
The Two Faces of Empowerment in Conflict

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ABSTRACT This article problematises Bush & Saltarelli's call for a new and comprehensive peacebuilding education which empowers children through demonstrating that alternatives to conflict exist, that they have choices and the capacity to change their own and their society's situation. It does so by exploring the various possibilities for empowerment available to young Bhutanese refugees living in Nepal, which are advanced by agencies administering services in the refugee camps and promoted by refugee political groups. Fieldwork demonstrates that some children simultaneously engage in humanitarian agency projects, which promote human rights and peaceful values, and with political groups advocating violence. Through their participation in agency projects, children learn awareness-raising methods, such as poetry and street theatre, which they also employ in their work with political groups. This article will consider the relationship between children's empowerment through their involvement in agency-initiated non-formal education projects and their engagement in violent political activities, suggesting that, like education, empowerment may show two faces in situations affected by conflict.

Introduction

This article focuses on the experiences and choices available to young Bhutanese refugees growing up in Nepal. The majority of the young people upon whom the study focuses were born in the refugee camps in Nepal. They face social, economic and political limitations due to their status as refugees, and their status as children. Yet, despite these difficulties, young refugees form opinions, make decisions and take actions to improve their lives. The opportunities for empowerment available to young refugees living in long-term camps, where political tensions have recently rapidly heightened, are examined. Two possible avenues towards empowerment are offered through young people's participation in agency-initiated projects and through their engagement with political groups in the refugee camps. My fieldwork data suggests that there may be a link between young people's engagement in agency-initiated participatory projects and their involvement in political activities, some of which are violent. Building on insights concerning the two faces of education in situations of ethnic conflict (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000), this article considers whether, in a context of political violence, there may also be two faces to empowerment.

Drawing on the work of Lane (1995) and Chambers (1995), I define empowerment as a process through which individuals and/or groups access or create opportunities to enhance their capacity to influence decisions affecting all areas of their lives. This involves the transformation of socio-political structures and behavioural norms, which are experienced by such individuals as constraining. These could include both cultural patterns of age hierarchies and government policies of ethnic discrimination. In Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal some young refugees simultaneously engage in children's participation projects promoting 'a violence free children society', and violent political activities, intended to enable the return of the refugees to Bhutan. For these young people, such activities are not considered mutually exclusive, but rather may both be viewed as work which supports the community and the nation. This may be because, in protracted

refugee situations, refugees face difficulties due to structural political, economic and social inequalities, which humanitarian agencies do not have the capacity to transform. In these circumstances there are limits to agencies' ability to empower project participants (James, 1999), who may seek alternative, potentially violent, strategies to improve their situation.

By exploring this case study, the article will problematise the concept of a peacebuilding education which encourages non-violence through empowering participants. Participatory education projects are often successful in empowering participants through increasing their skills and confidence. However, facilitators cannot control how skills and experience gained through participation in peacebuilding initiatives are employed by participants outside the context of project activities. In practice, project participants may utilise these tools in ways unanticipated by humanitarian agencies, for example, to promote political violence, rather than peaceful ideals. Empowerment is a contested concept and is understood differently depending on what definitions of agency and power are adopted. Transformation can occur through formal 'participation' processes alone; for example, through committees, if a voluntaristic approach to agency is adopted, seeing society 'as made up of free-floating actors, each with different interests which they pursue by bargaining with each other in interactional space' (Nelson & Wright, 1995, p. 7). However, if a 'structural view is taken which sees people as positioned within systems of relations through which inequalities are reproduced' (p. 7), facilitating opportunities for stakeholders to meet and for beneficiaries to express their opinion is not enough. In this view, participation and empowerment would require broader processes of social and political transformation and structural change (Hilyard et al, 2001, p. 69).

In certain circumstances political violence, intended to result in such societal change, may be experienced as a form of empowerment. Researchers have documented the sense of empowerment which can result when previously marginalised groups challenge hierarchical power relations. This may be through enacting violence against those perceived to have exploited or persecuted a social group (James, 1997), through taking part in violent movements intended to construct new social roles (West, 2000) and/or to construct a more socially and economically just society (Manchanda, 2004). Whilst this is not what development discourse means by the idea of empowerment, for marginalised groups, such as refugees, participation in violent political action may be experienced as positive and empowering (James, 1997, 1999, p. 23) or may be seen as the only way for refugees to address the root causes of their situation. This article will consider whether there may be a relationship between young people's participation and empowerment through development projects and political participation in violent movements.

Research Methodology

This article is based on my doctoral fieldwork amongst Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. I completed two rounds of fieldwork between September 2006 and March 2007 and from August 2007 to January 2008. My initial intention was to conduct research on the impact of children's participation projects in the refugee camps and to explore how and whether such projects contributed to the empowerment of refugee children. However, during my fieldwork period, the influence of political issues, such as the growth of revolutionary political groups and intra-camp tensions, steadily increased and seeped into all aspects of camp life. As these political concerns affect all refugees (from young to old), I also began collecting data on children's political learning and activities in formal and informal settings. My fieldwork sites include all seven refugee camps in eastern Nepal. I resided with a Nepali family in a nearby town and visited the refugee camps almost every day. I also did research with Bhutanese refugees living in Kathmandu and moved between the two sites frequently.

