

# **Feeling at Home? Former Bhutanese Refugee Women and Girls in New Zealand**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the meaning of home and homemaking practices for former Bhutanese refugees, especially women and girls living in Auckland, Christchurch, Nelson, and Palmerston North in New Zealand under the refugees' quota programme. I examine how and in what ways these women and girls experience New Zealand as 'home' and explore their feelings of (not) belonging. The fieldwork is part of my PhD research and was conducted between February and September 2015. A total of 42 in-depth semi-structured interviews with former Bhutanese refugees were conducted. These were mainly with women and girls, but eight men were also interviewed. In addition to individual interviews, I used a focus group interview with four girls aged between 12-15 who sketched images of their actual or imagine home. The findings are that just providing a 'house' to refugees does not necessarily mean that they feel at home in New Zealand. Many participants reported that family is their home. Another finding is that strong neighbourhood ties contributed to feeling at home (or not). Participants also discussed what it means to be a citizen in New Zealand. Finally, I argue that researching former refugees' home and homemaking everyday practices is useful for understanding resettlement processes and senses of belonging in New Zealand.

**Keywords:** Homemaking, Sense of Home, Bhutanese Refugees, New Zealand, Nepal

## Introduction

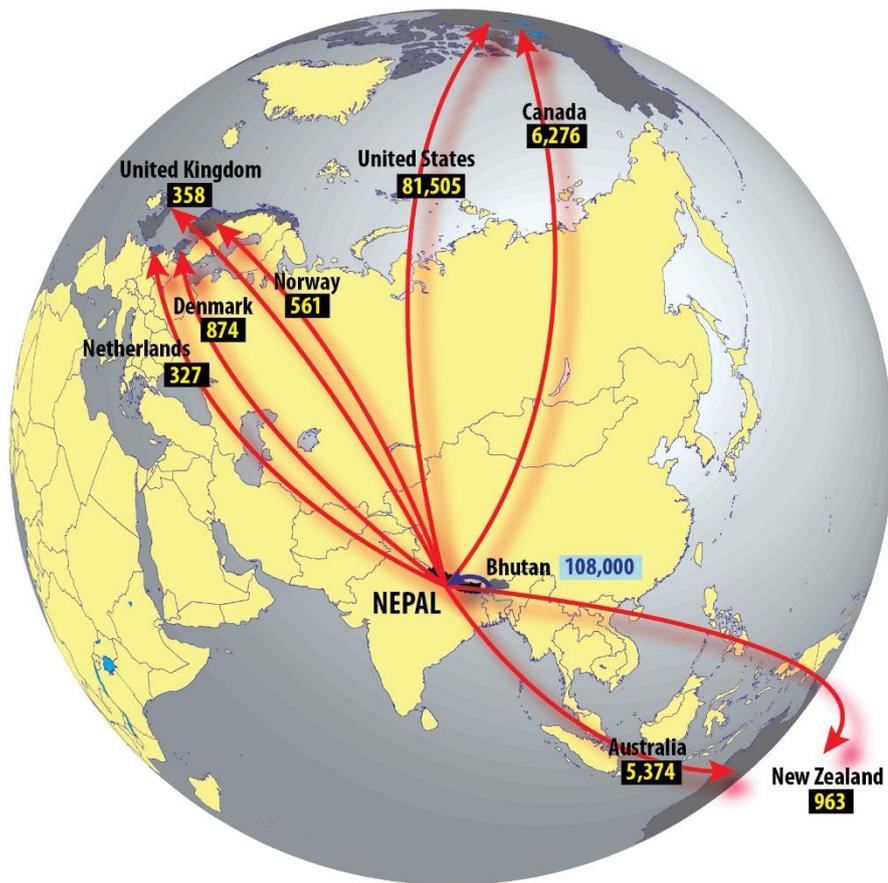
This article addresses two questions: how and in what ways do Bhutanese refugees<sup>1</sup> — especially women and girls — experience New Zealand as ‘home’; and do they feel they belong in New Zealand?

