

Buddhist Bhutan wrestles with 'shocking' abuse study

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NEW DELHI (RNS) The government commissioner charged with promoting "Gross National Happiness" in the tiny Buddhist nation of Bhutan said he was deeply dismayed by a recent study that found a majority of Bhutanese women think their husbands have the right to beat them.

Karma Tshiteem, head of Bhutan's Commission for Gross National Happiness, called the findings "surprising" and "shocking," and said such attitudes are "totally inconsistent" with Buddhist teachings.

The survey by Bhutan's National Statistics Bureau found that roughly 70 percent of women say they deserved beating if they neglect children, argue with their partners, refuse sex or burn dinner, reported the Business Bhutan newspaper.

The acceptance of domestic violence is highest (90 percent) among the women in Paro, a picturesque valley that's home to Bhutan's most revered monastery, Takshang. The capital city of Thimphu scores the lowest acceptance rate, about 50 percent, for wife beating.

"Any form of violence is totally contradictory to the teachings of the Buddha," Tshiteem said, noting that Ahimsa (non-violence) "is a central tenet in Buddhist philosophy."

Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion of Bhutan, where a vast majority of the 700,000 citizens are Buddhist.

Gross National Happiness, which seeks to create an "enlightened" society in which government fosters the well-being of people as well as other "sentient beings," was first envisioned by Bhutan's former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1972.

The landlocked Himalayan nation -- about half the size of Indiana -- peacefully transitioned to democracy after the king abdicated power in 2006, but Buddhist principles continue to shape the country's government.

Bhutan's Gross National Happiness index -- as opposed to more traditional measures like a nation's economic activity -- is based on nine components of happiness: psychological well-being, ecology, health, education, culture, living standards, time use, community vitality and good governance.

Because healthy family relationships are key to harmonious communities, "attitudes accepting such behavior, in these relationships or even outside, would be totally inconsistent" with Gross National Happiness, Tshiteem said.

Covering 15,000 households, the Bhutan Multiple Indicator Survey also found that more than one in four women believe HIV/AIDS is transmitted supernaturally; one in four children do not attend school and one in five children are involved in child labor.