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Everyday realities of reintegration: experiences of Maoist 'verified' women ex-combatants in the aftermath of war in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Global studies of women's experiences in the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process have explored its implications for women in the post-war period. Scholars have also already pointed out that ex-combatants in Nepal are facing difficulties in the reintegration period. This paper examines in particular the consequences of the DDR process for so-called Maoist 'verified' women ex-combatants, those who were formally acknowledged as former Maoist combatants and have experienced the entire DDR process. The paper asks how they experienced this process and how it shaped their post-conflict options. The paper first problematises the idea of a 'return to normalcy' and, second, shows how female ex-combatants suffered multiple forms of marginalisation as they sought to give new shape to their lives. I argue that this is in part due to the lack of a gender-inclusive framework in the DDR policy in Nepal and the failure to take into account the voices of women ex-combatants.

KEYWORDS

Verified women ex-combatant; disarmament; demobilisation and reintegration; Maoist armed conflict; gender equality; post-conflict settings; Nepal

Introduction

The Maoist armed conflict in Nepal started on 13 February 1996 and concluded on 21 November 2006 with the signing of the comprehensive peace accord (CPA) between the Government of Nepal and the Maoist party.¹ Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) were central to the CPA and aimed to transform Maoist combatants into citizens.² This paper focuses on how female ex-combatants experienced the DDR process, zooming in, in particular, on the reintegration process.

Women combatants were heavily involved in the Maoist armed conflict in Nepal. Between 30–40 per cent of the Maoist combatants were women,³ yet little attention has been paid to how female ex-combatants are coping in the aftermath of war when they are expected to meet expectations that they 'return to normal life'. The paper examines the consequences of the DDR process for so-called 'verified' female ex-combatants, which refers to those who were formally acknowledged as former combatants. These women experienced the entire DDR process. The paper examines how they experienced this process and how it shaped their post-conflict options, especially reintegration. The paper first problematises the very idea of a 'return to normalcy' and, second, shows how

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female ex-combatants suffered multiple forms of exclusion as they sought to give new shape to their lives. I argue that this is in part due to the lack of a gender inclusive approach in the DDR policy in Nepal and the failure to take into account the voices of women ex-combatants.

A significant body of comparative literature on gender and DDR has shown that even where gender roles became more fluid during war times, and male and female combatants fulfilled similar roles, the DDR process tends to be gender-exclusive and overlooks the special challenges faced by women and girl combatants.⁴ More attention is now being paid to the centrality of female combatant roles in armed conflict and their participation in the DDR process.⁵ In the same manner, feminist writers have raised serious concerns about reintegration programming lacking a gender inclusive framework that would address women combatants' needs in particular.⁶ Earlier studies, mostly concerning the African context, have shown that women and girls are often excluded from the DDR processes because their roles in the armed conflict are seen as auxiliary⁷ and they are not recognised as 'fighters'. In the case of Nepal, as this paper will show, the exclusion does not happen in the disarmament phase but later, during reintegration.

Nepal's peace process and the DDR process have been studied extensively, with a focus on factors leading from war to peace.⁸ Much work to date highlights issues concerning 'disqualified' combatants, i.e. those ex-combatants who failed to obtain formal recognition as such. This group was discharged in 2007 without the benefits of 'verified' combatants. There was considerable media attention on the disqualified combatants as they protested over their situation, raising the attention of scholars, academics as well as development agencies,⁹ however, their concerns were primarily based upon the narratives of male ex-combatants.¹⁰ The few studies that considered stories of 'disqualified' female ex-combatants found that the typical challenges women faced were associated with social stigmas for returning empty-handed from the war and rejection from becoming suitable wives and mothers.¹¹ This paper contributes to the literature on gender and the DDR by zooming in on the reintegration experiences of Maoist 'verified' women ex-combatants in Nepal, who took part in the entire official DDR process. The paper is based on the narratives of Maoist 'verified' women ex-combatants.

