

Jane - August 2000

They Sterilized Us

Through rusty IUDs or electrical rods, Chinese family planners prevent Tibetan women from having children. **Rachel Louise Snyder** meets refugees who ask: Is this population control or genocide?

We are in a four-story concrete refugee reception center on the outskirts of Kathmandu, Nepal. Tsering Lhamo, the head nurse, is running her hand along the frostbitten, purple calves of Sonam Lhamo (no relation), a pregnant 28-year-old Tibetan. Sonam is getting better, Tsering decides. The swelling in her calves is going down, the color reviving, the frostbite healing, and Sonam's long,



Woman something something... (Photo: Ann Maxwell)

freckled face looks calmer than when she arrived a week earlier. Tsering moves her hand to Sonam's belly and asks about the baby, who's due in less than three months. She presses gently on Sonam's abdomen, one side then the other. The prognosis is good. Sonam looks exhausted, yet relieved.

Sonam and her husband, Toga, 26, have just spent 27 days hiking over the Himalayan Mountains. They arrived at the border starving, frostbitten and relieved to be out of Chinese-occupied Tibet. The Chinese government had not granted the couple permission to start their family. And without

permission, Sonam feared the couple would face fines of up to five years' pay--and she possible sterilization after the baby's birth. So with Sonam five months pregnant they left everything behind forever--family, friends, possessions--and got out.

Long known for its one-child policy in the mainland, China extended variations of this concept to Tibet in the 1980s. In general, families in urban areas were limited to two children, and those in rural areas to three. Now some claim that Tibetans--many of whom are farmers who need all the hands they can get--are being limited to just two kids. Those who do not comply face

mandatory contraception and coercive or forced sterilization (which, thanks to crude methods, has killed some women) and abortion. There are even accusations of infanticide via the injection of chemicals into a baby's brain. Forced sterilization is so common that the Tibetan Women's Association estimates that as many as 20 percent of Tibetans may no longer be able to reproduce.

It is not the idea of family planning that repels Tibetans, but the Big Brotherly methods allegedly used to carry it out. Where Sonam lived, mobile birth-control teams roam the countryside and track women's menstrual cycles through regular vaginal exams. If a woman is found pregnant without permission, a particularly vigilant family planner may haul her in for a forced abortion and immediate sterilization via tubal ligation (that's where your abdomen gets sliced open and your fallopian tubes seared shut). This is sometimes done without anesthesia. Refugees recount stories of electrical rods shoved into vaginas to abort fetuses and cockeyed IUDs causing severe infections and pain. Women say they have been forcibly sterilized or fitted with IUDs immediately following the birth of their second or third child. In one district alone, 308 women were reportedly sterilized over just 22 days.

And there could be an even more insidious violation going on. The eastern territories where Sonam lived, and where the mobile birth-control teams are most active, are the most hotly disputed, with both Tibetans and Chinese claiming rights to the land. Some Tibetans think the "population controls" are just a ploy by the Chinese to wipe out their staunchest resisters.

A Growing Pile of Fetuses

Sonam and Toga were farmers, in tune with the cycles of the land. They were also well aware of family-planning drills. Sonam says the women in her village had to attend birth-control meetings every three months. "Two women from each family were made to go, or they were fined," she explains to me through an interpreter. "When the authorities came to give the tests, the women cried not to be taken. One was four months pregnant with her third child. When her test came back positive, she was given an injection into her womb and the child was aborted." Sonam's sister was involuntarily fitted with an IUD at age 29 after the birth of her second child. Sonam remembers pleading with the authorities to be left alone. "The women in my village had no choice," she says.

The accounts like Sonam's that have accumulated over the years are nothing short of nauseating (so stop reading now if you are the least bit squeamish). "I had an abortion called the menstrual termination of pregnancy," one Tibetan told Blake Kerr, an American doctor who spent months in Tibet researching birth-control policies for his report *Tibetans Under the Knife* [the woman's name is withheld for her safety]. "The doctor inserted an instrument into my vagina," she said. "It was shaped like a spoon and the scraped the uterus in all directions. I had no anesthesia and unbearable pain..." The woman could hear them scraping pieces of the fetus out. Then a tube was inserted into her vagina. "The tube became clogged with fetal parts several times," she said. "I was not given any medicine of any kind. No antibiotics." Kerr claimed that conditions in the hospitals he visited were abhorrent, with bloodstained gurneys and the regular use of non-sterilized equipment. They were, he recalled, "a hygienic atrocity."

According to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), Sothar Dolma, 29, died seven days after being sterilized. Doctors attributed her death to "internal ailments." Another woman says she witnessed the infanticide of her friend's baby. First, labor was induced. A chemical was then injected into the baby's fontanel, or soft spot. "The baby was born and cried," she said. "Then it started bleeding from the nose and died." The mother "volunteered" for this because she did not have money for the fine.

