Changing Gender Role: Women’s Livelihoods, Conflict and Post-conflict Security in Nepal

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Abstract
This article examines how the Maoist conflict in Nepal affected women ex-combatants and non-combatants, looking at shifts in gender roles during and after the conflict particularly from the standpoint of current livelihood challenges. We argue changing gender roles largely depends upon everyday practice of gender division of labour and power as it evolved during and after the conflict. We also found the conflict had different and contradictory effects: Both categories of women experienced shift in gender roles, with women taking on tasks earlier reserved for men, but this effect was strongest amongst ex-combatants during conflict. In the aftermath of conflict, these changes were partly reversed and especially ex-combatant women faced severe livelihood challenges and returned to traditional gender roles. The article also considers how women experience state and non-state responses meant to improve their livelihoods security in the post-conflict setting. The article is based on in-depth fieldwork in Chitwan and Kathmandu districts of Nepal. It draws on interviews with women ex-combatants/non-combatants and key informant interviews.

Keywords
Gender, women ex-combatants, non-combatants, Maoist conflict, post-conflict

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Introduction

When women and girls around the globe join an armed conflict as combatants, they often break traditional gender norms and take up new roles and responsibilities earlier reserved for men, as they enter what is broadly accepted as a men’s arena (Shekhawat, 2015). Also, non-combatant women tend to face a shift in gender roles due to conflict. When men are away on military duty or involved in rebel groups, or where husbands or fathers or sons are killed or disabled, the economic responsibilities which were previously fulfilled by men are disproportionately shifted to the shoulders of women (Arostegui, 2013). There has been much academic debate whether conflict-induced change in gender roles means that women are better positioned in the aftermath of war or whether it means women are encountering new forms of insecurities. Authors have identified a diversity of gender effects of war and its aftermath. El-Bushra’s (2003) field research carried out in Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, Mali and Angola indicates that new economic responsibilities and greater public presence of women induced by conflict may imply a (limited) shift in gender roles that to some degree carries over into the post-war period. Denov and Ricard-Guay (2013) argue that reproductive roles and power relations during and after conflict are embedded within broader gendered power structures that shape gender identity and are unlikely to shift unless these structures changes. Moosa, Rahmani and Webster (2013) state that pre-war gender differences in rights and entitlements impact post-war situations, rather than temporal changes during wartime.

Current work on armed conflict and gender have suggested that warfare may be a process that empowers women through various transitions over time (Arostegui, 2013; Buvinic, Dasgupta, Casabonne, & Verwimp, 2012; Grabska, 2013). However, the degree to which this is the case and the mechanisms at work are not yet well understood, and might be very different for women ex-combatants and women non-combatants. To understand this process, we studied the Maoist armed conflict and the post-conflict context of Nepal. The article aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on gender and war by offering a differentiated analysis of the experiences of both women ex-combatants and non-combatants on shifts in gender roles during the Maoist conflict and how that shapes their positions in the post-conflict condition in Nepal.

This article investigates how the Maoist conflict in Nepal affected women, both ex-combatant and non-combatant (including war widows and women heads of households), differently. It looks at shifts in gender roles and livelihoods during and after conflict, and asks how women experience state and non-state responses concerning their current livelihoods security. The article traces how the labour and livelihoods endeavours for women as well as their power positions have evolved in time. The article elucidates how post-conflict programmes in Nepal have systematically marginalized some categories of women despite their focus on gender mainstreaming. The article further provides critical insights on how livelihoods insecurity for women in Nepal is intrinsically linked to not just the question of gender but also to caste and ethnicity.

The article starts with an introduction followed by conceptual framework, research methodology, findings and conclusion. The findings of the article have been presented with two main headings: gender division of labour and power;
and experiences of women ex-combatants and non-combatants during Maoist conflict and post-conflict in Nepal.

**Conceptual Framework: Gender and Power Theory**

Gender scholarship emerging during the late 1980s conceptualized female and male roles as socially constructed through gendered meaning and practices (cf. Bock, 2006, p. 4), and pointed to the nexus between gender and power (Radtke & Stam, 1994, p. 5). Similar issues have been raised in research emanating from the context of crisis recovery, disasters and conflict where women tend to lack opportunities due to practice of power in their everyday life (Connell, 2011; Moser & Clark, 2001). A significant body of literature on feminist studies, feminist transnational studies and security studies have questioned how gender practices and power relations affect women’s role, relationships, victimization and capacity differently from men (Arostegui, 2013; Moosa et al., 2013). Similarly, Cockburn (2013) suggested that women and men possess different roles, heroism and fatality, and die different deaths during war and peace. Power in an analysis of gender allows us to see how gender is constructed through the practices of power and labour and how women and men at the micro level of everyday politics and social interaction regulate the practice of gender (Radtke & Stam, 1994, p. 5). Further, the gendered lived experiences intersect with hierarchies of identities like caste, class and region, which call for multi-layered analysis of the category of gender itself (Crenshaw, 1998). This article draws on the insights of gender studies, feminist studies and intersectionality to analyze the daily livelihood of women in conflict affected areas and to explore what their lived experiences tell us about the nexus of gender and power in Nepal.

