted 53,612 people, representing around 6,9% of the entire population and, according to UN data, 8,088 of them were female (2,2% of the international migrant stock).ⁱⁱⁱ Most foreigners living in Bhutan come from India, Nepal, the USA, Australia and Thailand, and migrate here for work related reasons or, like a small number of women (10%) do, for marriage purposes.^{iv}

Internal migration is a recurrent phenomenon in Bhutan and, according to the last census (2017), it involves 45.2% of the resident population in the country.^v Concerning human trafficking, the government identified no victims in 2020. However, it is widely known that traffickers abuse Bhutanese women and girls in both sex and labour exploitation in a variety of ways, either in Bhutan or abroad. The same occurs with men, even to a minor extent.^{vi}

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

Bhutan has a largely mountainous territory and no major waterways. Gangkhar Puensum is the highest peak, claimed to be the world's tallest unclimbed mountain, 7,570 metre high. With such a territory, the population is mainly concentrated in lowlands.

In Bhutan there are 754,394 inhabitants, divided in several ethnic groups. The main ones are the Sharchops and the Ngalops, originally from Tibet, and two other smaller tribal groups, the Bumthaps and Kurtops. They mostly practice Buddhism and are located in the central, northern and eastern parts of the country.^{vii} Another group includes the Lhotshampa (literally *southern borderlanders*) or Nepalese immigrants, who massively fled their country about two decades ago and still make up the majority of the refugee population in Bhutan.

The most common religion is Buddhism (75%), especially the Mahayana Buddhism divided into two different sects, the Drukpa Kagyu and the Nyingma. The second largest religion is Hinduism, and a small group follows the animist beliefs, such as Bon. There is also a Christian minority,^{viii} and most of them are Roman Catholics, while the remaining ones belong to other Protestant denominations.^{ix}

Bhutan's international relations are mainly with India, but none with China, even though both countries meet regularly to negotiate their borders. In October 2021, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the *Three-Step Roadmap for Expediting the Bhutan-China Boundary Negotiations* to help accelerate these negotiations.^x

II. International and Internal Migrants

At mid-year 2020, the international migrant stock in Bhutan counted 53,612 people, representing around 6,9% of the entire population and, according to UN data, 8,088 of them were female (2,2%).^{xi}

Most international migrants were aged between 25 and 29 years old (precisely 11,465 people); the second largest group was between 30 and 34 years old (11,039), while a minority were aged between 70 and 74 years old (249). Most men were aged between 30 and 34 years old (9,908) and a minority of them were aged between 70 and 74 years old (171). Most women were aged between 25 and 29 years old (1,683) and a minority of them were aged between 70 and 74 years old (78).^{xii} It means that most migrants are young adults, aged between 25 and 29 or between 30 and 34 years old. Very few migrants are aged between 70 and 74 years old, or under 4 years old.

Many foreigners living in Bhutan come from India, Nepal, the USA, Australia, and Thailand. Most of these people migrate to Bhutan for work related reasons (96.3%), mostly male, while 49% of them were female.^{xiii} Only 10% of females moved here for marriage reasons.

Internal Migration is a major phenomenon in Bhutan.^{xiv} Even though rural-to-urban migrants represent one of the largest groups of internal migrants (29,3%), rural-to-rural migrants are however the most important group (32,2% of internal migrants). The third group includes urban-to-rural migrants (29,3%), and the fourth one involves urban-to-urban migrants (18%). As of today, the largest category is represented by rural-to-rural migrants. In all four categories, most migrants are men, even though the relatively largest male majority is found in the rural-to-rural migration.^{xv} In the last census (2017), recent internal migrants made up 45.2% of the resident population in Bhutan.^{xvi} The Thimphu *dzongkhag* (district) is the one attracting the most in and out migrants. The second one is Chhukha, and the third one is Paro.