Bhutanese refugees are the southern Bhutanese, also known as Lhotshampa. Many scholars have argued that Drukpas uses the term Lhotshampas to refer to the Nepali-Bhutanese living in Bhutan, distinguishing them from other Bhutanese or people of Bhutanese origin (Giri, 2005; Hutt, 2005; Mathew, 1999). They are the descendants of Nepalese who immigrated to Bhutan at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and were granted citizenship and land tax receipts (Rousselot, 2015). However, they were forcefully expelled from Bhutan during the early 1990s when the southern people demonstrated for greater democracy after the imposition of Bhutan’s “one nation, one people” policy and Bhutan’s first census in 1988 classified most of the southern population as ‘illegal’ immigrants (Donini, 2008; Gharti, 2011; Hutt, 2003; Rousselot, 2015; C. Shrestha, 2011).

Since then, hundreds of thousands of Lhotshampa were kept in UN refugee camps in Nepal. When repatriation in Bhutan and local integration in Nepal seemed impossible, resettlement was offered as a long term solution with the help of UNHCR in 2007 and 2008. New Zealand is one of eight countries that accept Bhutanese refugees referred by UNHCR [see Figure 1].

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, refugees are people who are outside their country of nationality or habitual residence, and have a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political opinion (UNHCR, 2011).



**Figure 1: Third country resettlement of Bhutanese refugees as of 30 April 2015  
 (Data from UNHCR Nepal, personal communication, 5 May 2015)  
 Map: Max Oulton, Cartographer, University of Waikato**

This study investigates the sense of home among former Bhutanese refugees — especially women and girls — in New Zealand. The aim of this study is to ascertain how and in what ways these Nepali-speaking Bhutanese — especially women and girls — experience New Zealand as home, and to explore their feelings of belonging. This study is significant for several reasons. First, it promotes and gathers the narratives of resettled former refugees from Bhutan which will help to highlight the existence and complexity associated in the resettlement process of the community. Second, although there is an increasing interest in and emphasis on the role that home and homemaking practices play in regard to the resettlement of stateless people, especially refugees, most studies either focus on very broad initial resettlement experiences (Department of Labour, 2012; Ferguson, 2011), including the need of refugee health care in general

(Ministry of Health, 2012; New Zealand Red Cross, 2013), or the Facebook identities of young Bhutanese in the process of becoming ‘Kiwi’ (Halley, 2014). This article, therefore, responds to the lack of attention paid to the everyday homemaking experiences of resettled Bhutanese women and girl refugees. The private homemaking experiences of refugee women — and the associated embodied geographies — are still missing in the literature. In this sense, this study is original and contributes to new knowledge production.

The article is divided into four sections. In the first section, I provide recent scholarship on home and homemaking practices through a geographical framework. Following this, I briefly outline the New Zealand context and the methodological approach used to carry out this study. I then draw on data to explore whether home, family, language, food, kitchen, neighbours and ownership generate feelings of homemaking practices. The article concludes that home and homemaking practices among refugee women and girls from Bhutan in New Zealand can be useful for understanding more about the experiences of refugees, but also for understanding subjectivity, difference and power more generally. The overall aim of this article is to pay careful attention to the emotive aspects of place attachment including the notion of ‘being at home’.

## **Home**

The meaning of ‘home’ is highly contested and fluid because it means different things to different people (Cancellieri, 2014; Peil, 2009). Home is lived, experienced and recreated through everyday homemaking practices wherein people constitute their identities through lived and imaginative experiences (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Johnston & Valentine, 1995). For some, home is a symbolic space of emotional attachment

(hooks, 2009). For others, it is the 'private' material space and the site of domination (Hall, 1990). Thus, home is a multifaceted and multiscalar concept and its meaning varies greatly depending on 'who' and 'where' we are. Hence, home and place attachment often become problematic because of the complexities associated with the concept of home, which needs to be acknowledged and further researched (Windsong, 2010).

There is little literature linking feminist geography to refugee women in relation to feeling 'at home,' and emotional attachment based on place. This article, then, is in response to the lack of attention paid to gendered places, identity and belonging, particularly with respect to refugee women and girls.