We build our definition of ‘gender and power’ upon Connell’s (1987) and Foucault’s (1980) to analyze the construction and reproduction of gender roles, relationships, labour and power in a social historical context (cf. Chonody & Siebert, 2008, p. 343). Connell states that gender roles and relationships are based on: (i) gender division of labour, describing gendered labour practices and difference in ‘women and men work’ (domestic/public) and ‘pay’; and (ii) gender division of power, considering power as a mechanism that affect everyday lives. ‘Power is relational, it becomes apparent when it is exercised, power is not associated with a particular institution, but with practices, techniques, and procedures, employed at all levels and through many dimensions’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 154). The theories will allow us to explore how gender and power are practiced during and after conflict, and how this affects women’s gender roles and livelihoods security in their daily lives.

**Gender and Women Situation in Nepal: A Historical and Political Context**

Historically, women in Nepal have suffered from gender, caste, ethnicity and regional-based inequality (Acharya, 2006; Manchanda, 2004), which is reflected in women’s participation in the economic, social, health, education and political sectors at all levels (Åshild, 2010). Women have a subordinate position in Nepalese
society, either subjected to their father or their husband, and their roles tend to be confined to the domestic sphere (Acharya, 2006). Prevalence of girl child marriages, preference for sons and polygamy are some of the factors which limit women within the domestic sector (ibid.). Women’s expectations to gain full citizenship rights in the most recent 2015 Constitution remains unfulfilled because the new Constitution will confer citizenship right to the child of a Nepalese women only if she can prove that the father of the child is not a foreigner and that the child was born in Nepal; and in case of a child born to a Nepalese woman who is married to a foreign man, the 2015 Constitution will only confer naturalized citizenship to the child. For Nepalese men, however, these clauses do not apply (Malla, 2015).

For decades, Nepal has faced diversity in poverty because one category of caste (Bahun and Chettri), class (upper class) and gender are more powerful than another with large access to resources; among them men occupy superior positions to women. Such historical constructions of gender norms and roles result in women having to face diverse poverty and unequal development outcomes in Nepal (ADB, 2010). In addition, rural women from certain caste and ethnic groups (particularly Dalit, Janjati, Madeshi, Tharu) experience larger exclusion because the state and non-state actors have ignored to include right, needs and issues of these group in the mainstream of development (Nepal NGO Coalition, 2010).

There was a major political shift in Nepal during 1996 as the Maoist party of Nepal started the People’s War with an objective to end structural inequalities (Briggs, 2015) based on gender, caste, class, ethnicity and region, and to abolish the monarchy that lasted for 250 years (Manchanda, 2001). Between 1996 and 2006, the conflict caused great political, social and economic turmoil that led to 13,000 fatalities and 200,000 being internally displaced (Ariño, 2008). The Government of Nepal and the Maoist party signed a Comprehensive Peace Accord on 21 November 2006; since then Nepal has formally been in a post-conflict peace-building phase (ibid.).

The Maoist conflict affected Nepalese women in various ways. Many, especially in the rural areas, suffered from fear of insurgent reprisal, gender-based and sexual violence and increasing vulnerability as husbands or fathers were killed or out-migrated (International Centre for Transitional Justice, 2010). However, the conflict also allowed women to take on social and economic duties previously reserved for men (Bhadra & Shah, 2007). Non-combatant women took up roles formerly performed by their absent husbands both in the domestic sphere and to a certain degree in the public sphere. Shifts in gender roles were even stronger for women who joined the Maoist army. Female participation in the insurgency was without precedent in Nepal. Nearly 30–40 per cent of the Maoist combatants were women taking up guerrilla roles (Ariño, 2008; Tamang, 2009). But after the war ended, some women ex-combatants faced stigmatization while returning home (KC, 2011; Valente, 2011). The ‘gender dividend’ of war was not straightforward and both ex-combatant and non-combatant women faced severe limitations in building up livelihoods.

To recognize the gendered challenges in post-conflict reconstruction and to promote women’s participation in the public sphere, there have been some reconstruction programmes in Nepal. The 2015 Constitution extends affirmative action and the rights of women, Dalits, indigenous and other minorities. Independent
constitutional commissions are provided for women and the Dalit, Janjati, Madhesi, Tharu and Muslim communities. The Human Rights Commission has been given the mandate to recommend reforms to laws, policies and practices to end discrimination (Mahat, 2015). Government and non-governmental agencies have worked to ensure the participation of women from various caste groups in electoral processes and in government through a variety of programmes (Dahal & Bhatta, 2008; Ramnarain, 2015). To further the aims set out by the Beijing World Conference 1995, there have also been endeavours to mainstream women’s issues in Nepal’s development agenda. All these have been done in tandem with the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which supports local women’s efforts in building sustainable peace. These attempts have also been made to foreground indigenous processes based on equitable distribution of social, economic and political power (Dahal & Bhatta, 2008). The Nepalese Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction is also working to engage women’s organizations from different caste and ethnic groups in peace-building and reconstruction programmes in Nepal (ibid.).

Research Methodology

The study selected woman ex-combatant and non-combatant heads of households (in charge of socio-economic chores in the absence of the men during the war, including war widows). The central method of the article is ethnography. Author 1 stayed in the field for more than a year in 2014–2015 and conducted in-depth interviews at different intervals of time with 25 female ex-combatants and 20 female non-combatants,1 six focus group discussions and a range of key informant interviews.2 The research was conducted in Padampur and Judpani villages in Chitwan district of Nepal, which were highly impacted by Maoist conflict and comprise of diverse caste and ethnic groups, such as Tharu, Magar, Gurung, Limbu, Rai, Bhaun, Chettri, Tamang, Madhesi, Dalit3 and Newar.