Thimphu, Chhukha and Paro are the country's three largest urban areas. From the census, it seems that people moving from urban to rural areas are the oldest (27.9 years old average), while people moving from rural to rural areas are the youngest (25.9 years old average).^{xvii} Internal migrants, particularly rural-urban migrants, have a low labour employment rate, and this could be explained by the amount of students and trainees who make up the rural-urban population. Students and stagiaires are either underemployed or unemployed.^{xviii} Also, migrants moving to urban areas seem to have higher unemployment rates, but this depends on the fact that being unemployed or looking for work are the main drivers for migration, resulting in a significant over-representation of this issue among internal migrants.^{xix}

People seem to migrate internally for four main reasons. The first one is employment. The second one is family, in the sense of moving as a dependent family member, a household migrating together. The third one is education and training, because in many rural areas there are no other schools beyond primary education. The fourth one is marriage, including changes in marital status (partners changing residence either after marriage, or after a divorce, or after the death of a partner).

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

According to the UN International Migrant Stock, the total number of emigrants at mid-year 2020 was 51,998 representing about 5,2% of the whole population. Among them, 25,703 were female, meaning 49,4% of the international migrant stock.^{xx}

Emigration for employment is still the main reason for leaving Bhutan today,^{xxi} and the second one is education. As a matter of fact, a large number of young students move outside the country to receive tertiary education abroad,^{xxii} especially in Thailand, India, and Australia on government scholarships. In 2020, most Bhutanese students attended private tertiary education in Australia (1,299 students), in India (1,131), in Thailand (27), and in the United States (23).^{xxiii}

IV. Forced Migrants (internally displaced, asylum seekers and refugees, climate displaced people)

Concerning climate displaced people, in 2020 there were 120 new displacements in Bhutan. In May 2020, cyclone Amphan affected 84 IDPs, and in October 2020 the landslide in Rochu caused another 36 IDPs. According to IDMC, the average expected number of displacements per year for sudden-onset hazards should be 4,551 in total.^{xxiv}

According to the UN International Migrants Stock, in Bhutan data regarding the total estimated refugee stock (including asylum seekers) is not known for privacy reasons, however refugees in Bhutan might be less than 5.^{xxv}

According to UNHCR, by the end-2020 there were no asylum seekers in Bhutan.^{xxvi} However, in 2020 many Bhutanese people (6,396) were refugees or in refugee-like situations (excluding asylum-seekers), and were all located in Nepal.^{xxvii} Among those, 5,580 were assisted by the UNHCR. In 2020, 15 Bhutanese people became Dutch citizens,^{xxviii} 17 Bhutanese people

relocated in Australia, and 8 in the United States.^{xxix}

Regarding Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, the majority of females (1,717) were aged between 18 and 59 years old, and a minority (175) between 0 and 4 years old. The same percentage could be found with the male population; the majority of male Bhutanese refugees in Nepal were between 18 and 59 years old (1,970 persons), while a minority were between 0 and 4 years old (180 children). The number of Bhutanese asylum seekers is zero, or not available or not applicable.

Most refugees who arrived in Nepal in the '90s were little by little resettled in third countries, rather than coming back to Bhutan, because of the general lack of voluntary repatriation.^{xxx} As of 2021, over 113,500 Bhutanese refugees departed from Nepal and were resettled in the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Denmark, and other countries.^{xxxi}

The Bhutanese refugees who are still living in Nepal are mainly Lhotshampas Bhutanese (meaning ethnic Nepalis in Bhutan). They were expelled from Bhutan in the early 1990s and some of them have been in Nepal camps for over 20 years. According to the UNHCR, refugees still living in these camps are finally experiencing some changes, for UNHCR is providing for them additional technology, and the two settlements are supplied today with solar energy.^{xxxii}

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

In 2020, the government of Bhutan identified no victims of human trafficking.^{xxxiii} In 2019, instead, there were 160 Bhutanese victims in Iraq, Oman and the UAE. Even though no new trafficking victim was identified in the reporting period, it is known that traffickers abuse Bhutanese women and girls in both sex and labour in a variety of ways. Forced domestic labour occurs through the blackmail of debt bondage or threats of physical violence. Child labour exists within the country's restaurants and automobile workshop businesses, and some of it seems to be coerced.