I mainly relied on ethnographic research methods, gathering information through spending large amounts of time with Bhutanese refugees in camp and other settings. I observed the daily routines and practices of camp residents and built close relationships with many refugees, who actively sought to share their experiences with me. I used a mixture of individual and collective qualitative research methods. These included individual interviews and discussions, focus group discussions and participatory drawing and writing activities with children. I supplemented these methods by engaging young refugees (aged between 12 and 18 years) in the research process,

providing them with research methods training and support, which enabled them to do their own research on issues they identified as important to refugee children.[1] The political situation in the refugee camps dramatically changed throughout my fieldwork. Political tensions escalated, resulting in threats, intimidation and outbreaks of collective violence. This violence created ethical challenges in maintaining research participants' well-being and necessitated a continual re-assessment of my own and others' safety. Due to the sensitivity of political issues in the camps, data collection during my second fieldwork period was limited to research activities with a small number of young people with whom I could meet individually and with whom I had built relationships of trust on my previous visit.

Children and Politics

Despite academic recognition that childhood is a social construction and that children live through a range of experiences of childhood(s), influenced by factors such as culture, gender and class (James & Prout [1990] 1997; Scheper-Hughes & Sargent, 1998; Seymour, 1999; Panter-Brick & Smith, 2002; Levine, 2003), the model of childhood prevalent in the Global North exerts widespread influence. This concept of childhood, which developed in the context of European industrialisation (Hendrick, 1997; Cunningham, 1998), separates children from the adult world of work, politics and sex and understands childhood as a period of innocence, protection and education (Ennew, 2000; Tolfree, 2004). This understanding of childhood affects many children's lives due to its impact on policy, law and education, for example, through the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which has been almost universally ratified. International child rights norms are promoted around the world, yet are biased towards promoting culturally-specific concepts of childhood (Boyden, 1997) which emphasise children's dependency, vulnerability and need for protection (Pupavac, 2001). Not only are culturally-grounded childhood roles advanced through the UNCRC, but so too are rights that relate to families' and children's material circumstances, such as their economic and political status (Hart, 2008 forthcoming). Certain children's roles and experiences are thus promoted at the expense of others. The right to education, for example, is often privileged over children's right to work with dignity. Yet, the socio-economic situation of many children living in the Global South necessitates work, which is valued by their families and communities. Children's everyday experiences are impacted by social, political and economic processes, occurring on local, national and international levels (Hart, 2006, p. 6). However, the humanitarian policies and practices designed to improve poor and/or displaced children's lives are often based on international child rights norms and are usually viewed as politically neutral. This results in a lack of recognition of the influence of political economy on children's lives, and in welfare initiatives that do not address their material needs but instead seek to raise awareness of child rights values (White, 2002).

Internationally prevalent concepts of childhood influence the roles which are considered appropriate for children. The UNCRC (1989) aims to give children the right to participate in decisions that affect them and this has encouraged adults to provide children with opportunities to participate in various consultations, community development and research activities. Although children's social competence is recognised in participatory children's projects, it is adults who permit children to participate in ways defined by adults. Other forms of child participation (such as military, political, sexual or economic activities) are often not recognised by adults as legitimate (Ennew, 2000). However, in situations such as the Bhutanese refugee camps, where children's lived experiences do not reflect child rights standards, their difficulties stem from political problems (i.e. internal conflict and lack of citizenship). Yet, children around the world are often not viewed by adults as capable political actors. This is usually due to the perception of children as incompetent in moral and political reasoning and as susceptible to adult manipulation (Brett & Specht, 2004; Such et al, 2005; Rosen, 2007). Lack of recognition of children as political actors and the ideas of political neutrality underpinning humanitarian action mean that refugee children are prohibited from expressing overtly political ideas or engaging in political activities through projects designed to promote children's rights.

Two Faces of Education, Two Faces of Empowerment?

In *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict*, Bush & Saltarelli (2000) consider the impact that education may have on young people's political learning, sense of identity and values. Bush & Saltarelli (2000, p. ix) broadly define education as a medium for the transmission of moral and cultural values, language and behavioural norms. This transmission occurs through processes of formal learning (e.g. in schools), informal learning (e.g. through socialisation within a family or community) and non-formal learning, which entails planned and organised education that is more flexible than formal learning in school (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000, p. ix). It has been noted that 'generally agencies treat education as inherently benevolent and argue that it represents a "force for good" in situations of conflict without acknowledging that education can have negative consequences' (Smith & Vaux, 2003, p. 18). However, Bush & Saltarelli draw attention to the constructive role that education plays in political and social processes and emphasise the potentially negative aspects of education in relation to conflict. These negative impacts of education result from unequal access to educational opportunities, education as means of cultural repression, the denial of education as a weapon of war, the manipulation of history for political reasons (e.g. through textbooks that tell an incomplete 'national story'), the promotion of hatred for other groups, and segregated education (2000, pp. 9-16). Such educational practices may in fact encourage ethnic conflict, rather than contributing to peaceful relations between groups. To counter the potentially negative and conflict-promoting impacts of educational policies and practices Bush & Saltarelli argue for a new and comprehensive peacebuilding education that would empower children by demonstrating that alternatives to conflict exist, that children have choices and the capacity to change their own and their society's situation (2000, pp. 29-30).