The authors also conducted interviews with 10 men ex-combatants and 5 non-combatants to assess their everyday experience on gender roles and relationship during and after the Maoist war. This allowed us to integrate male standpoints. Interviews were conducted in different areas of Kathmandu. Women and men are quoted by their surnames as it represents their caste and ethnic identity, which is an important element for analysis. The article does not intend to represent any individual women and men ex-combatants or non-combatants, but draws upon their narratives to contribute to the debate on gender in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

Gender Division of Labour and Power: Experience of Women Ex-combatants and Non-combatants during Maoist Conflict in Nepal

Connecting with Connell’s (1987) theory on ‘gender and power’, this section of the article first examines the gender division of labour during the Maoist conflict for both categories of women who experienced shifts in gender roles due to the
conflict and took up roles formerly reserved for men. It then turns to the question of gender division of power at the same period in Nepal.

**Women Ex-combatants: Experiencing Gender Equality**

**Gender Division of Labour**

This section illustrates gender division of labour during the Maoist conflict based on in-depth study conducted with women ex-combatants and some of the men ex-combatants. Issues discussed in the interviews were how the works were distributed among them and how the practice of gender took place in their everyday lives. The Maoist movement had a stated agenda on gender equality that, as we found, was translated into the daily organization of the insurgency. Both women and men shared that they held positions related to combat, for example, brigade commanders, platoon commanders, section commander, leading the formation, giving training, fighting and carrying the guns/bullets. In addition, both women and men performed service-oriented tasks, such as providing health care; working in the cafeteria as cooks and cleaners; acting as messengers; running, climbing trees and carrying wooden logs; participating in sentry duty; performed hard military trainings, facilitating, getting involved in construction work; and organizing events such as cultural programmes, festival ceremonies, etc.

The majority of the interviewed women’s ex-combatants and men ex-combatants stressed the contrast between the clearly defined gender roles they had been used to and the policy of gender equality within the Maoist movement. The following quote illustrates that:

> During the Maoist war, I [and] all the women ex-combatants performed male roles, which are reserved for men in our society. I did military training, took part in decision making, speaking in-front of the groups with confidence, taking up the leadership roles, climbing the trees, digging the ditches based on rotations. Similarly, men also did the cooking, cutting vegetables, washing, and cleaning jobs at that time. (Tamang women ex-combatant, focus group discussion in July 2014, Chitwan)

The Maoist movement also claimed to erase ethnic and caste discrimination; for instance, during the time of war, large number of women were mobilized from the excluded castes such as ethnic indigenous and Dalit groups. These groups of women wanted to uphold their rights and seek social justice. The Maoist movement strengthened the level of awareness of these groups and empowered them by providing them skills training. The following quotes illustrate this point:

> I am a Dalit woman, during the war I performed all types of work given to me such as construction work, leading the battalion, decision making, running, or climbing trees. I was not discriminated for holding Dalit identity in the Maoist group. (Dalit women ex-combatant, interviewed in February 2014, Chitwan)

Our study demonstrates that during the Maoist conflict in Nepal, women ex-combatants were liberated from traditional gender roles and empowered to take on new roles traditionally reserved for men, which was unprecedented in the
Nepalese context. While looking in this context, we learned that the Nepalese women ex-combatants received room for manoeuvre to stretch their gender roles and higher degree of gender equality during the war, which made them capable to internalize that women spheres are unlimited when they get exposures in public domain. Most importantly, our findings from the case study of Dalit women ex-combatants raise an attention in the feminist debate that gender should not be the only axis of analysis, rather ethnicity, class, caste, location should be considered to identify differences among women.

**Gender Division of Power**

This section identifies and analyzes women and men ex-combatants’ experiences of division of power, and the way they accepted and mobilized it in their daily lives during the Maoist insurgency. Power was internalized by women ex-combatants since both women and men participated equally in decision making and negotiating within the Maoist party at all levels, had the ability to overcome difficult situations and influenced the political and economic decisions of the party.

A majority of women and men ex-combatants shared that they experienced an equal division of power in their lives during the war; for example, some women actively participated in decision making and their contributions were acknowledged by the Maoist party by offering them higher ranks. Some other women combatants were involved in designing, planning and monitoring activities of the battalion and participated in economic decisions. During the discussion, women ex-combatants shared that they were accurate and reliable in planning and monitoring combat activities. The following quotes provide evidence of this:

I was in the platoon led by woman commander, she was very brave, and made wise decisions of the Maoist party. I did not find any difference in her leadership compared with other men commanders. (Chettri men ex-combatant, interviewed in March 2014, Chitwan)

I was a company commander, I provided training, and headed the management and decision making of my battalions. (Magar women commander, interviewed in April 2014, Chitwan)

