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The situation of women combatants and the roles they can play in conflict transformation and peace building is an area which has received minimal attention in the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda over the past 15 years. This is despite consistent accounts from countries emerging from armed conflict or war that show that women combatants face significant discrimination when the conflict ends and post-conflict reconstruction processes begin.

Studies from these different contexts of conflict suggest that although many women are transformed by their experiences participating in armed resistance, they rarely gain equality through this engagement. In reality, new vulnerabilities and vulnerable groups emerge as a direct fallout of conflict, and gender inequalities that were entrenched in societies in the pre-conflict period often get accentuated post-conflict.

At the same time, there is an increasing realization that a post-conflict or post-war period can also be one of deconstruction and reconstruction, and that peace processes could offer a transformative moment to secure gender justice and advance human rights for all members of society. A window of opportunity exists for societies emerging from conflict to develop and institutionalize laws, policies and other measures to fully protect and advance women's human rights, as well as seriously engage on issues of accountability, reparations, human security, peace and justice, and social and political agency. This "post-war moment" – can provide strategic opportunities for transformation in all areas of women's lives.

Within this context, it is important to reiterate that women in the WPS agenda are not a

homogenous group. Instead, they belong to very diverse categories such as peacemakers, combatants, sympathizers, human rights defenders, survivors of sexual violence etc., with the concomitant diversity of needs, voices and perspectives. This understanding, particularly as it relates to female combatants, has often been missing in UNSCR 1325 work despite the fact that the Resolution recognized the active participation of women in combat, and the importance of using a gender lens in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes.

This paper attempts to document and analyze the realities of Maoist women combatants in conflict and post-conflict Nepal within the contrasting narratives of victimhood and agency. It looks at their experiences at entry, and during the active conflict, as well as in the post-conflict period, and examines the continuum of gender inequalities faced by these women right through to the peace building and DDR processes. It discusses the issue of their 'agency,' and the linkages between class, caste, ethnicity and historical context that informed this agency and shaped their political consciousness.

The research argues for the use of the CEDAW framework of substantive equality to address issues faced by the Maoist women, including their

experiences of discrimination in the transition period, and their exclusion from peace building efforts. It suggests that meaningful reintegration requires a comprehensive approach that factors in both victimhood and agency, and recommends going

beyond meeting a checklist of technicalities to an expanded and deeper engagement aimed at a full transformation of both the conditions and position of the Maoist women, to allow them to channel their agency towards building durable peace.

WOMEN AND THE 'PEOPLE'S WAR' IN NEPAL

Nepal experienced a decade of violent conflict (known as the 'People's War') between government security forces and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN)—Maoist, ending with a Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2006. One of the most reported aspects of the war was its high levels of female participation. Official records put this at about 30 per cent although during the height of the conflict some observers even put the estimates around 40 per cent.

In January 2007, the Interim Constitution of Nepal was adopted, where the Mao-ists joined the interim parliament and became part of the government with 33 per cent of seats reserved for women. A small percentage of Maoist women did enter the political fray, and during the DDR process, another small percentage were integrated into the Nepal Army.

The complex causes of the conflict in Nepal have been attributed to competition over power, politics and economics, rooted in deep seated and structural discrimination and social exclusion. The wide ethnic, linguistic, religious and caste distinctions in Nepali society added to this complexity, which was also compounded by deeply entrenched and pervasive gender discrimination. These factors helped create the conditions that led women to join the armed struggle on the one hand, and increased their vulnerability to being forcibly recruited on the other.

The Maoists espoused an egalitarian ideology, and their 'People's War' provided a platform for challenging and ending the socio-political tensions in Nepal, while simultaneously taking advantage of the different aspirations of women in each community to energize the revolution. Comrade Parvati—or Hisila Yami—who was a Central Committee Member and Head of the Women's Department of CPN, described how the revolution helped Hindu women by unleashing their repressed energy "... to break the feudal patriarchal restrictive life imposed by the puritanical Hindu religion." For Tibeto-Burman and other women who were already relatively independent with

greater decision-making power, the war provided them with challenging work to do. Yami also pointed out that the war had a particularly important impact on those from the traditionally most exploited Dalit communities by mobilizing them and teaching them the value of using a collective voice against repressive mainstream structures.

Various documented accounts and interviews with Maoist women in the course of this research corroborate that the Maoist leaders' egalitarian ideology—with its promise of gender equality, social justice and social inclusion—was tremendously appealing to women. The Maoist vision of a revolutionary and politically transformed Nepal opened up spaces for women to participate in bringing about that change. Many thus joined the revolution driven by notions of freedom and adventure and a sense of agency and self-worth knowing that they were contributing towards shaping a better future for Nepal. Furthermore, denial of their rights to abortion, inheritance and equal citizenship were issues that the Nepali women's movement had long been grappling with, and these issues were afforded a special prominence during the revolution, one that continues today.

Many women saw in the 'People's War' an opportunity to escape from gender-based oppression notably child, early or forced marriage, domestic violence, polygamy or the tortuous rites and rituals surrounding widowhood. The Maoist leaders took strong positions on these issues, encouraged

widow remarriage and 'choice' in marital matters and above all, made property rights for women a key concern in their charter of demands. On the flip side however, in the rural and remote areas where the bulk of recruitment took place, extreme poverty and the undervalued status of women in Nepali society were thrown up in stark relief, with women having no choice but to join. Here, the Maoist's targeted

recruitment drive required families to contribute at least one family member towards the cause. In many instances, families 'sacrificed' the least valued member of the family—either the daughter-in-law whose husband was away in India as a sea-sonal migrant, or a daughter rather than a son. Women had little say in the matter. As a result, there were large numbers of female recruits from the indigenous communities.

THE ROLES OF WOMEN COMBATANTS

The roles that women played as combatants in the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA) differed significantly and determined their relative power and position within the armed struggle. Studies have shown that the failure to adopt a gender perspective that recognizes these differences amongst former combatants can have negative implications for the reintegration process.

Contrary to more general gender stereotypes of women's roles within armed resistance groups, Maoist women were very visible as combatants. In the PLA, there were several female section commanders and vice commanders, and to encourage women's leadership, there were also separate women's sections within brigades, and female-only squads and platoons with large numbers of local level female cadres. Despite their subordinate status in Nepali society, within the rank and file, once recruited, women tended to be highly valued and seen as more loyal and disciplined than men.

According to Hisila Yami, women in the PLA were able to expand their capacity and skills beyond fighting to mobilizing, organizing and other long-term sustainable work. Women acted as mass mobilizers—considered of strategic and crucial importance to the revolution—and an emphasis was put on developing women's leadership, with a separate department created for this purpose. Women also performed non-combat military roles ranging from intelligence

found it hard to accept that poor, rural, uneducated women were actually on the frontline of the revolution, sacrificing their lives for the socio-political transformation of Nepal. Within the PLA too, as pointed out by Hisila Yami, despite their new roles, women grappled with complex power hierarchies and ingrained gender stereotyping, which led inevitably to traditional divisions of labor remaining largely unchanged. Women's issues were rarely handled by the Maoist male leadership but relegated to women themselves. Programmes for women often did not get implemented or men monopolized the '...mental work and relegated women to everyday drudgery work.' Coming as they did from communities with entrenched gender inequalities, many women found it hard to assert themselves while male cadres, as Yami describes, had difficulty relinquishing "...the privileged position bestowed on them by the patriarchal structures."

Therefore, despite the 'People's War' offering new and oftentimes empowering experiences for Nepali

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