Peace education programmes usually entail activities with children aimed to prevent political violence through changing learned attitudes and behaviour (Boyden & Ryder, 1996, p. 38). They have been criticised for focusing on interpersonal behaviour, which, psychologists argue, may have a tenuous relationship with the inter-group behaviour that is usually implicated in political conflict (Boyden & Ryder, 1996). Bush & Saltarelli contrast their vision of a peacebuilding education with peace education programmes which they argue are too narrow in their focus on mediation and negotiation skills and which fail to address the deeper structural causes of violent conflict (2000, p. 23). A peacebuilding education, Bush & Saltarelli argue, should be based on the capacities and experiences of conflict-affected persons, should be a bottom-up (rather than externally driven) process, should include teaching of conflict management methods and the promotion of values of tolerance and non-violence, should not be restricted to the classroom, and may involve community projects with young people (2000, p. 27). Peacebuilding education should be a long-term process, which depends on local resources and tries to create opportunities rather than enforcing solutions (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000, p. 27).

Bush & Saltarelli are not prescriptive in the format that their vision of peacebuilding education would take. This is presumably because they recognise that the content of such an education will differ depending on the context. However, their proposal appears to share many elements with the project of 'children's participation', which developed during the 1990s following the widespread influence of the UNCRC. As the UNCRC grants children rights to participate in matters affecting them, it has inspired the formation of various children's groups, youth parliaments and forums intended to increase children's participation in their local, national and international communities.[2] In Nepal, the UNCRC has had a direct impact on the formation of many children's clubs (Nepal Government, 2002), most of which have been established by and receive support from the plethora of international and national development agencies. These initiatives can be described as non-formal educational opportunities, where children take part in structured activities outside the classroom. Children's participation projects aim to empower young participants by providing skills training, rights awareness and opportunities for collective (democratic) decision making.

Children's participation projects are also influenced by participatory development models. 'Participation', as an activity, evolved from international development practice designed to improve development processes by engaging beneficiaries in project planning, implementation and resource control. Participatory development can be situated as a reaction to the failures of externally planned, 'top-down' development interventions and it therefore aims to promote

'bottom-up' solutions, which are identified and driven by project beneficiaries. Chambers (1992) describes Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) as 'a family of approaches and methods to enable rural people to share, enhance, and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act' (Chambers, 1992, p. 1), which are held to empower local people to make their own decisions (Chambers, 1995, p. 30). According to Bush & Saltarelli it is this sense of empowerment which peacebuilding education should cultivate. Children should be encouraged to feel 'you have the power to change your world in a way that affects your place and role – past, present and future' (2000, pp. 29-30). It is hoped that this experience of empowerment will result in young people upholding peaceful values and contributing to a reduction in communal violence.

Context: Bhutanese refugee children in Nepal

There are currently more than 100,000 Bhutanese refugees living in seven camps in eastern Nepal. Most of these refugees fled Bhutan in the early 1990s due to discriminatory government legislation and practices, targeting the ethnic Nepalese population of southern Bhutan (Hutt, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2003). The refugees have now been housed in 'temporary' refugee camps for more than 15 years, with, until recently, no prospect of any durable solution on the horizon. For many years, almost all the refugees seemingly desired repatriation to Bhutan as the solution to their problem. For this reason, organisations operating in the camps, including those working with children, built 'assisting the refugees to repatriate with honour and dignity' (unpublished project proposal) into their project aims. The school system was conceptualised as an education for repatriation and follows a specific Bhutanese refugee curriculum, which includes Bhutanese social studies and Dzongkha (Bhutan's national language) components. In addition to promoting children's rights, children's projects in the camps aim to develop of a sense of Bhutanese nationality amongst young people (Bhutanese Refugee Children Forum [BRCF], 2007). In 2001, representatives of the Nepal and Bhutan governments established a process of Joint Verification of the refugee population. It was hoped that this would result in the refugees' eventual repatriation. However, the categorisation was slow and resulted in only 2.4% of the refugee population being declared bona fide Bhutanese citizens who were forcibly evicted (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Further, following a security incident in 2003, the process was halted by the Bhutanese Government. The failure of the Joint Verification Team to classify more than a small proportion of the refugees as genuine Bhutanese citizens with the right to return home resulted in many refugees and international actors concluding that repatriation to Bhutan is currently impossible.