Understanding disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) from a gender perspective

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) is considered a crucial process for long-term peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction.¹² In most cases, the United Nations assists the DDR programmes in war-torn countries.¹³ Disarmament and demobilisation, the first two components of DDR, take place before the reintegration phase and create the security and trust necessary for implementing peace agreements.¹⁴ After demobilisation follows the reintegration of the combatants, which is often the most challenging phase. As combatants' transition from combatant to non-combatant roles they encounter challenges around rebuilding livelihoods, job searches, renewing trust, re-establishing family, networks and relationships.¹⁵

The reintegration period is 'crowded with gender decisions' that women and men face differently.¹⁶ Women emerging from combat roles have their own expectations and ideas about how their lives are to develop in the evolving peace process. They might face tensions between the war-time empowerment they experienced and the limitations deriving from the patriarchal structures that were upheld or resurfaced in the post-war era.¹⁷

Most official DDR policies assume that after the conflict ends and reintegration programmes are delivered, security and normality are likely to resume and ex-combatants are expected to perform normalcy.¹⁸ However, such conventional practices are largely criticised for not taking into account ex-combatants' post-war transition challenges.¹⁹ One way of looking at the success of DDR is in terms of strict security considerations: the numbers of ex-combatants demobilised, the weapons reduced and destroyed, and the successful post-war monitoring of weapons.²⁰ Another, category of DDR studies suggest family and community can play constructive roles in resettling the combatants after their return because their relationships are rooted in pre-war conditions.²¹ Next, scholarship on gender and the DDR process further argues that unless reintegration programming integrates a 'gender inclusive framework' women are more likely to face special problems because of gender, culture, ethnicity, location and other identities.²²

These gender-based problems have been confirmed by a number of research studies. A study in Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique offers empirical findings on the lived experiences of females and their difficulties in starting new lives in the post-conflict period.²³ One of the major findings suggests that due to DDR officials' lack of knowledge about girls' and women's issues, women encounter larger exclusions.²⁴ For instance, young female ex-combatants with war-born children faced extreme difficulties and stigmatisation while seeking proper health services and treatments because health related issues are often absent in the DDR policies and frameworks.²⁵ Another study in Sierra Leone points out that DDR failed to serve female former combatant needs as it was guided by gender stereotyping, neglecting women's roles in the conflict, and limiting their war roles to either bush wives, abductees or spying.²⁶ In her study, McKay found girls hesitated to reintegrate because they were unable to financially support themselves, and they often migrated to an urban setting in hopes of finding a means of economic survival.²⁷ Research in Sri Lanka revealed that when women who had been with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) returned home they were often assumed to have perpetrated violence in the war and were suspected of being sexually abused.²⁸ Such stereotyping demoralised and hampered their social reintegration process. These studies demonstrate that women ex-combatants often struggle in the post-war context because reintegration programmes are often inadequate to meet their needs.

A few studies have found some positive experiences of reintegration processes. Research in Northern Uganda argues that some female ex-combatants reintegrated better and were more resilient thanks to family support.²⁹ Another study in El-Salvador and Guatemala showed that women ex-combatants were not always marginalised after their return, but rather showed considerable resilience thanks to collective action.³⁰ In the same vein, the scholarly literature also sheds light on the roles of the community/family in whether women remain or opt to leave a community after returning.

Reintegration programmes aim to support women ex-combatants to integrate into the community and resume normalcy. The outcomes of these programmes are context-specific and female ex-combatants may face both positive or negative experiences during the process. The main problems identified in the reintegration process are knowledge gaps amongst DDR officials and a lack of a gender inclusive framework. Other challenges include societal factors such as cultural-social prejudices, gender stereotyping and a woman's pre-conflict situation which re-emerges once women return to their communities of origin.

