

The Prevailing Practice of Night Hunting in Central Bhutan: Traditional Practice of Courtship as a Sexual Coercion to Women

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Abstract : A popular and entrenched custom as a form of courtship has been practicing in Bhutan from long time back. This custom is widely being practiced in the villages of eastern and central Bhutan. This long-practiced custom is known by different terms in Bhutan, but it is popularly known to the foreigners as 'night hunting'. This unique form of courtship custom involves the boy visiting the girl's house stealthily under the cover of darkness without any pre-appointment. It is still perceived as a serving norms of courtship in the villages in central Bhutan. For many years this practice of night hunting has been in the spotlight of debate as a harmless culture but as sexual violence against women. However, this study examined the changing perception on the night hunting as a form of courtship custom or sexual coercion to women by employing the in-depth interview with 42 participants (21 females and 9 males from 3 different villages, 5 females and 7 males from urban areas) in central Bhutan. Moreover, the study investigated the gender inequality linked with the practice of night hunting in the rural areas of central Bhutan. The study revealed the changing perception on night hunting as more of sexual coercion taking place during night hunting than merely tolerating it as traditional form of practice of courtship. The finding of this study revealed unlike the past; this practice serves minimal social purpose in the society as the social changes with the development of socioeconomic of the people. However, the practice of night hunting is still prevalent at the villages, and it is known that the social power, single and widow women, valuing of village endogamy practices and the popular notion of pride of promiscuous amongst the men have attributed in sexual coercion and in ultimate victimization of the women. Furthermore, the study revealed the gender inequality linked with night hunting thus significantly increasing the vulnerability of rural women to other forms of violence in the society.

Keywords : courtship, custom, men, night hunting, practice, sexual coercion, women, violence

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