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## The power to deprive: prejudiced and precarious citizenship

13 MARCH 2019 | AMAL DE CHICKERA, CO-DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE ON STATELESSNESS AND INCLUSION

“The baby turned blue and was cold.”

Shamima Begum’s three-week-old son Jarrah has died in the Al-Roj camp in Syria.

This is Shamima Begum’s third baby, all of whom have died. She is 19 years old.

As a fifteen-year-old child, Shamima Begum travelled from London to Syria to join the Islamic State. Ten days after arriving in Syria, still a child, she married a Dutch foreign fighter. Having lived through the deaths of her previous two babies, when Jarrah’s birth was imminent, she asked to return back to the UK.



Instead of allowing her back, the British Home Secretary Sajid Javid decided to strip Shamima Begum of her citizenship.

While Shamima Begum and Jarrah were stuck in Syria, their story travelled the world. Shamima’s image was even made into a target at a UK shooting range. As gun enthusiasts played out their fantasies of executing the teenage girl, her new-born son – a British citizen – was abandoned by his country.

The Home Secretary’s decision, which made Shamima stateless, was arbitrary and unlawful. It is also the latest in a long series of actions by powerful people to give themselves more power and then abuse that power further. The legal and practical evolution of citizenship stripping in the UK has seen a dramatic increase in both the power of the executive and the use (and abuse) of that power to deprive British citizens of their nationality.

The power to make and break the rules can be intoxicating, particularly when the costs are mostly borne by the powerless.

“The baby turned blue and was cold.”

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“Whether we agree with it or not, in Eastern culture and tradition, a woman is entirely devoted to a man”.

Bidhya Devi Bhandari is the first woman president of Nepal.

Her country denies women equal rights as men to pass on citizenship to their children and spouses, and to retain their own citizenship when married.

Countless Nepali women have had their lives turned upside down because the state refuses to treat them as equal citizens. The inability to pass your own nationality to your own children is crippling and dehumanising. Many Nepali women endure abuse to ensure their children will have citizenship through their abusive father. Many others endure base sexism and antagonism at the hands of government officials, as they desperately try to register their children themselves.

Many Nepali children cannot even claim to be Nepali because their mother matters less in the eyes of the state and the law. It may be the mother who carries and gives birth to the child, but it is the father’s identity that counts. It may be the child’s right to a nationality at stake, but it is the woman’s devotion to the man that takes precedence.

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“A woman is entirely devoted to a man”.

These are the words of a woman in power, defending a law, which degrades millions of women. These are the words of a woman in power, painting an entire country into a patriarchal corner, as if ‘culture’ is a static, uncontradictory and universally accepted set of norms.

These are the words of a woman in power, entirely devoted to power.

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The power to deprive citizenship in the UK and the power to deny citizenship in Nepal are not accidents of history. These powers exist, not because they serve legitimate purposes, or are proportionate or fair, but because they serve the agendas of the powerful.

In both countries, the powers are discriminatory in their origin and their impact. The UK law, which targets dual nationals and naturalised citizens, discriminates against minorities and those of migrant heritage. The Nepali law discriminates against women and disproportionately impacts the most marginalised. This is not surprising, for these powers play on deeper societal prejudices, hierarchies and divides.

They are rooted in the narratives of ‘national security and counter–terrorism’; ‘patriotism and traditional values’. Easy political wins. At the receiving end are the suspected terrorist, the Dalit, the Muslim girl, the ‘undevoted’ woman. Tough political sells.

And of course, the baby, the child, the mother are collateral.

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These laws and powers are rightly critiqued through the lens of international human rights law. But they also push us to reflect on what we have become; societies that elevate and reward the powerful, while shunning and betraying the powerless.

Bidhya Devi Bhandari was a celebrated high–profile panellist at a “Women in Power” UN event in New York this week. Sajid Javid – in his ambition to be the next British Prime Minister – is following the course charted by the incumbent Theresa May, whose term as Home Secretary paved the way for the erosion of many hard–fought protections.

Meanwhile, a teenage mother grieves the death of her third child and millions of women will go to sleep in the knowledge that their president is comfortable with them waking up, every day, as second–class citizens.

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