Structural factors which sustain or challenge reintegration

The scholarship to date has suggested that, although conflict might offer women a window for change, these changes might not last for long, and may roll back as 'normality' returns.³¹ Whereas individual women may gain considerable empowerment, and the notion of appropriate roles for women is enlarged, this does not imply that gender norms and social power relations change in a structural way.³² Structural factors including patriarchy and gender bias that work against women such as inequality of income, class differences, caste hierarchy and cultural systems remain relatively in tact despite the war, and so do discriminatory legal systems.³³

Although Nepal's social and political landscape has been rapidly transforming, the patriarchal system is still prevalent and is reflected in the Nepalese marriage system, family relations, caste system, cultural practices, inheritance system and some legal frameworks,³⁴ all of which limit gender equality. For example, even after the declaration of the new 2015 constitution, women do not have equal citizenship rights, inheritance rights or property rights equal to men. People are socialised in a way which, intentionally or unintentionally, accepts and endorses patriarchal norms. Also, marriage plays a key role in a woman's lifetime because it determines her destiny and livelihood options.³⁵ Traditionally, Nepalese women and girls have been restricted to the domestic sphere and excluded from public decision-making.³⁶

The literature to date on gender and reintegration is rich, although there is little on the particular case of Nepal. This ethnographic study contributes to the body of literature by addressing the experiences of Maoist 'verified' women ex-combatants in Nepal. The study presents how these women experienced re-marginalisation during the reintegration process and shows how they felt their wartime contributions were devalued and made invisible, offering them limited options in a post-conflict era.

Methods

This study employed in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews were conducted by the author, a Nepali, in the framework of her PhD research. Thirty-five Maoist women ex-combatants were interviewed for this study. In addition, four focus group discussions were conducted with women ex-combatants and two focus groups were conducted with their husbands (also Maoist ex-combatants). Finding female ex-combatants for interviews proved very challenging. To get access to women ex-combatants, the author drew on previous contacts with Maoist political leaders. Contact was established with some women ex-combatants currently

living in Chitwan, and these women supported the researcher in establishing contacts with other ex-combatant women. The fieldwork was conducted in Chitwan district of Nepal between January 2014 and February 2015 in various phases. Before starting the field work, two exploratory visits were made in December 2013 and January 2014.

The interviews lasted from two to three hours each and follow-up visits were made to the same women several times. The interviews were conducted entirely in Nepali and audio recorded. Notes and photographs were taken only after getting consent from the interviewees. The researcher had the advantage of being Nepali: interacting in the Nepali language made the interviews livelier and more in-depth, and the researcher was able to understand even the local dialect, which gave cultural and contextual meaning to the topic. After collection, the data were translated into English, then coded and analysed using Atlas ti software. To maintain anonymity of the interviewees, all the names applied in this paper are pseudonyms.

Women's mobilisation in the Maoist insurgency

Gender, caste and ethnic based exclusion have been pervasive in Nepalese society, and women in particular experience all forms of discrimination.³⁷ The central objective of what became known as the 'People's War' was to abolish a feudal system and establish a new democratic Republic.³⁸ The Maoists had a strong message of emancipation for the oppressed rural population, lower caste, marginalised groups and women.³⁹ The Maoist manifesto, known as the '40-points demand document',⁴⁰ delivered a clear-cut agenda on gender equality and social inclusion, especially reflected in points 19, 20 and 21:

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.⁴¹

These three points are closely interrelated and show how the Maoists framed women's issues in its ideological discourse.⁴² The Maoist recruitment policy was to have 'women 3-in-1', meaning that among every three fighters one is a woman.⁴³ The Maoist movement was successful in recruiting women and this number was even surpassed.