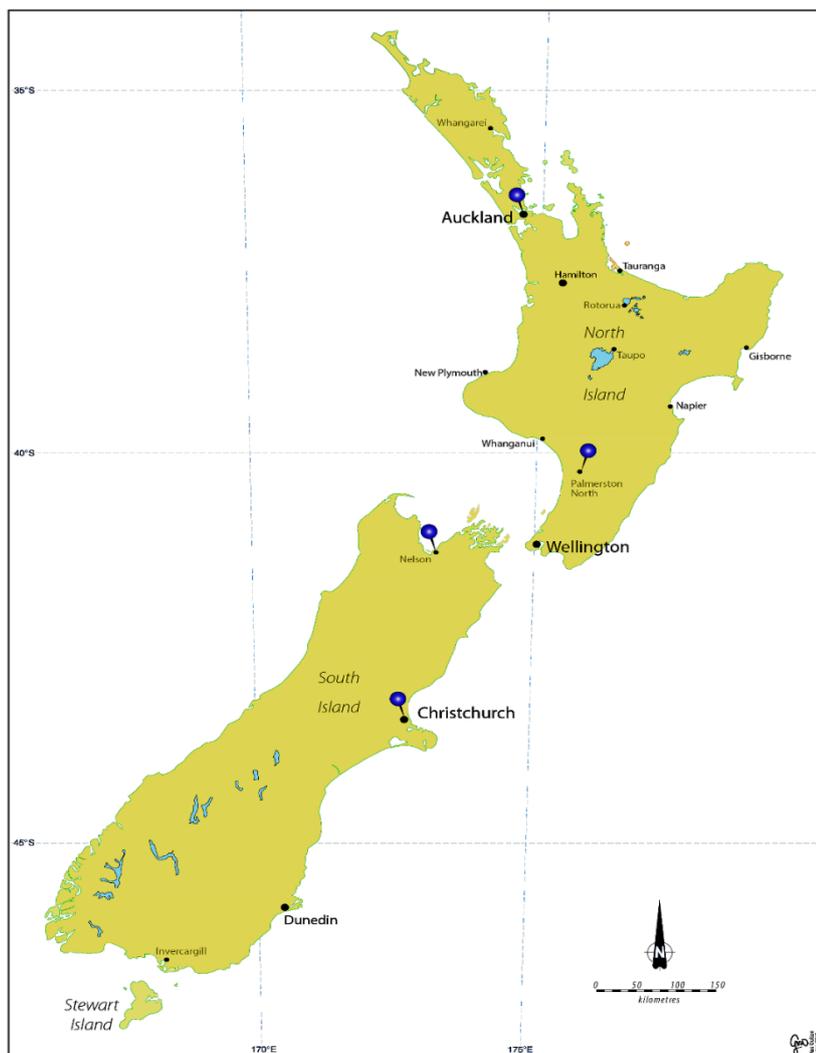
### **Context and Method**

The population of New Zealand is approximately 4.6 million (Statistics New Zealand, 2015) and grows annually on average by about 31,000 (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). New Zealand received 7065 refugees (3526 female and 3539 male) from 2004 to 2014. In keeping with its annual quota program, New Zealand has accepted 1002 former Bhutanese refugees referred under the third country resettlement programme (D.D. Shrestha, 2015). These refugees are resettled in Palmerston North, Nelson, Christchurch and Auckland (Immigration New Zealand, 2014), which are also the sites of my research. Since 2006, New Zealand resettled quota refugees in Auckland (2255), Manawatu (841), Nelson (680) and the Canterbury (489) region (Immigration New Zealand, 2015).

The initial contact with the potential participants was made using contact details which are publically available from the Bhutanese Society of Nelson New Zealand Inc. for Nelson and Christchurch. Participants were also recruited using flyers and Facebook

posts in Auckland and thereafter snowballing in Palmerston North. Each interview was preceded by an explanation of the purpose of the study, and potential participants signed a consent form which granted permission to conduct and record the interviews and interactions. This research is part of my PhD study and empirical collection was undertaken between February and September 2015.

This study investigates the meaning of this ‘new home’ to the refugees. Asking participants, who were stateless for about two decades prior to resettling in New Zealand, to share and reflect on home and homemaking practices, meant touching on very personal feelings — feelings that could be positive, but could also raise very strong, negative memories. Therefore, several steps were taken to gain research participants’ confidence and trust.