The above findings illustrate that during the Maoist war, power as defined by the Maoists was organized and deployed equally among women and men combatants in such a way that both women and men had equal opportunities to access, deliver and practice power in their daily surroundings. The scholarly literature on conflict often portrays the image of women as victims of their armed groups; hence, before we conducted our fieldwork, we had *a priori* assumption that Nepalese women ex-combatants had been victimized by and suffered at the hands of the Maoists during the civil war. However, our findings from the fieldwork confirmed for us that the Maoists had shifted the traditional pattern of gender relations in Nepalese society by mobilizing and treating women and men equally during the civil war. Our conclusion contrasted with the findings of Denov and Gervais’ (2007) study on the civil war in Sierra Leone, where women ex-combatants admitted to being victimized by their armed groups and feeling a sense of power while holding a gun as it symbolized a sense of victory over their victimization by their armed groups.
Women Non-combatants: Replacing Husbands and Fathers

Gender Division of Labour

Women non-combatants, who did not join the Maoist movement, also experienced shifts in gender roles. In the villages, women had to cope without their husbands and fathers, many of whom were killed or out-migrated in search of economic opportunities or to escape from the war. Next to their domestic roles, these women started to take on the tasks previously performed by men, both in agricultural production as well as in the more public roles related to trade and local politics. Based on the in-depth interviews with women and men non-combatants, we constructed the gender division of labour during the conflict as follows:

- Women responsible for traditional roles such as taking care of the kids, preparing and serving the meals, doing the laundry and washing dishes, taking and bringing back children from school and fetching water.
- New conflict-induced roles performed by women in the absence of men; for instance, bringing firewood from the forest, running small businesses like tea stalls, tailoring shops or restaurants, bringing food from the market, doing cultivation (own land or others) and taking care of livestock (chicken, cow, buffalo, goat).
- Women also took on social roles; they attended the festivals and feasts in the village, yet also found room to attend village meetings and participate in local politics.

The following quote demonstrates these points:

After my husband was killed during the Maoist insurgency, I completely took responsibility of my two sons and my father and mother in-laws, the farm and households including making money for my family. I learned tailoring and started running my own small business. But I also took care of cattle and goats, bringing firewood, cooking food, looking after the children. (Magar widow, interviewed in July 2014, Chitwan)

A migrant woman now living in Kathmandu, affiliated to a local NGO that implements women empowerment programmes, shared:

My husband migrated to India to protect himself as he was suspected of being a Maoist and was under an army search list. During that time, I was left alone and came to Kathmandu, I learned driving tempo and earned my family livelihood through it. I am Chettri\(^9\) and in my caste women doing such jobs are not accepted and I faced many stigmas for being women driver and overcame the challenges. (Chettri women non-combatant, interviewed in January 2015, Kathmandu)

My wife was very shy, she never went out of the village. I was affiliated with the Maoist party. Many times, the army raided my house suspecting me to be a spy, and later I went underground for about 6 years. During my absence, my wife looked after my 2 kids and my parents. She performed all the duties alone in the kitchen, farm, and outside; for instance, she runs a tailoring shop. (Maoist local leader, interviewed in November 2014, Chitwan)
From the above explanations, we learned that women non-combatants during the Maoist conflict had to undergo greater struggle as these group of women performed both the jobs at household level (taking care of kitchen and kids) and new roles in public affairs (earning, participating in trainings, affiliation with local organizations and local politics) previously fulfilled by male members of their family. Our findings highlight that the Maoist conflict not only changed the gender roles among women ex-combatants but also among women non-combatants, as can be seen through the experiences of the Chettri (upper caste) migrant woman who accepted the tempo driver’s job and the Magar widow who solely took the economic responsibility of her family and ran a tailoring shop. This was a very rare social practice in Nepal during the Maoist war. Our study also confirms the view that conflict transforms gender roles to some degree, enabling women to construct independent resistance and resilience to face the altered realities of their daily lives, something they would never have experienced in the presence of men under normal circumstances.

Gender Division of Power

In the interviews conducted, the women non-combatants identified power as the ability of women to make decisions within their households and communities; networking and negotiating; accessing and exercising control over assets; having opportunities to join politics; and setting up businesses and participating in meetings. The following story of a woman non-combatant illustrates these points:

I was married to a Bahun man but I belong to the Tamang ethnic group. After I became a widow my husband’s family did not give me place to live nor did they look after my children. My husband’s parents and brothers were also unwilling to give the portion of land, which was the share of my husband. Later with the help of the local organization that provided legal advice I filed a case against them and decision of the local court was in my favour. I was afraid thinking that they would take revenge for what I did. (Tamang widow, interviewed in April 2014, Chitwan)

A majority of the women non-combatants who were interviewed shared that due to Nepal’s patriarchal society the markets still remain masculine (dominated by men); hence, it is difficult for women who are not protected by men. This can be seen from the experience of the Tamang widow above, who was denied rights to her dead husband’s property by her in-laws and suffered from the fear of social prejudice and retribution. Some women non-combatants also shared that they faced stigmatization when they ran a business (driving, running shop and restaurants) as it is still considered a man’s job. A few Maoist widows even hid their identity to avoid certain evil practices that continue in some areas. For instance, widows face stigma while operating their businesses; they are often denied participation in social rituals and functions as they are projected as a ‘symbol of impurity’ (Yadav, 2016); they also face stigma if they decide to remarry; and they are discriminated against in trying to find jobs or to rent a house. This reflects how women as a widow, or as a business person, or as a mother require male presence in the community as a part of social gender order. Our study argues that despite of the presence of male supremacy in the Nepalese community,
women non-combatants challenged the traditional gender norms and took the new gender roles to protect their identity and daily needs. However, women in Nepal have become more aware and informed about their legal rights, mainly because of awareness and advocacy campaigns. Being more informed as well as being economically empowered, women can now offer greater resistance and establish more equitable gender roles and relationships in the society.