The victims of human trafficking are men, women and children, of both Bhutanese or foreign origin. It is not uncommon that low-skilled male Indian migrant workers receive advances before beginning work in Bhutan.^{xxxiv} Indian children are also employed by human traffickers as domestic workers in Bhutan. In the hospitality and entertainment business along the Bhutanese-Indian border, especially in hotels, massage parlors or nightclubs, some NGOs claim that Bhutanese and Indian women are forced to be involved in commercial sex. The victims who work in the *drayang*s, meaning the entertainment bars in Bhutan, are more likely to come from rural areas.

Victims of human trafficking face several problems. Their wages are often not paid or underpaid. *Drayang* workers, for example, are very likely to sign contracts they later cannot access. In such contracts, they are compelled to giving more than 50% of their income to the *drayang* owners. Moreover, victims of human trafficking face unauthorized deductions, passport retention and psychological issues due to their physical and/or mental abuse.

Victims of human trafficking have access to facilities provided by international organisations.

However, the government is also involved, by providing public awareness events and cooperating with international agencies to offer anti-trafficking training. In 2020, it increased funding to build a shelter in Thimpu.^{xxxv}

VI. National Legal Framework

Bhutan is on the “Tier 2 Watch list”, meaning that the government does not fully comply with the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)’s minimum standard. Nevertheless, it is making efforts to do so, even though the fact that Bhutan did not identify any trafficking victim in 2021 can demonstrate the shortcomings of the government’s legal system. For example, Section 224 of the Child Care and Protection Act (CCPA) criminalizes child trafficking, but it does not condemn *all kinds* of child sex trafficking for any purpose or in any form, since it needs a proof of force, fraud, or coercion or other detail, which seems to contradict the international law.^{xxxvi}

Section 154 of the Bhutan’s Penal Code was recently amended, in an effort to better prevent and counter trafficking in persons. It defines exploitation in a large sense such as sexual and domestic servitude exploitation, trafficking of human organs, forced labour and child labour. Immigration in Bhutan, instead, was codified by the Immigration Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, adopted in 2007.

Concerning international conventions, Bhutan did not ratify the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol. It also did not accede to the 2000 UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons. The international community has been encouraging the country to comply with these instruments.

VII. Main Actors

The State

The Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, Department of Immigration, implements the immigration policy, mainly the Immigration Act, and its related procedures.^{xxxvii}

In addition, in 2004 the government established a commission, the National Commission For Women And Children (NCWC), in order to promote and protect women and children’s rights in Bhutan. The NCWC also started a *Women and Child Helpline* that is active 24/7.^{xxxviii}

The government’s anti-trafficking task team is led by the Department of Law and Order (DLO). DLO encourages law enforcement and prosecutors to participate in anti-trafficking training, and sponsors human trafficking public awareness activities for schools and local government officials.

International organisations and other organisations

In 2014 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) launched its project called “Enhance Government and Civil Society Responses to Counter Trafficking in Persons in Bhutan”, in collaboration with the US Department of State. The project involves local

stakeholders to conduct a legal and policy review in order to identify gaps in national responses to trafficking in persons.^{xxxix} UNODC has also implemented some projects to facilitate the repatriation of victims.^{xl}

UNHCR helps Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. It funded the construction of several public school buildings to promote access to public education for Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.

The Catholic Church

Bhutan never had a hierarchical Catholic jurisdiction of its own. It is the Diocese of Darjeeling (India) that has jurisdiction over the Kingdom of Bhutan.^{xli}

The Catholic Church in Bhutan has little to no activity. The Christian minority in Bhutan is not registered as a religious organisation under the 2007 Religious Organisations Act. In Bhutan, Catholics worship in private. Christians do not own a burial place within the country.^{xlii} The Pentecostal Church buries its members in a cemetery in Chamurchi, a border town in India, and the Roman Catholics in Jaigaon or Darjeeling (India).^{xliii}

Even though it does not seem that a Catholic association directly operates within Bhutan, the Catholic Church has immensely helped the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Caritas supported them in the past and continues to do so, by providing food and other services to meet the basic needs of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.^{xliv}

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) also has served Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Even this organisation does not directly operate in the Bhutanese territory, but is actively involved in the Nepalian camps. JRS provides education and psychological support together with Caritas and UNHCR in the camps in Nepal.^{xlv}

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D. Endnotes

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