In October 2006, the US government announced a proposal to resettle 60,000 Bhutanese refugees and other countries offered to take smaller numbers (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Many refugees welcome this offer to move to countries where they will enjoy rights, employment opportunities and eventual citizenship. However, some refugee leaders and political groups strongly oppose the proposal of durable solutions other than repatriation. Inspired by the political achievements of the Maoist movement in Nepal [3], a Bhutanese communist movement has been established by camp-based refugees and also operates in Bhutan (Adhikari, 2007). This movement aims to enable return to Bhutan by force, and to achieve radical political change there. Due to the contrasting perspectives among refugees as to their future, the current situation in the refugee camps is tense. Since 2006, the Bhutanese Communist Party and its various sister organisations have become very active in the refugee camps. Political hostilities have rapidly heightened, as their membership and activities have expanded. Refugee Maoists intimidate and attack activists who speak openly in favour of third country resettlement. They also collect donations from refugees for their movement, which are sometimes enforced through threats of physical violence. Social mistrust has developed in the camps, as neighbours engage in verbal and physical attacks over their conflicting political positions. In May and August 2007, a few pro-resettlement refugees suffered attacks on their huts. These activists and their families were beaten and some had to be hospitalised. Their homes and property were destroyed and they received further threats of death if they continue to 'mobilise' people for resettlement.

It is against this backdrop of social and political tension that Bhutanese refugee children are growing up, learning about their situations and forming their moral and political ideas. Almost all Bhutanese refugee children attend school in the camps, where they continue to receive an

'education for repatriation' provided by an international agency. Young refugees interact daily with peers and family members, observe the frequent political protests and events in the camps, and are affected by political instability in Nepal. Some refugee children do not attend school, but work to earn money to support their families, or care for sick and elderly relatives. A small proportion of refugee children elected by their peers are involved in an agency-initiated participation project (the Bhutanese Refugee Children Forum – BRCF) that is designed to increase their capacity to take part in decision making and action to improve their lives. This children's participation project aims to empower children, by raising awareness of and encouraging them to claim their rights from the adults in their community. Young refugees take action to prevent incidents, such as early marriage, child labour and domestic violence, which are perceived to be harmful to children. It is hoped that children's status in their community will be raised, through the transformation of power relations between adults and children. Many young refugees also engage in Maoist political activities, which support the violent struggle for return to Bhutan. These activities include public demonstrations, effigy burning, and threatening and attacking political opponents. Some young people conduct activities with Maoist groups which are similar to those promoted by participatory agency-initiated projects. Indeed, some young people participate in both agency participatory activities and political activities with Maoist groups. These activities involve raising awareness on issues important to children through the use of poetry, street theatre and other performing arts.

Empowerment through Agency Projects

The Bhutanese refugee camps are cited as examples of model refugee camps, because of the high level of refugee participation in camp management and service delivery (Human Rights Watch, 2003). The agencies operating in the camps follow the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s Community Development Approach (Muggah, 2005). This approach aims to provide an 'equitable and cost-effective distribution of basic services' in a long-term refugee situation (Muggah, 2005, p. 151). UNHCR intends to achieve this through encouraging 'self-reliance' and 'ownership' amongst the refugees, by introducing democratic management structures, participatory approaches to decision-making and promoting women and children's rights (Muggah, 2005, p. 154). Children's rights and their participation in camp decision-making structures are advanced through agency-initiated projects such as the BRCF. This organisation of democratically elected refugee children is expected to result in young people's empowerment.

The BRCF engages children (who have been elected by their peers) in identifying and taking action on child protection concerns, raising awareness of child rights and organising leisure and skill-development activities. The refugee camps are divided into sectors and units, where there are approximately 100-125 huts in one unit and one sector contains four units. There is a BRCF in each refugee camp, where four children from each unit are elected to their sector-level committees, which have 16 members in total. Representatives from the sector-level committees form a camp central committee (with 20-30 members depending on camp size) and hold meetings every week. There is also an executive inter-camp children's committee, which meets on a monthly basis. The organisation defines itself as a non-political, social organisation, which works for child protection, development and participation. Its vision and motto is 'to create a violence free children society' (BRCF, 2007). BRCF members attend training on and then utilise arts, journalism, photography and street performance skills to take action on issues such as child marriage, girl trafficking, domestic violence, alcoholism, caste discrimination and school drop-outs. Children's participation in this project entails their involvement in consultation, information sharing, decision-making, project planning, delivery and evaluation. The project aims to improve the lives of young refugees, their peers, families and communities by engaging them in social action. Through these activities, the implementing agencies aim to 'maximise the potential for young Bhutanese refugees to enhance their lives and livelihoods', to provide 'tools and channels for self-expression and self-advocacy' (unpublished project proposal) and to empower young refugees to feel that they can make a positive contribution to the development of their society. It is assumed that through their participation in this project young participants will be inspired to use peaceful group action to improve their situation (unpublished project proposal).