Comparing Women Ex-combatants and Non-combatants: Gender Division Labour and Power during Maoist Conflict in Nepal

Looking into the gender division of labour between women ex-combatants and non-combatants during the Maoist conflict, one finds that in the case of women ex-combatants the division of labour were equal which provided a forum to women to perform masculine roles by shifting their traditional roles and relationships. Women non-combatants performed both the duties in the domestic and public domains in the absence of their men. For both groups of women, gender roles changed but in a different way; one group of women were recruited as combatants as it was their motivation to join the war, but for women non-combatants there was no choice in their lives rather than accepting the reality of losing their male counterparts. Further, during the conflict, women ex-combatants performed jobs collectively on rotation basis between women and men, whereas in case of women non-combatants they did it all alone facing all the challenges of life.

While comparing the gender division of power and considering everyday practice of power in their lives, one finds the following. In case of women ex-combatants during the conflict, the power division was equal. Women were provided opportunity equal to men and women even controlled the battalion where men were subordinate to them and accepted their leadership. Moreover, the decision-making process, party management and leadership positions were led equally by women based on their capacity and skills. Therefore, during the conflict, power was practiced collectively within groups. In the case of women non-combatants, however, they had to perform more tasks individually, taking up men’s roles, and had to fight hard for their rights and livelihoods. The increase in the workload they experienced was not accompanied by a greater acknowledgement in society, and many women faced stigmatization, which complicated fulfilling their daily livelihood tasks. While women ex-combatants gained respect for the way they changed their roles, non-combatant women in the communities faced stigmatization and marginalization.

Gender Division of Labour and Power: Experience of Women Ex-combatants and Non-combatants in Post-conflict Nepal

This section describes the gendered division of labour in the public and private spheres in the post-conflict setting in the lives of women ex-combatants and non-combatants, and how this practice impacted their livelihoods differently. It also shows how some of the ‘gains’ for women, in terms of power, came under pressure after the conflict.
Women Ex-combatants: Re-integration and (Re-)Marginalization

Gender Division of Labour

Women ex-combatants experienced a strong shift from the conflict to the post-conflict period. After a lengthy period of demobilization (during which many of them spend several years in a cantonment), they returned to civilian life with a small sum to set up new livelihoods. Many of the women ex-combatant interviewed did not return to their regions of origin but settled instead near the cantonment areas. They now faced the hardships of managing household and searching for ways to generate an income for living.

A majority of the women ex-combatants shared that due to having small kids they invested most of their time at home; hence, many women ex-combatants created their livelihoods by rearing livestock, producing alcohol at home, selling firewood and sharecropping. It was surprising to note that only few women ex-combatants participated in the village-level meetings. However, for many of the women ex-combatants, livelihoods survival was largely dependent on social networks, their own agency and support from war peers. In many cases, women borrowed money from friends or neighbours, they also exchanged labour with their extended family to perform certain chores and some others invested in a business or trade together with their war peers. There are approximately 300 households of ex-combatants in the Padampur and Judpani villages in the Chitwan district. The following stories explain how the gender division of labour changed from the war to the post-war situation:

I am married to a Dalit man, but Dalit are still considered untouchable in the community. My husband goes out in the search of work and I do all the household tasks. We both do not have formal education, so cannot find jobs. Specific training that we received during the war, such as hard exercise, formation, running, fighting, and leading the battalion, cannot be used now. (Limbu women ex-combatant, interviewed in January 2015, Chitwan)

I am a trainer of non-violent conflict. GIZ provided this training and now I travel to the villages and also to other districts to provide training to the people. My husband looks after my child and cook’s food and takes care of the business. I also cook sometimes, but most of the time my husband does for me and my son. (Tamang women ex-combatant, interviewed in July 2014, Chitwan)

Until now I participated in the kitchen garden training provided by GIZ, but I cannot utilize it as I do not have enough land to do the farming. My husband and I work together; mostly I do the households chores as my child is very small, and my husband does most of the outside jobs. We have a small shop where we sell the food items in the village, so my husband does all the shopping. (Bahun women ex-combatant, interviewed in June 2014, Chitwan)

All the women ex-combatants we approached got married out of their caste. This was a major achievement of the Maoist movement, which accepted inter-caste marriages; but marriage with a Dalit and getting that marriage socially accepted is still a big taboo. In some cases, we discovered that if a Dalit man is married to a woman from a higher caste group such as Magar or Gurung, the woman is easily accepted by the man’s family; but if the woman happened to be Dalit and is
married to a man from a higher caste group, in such a situation the woman is rejected by the man’s family. This reflects caste-based gender discrimination, which applies to Dalit women but not men.

The Maoists’ primary conflict objective was to end all forms of discrimination in Nepal based on caste. However, while inter-caste marriages between different ‘touchable’ (that is, non-Dalit) caste groups such as between Bahun and Newar are frequent and widely accepted, inter-caste marriages between ‘touchable’ and ‘untouchable’ (Dalit) caste groups are still considered a big taboo and rarely accepted.