The stories go on and on. Kerr reports that a group of monks watched a mobile birth-control team set up shop in their village. They recalled the smell and horror of a "growing pile of fetuses" outside the makeshift tent where local women had been rounded up. "Women nine months pregnant had their babies taken out," one monk said. "I saw many girls crying. I heard their screams as they waited for their turn to go into the tent."

Researchers for the Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, India, spoke to a woman who said that 70 percent of the women over 18 in her village—herself included—have been sterilized. "The Chinese treat us like animals," she said. "My sister-in-law's baby was aborted before her husband's eyes. She was four months into pregnancy when they took her to the clinic by force. They bound her hands and legs. A doctor, wearing gloves, put his hand into her vagina and seemed to squeeze the fetus. She became delirious and bled profusely. I have witnessed these terrible things with my own eyes."

It's not exactly easy for Tibetan women to avoid this nightmare. Say you wind up pregnant. Here are the hurdles: You must be married and be between the ages of 25 and 35 (some places let you slide at 21). You have to first get permission from your local family-planning representative-but don't even bother asking if it hasn't been at least three years since you last gave birth. Women who work under government/party auspices need to get permission from their work-unit leader and may be forced to sign a birth plan before they get pregnant saying they won't have more than two kids. In all cases, newborns must be registered with local family-planning officials.

If you break any of these rules, you could be looking at abortion and sterilization, depending on the whims of your local family-planner. "You never know what the Chinese are going to do at the local level," claims Tenzin Choephel of the Office of Tibet, which represents the exiled government. "Because they say one thing and do another. They might drag you off at any time and abort your child and sterilize you, despite the policy." Your child, if born, may be denied a ration card, which means no food, education, healthcare or employment. In short, your child becomes a nonentity and you have to scrounge up the extra food and do the schooling yourself. Tsering recalls a dad who had fled through the Himalayas with two of his four children because they'd been denied ration cards. He'd brought them to Dharamsala to be raised in the exile community there and returned to Tibet on foot without them, hoping his punishment would not be severe.

Tsering tells me this during Sonam's exam in one of the center's smaller living quarters. Sonam lies on a metal cot. After the exam, Toga, sitting at her feet, watches as she pulls her swollen legs up and folds herself into a fetal position. Sonam's face stays trained toward the floor, lapsing into worry. When she is well enough to travel, they too will take a bus to Dharamsala.

"I want a better future for my child," Sonam says. "A Tibetan education." A new baby, new jobs, home, country --Sonam and Toga sport the shell-shocked look of those who are just beginning to grasp where reality has landed them. She gazes out the open window to the nice fields beyond, and tells Tsering that they are looking forward to having more children. "Three, at least!" says Sonam, offering her first laugh in days. "The journey is worth it." "It" being a choice that, unlike in Tibet, is now theirs.

Rusty IUDs and Electrical Rods

Tsering is generally mellow, but get her talking about the rotten tactics of Chinese family planners and her voice lowers to a controlled rage. She recounts the number of rusty IUDs and severe infections that Tibetan refugees come to her with. "Last year I had a woman who had tuberculosis, hepatitis B, anemia and weak kidneys," she says. Tsering tells me this over an ever-ringing phone and interruptions from the more than 200 refugees residing at the reception center. Born in Dharamsala, Tsering is Tibetan, but has never been to Tibet. Still, she wears the traditional Tibetan jumper dress called the chuba.

Of her many daily phone calls, Tsering is guaranteed that one will require her to go to the hospital to consult on the worst cases--those who aren't well enough even for the reception center. Photos pinned to a bulletin board document blackened, frostbitten flesh on feet and hands hanging in sanguine shreds--the nastiest cases she's seen since she took up this work 15 years ago. Perhaps they serve as a grisly reminder of what her people have been through. In several photos, Richard Gere, who has visited the center on more than one occasion, looks on.

The sour smell of unwashed bodies and open wounds in the center makes me want to escape to the rice fields, too, though it's nothing compared to what Tsering has seen. "One woman came in horribly anemic from an IUD that had been in her uterus for eight years," she recalls. The recommended time for an IUD is three years. "The Chinese had told her she could keep it in for 20. She had been heavily bleeding for four months." Tsering says the woman would have died had she not been given immediate medical attention. This reckless disregard, she claims with a shake of her head, is not unusual. Nor is the constant barrage of human need that lands on her doorstep because of it. "A lot of energy this job takes," she says. There is a knock at the door. She tells Yungchen Dolkai, a 20-year-old nun with a shaved head and maroon robes, to come inside. Yungchen recently arrived from eastern Tibet with a gastric infection and dozens of raw, purple insect bites. Tsering directs her to the makeshift examination corner of her office to check on the bites and her temperature.

Yungchen left Tibet to be near the Dalai Lama and get religious education. She says that because she became a nun at an early age, the birth-control policies in Tibet were not enforced on her.

Yungchen was lucky. She tells the story of one friend whose unsanctioned pregnancy was aborted with an electrical rod inserted into her vagina; afterward, she was fitted with an IUD and had persistent bleeding.