Fieldwork demonstrated that project participants clearly feel they benefit from their involvement in the BRCF. Young people report an increase in confidence, especially in expressing their views in group situations – ‘after working in the BRCF, I felt confident to speak in front of other people and to share my views’ (ex-member) – and to adults – ‘since joining the BRCF I feel more confident to tell my opinions to senior people’ (current member). Through their participation in the BRCF young people also develop new skills and knowledge, and described their increased personal freedom:

Before I went to the BRCF, my family was very strict. I was not usually allowed to go out from my home and if I did go out I had to come back exactly on time or I was scolded badly. But taking part in the Child-to-Child programme played a vital role in my life as I was able to convince my parents that I was not doing bad activities and that along with my duties, I also had the right to go out. (Ex-member)

BRCF members also made more friendships, improved in their studies and gained the ability to earn money through their new skills (e.g. photography or painting). Family members seem to benefit from their children’s involvement in the BRCF. Parents explained that they learned about child rights and other issues, felt proud of their children and were also pleased when children could earn a small income: ‘I feel proud of my son since he has been working in the BRCF and I feel that through this he has learned about his duties’ (parent of BRCF member). Family relations sometimes improved, with child participants noting changes in their parents’ behaviour towards them, for example, being beaten or scolded less and being allowed more freedom to move outside the home, particularly for girls.

Young people and community members also pointed to the advantages derived from the efforts of the BRCF, by the whole refugee community. This was attributed to children raising awareness of social problems (e.g. child marriage and domestic violence) through street dramas, articles in the children’s newspaper and art/photography exhibitions: ‘the BRCF members make people aware of social issues, such as alcoholism and gender discrimination by showing street dramas, displaying pamphlets and posters’ (community member). It appears that through their participation in BRCF activities young people develop a sense of duty towards their families and their community and desire to work to improve their society: ‘I try to help other children through doing street dramas in our camp to remove social problems like alcoholism and polygamy’ (current member). Young people also felt that their involvement in the BRCF improved their status in the community and led to their being invited to meetings with adults to take part in camp decision-making processes. Further, BRCF members and staff explained that refugees (both children and adults) have been encouraged to report child rights violations and protection issues (e.g. rape or domestic violence) to the camp management and the agencies.

Most of the challenges to the BRCF’s work raised by agency staff and BRCF members related to sociocultural values and practices which do not match international child rights norms. A senior project manager explained that ‘the main challenges faced by the BRCF involve the attitude, practices and behaviour towards children amongst the refugee community’. These practices which are deemed by agencies and young participants to be harmful to children include early marriage, child labour and the differential treatment of boys and girls. Yet, early marriage, for example, has been practiced amongst the refugees for years and is regarded by many in the community as acceptable. Therefore, when children report certain issues, such as an incident of early marriage, to agency staff, they sometimes come into conflict with adult community leaders and Camp Management Committee members, who would prefer to resolve the matter within the refugee camp. The BRCF focuses on changing social and power relations within the refugee camp itself, where young refugees are encouraged to claim their rights vis-à-vis the adults in their community. Their activities are limited to the humanitarian space of the camps, rather than relating to the social and political realities of the world external to the camps. While, the BRCF is clearly playing an important role in mediating situations of domestic violence and abuse, this focus on relations between adults and children in the camps neglects unequal relations between children and also fails to address the ‘disempowerment’ experienced by the whole community (i.e. their lack of citizenship, basic rights, freedom of movement and social and economic opportunities).

Empowerment through Political Engagement

The existence of structural political and economic difficulties faced by refugee children (and their families and caregivers) means there are limits to the ability of agency-led participatory projects to 'empower' young refugees. These limitations result from the participants' status as refugees and to the inability of the agencies and the refugees to change the political situation that caused them to be displaced from Bhutan 17 years ago and which has resulted in their being denied citizenship and basic rights. However, refugee-initiated political organisations have mandates that attempt to address the root causes of the political and economic problems faced by all the refugees. The Bhutanese Communist Party's demands include democracy, freedom and rights, health care, free education, women's equality, land redistribution and minimum wage in Bhutan, and the repatriation of the refugees with dignity and honour (Chandrasekharan, 2003). In order to achieve these ends, the Bhutanese Maoists are preparing to fight a guerrilla war in southern Bhutan and are recruiting refugees living in camps in Nepal. According to Maoist leaders, the guerrilla cadres in Bhutan are volunteers who are over 21. However, within refugee camps children are involved in Maoist political activities to raise awareness of the group's aims and to build up moral and financial support for the movement. These groups also employ tactics of violence and intimidation against those refugees who publicly welcome the recent US offer of third country resettlement as a durable solution.