The majority of the women ex-combatants that we interviewed believe that the Nepal government has not provided them with good training and job skills to get reintegrated properly into the community, which has resulted in unemployment and suffering. Some international NGOs such as the German GIZ, in partnership with pro-public11 (a national NGO), did provide some training in tailoring, snack making, vegetable farming and so on, but it was not very useful due to the lack of land and demand for these training.

Within the household, the equal gender balance that women grew accustomed to during the Maoist conflict was largely maintained during the post-conflict period. Although the women ex-combatants mostly performed household jobs, the practice of gender equality within the household and in family decision making (such as pertaining to buying or selling of land or livestock, lending money, participating in training or going to a marriage ceremony) continued during the post-conflict phase. However, outside of the household, women had to confront more traditional ideas on the gender division of labour: for instance, majority of the women we interviewed felt that men still dominated the village, and in the market, men still hesitated to offer women masculine jobs like construction work, running the motorbike workshop, driving and electronics repairing—jobs in these sectors were still mostly covered by men.

The above findings reveal how gendered division of labour is performed in everyday lives of women ex-combatants in the public and private spheres, and how this helps to create their livelihoods in the post-conflict context. While gender relations in the private sphere, between man and wife, continued mostly as constructed during the Maoist insurgency, in the public sphere, especially related to employment, women were confined to traditional roles and the ‘gender divide’ of the war did not carry over into the post-war setting. The study also indicates that the failure of the government to respond to the needs of women-combatants created a sense of isolation and limited women’s mobility in the public sphere. For example, many women ex-combatants missed school as they had joined the Maoist movement at an early age; this lack of formal education became a handicap for them in the post-conflict phase since even some of the lowest level jobs required formal education. Moreover, the lack of appropriate skills and job training for ex-combatants and inadequate government investment in employment made the post-conflict condition difficult for women ex-combatants.

The paradox of the Maoist conflict for women ex-combatants was that while the conflict mobilized and empowered them, but after the conflict ended they had to live in isolation. The skills they had learned during the conflict were not particularly useful for the labour market. Hence, many women ex-combatants had
to return to their traditional gender roles limited to their household regimes. Especially women with small children were more confined to domestic tasks, as it is difficult for them to go out to work with children. This research found that only one woman ex-combatant who got affiliation with GIZ was able to maintain herself by going out for part-time work as a trainer. Our main conclusion then is that while the Maoist conflict has brought about transformation in the labour and power structures at the household and individual levels, it has not done so at the societal level. Therefore, it is still difficult to remove entrenched patriarchal practices at all levels of society.

Furthermore, these findings raise an important question: to what extent are women able to have ‘meaningful lives’ in post-conflict Nepal? In this context, Manchanda (2004, p. 238), in her paper on the women movement and Maoist insurgency in Nepal, has observed that

In South Asia, both nation state-building projects and armed revolutionary class struggles have seen the mobilization of women and its corollary, the subsuming of the women’s question in nationalist or socialist projects and ideological strictures that in the aftermath pull women back to the gender discriminatory regimes of the personal sphere.

**Gender Division of Power**

The following section provides empirical evidence on gendered division of power in the daily lives of women ex-combatants to elaborate how the practice of power impacts their livelihoods. Based on discussions with women ex-combatants, this study categorized power as the following: process of decision making within the household and community; mobilizing resources; having access to assets (land, jobs, business, opportunities); negotiating; involvement in local politics; and social networking and agency.

Most Maoist women ex-combatants shared the household jobs, which are concentrated to domestic spheres in contrast to the roles that they performed in the war. In addition, they also shared that this did not mean that they are powerless; they are still very courageous, can make things happen, speak with confidence and do not hesitate to perform male jobs. They further added that their way of life and ideas are very different compared to normal women in the village. They are now aware of their basic rights and are informed about most of the contemporary local and national issues. The following quotation is from an ethnic woman ex-combatant, who shared that she still feels confident in speaking and making decisions compared to other women in the village:

> I am very confident of myself, I understand the women needs, I can think wisely for the sake of my family good, and I am very much informed about local politics. When it comes to making decisions for the house, me and my husband mostly take decisions together. (Limbu women ex-combatant, interviewed in July 2014, Chitwan)

The case of women ex-combatants in relation to division of power in the aftermath of war reflects that though women felt more confident about their ability and personality, when it came to owning property rights they generally failed despite having experienced gender equality during the Maoist war. This means that after
the war, women have once again become economically dependent upon men for their everyday livelihoods; and if women came forward to claim property ownership, they risked their marital relationship and exposed themselves to social stigmatization. We learned from the women ex-combatants that they felt they would carry more power and choice in the post-conflict phase if they were provided better reintegration packages including access to formal schooling, availability of micro-credit schemes and opportunities for training and skills development. The study conducted by Mazurana and McKay (2004) in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique revealed a similar pattern, where girl combatants complained that they would carry more power and choice during the post-conflict phase if they were provided formal schooling, micro-credit to start a small business and skills training and development.