**Figure 2: Former Bhutanese refugees in New Zealand under the quota scheme**

**Source: Map by Max Oulton, Cartographer, University of Waikato**

A total of 42 semi-structured interviews with former Bhutanese refugee adults aged above 16 were conducted. These were mainly with women and girls, but eight men were also interviewed.<sup>2</sup> Participants were asked to fill in socio-demographic information, such as age, source of income, education, gender, marital status, children status (if married) and length of residence. If they had children aged between 12-15, I then sought permission from the parents to involve the children in a focus group

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<sup>2</sup> After I interviewed the women participants, I asked them if they would be willing to participate in diary-writing and photography and cooking sessions. Out of 34 women, five of them were involved in writing solicited diaries and photo elicitations and/or five in cooking sessions (although I do not draw on this data in this article).

activity. I managed to conduct a focus group activity with four teenage (12-15) girls who sketched images of home. Drawings were made in response to the question, “please draw your ‘imagined’ or actual home”. The focus group participants were encouraged to think about all the places they have been and/or lived.

In this research, I used mixed methods such as interview quotes from adult respondents, and sketches and interview quotes from a focus group activity, in order to triangulate the data and address the research question. The mixed method approach is also useful for exploring inter-generational differences of former refugee women and girls. This data enabled me to find out about their feelings, thoughts and ideas of home and homemaking practices in detail. My research participants in this study are all from the same ethnic group (former Bhutanese refugees) and are first-generation migrants who came to Aotearoa New Zealand under the refugee quota programme. They, however, differ in their religious beliefs (Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and Kiratism), socioeconomic status, age (ranging from 12-85), cast and class and education (never been to school to completion of a university degree). The most recent arrival has been in New Zealand just nine months, and the longest seven years.

All of the interviews and interactions were conducted in Nepali, recorded and then translated and transcribed in English in full. I then coded the transcripts using ‘QSR Nvivo 10’ software into general themes such as: food; garden; childhood; memories; community; security; rootedness; family; friends; employment; social ties; citizenship; trauma; language; place attachment; neighbourhood; and feelings. The overall coding was then categorised into broad themes, such as home, community/neighbourhood, and nationhood/(trans)national. The theme of home was further coded into the subtopics ‘place as home’, family, and ‘feelings of being at home’. I became very familiar with all the interview transcripts, which I analysed using a critical discourse approach. I searched through more than 100 pages of transcripts

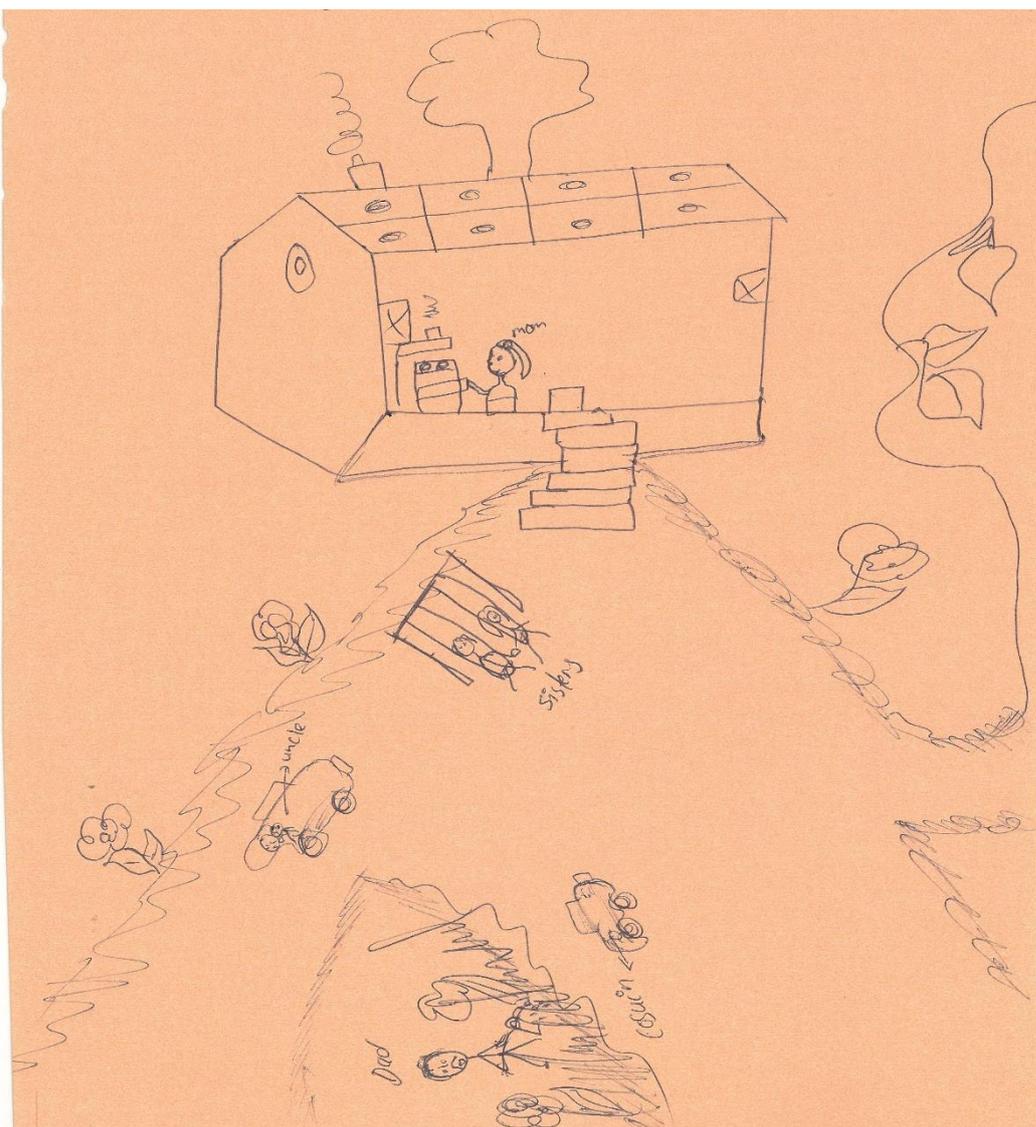
using the following key words: home; family; belonging; citizenship; language; food; and place attachment.