In the context of Nepal, research has shown that some young people appear to experience a sense of empowerment resulting from recruitment to or association with the Maoists (Pettigrew, 2003; Shneiderman & Turin, 2004; Sharma & Prasain, 2004). This is partly due to the ideology of equality promoted by the Maoists, which means that membership 'directly addresses the structural inequalities, which constrain young people' (Pettigrew, 2003, p. 318), women (Sharma & Prasain, 2004) and certain ethnic groups (de Sales, 2003) in Nepal. Recruitment can allow young cadres to acquire a new public voice and to create alternative relations outside the existing hierarchical power dynamics at the village level (Pettigrew, 2003, p. 319). Some academics have also noted a potential relationship between development projects which aim to empower women and children, and their subsequent recruitment to the Maoist movement (Gautam et al, 2001; Manchanda, 2004; Pettigrew & Shneidermann, 2004; Leve, 2007). Anecdotal evidence suggests that Maoist members have sought to recruit women and children who have had training on rights and empowerment and who may therefore be more confident and have better leadership skills than their peers. The Maoists have also apparently convinced such women and children to join the movement by arguing that their rights can be achieved through dramatic political change alone. Further, it appears that the promotion of 'rural women's critical thinking skills' through empowerment projects 'may have paved the way for them to engage with Maoist ideology as fully conscious political subjects' (Pettigrew & Shneidermann, 2004, p. 4). This is echoed by observations from children's clubs, which operate on the same model as the BRCF, where members have been recruited by the Nepalese Maoists. Lansdown perceives this as a negative risk of children's participation projects, when adults have successfully persuaded 'some children to join by convincing them that they were fighting for their rights' (2006, p. 11).

In the Bhutanese camps, a number of young refugees (mainly teenagers) have chosen to become involved in Maoist political activities. Young people have attended Maoist demonstrations, political rallies and other events (such as burning effigies of the Bhutanese king) both within and outside the camp, including attending large Nepali Maoist meetings. Some young refugees have joined Maoist cultural organisations. These cultural organisations operate openly and legally in the refugee camps, raising awareness, through song, dance and street performance, of the duty to struggle to return to Bhutan. Other young refugees distribute Maoist pamphlets and take part in threatening refugees who publicly welcome the US resettlement offer. There were high levels of youth involvement in several outbreaks of collective violence, in May and August 2007, against refugees perceived to publicly support third country resettlement. During this violence, resettlement activists' huts were destroyed and some activists, their families and bystanders were severely beaten. Following the incident in May 2007, many refugees were injured in rioting and several teenagers were shot and killed by police who were trying to maintain order in the camps. At the same time, thousands of refugees, including a high proportion of school-going young people, attended demonstrations on the India/Nepal border. This *jana āndolan* (people's

movement) was organised as a peaceful attempt to walk back to Bhutan, yet this protest also became violent. Refugees burnt tyres and threw stones at the Indian and Nepal security forces, while the Indian army used tear gas and opened fire on the refugees, resulting in several deaths and many injuries.

Of the young people who have spoken to me about their involvement in Maoist activities, almost all are current or former BRCF members. This may be because I have spent most time with BRCF members who have chosen to share their political views and experiences. It is important to clarify that not all BRCF members are involved in political activities. In fact, many members express their disappointment at the increase in violence in the camps and many young people involved in political violence are non-BRCF members. It should also be noted that since the increase in political tensions and activities in the camp, BRCF members have discussed the situation and have introduced a new rule which terminates the membership of any participants who are also members of political parties (although in practice no child has been asked to resign to date). Further, it is not the case that all these young people are totally committed to violent political struggle. Despite being interested in and excited by Maoist political activities and the example of the success of the Maoists in Nepal, many young refugees are reserving their judgement on whether they want to become fully involved in Bhutanese Maoist organisations. For some school-going children this is because they feel that they want to concentrate on their studies and do not have time for full-time political engagement, yet. However, it appears that a significant number of young refugees are active in both agency-initiated social projects and political activities. This leads to the question of whether there may be a link between empowering young people through agency-initiated activities and their becoming politically active.

Maoist cultural groups containing former and current BRCF members use skills and methods learned in the BRCF to plan and execute activities to promote awareness of communist ideology and the importance of return to Bhutan, through armed struggle if necessary. This includes the child-to-child six-step approach (Hawes, 1997; Pridmore & Stephens, 2000) and street theatre. One 17-year-old female activist, Dhan Maya [4], who received training in street theatre through the BRCF, took part both in BRCF performances on child protection issues, and performances for a Bhutanese Maoist cultural organisation. Dhan Maya has performed in political awareness-raising programmes in the camp and has also travelled to Kathmandu to record revolutionary songs and to participate in a play, *paristhitile janmāeko laksha* (Goal Created by Circumstance) (Adhikari, 2007). These cultural activities both promote a political ideology and also help the party to raise funds. It has been noted in relation to the Maoist conflict in Nepal that for many cadres involved in the movement 'the road underground to the forest, armed struggle and capture or death, often begins with the overground student-based cultural activities' (Gautam et al, 2001 p. 246). This also appears to be the case in the Bhutanese camps. In early 2007, Dhan Maya explained:

I work in this cultural group to raise awareness about our country by doing drama, dancing and singing. We have to go to our motherland and have to fight for our right to go back. We have to fight by thinking power and with a peaceful mind.

