



## RESEARCH BRIEF

# Toward Healing Centered Engagement to Address Mental Well-Being among Young Bhutanese Refugee Women: Findings from a Cultural Leadership Project

Young Bhutanese refugee women in the US face many challenges from belonging and identity struggles in urban spaces, to experiences with persistent social isolation and discrimination; difficulties in adapting to new conditions and structures; cultural barriers associated with gender, and inter-generational conflicts that largely affect their mental well-being and shape their resettlement experience. Given the increasing mental health risks among Bhutanese refugee women, a year long culturally responsive leadership project was co-developed and co-implemented with young Bhutanese women to: empower young Bhutanese women as cultural leaders, help identify community assets and cultural resources that can serve as protective factors to challenge gender norms, promote mental well-being, and build community resilience among the local Bhutanese community.



### METHODS

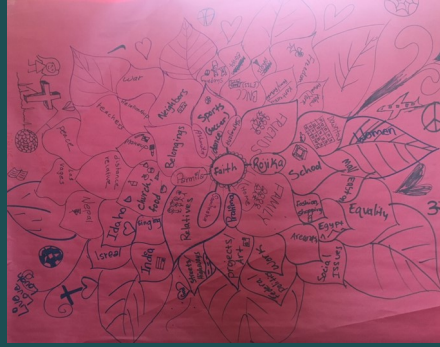
Using participatory methods, the project focused on cultural leadership development as a core component of addressing mental well-being and building community resilience. The 12-month leadership project (2 cycles) critically documented the experiences and perspectives of young Bhutanese women and engaged them in a co-learning process that helped co-develop culturally responsive skills that would help them challenge gender norms and become active members in their communities. Participants attended 2 hour sessions every 2 weeks for 6 months, focused on five key areas: political literacy, economic/financial literacy, legal literacy, health literacy, and school system literacy. Both quantitative and qualitative data (N=60) including arts based and photovoice projects were collected on identity, acculturative stress, gender, mental health, and resilience factors using convergent mixed method approaches. Over 50% of participants had been in the US for over 5 years and were high schoolers, the vast majority practiced Hindu religion (71%) and the mean age was 15.97 years (SD=2.91)

## CULTURAL LEADERSHIP PROJECT

*Cultural leadership is rooted in community, family, and cultural identity*



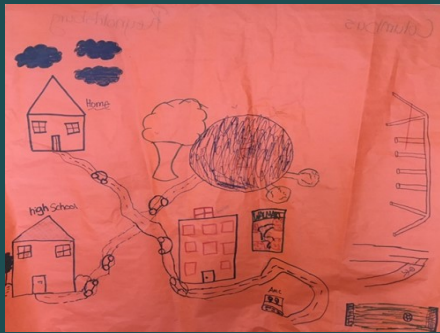
**Interconnected identities**



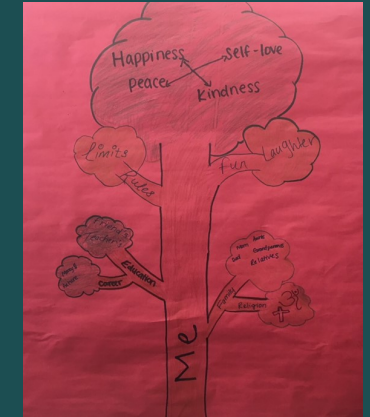
**Flower of identities**



**The Lotus: Resurrection & Revival**



**Spaces of Identities**



**Growing tree of identities**

*"Being part of this project has truly been a life changing experience for me. Not only do I get to learn new things every time, but I get to form a connection with everyone in a personal level. I get to learn about my culture and tradition even more and I love how talented all the girls are. We all love the experience and knowledge we gain from the project. For some of us, this project is the only experience we can get outside of our house and school. To add to that, this project gives voice to everyone. All the girls in the group grew up being told that girls cannot speak up and must stay silent. Therefore, this project is a platform for all of us to express our opinions. I remember, someone telling me how they look forward to Sunday and how excited they get to be part of this amazing event. For me, this project has given me a platform to share my life experience and a platform to be myself without being judged." -Participant*

**RESULTS** Findings show increased leadership skills, self-esteem, social support and resilience among young Bhutanese women. Findings reiterate the use of healing centered engagement strategies and the importance of culturally responsive leadership project, crucial for building leadership skills to support young Bhutanese women become cultural ambassadors both within and outside their communities. Pre and posttest scores on mental health indicators showed significant decrease in anxiety ( $t = .47, p < .001, d = .09$ ) and depression ( $t = 3.91, p < .10, d = .67$ ). Given the project platform, the young women initiated their own support group during the research process, which continued even after the culmination of the project.

**IMPLICATIONS** Healing centered projects such as cultural leadership promotes a holistic view of healing from traumatic experiences and environments; offers an asset driven approach aimed at restoration of young peoples' well-being; is culturally grounded and views healing as the restoration of identity. Although discussions around healing centered engagement (HCE) is evolving, there are persistent gaps in how the knowledge of HCE can be translated into pragmatic actions. The cultural leadership project is one example of how participatory research approaches can be used to infuse hope and healing among diverse young refugee women.

### ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Dr. Arati Maleku is an expert on human migration and social demography, community resilience, social determinants of health, and mixed methods research. Dr. Binaya Subedi researches the challenges and possibilities that immigrant and refugee families create when they collectively migrate across national and international borders.

Contact information: [Maleku.1@osu.edu](mailto:Maleku.1@osu.edu)

### CONTACT US

The Ohio State University  
College of Social Work  
Stillman Hall, 1947 College Rd.  
Columbus, OH 43210-1162



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