Studies point to diverse explanations for women's mobilisation in the Maoist insurgency. Some writings contend that women were attracted to what they understood as a struggle against women's oppression.⁴⁴ Similarly, others argue that the Maoist movement offered rural women an option to escape narrowly confined gender roles and the exploitation they experienced in their daily lives.⁴⁵

Research also suggests that women were moved by the Maoist's ideological message and made a conscious choice to join the Maoist struggle, including some who joined due to their family's loyalty to the Maoist insurgency and others who became familiar with it after joining the movement.⁴⁶ Such transformation occurred as women began to occupy new types of gender roles and caste hierarchies were disrupted. The Maoist

message of ending discrimination reinforced their personal aspirations to achieve equality.⁴⁷

Context: the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process in Nepal

This section first provides a brief description of Nepal's DDR process and then gives detailed explanations of how Maoist 'verified' women combatants experienced reintegration programming and how it affected their everyday realities after their return.

Disarmament

The DDR process was a key agenda of the comprehensive peace accord (CPA) and as per the CPA, the Maoist Party of Nepal and the Seven-Party Alliance members consented to invite the UN to assist and monitor the peace process.⁴⁸ On 23 January 2007, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1740 to mandate the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN). The fundamental task of UNMIN was to monitor and manage arms and armies,⁴⁹ and to observe the election of the Constituent Assembly in consultation with the parties.⁵⁰ It has been noted that the UN's role in Nepal was not modelled on a template from peace operations elsewhere but was designed in close co-ordination between UN representatives and local peace process parties, leading to an unusual UN mission in assisting Nepal's DDR process with a limited mandate.⁵¹ Initially, the DDR process started with an agreement signed on 8 December 2006 between the Government of Nepal and the Maoist party to monitor the management of arms and armies (AMMAA), which led to the formation of the Joint Monitoring Co-ordination Committee. This committee laid down the criteria for registration and verification of the Maoist combatants.⁵²

Disarmament started with a voluntary and collective process of weapon submission under the supervision of the UNMIN. This disarmament method included larger numbers of Maoist women ex-combatants in the DDR process in Nepal, in which even combatants who did not have weapons to hand in were considered as part of the Maoist's army based on their statements in the interview process. Altogether 3,475 weapons from the Maoist's 'side' of the conflict were registered and stored in the containers inside the Maoist cantonments. Similarly, from the Nepal Army's side, a total of 2,855 weapons were registered and placed in the containers inside army barracks. All these registered weapons were closely supervised by an authorised body.⁵³

The registration of Maoist combatants began in January 2007 with the UN teams collecting personal military information and examining identity cards. The possession of a weapon was not a criterion for registration, but presentation of a Maoist army identity card was required to demonstrate service.⁵⁴ Two conditions of eligibility for verification were set: candidates were only eligible if they joined the Maoist army before 25 May 2006 and were born before 25 May 1988.⁵⁵ With the completion of the verification and registration process, Maoist ex-combatants were categorised as either 'verified' (*yogya*) or 'disqualified' (*ayogya*). The verification process was controversial

because disqualified combatants claimed that the set criteria for verification disregarded their service in the Maoist war.⁵⁶

At first, a total of 32,250 combatants were registered to be verified, however, not all registered combatants qualified.⁵⁷ In the second phase, 19,602 combatants of the original group (15,756 men and 3,846 women) were declared 'verified', meaning they qualified for entitlements of Maoist ex-combatants. Over 4,000 candidates were considered 'disqualified' and 8,640 ex-combatants did not return for the second-round verification interviews so were automatically discharged.⁵⁸

Demobilisation

As part of the demobilisation agreement, cantonment sites or camps were established to temporarily settle Maoist combatants. Verified combatants were stationed in seven main cantonments and 21 satellite cantonments across the country; the weapons were also stored in the cantonments under the supervision of authorised personnel.⁵⁹ The disqualified combatants' group were immediately demobilised after the conclusion of the verification process and later called to participate in the rehabilitation training offered by the United Nations Interagency Rehabilitation Programme,⁶⁰ whereas the verified combatants remained in the cantonments until the reintegration programming was finalised in 2012.⁶¹