**Women Non-combatants: Maintaining Economic Independence**

**Gender Division of Labour**

The women non-combatants continued performing jobs both in private and public domain in the aftermath of war. Especially women who became widows have had to take all the responsibilities of their family. For women, whose husbands came back after the war, the men did not find immediate jobs in the current market mainly because of being away for a long time and because of the lack of proper skills and education. Most of these men helped in running their wife’s business. They also did kitchen and household jobs, unlike before the conflict. The following are voices from women non-combatants about their experience:

After my husband died in the Maoist war, I came to Kathmandu, where I am taking care of two sons. I run a tailoring shop. I do work, both at home and at the market. I am also a member of cooperatives, a religious network and a women’s group so I go there some time every month. I also participated in the bookkeeping and financial training provided by a local community based organization. (Bahun widow non-combatant, interviewed in August 2014, Kathmandu)

Right now, I operate a small restaurant in the Kathmandu Kapan area. My shop is located near school and college and the business is going good. After the end of conflict my husband returned from India, now we work together in this business. My husband does vegetable cutting, cooking and serving the food to the customers. The restaurant is registered in my name. (Magar migrant woman non-combatant, interviewed in October 2014, Kathmandu)

Our study reveals that in the post-conflict phase, women non-combatants are doing their own earnings and are economically independent. They earn their own income in the public sphere; that is, by operating a business, plying a trade like running a restaurant or a food stall and attending meetings and entering politics. In the absence of their husband during the war, they had participated in life skill trainings, conducted business, made decisions and managed their livelihood. Therefore, they now know how to face the problems in life and that women can
also do tasks that are reserved for men. Before the Maoist conflict, women were never invited to meetings, did not take part in cooperatives and financial institutions and were not given space in decision making within the household. Women worked in the kitchen from dawn until dusk. The Maoist war provided women a level of awareness and now people cannot underestimate women anymore. Social networking and agency is another important aspect of women’s independent livelihoods; for instance, local-level family, relatives and friends’ networks as well as peer groups provide useful channels for borrowing money, arranging childcare and sharing of problems.

Our study also finds that the Maoist movement led women non-combatants (widows, single women and women-headed households) to search for diversified livelihood options. In the absence of men, women had to re-negotiate their roles to establish their position in the community. Therefore, even in the aftermath of conflict, they continued their roles in the public sphere. Women were obliged to make decisions in the absence of men. They formed informal institutions such as working groups to foster small entrepreneurial activities. These groups provide women access to information and informal political power. Some aid organizations tried to further challenge the existing gender regime by offering women training in ‘masculine’ occupations, such as driving. While women were proud to be able to perform tasks traditionally considered masculine, such training is often unconnected to employment prospects in the real world.

**Gender Division of Power**

Majority of women non-combatants did not find much difference in the practice of power in the post-conflict situation, because of their economic independency. The quotes below are illustrative:

I am the president of a cooperative and also got affiliated with many organizations. My husband is back after being underground for many years during the war. I do all the public related jobs, and my husband looks after the farm, cattle, and other household issues. During the Maoist war, when my husband was not in the village, I performed all the duties at home and also outside. So now people believe in me; for small matters they come to me and ask for help. (Women non-ccombatant, interviewed in May 2014, Chitwan)

My husband disappeared during the Maoist War. I am solely taking care of my four daughters. Now, I lead the house painting contracts at Narayanghat Bazar and I am also a sub-contractor. I did this job for 14 years, so locals now trust me and my job. (Non-combatant, interviewed in November 2014, Chitwan)

All the men (husbands of women non-combatants) whom we met shared that in their absence during the conflict, women performed great jobs alone and this made them independent and powerful. One husband of a woman non-combatant shared: ‘If women would have lost hope, our children would have died, and our families would have collapsed in Maoist war.’ Our study suggests that women non-combatants who experienced independence did so because the Maoist conflict enabled them to manage livelihoods and to maintain power relationships. Being with cooperatives and other local organizations provided women non-combatants recognition
and sustained trust in the community. Women also emphasized the importance of proper training and market development to enable entrepreneurship.

Comparing Women Ex-combatants and Non-combatants: Gender Division of Labour and Power in Post-conflict Nepal

In this section, we compare women ex-combatants and non-combatants in terms of the practice of their labour and power in their daily lives in the post-conflict situation. The gender division of power of women ex-combatants changed after the conflict. During the conflict, women followed the norms, regulations, tasks and decisions as per the demand of the Maoist party collectively. However, after their demobilization they could not use their skills such as carrying guns or leading battalions. The lack of proper re-integration packages, opportunities and skills suitable in the post-conflict situation drove them to accept their previous roles from before the war. In many cases, women were more confined to the house as they now lived in a nuclear family and could not rely on grandparents to look after the children. In terms of their livelihoods, women ex-combatants are mainly limited to farm activities, rearing livestock or making local alcohol. Although women ex-combatants have taken up traditional roles, they have clear understandings of their rights, political agenda and need to maintain social networks.

In contrast, women non-combatants are doing both public and private sphere jobs such as looking after their children, running their households and maintaining their business. All of them have their own business and have turned into entrepreneurs. They have also applied diverse livelihood strategies to run their daily lives: grocery stores, clothing shops, eateries and noodles selling, fancy stores, cosmetics and stationary shops, photocopying shops and meat shops. Many of these women have taken loans from NGOs to start and run their businesses. However, in terms of owning assets such as land or house, only one woman had access to it.