However, just a few months later Dhan Maya led attacks on the homes of third country resettlement activists. Whilst brandishing a *khukuri* knife, she played an active role in destroying huts and searched for the wife of a resettlement supporter, apparently to kill her. She was observed beating an elderly woman and her pregnant daughter-in-law when they tried to save their possessions. Following these attacks in August 2007, Dhan Maya fled from the refugee camp and her current location is unknown.

It seems that already 'empowered' young project participants may be more likely to be approached by Maoist members for recruitment to the movement, as they have skills and confidence that are attractive to political groups. One senior BRCF member explained that she had been approached many times, as 'I am confident to speak in the mass and I know karate'. Although she refused to intimidate people as she disagrees with violence, she decided to help through writing poetry about Bhutan. Several ex-BRCF members explained that due to training opportunities and experience gained through taking part in BRCF activities, they have developed skills in street theatre. They have used these skills to establish a drama organisation in their camp through which they train other children in street theatre methods and encourage them to perform plays on social

issues in the community. They were approached by a Maoist cultural organisation who wanted to train their members in drama techniques:

Sometimes I help political persons in organising cultural activities, like dance and street drama about the torture our parents received from the government in Bhutan and the need to struggle to go back to our motherland. They ask us for help because we know about drama.

In addition to employing street theatre skills developed through participation in BRCF training and activities, young BRCF members also used agency-funded wall magazines to write poetry, some of which contains a call to arms to start a violent revolution in Bhutan, for which young people should be prepared to die.[5]

Young people were able to explain why they have decided to take part in political activities. These reasons related to their desire to transform the political and economic problems in Bhutan which led to their becoming refugees. As the agencies hoped, many young project participants do express their conviction that they can positively contribute to the development of their community, but some wish to do so through ensuring their right to return and to securing the rights of both the refugees and those Nepali Bhutanese remaining inside Bhutan, even if this involves violence. The aims of the BRCF include both the development of a sense of Bhutanese nationality among the refugee children and the creation of a society free from violence against children. BRCF members are encouraged to use participatory arts as tools to achieve both these objectives. It is not unusual for events organised by the BRCF to include children reciting poetry emphasising the need to return to their motherland, as well as drama performances on the negative impact of domestic violence on children or the dangers of girl trafficking from the camps. For some BRCF participants, it seems that the goals of helping their society (e.g. through community work in the refugee camps) and their nation (e.g. through armed struggle for repatriation) are interchangeable. An ex-BRCF member explained that when the Maoist cadres return to the camp from Bhutan:

They ask us to come to Bhutan to fight. They say that if we die, we die for the nation and this is better than dying in a different way. We say that we want to stay in the camp and do something for the community and that this is also for the nation. They agree that this is also for the nation and accept that we are busy with this work. In the future, if the time is right, if our friends are going and our parents are encouraging us and giving us permission to go then we would also go to fight for the nation.

Further, as might be expected when encouraged to heavily invest in improving their communities, young people have a strong desire to keep their community together, which would not be possible if and when third country resettlement takes place: 'In the US people will be separated from each other and our sense of community will be lost' (Maoist cultural group member). Children's daily experiences, including the effects of living as refugees in a politically unstable country, also influence their opinions. For example, there are sometimes outbreaks of violence and tension between local Nepali residents and refugees, over firewood collection or other resource distribution. In February 2007, such tensions resulted in the deaths of several people and the injuries of many refugees and locals:

I want to go back to Bhutan because if I am in my own country then I can eat and work and do everything and no one can say anything against me. But if we are in another country, they might not allow us to do things. They might say 'you are not our nationals', for example, at the moment there are problems in one camp where the Nepalese people are now saying, 'you should leave this place'.

Such incidents are referred to by young people when questioning how secure they would be in third countries.

Despite young people's ability to explain their choice to take part in political, as well as social activities, refugee adults and agency staff members generally convey their belief that the young people who are politically involved are being misused by political leaders and do not fully understand their actions. There is also a common perception that the young people engaging in political activities are those who have dropped out of school and who therefore have little to occupy their time and few hopes for the future. Most senior agency staff and many refugee adults

seem to believe that children involved in agency projects, such as the BRCF, are not engaging in political activities as they are occupied with social work in the camps. Children who are out of school or disengaged from organised activities, however, are considered to be more susceptible to recruitment by political groups. Yet, my fieldwork observations suggested that many non-school-going children had left school due to family problems and spend their time engaged in income-generating and/or domestic work, essential to their families' survival. Therefore these children do not have time to attend school or to participate in political activities, whereas other young people simultaneously engage in both social (through the BRCF) and political work. Many refugee adults are (understandably) concerned that young refugees' involvement in political activities will have a negative effect on their short- and long-term interests. Involvement in violent political movements, such as the refugee Maoist movement, has real consequences for those who are involved. This could include imprisonment in Nepal and/or long-term lack of citizenship, as records are kept of refugees involved in the outbreaks of violence. People who have committed serious crimes, such as the violent attacks in the refugee camps, will not be eligible for resettlement, which is currently the only available durable solution.