Reintegration

According to the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA), the Government of Nepal formed the Secretariat of the Special Committee in October 2008 chaired by the Prime Minister and represented by the major political parties, the UN and Maoist leaders.⁶² The committee remained the highest authority to design reintegration modalities, including supervision, integration and rehabilitation of the Maoist ex-combatants.⁶³

In 2011, a survey of the verified combatants was conducted, this study found a decrease in the number of total ex-combatants from 19,602 (UNMIN verified in 2007) to 17,052 (of which 3,350 were female and 13,702 were male). This decrease was partly due to 94 deaths, the other 2,456 were, and remain, unaccounted for.⁶⁴ The missing ex-combatants created political turmoil and Maoist commanders were blamed for their fraudulent behaviour, such as issuing allowances in the name of dead and missing ex-combatants.⁶⁵ However, questions about absent combatants were rarely raised and never received attention on Nepal's new political agenda.

The reintegration process turned out to be very controversial. At the time, various political parties were involved and building consensus over reintegration programme options remained a major challenge, which prolonged the process. The six-month timeframe for completing the DDR process took nearly six years. Finally, in November 2012, all the major political parties signed an agreement that offered three reintegration options for ex-combatants: (1) integration into the Nepal army, (2) voluntary retirement with a cash compensation or (3) a rehabilitation package that included educational support and vocational training opportunities.⁶⁶

However, despite the options given, the reintegration programming was designed to be largely cash-based.⁶⁷ The delivery mechanism was coded in such a way that the majority of women ex-combatants ended up choosing cash compensation. For instance, the first option – integration into the Nepal army – attracted many women combatants as this was a permanent job offer, however, due to competitive criteria (i.e. education, experience, skills and age etc.) and as new mothers who had a child-caring responsibility, they were unable to take this option. By the same token, the rehabilitation option required some knowledge of maths, English, reading and writing, which many women lacked. Thus, even if women showed interest in the first two options, they were likely to be excluded from these and ‘forced’ to choose the cash compensation. Compensation was delivered on the basis of rank, meaning ex-combatants of the highest rank received between NPR 500,000–800,000 (US \$5,000–8,000) depending on rank.⁶⁸ Among a total 17,052 verified combatants: 3,246 of the female combatants opted for the cash compensation option (also known as voluntary retirement) and 104 of them joined the Nepal Army; 12,378 male combatants also opted for cash compensation and 1,318 registered their interest to be integrated in the Nepal army and only six chose the rehabilitation package.⁶⁹

Zooming in on the reintegration process: what did it offer to ‘verified’ women ex-combatants?

This study analyses women’s everyday lives and their experiences to inform our understanding of what reintegration means to them and the challenges they encounter while transforming from a combatant to a civilian role. In this section, I will first highlight how a gender inclusive framework was lacking in the DDR process, particularly in reintegration programming. Then I will present the women ex-combatants’ lived experiences as they went through this process. Finally, based on these analyses, I offer conclusions about the reintegration process in Nepal.

I first show how a gender inclusive framework was not adopted in the DDR process and how it remained discriminatory. The Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) is the fundamental document which directed the DDR process in Nepal, however, it does not provide a clear methodology and guidelines on addressing women’s issues in the post-conflict reintegration. CPA mentions: ‘[...] to address the problems of women [...] by deconstructing the current centralised and unitary structure, the state shall be restructured in an inclusive, democratic and forward-looking manner’.⁷⁰ Such an ambiguous approach to gender inclusion in the CPA itself further produced gender-discriminatory reintegration programming. Secondly, Nepal’s DDR process remained highly male-centric, meaning that DDR planning and management were conducted solely by men and excluded women ex-combatant’s voices. Thirdly, because the reintegration compensation package (cash and training) would be provided equally to women and men ex-combatants, the DDR implementers assumed that ‘gender equality’ would be inherent in such treatment. Lastly, DDR personnel assumed that after women ex-combatants returned home along with their compensation money their lives would be automatically ‘resumed’, without realising the fact that simply returning does not necessarily equate to regaining a normal life, but is rather in a post-conflict situation, a period filled with transitions at different levels.