### **Findings: Place attachment in New Zealand**

I asked the participants where they feel at home, where they call home, and whether they consider New Zealand their home. It was equally important, however, to explore the meaning of home and homemaking practices. In order to do so, I asked my participants about what home means to them. When and why do they feel at home? In discussing home, participants considered feelings of being ‘at home,’ resulting from emotion and affect as connected to a particular place.

For most of the participants, attachment to home and homemaking processes means their family. Studies also indicate that home and family are intertwined (Holland, 2011; Rousselot, 2015), especially for refugees. Avy articulated feelings about family and home being intertwined during the focus group. Avy is 13 years old and she came to New Zealand with her parents two and half years ago, along with her two other siblings. She describes her sketch [Figure 3] of her current home:

Home is all about my family members. A place where I can see my mama cooking food in the kitchen, a place where I can go to the park and swing with my sister. Where daddy takes care of vegetable garden. He used to plant vegetable garden. When he was in Nepal, he used to plough the rice field and harvest the crops but such types of work is not available here and he lacks language proficiency. It is also a place where my uncle or sometimes cousin [male] take us out for the shopping. I don't care about the physical structure as long as we have enough place to sleep, eat and relax. It's about a peace, feeling safe and complete with the people I am with. (Focus group, Palmerston North)



**Figure 3: Home (Sketch by Avy, Focus group)**

Avy's understanding of home and homemaking practices is very gendered and follows patriarchal norms of Nepali speaking Bhutanese. Women tend to be within private spaces such as kitchens executing the daily household chores of preparing three meals a day, while men are more likely to be out in public spaces carrying out activities such as shopping for food and/or performing activities as a hobby. Children embed their memories with either real or imaginary memories of cooking mothers (Gvion, 2015). In this case, kitchens are patriarchal (Johnson, 2006).

While highlighting the present situation of her parents, Avy tries to recall her past. Studies indicate that people often refer to the past while discussing the present (Pineteh, 2005). It is not just the patriarchal practices that have transferred across national boundaries along with people, but also some rigid beliefs about caste hierarchies. I asked Kabita if she ever experienced discrimination from her community based on caste in New Zealand. She replied:

Oh yeah, I went to drink water and tea from the common area at the school, the so called higher caste people of the community didn't drink because I am considered impure and untouchable for them. They threw the water out, cleaned it thoroughly with soap and prepared themselves and drank. They won't eat that which is prepared or touched by me.

Participants in this study, however, strictly follow rigid traditional caste systems as well as rituals and some other cultural practices. These are about mundane everyday practices, but it is also where sensory experiences of home are evoked and reproduced.