Conclusion

As Bush & Saltarelli (2000) argue in terms of the impact of educational practices in ethnic conflict, these fieldwork observations suggest that, in highly politicised environments, there may also be two faces to empowerment. In the context of the Bhutanese refugee camps, the relationship between agency-initiated projects and Maoist political groups centres on shared participants, shared organisational and awareness-raising methods and the recruitment of young people already empowered through their activities in children's projects. Given the aims of these projects – to improve the lives of all children in the camps and to develop their sense of Bhutanese nationality – perhaps this should be unsurprising. Children's political competency is closely linked to their moral and social skills (Read, 2002; Rosen, 2005). Studies have demonstrated that very young children are capable of moral thought and pro-social behaviour, the specific content of which is determined by context (Shweder et al, 1987; Damon, 1988). However, children's moral and political development has often been studied from the perspective of developmental psychology's stage theory (Piaget, 2001), which asserts that children mature through universally determined stages of cognitive development. Despite being disputed by many developmental psychologists, the prevalence of such theories have led to individual psychological functioning being 'studied independently of context' while 'the conclusions have been generalised to all' (Woodhead, 1999, pp. 5-6). This has led to the assumption that children lack abstract reasoning skills, which renders them morally and politically incompetent (Mayall, 2002, p. 88).

Bhutanese children are generally not recognised by agency staff or by refugee adults as being competent political actors, with the ability to form their own moral and political opinions and the capability to make decisions in their best interests. Therefore, when young people engage in political activities, their involvement is perceived to result merely from the 'misuse' and 'misdirection' of adult political leaders. The assumption that BRCF members do not engage in political activities as they are focused on social work neglects consideration of the pro-social aspects of political activities, which young people explain they conduct for the benefit of their nation and community.

The assumptions made by many adults concerning children's political involvement result in a lack of attention to the processes through which young refugees develop their political, social and moral opinions, and make decisions about how to improve their situation. It is important not to over-emphasise children's ability to make free and unconstrained decisions, especially when situations of poverty, political instability and war limit the range of possible choices. It is also essential to recognise the distress and suffering experienced by children (and adults) living in situations of conflict. However, the notion that children's political activities necessarily amount to their victimisation by adults is unhelpful and prevents consideration of children's political development and decision making. In order to constructively engage with the experiences of young Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, and young people living in situations of political tension and conflict elsewhere, it is vital to understand these processes and their reasons for engaging in political and

social action. In the Bhutanese refugee camps, it seems that there are some unanticipated outcomes of a children's participation project, implemented in a situation of escalating political tension. This involves young people's use of skills developed through these projects to advocate for a violent political movement. Therefore, it should not be assumed that the skills, experiences and sense of empowerment gained by young people through peacebuilding education will necessarily be used in the promotion of solely peaceful values.

Notes

- [1] In trying to reflect Bhutanese refugees' concepts of childhood and youth I use the terms 'children' and 'young people' throughout this article. There was variation amongst the refugee population in the terms used to describe older children and youth/young people. The most common Nepali terms used by Bhutanese refugees to describe older (8 or 9 years and above) children are *ketā* (boy), *keti* (girl) and *ketāketiharu* (children – boys and girls). These terms are used to describe a person who is not yet considered to be an adult. However, when using the terms *yubā* (young man), *yubati* (young woman), *jawān* (youth), refugees explained that they are describing young people who are considered to have 'grown up'. When discussing these terms with refugee adults and children, there was significant variation between the ages or stages at which children (*ketāketiharu*) were considered to become youth (*yubāyubatiharu*), which implies adulthood. I use the term 'young people', rather than 'youth' to describe teenagers who are considered by international agencies and some refugees to be children, but who would be categorised by other refugees as young adults.
- [2] For a more detailed discussion on the content and aims of children's participation activities see Hart et al (2004) and articles in *Children, Youth and Environments*, Special issue on Children's Participation (2007)
- [3] For details on the Maoist movement in Nepal see Thapa (2003), Gersony (2003), Hutt (2004) and Lawoti (2005).
- [4] All research participants have been given pseudonyms.
- [5] Unlike the adult-edited English-language newspaper, which excludes young people's political opinions, including criticism of agencies, the wall magazines were produced by children in their individual units (in August and September 2006) and were not edited by adults. Such wall bulletins are no longer funded by agencies supporting the BRCF. This is a typical example of one of the poems written by a young man:

Appeal

Hey, young students,
Rise up with thought and enthusiasm.
Look back and praise your country,
All our own brothers and sisters are in the district.
Other young students
Became bombs and explosives
And took back their identities.
Listen to the hundreds and thousands of voices – Marx, Lenin and Mao,
And you will find all their thoughts of liberation.
Hey, young students,
Rise up and make a new promise now.
Go on, fulfilling your historical responsibilities,
Wear a garland of all bullets and guns.
Look, the horizon is also smiling.
Enthusiastic hands are being united.
It seems our unity is growing.
So, hey young students,
In search of a liberated morning,
You have to come out and be a fighter,
You must liberate your motherland.

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