All of the verified women ex-combatants interviewed for this paper were initially interested in the option to integrate into the Nepal army, particularly because the offer was for permanent positions, however many women found this option too vague. For example, in the beginning, the peace accord committed to integrating all interested Maoist ex-combatants into the Nepal army, but afterwards it imposed restrictions around minimum education, skills, age and other military training experience as requirements. As previously mentioned, such criteria prevented women from choosing this option. Considering that the overall percentage of combatant's entering the Nepal army was small, only 1,422 combatants (of which 104 were female) were offered posts.⁷¹ Goswami points out that 'only a small number of Maoist women were able to meet the eligibility criteria for [Nepal army] integration, which raised considerable resentment'.⁷²

Binita Magar explains how the reintegration process was unclear to her and how she realised her exclusion from the Nepal army:

I wanted to go for integration into Nepal Army (NA) this was government's permanent job, but to enter NA criteria of education, and skills were very strict [...] I am uneducated, and never went to school, so I could not think of going for this option. I felt excluded when I heard this news, because before we were told that Maoist combatants those who wants to join NA can get direct integration [...] later found the process was unclear and gave me a big surprised.⁷³

The female ex-combatant Nirmala Gurung also shared her story of how she was not able to gain entry into the Nepal army:

I wanted to opt for integration into Nepal Army but at that time I already crossed 30 years of age [I was considered] over-aged and added to the lack of education I was excluded. I really felt abandoned from my own Maoist party for signing such an agreement which is not in our favour, Maoist party also did not discuss with us (women) our reintegration planning, and our future priority.⁷⁴

Other accounts show how reintegration ignored women's issues. A verified woman ex-combatant, Kirtika Tamang, shared her story about the reintegration process, and how she felt it was a false promise:

While living in the cantonment I got married, later in 2011 I became a mother, I went to my village to meet my parents. My village is in a very remote area (almost 3 days walk) from the local market, at that time debate on integration into Nepal Army was heated. To enter the Nepal Army many requirements were raised by the political parties who were in the government [...] I had a small baby and travelling from the village to appear for the Nepal Army integration examinations and interviews was impossible to my situation and that's why I had to quit my decision.⁷⁵

Another woman discussed her health issues and how the reintegration programme neglected the health concerns of combatants who were wounded in the war:

In the war I got wounded; I received treatment when I was in the cantonment, but later after returning back [...] I get sick often due to my insufficient treatment of old bullets wounds; sometimes I get bleeding and often I get body pain and headache, and need to travel to the hospital. I have invested all my compensation money into my health, now I am facing a financial crisis [and find it] very difficult to survive. When I am sick my household turns into a complete disaster [...] including my child suffers due to lack of my care during that time.⁷⁶

The above illustrations show that entering the Nepalese army was not an option for most female ex-combatants. Likewise, other women, like Kritika Tamang, show that mothers with infants or young children were unable to access integration programmes due to travel restrictions and childcare duties. This account resonates with findings by Bleie and Shrestha, who suggest that Maoist women ex-fighters with children rely upon childcare providers for integration and the current policy may not solve their problem.⁷⁷ In Nirmala Gurung's case, the main reason for her exclusion from entering the Nepal army was due to her age. Binita Magar's case shows she lacked the education and skills to meet the army requirements and was automatically discharged. Similarly, Bijaya Magar's narrative illustrates that because her war-borne health issue was not considered in the reintegration programming and due to a lack of alternatives, she was compelled to use her cash compensation for health treatment. Currently she is facing adversity in re-organising her life.