Conclusion

This study suggests that during the Maoist conflict in Nepal gender division of labour amongst women ex-combatants was more equal than what people were used to in pre-conflict settings. In discourse and in practice, the Maoists sought to reduce discrimination based on gender, caste and ethnicity. Both men and women held important positions within the organization such as brigadier commander, platoon commander and section commander, and provided leadership in formation and training. Women and men combatants were provided equal opportunities to exercise power at all levels within the organization depending upon their capacity and skills, particularly in decision making, leadership and ideological commitment, planning and design and monitoring of war activities. During the conflict, women combatants’ gender roles shifted to include roles previously reserved only for men, and they could occupy leadership positions. As for women non-combatants, they took sole responsibility of the household after their husband died, or disappeared, or migrated out of the region/country.
In the search for livelihood options, these non-combatant women faced many challenges but managed to develop their entrepreneurship and leadership skills. Therefore, gender roles, which were confined within households, transformed towards the public sphere when these women started operating restaurants and tailoring shops, conducting farming and selling vegetables in the local markets and getting involved in local NGOs and financial organizations.

With regards to gender division of labour in the post-conflict setting, the failure of the Nepal government to offer proper re-integration package that addressed the needs of women ex-combatants created a sense of isolation among these women and limited their mobility in the public sphere. In addition, lack of formal education and adequate employment opportunities were the key reasons why women ex-combatants resorted to traditional work in the post-conflict scenario and became more dependent on their husband’s income. In contrast, women non-combatants were mostly earning an independent income through their involvement in the public sphere, and thus did not have to depend on their husband’s income.

Our study informs that women ex-combatants have faced re-marginalization with regards to gender division of power in the post-conflict context. This is due to masculine-oriented market and untransformed gender order of the society, which still demanded women to be in secondary position to men. Many of these women have had to depend upon their husband for income, which has limited their role of doing household chores and looking after livestock. In contrast, women non-combatants have created their own livelihoods without depending on others, although some of these women continue to experience domination by their husband’s family, particularly while getting access to their husband’s land or property. The study further reveals that for both ex-combatant and non-combatant women, social networking and agency are important channels through which they could renegotiate their gender roles to create independent livelihoods.

Another key finding of the study is that both men combatants who participated in the war and men non-combatants who stayed away from home during the war hold liberal views about women and their wives. In the post-conflict setting, these men usually perform household tasks and help their wives with cooking, cleaning, fetching water and looking after the kids. The role of men shifted during the conflict, and this trend continues in the post-conflict phase.

The article further finds that remarkably for non-combatant women, the Maoist war in Nepal triggered more positive changes to their gender roles compared to women ex-combatants, even though the latter experienced more transformational work during the conflict. While non-combatant women have consolidated their new position and have room to manoeuvre after the conflict, women ex-combatants have been driven to take up traditional roles. In terms of power in the post-conflict setting, we find that both ex-combatant and non-combatant women have strengthened their position in the private sphere where they encounter more equality between men and women. With regards to public power, we find non-combatant women more often taking up leadership roles in their communities. In society, at large, we find that the division of labour and power continues to be highly embedded and the war has not led to changes in mindsets and social structures.
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Notes

1. Women ex-combatants \([N = 25]:\) Tamang (an ethnic group in Nepal) 12, Magar (an ethnic group in Nepal) 4, Chettri (upper caste in Nepal) 3, Dalit (so-called untouchable/lower caste in Nepal) 3, Brahmin (upper caste in Nepal) 3] and Women non-combatants \([N = 20]:\) Gurung (an ethnic group in Nepal) 5, Brahmin 4, Chettri 3, Tamang 3, Limbu (an ethnic group of Nepal) 2, Dalit 2, Kumal (an ethnic group in Nepal) 1].
2. Local community leaders in Chitwan and Kathmandu, 10 men ex-combatants, 5 men non-combatants, members of local cooperatives in Chitwan.
3. Considered untouchable caste in Nepalese society, though the Constitution of Nepal prohibits this practice.
4. Maoist party declared 40-points demand document to parliament during the 1990s, this was Maoist party ideological manifesto, an overall message of this Maoist document was reconstructing ‘New Nepal’ which they refer to abolish monarchy-feudal system and ending all forms of discrimination based on social, economic, political, cultural, caste, class, gender and location (Karki & Seddon, 2003). Partly, within 40-points demand document there was a strong message on ‘gender equality’ (points 19, 20 and 21) highlighting women’s issues. 19. Patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women should be stopped, girls should be allowed to access paternal property as their brothers. 20. All racial exploitation and suppression should be stopped. Where ethnic communities are in the majority, they should be allowed to form their own autonomous governments. 21. Discrimination against downtrodden and backward people should be stopped. The system of untouchability should be eliminated (ibid.).
5. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 women ex-combatants, at different interval of time in 2014 and 2015 in Chitwan and Kathmandu district of Nepal.
6. Interviews with 10 men ex-combatants (all were husband of women ex-combatant) and, 5 men non-combatants, January–December 2014, including several months in 2015.
7. The marginalized ethnic group of Nepal.
8. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 women non-combatants in Chitwan and Kathmandu, January–December, 2014 and several months in 2015.
9. Categorized as high caste in Nepal.
10. GiZ, German Development Cooperation.
11. National level non-government organization working on governance and development issue of Nepal.
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