Some participants spoke of how quiet, isolated and empty New Zealand feels. Sarita says that she and her family “used to be in a crowded place like a beehive in the camp and could only sleep at midnight.” But coming from the concentrated refugee camps meant, “it's so quiet...quiet.... quiet” in New Zealand. She was feeling sensory stimulation. Sarita's understanding of home is mainly grounded in feelings of having strong neighbourhood ties among the participants. She discusses how she felt detached in New Zealand because of a lack of shared language to communicate with her neighbours:

We need adult Nepalese/Bhutanese friends. We cannot borrow five rupees<sup>3</sup> when needed. If something emergency happened, nobody will trust us for five rupees because we don't have *our people* here. *Back home* (Author emphasis added) we

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<sup>3</sup> Nepalese rupee is the national currency of Nepal but is often used as 'rupee' in everyday activities. Five rupees is equivalent to 7 cents in terms of New Zealand dollar (Xe.com, 2015).

are very used to borrowing money from our neighbours. Even as a loan. Maybe we have to get our children's marriage, we can't get anyone's financial support. I have two neighbours on both sides of my house. I know people are living there but we don't have the common language to communicate. On the other hand, our children have already started saying that they don't need to speak Nepali. We are illiterate. [Silence for 15 seconds] (Participant's emphasis inserted)

The strength of people's place attachment, as experienced by Sarita, depends on the strong bond with neighbours/people in a particular place. Other studies also indicate neighbourhood ties as one of the direct predictors of place attachment (Lewicka, 2010). Sarita still has a strong attachment to people and places in Nepal and/or Bhutan and often feels the need for "adult Nepalese/Bhutanese friends" or having similar people as her neighbours.

My research shows the inter-generational conflict within the family in terms of lingual assimilation, with the older generation wanting family members to speak Nepali at home and the younger generation using English as their common language to communicate with others. Most of the older generation in this study feel 'out of place', revealing that they don't belong or fit in New Zealand. The phrase "back home" was frequently used to refer to the participant's lives in the camp rather the country of origin. The binary "our" versus "their" and "we" versus "they" was frequently used by participants to create the boundaries and border between them (refugees/migrants) and others (local people). The understanding of home is further intensified with a sense of vulnerability. Feelings of victimization are particularly strong among the women and families with small children, as highlighted by Rama when she shares her bitter experience with her former neighbours:

The neighbours called us migrant. *They* asked *their* children to splash water on us.

*They* used to party all night, drink beers and make noises and throw the empty

bottles in our compound. *Our* daughters had difficulty getting out of the house because they used to come to our gate to urinate. *We* felt very insecure to live there and we did not know what to do and where to complain as we were new to the environment. The anger and the fear had piled up that there was a chance of getting physical. The police came but hesitated to take any actions because of the involvement of children. Thereafter we moved to a new house. (Author emphasis added)

Rama's experience clearly indicates that if people from a particular place feel threatened, they no longer feel the emotional bonds between people and place. Feeling threatened may lead to inter-group conflict when new settlers, who are culturally and ethnically unique, move to a new place (Fried, 2000). The idea is that the established/local residents might perceive new refugees/migrants as threatening to their way of life and taking over job opportunities and contributing to a collapse of social systems (Fried, 2000).

A similar argument has been used to explain the strength of people's place attachment, which can vary depending on the amount of contact people within the place and whether the place is safe (Anton & Lawrence, 2014). And when skin colour and clothing is constructed as 'other,' the matter of embodiment becomes crucial when trying to understand the relationship between people and place (Longhurst, Johnston, & Ho, 2008, 2009). People always have 'bodily ways-of-judging' (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2008, p. 469) each other in every aspect of living.

Racheal uses her body to help integrate herself and her family into 'kiwi'<sup>4</sup> culture. She makes friends with her 'kiwi' neighbours despite the language barriers:

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<sup>4</sup> 'Kiwī' is often used to refer to New Zealand national identity and immigrants often refer themselves and others NZ born as 'Kiwīs' (Longhurst, Johnston, & Ho, 2009).