Yungchen would watch as the women in her village were collected on trucks or tractors every three months to attend the mandatory birth-control meetings. "It doesn't seem like education is going along with these meetings," says Elizabeth Cossor, an Australian who worked as a volunteer at TCHRD in Dharamsala. Medical researchers note that Chinese doctors often don't speak Tibetan, and seem to think it is easier to sterilize a woman than teach her to use birth control. From age 16 on, Yungchen says, girls--married or not--were injected with Norplant, which they were told was a free gift from Western countries. Yungchen points to the place in an arm where Norplant goes.

Elizabeth says that while Norplant reports are a recent development, they are steadily increasing. Stories from women like Yungchen feed into a scary genocide-through-attribution theory shared by aid workers and Tibetan officials. China offers incentives to mainland people to relocate to Tibet. In fact, the World Bank was planning to fund the relocation of 60,000 Chinese near the country's eastern provinces in July. So, it's no wonder that the Tibetan government-in-exile calls China's family-planning policies a ploy "to reduce Tibetans to an insignificant minority in their country."

Sonam expresses these concepts in starker terms. She says that although she cannot imagine why the Chinese would want to subjugate Tibetans, she thinks the control of reproductive rights comes down to one thing. "They're trying to minimize the race," she says. "And eventually eliminate the population."

This Is Sheer Nonsense

It's hard to get a clear take on a situation when official statements totally contradict what people tell you. Plus, Chinese policies regarding Tibet are seemingly shrouded in secrecy; those that are available read like U.S. tax codes. For the record, China has long denied the routine practice of forced sterilization or abortion claiming that "there are no restrictions on having children for Tibetan farmers and herders," and that policies have been formed "in full consideration of the

wishes of the Tibetan people." In March, the family-planning director for Tibet called the reports of a two-child limit "sheer nonsense."

Now for the flip side: A 1991 Communist Central Committee document leaked to the Tibet information Network reads, "We must firmly redress the situation in places where planned-birth work has slackened; there must be no loopholes, no random approval of birth quotas ... the Party's Departments of Discipline must severely treat those who violate planned-birth policy and rules." Annual reports from TCHRD repeatedly accuse the Chinese government of breaking the rules of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which were adopted by the U.N. in 1979. These rules state that all women must have the right to "decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children." China's most recent report to CEDAW was found to be "insufficient, ambiguous, lacking in details, and therefore failed to meet the reporting standards."

Ironically, Tibetans are working against themselves here. In their highly religious culture, death through violent measures dishonors Buddhist beliefs, so women regularly choose voluntary sterilization over the prospect of forced abortion. On top of that, speaking openly about personal horrors is taboo, so reports usually refer to neighbors or family members who have been victims, rather than having first-person accounts. Also, refugees from eastern Tibet report atrocities way more often than those from other areas. Add the fact that numbers can be screwy when you rely on refugee testimony--let alone refugees who use the words "abortion" and "sterilization" interchangeably--and some activists will question the extent of the women's plight.

The U.S. State Department's 1999 report on China cites an abysmal human-rights record and claims that forced abortion and sterilization are, in fact, common in Tibet (at last count the TCHRD received reports of 432 Tibetan women being sterilized against their will in 1998, and believes the actual numbers are much higher). But it's unlikely our government is going to do anything about it. During the 1980s, Reagan was asleep at the wheel when it came to demanding that China clean up its human-rights record. Then Bush flubbed his chance. Now, with China poised to join the WTO and U.S.-China economic ties stronger than ever under Clinton (despite his unprecedented call to President Jiang Zemin to open a dialogue with the Dalai Lama) the past indeed seems bent on repeating itself. Except for the Tibetans, whose history of independence

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and self-rule recedes farther into memory with each passing generation.

Two months after their arrival, Sonam and Toga were still in Dharamsala. Toga tried to scare up work and housing, but with the town's hopeless unemployment and overcrowding, prospects were grim. The Lhamos had until the baby was born to find an alternative to the reception center; if that didn't happen, they said they would have to return to Tibet on foot. In this worst-case scenario, Sonam and Toga had already decided they would leave their child behind in Dharamsala, to be raised a free but exiled entity.

Fortunately, they finally got a break. Their baby boy, Tenzin, was born healthy and Sonam found work in a small town called McLeod Ganj, just up the winding, mountaintop road from Dharamsala. She washes clothes for tourists during the day and does dishes in one of the small restaurants at night. Toga studies Tibetan painting in school.

Sonam and Toga may have gotten what they wished for, yet in many ways, their struggle has just begun. "I'm glad to be near His Holiness," Sonam says, "but you can't compare the stability that I used to have to this. In Tibet I was with my parents, so whatever happened I felt secure. Tomorrow, if a tourist leaves, I won't earn money from washing clothes. I am happy that my son will get a Tibetan education, but I'm sorry I had to leave. I would rather have this all in Tibet."

Sonam pauses and then says: "There are no restrictions here on the number of children Toga and I could have, but now we have to wait and see if we can afford a second child," she says. "It is ironic."