I used to go to my neighbours' house and knock on the door. I would invite them for a tea. I wanted to improve my language proficiency. The only way you can improve your language is by making friends with someone who is *native*. I have never had the chance to go to school so I use my broken language such as *hi*, *come* and *tea* using body language. I never feel ashamed of my English language proficiency. Now I even go to interpret for some of my family members in the hospital. I was inviting *them* for tea but at the same time I was learning from them. I was gaining more than they have gained from having tea with me. I taught them how to make Nepalese style tea and they taught me how to make theirs. We then started having potluck gatherings from which I learnt to cook *kiwi* food in their way. (Participant's emphasis added).

Body language is vital for migrants and refugees who lack language proficiency but have a desire to integrate into their new society.

Other studies also shows that women feel more connected when they are in their kitchen (Johnston & Longhurst, 2013). The kitchen is considered as a domestic space of safety, self-definition, expression and pleasure for women (Johnson, 2006) as women prepare the food. Food is often used as a means of understanding other cultures (Johnston & Longhurst, 2013), bridging intercultural difference (Benbow, 2015) and settling into the new host country (Lee, 2015). Different cultural practices, cuisines, and aromas among migrants may travel across cultural boundaries (see Longhurst et al., 2009). Many participants recall their previous hardship in Bhutan as well as in the camps while describing their feelings about their sense of belonging. For instance, Kabita vividly described her experience of struggle in Bhutan and expressed a consistent desire to go back:

I remember all the work I used to do in the field. The land was very rich and nutrient and yielded lots of rice and millet. We had our own land and cattle.

Every day I remembered about those days I have spent in Bhutan. Because of this, sometimes I behave weird and unusual.

Other studies show that people's experiences of hardship may strengthen their attachment to place and home (Anton & Lawrence, 2014). The traumatic exercise of past memory and associated feelings is often highlighted in the process of creating present or current narratives (Pineteh, 2005). Some participants acknowledge house ownership as the predictor of place attachment and feelings of home. For instance, Racheal describes the issue of home ownership:

If you can own one, home is very important. Now we are not in a situation of owning one [in New Zealand]. I still think of living in Bhutan given the fact that it is much cheaper over there. My children also made me feel that I have to go home in certain time and turn this house into home. After living six years in NZ, I have realised that this [New Zealand] is my *home country*. When we were in the camp, we feel like part of us was missing in Bhutan. I also had a frequent dream of being in Bhutan and doing the everyday activities but after coming to New Zealand I never dreamt such. [Participant's emphasis added]

Home that is considered as fixed and as long term property relates to aspects of domiciliary stability (Holland, 2011).

Anita, unlike some of the other participants, considered New Zealand to be her home. Anita stressed repeatedly that New Zealand is her country and that she feels at home in New Zealand. She explains:

New Zealand is my home. I am the citizen and this is my country. This is my place. I stayed 18 years in the camp, neither were we Bhutanese nor were we Nepalese. We were stateless. When you finished your higher education and you need citizenship to go for work and we didn't have one. Because of that we ended up working in rice fields, construction sites and taking care of cattle. Sometimes

we had to lie by identifying ourselves as Nepalese so that people don't ask our citizenship. Now we belong to this country.

The feeling of being at home in New Zealand was echoed by the sense of security and a locus of identity. It also highlighted the importance of citizenship among refugees and stateless people. New Zealand is the country that offered Anita a sense of belonging as well as the opportunity to start a new life and to identify herself with a state.

## **Conclusion**

Placing emphasis on the role of home and homemaking practices can lead us to a better understanding of how former refugees, as distinct from citizens and migrants, feel they belong in a new country. I argue that researching former refugees' home and homemaking practices is useful for understanding and strengthening similar group resettlement processes and fostering a sense of belonging in New Zealand and/or elsewhere. The findings show that home continues to have strong claims on one's emotions. It is clear that the feelings of being at home or not at home are varied, and can change over the time and place. The meanings, linkages to, and experiences of 'home' and home-making practices vary greatly for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. My participants have varying and complex ideas about what constitutes home. The findings also show that just providing a 'house' to refugees does not necessarily mean that they feel at home in New Zealand. Migrants and refugees, especially women, are in the utmost need for health, education, and social services (New Zealand Immigration Service, 2004) as well as a sense of community, yet it is their experiences and perspectives that often remain hidden and/or silent. This research adds to this limited but important and growing body of work on home and homemaking practices among refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants.

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