The above women's accounts also reveal that the Maoist commitment to gender equality and inclusion was not upheld during the reintegration period. Although the 'people's war' offered empowering experiences to these women from different backgrounds, after demobilisation their combat roles and positions were devaluated, trapping them in undesirable gender roles.⁷⁸ Overall, women were not able to find validation of the experience and skills they acquired as combatants and instead, faced 're-marginalisation'. As Goswami claims, 'it is crucial that representation to design reintegration planning must be from those who understand and have lived experiences of social inclusion, gender justice, and rights.'⁷⁹

Reintegration experiences: cash compensation

As discussed in the previous section, most of the female ex-combatants were unable to access the full range of reintegration programmes. Of the total 35 women interviewed, all opted for cash compensation, of which 26 invested that money to purchase land. This section provides accounts of the Maoist female ex-combatants' experiences with the cash compensation option, highlighting how structural factors (such as marriage/family relations, and the property rights system) work against gender equality and how this shaped their everyday lives in various ways in the reintegration period.

Padma Thapa shared her story about how she made the decision to choose cash compensation and how she manages to live from this settlement:

Before me and my husband both were interested to join Nepal army, but we failed to meet the requirements and decided to go for cash compensation [...] we both each received NRs. 500,000 [US \$5,000], and bought unregistered land [10 dhur, or about 170 square meters] in a remote area, because with this amount we could only buy such type of land. I cultivate maize and sometimes vegetables for household purposes. My husband works as an agricultural labour and his work is irregular, and until now I did not find any job yet. The land we purchased is officially registered under my husband's name. What worries me the most is what will happen if my husband refuses to give me a portion of the land in the future.⁸⁰

Sarita Rai shares her story on why she decided to go for the cash compensation and how this has impacted her daily life:

I feel like in a nightmare now, before I thought I would buy a piece of land and build a house with the cash compensation, but after returning, I could not go back to my village as no one is living there right now, my mother died a few years before, and my father married another woman. I decided to live in Chitwan district. Nowadays, living is very expensive. I spent the cash compensation just to meet my daily needs like paying rent, food, paying my kids school fees [...] now I almost spent the entire amount. Now difficult time has come in my life, I could not sleep, thinking how I will take care of my children, and my family. I contacted my Maoist friends to search any type of job for me, like agriculture labour or maid this is what I can do as I am not educated and now old, nothing found yet.⁸¹

Bimala Thapa, another participant, also shared her situation after returning:

While living in the cantonment we were provided food, accommodation, everything [...] but as soon as we were discharged, we had to bear our sole responsibility such as rent, food, clothes, health care, child-care, travel etc. I became very nervous after I came to the community, thinking how I will make my living, with our first instalment I and my husband spent paying the rent, food, paying child school fees and health care. So, with our second instalment amount we bought a tiny piece of land, but my husband kept ownership in his name. I could not say anything [...] I hope he will not betray me. Another problem, cash compensation was delivered in two instalments therefore making it difficult to invest immediately, buying land or start small business. Later, after a few months when the next instalment was given, the land and goods prices went high.⁸²

One of the other female ex-combatants, Sanu Tamang, relayed her husband's reaction when she raised the issue of transferring land to her name or in a joint agreement: first he remained silent, then later blamed her for mistrusting him for a tiny piece of land, and then further questioned her as to whether she was planning to run away with another man and take the property. On the other hand, another woman, Maiya Thami, described her experience of investing the cash together with her husband much more equally:

We both received equal amount of [US \$6,000 each of us], we invested this amount together to buy a small piece of land, and we decided to issue combined land ownership certificate, so we have equal rights on it. His relatives many times suggested him to maintain single ownership, but my husband did not listen.⁸³

From the above explanations, it is clear that some women invested together with their husbands to buy a piece of land, others used the finances to maintain their everyday needs and a few looked for further financial support from family. The ways in which the women invested the cash to buy property illustrates a priority to regenerate life (or a livelihood) and create a certain future. However, the predominant challenge that emerged was having to renegotiate access to property rights, of which the majority of the women were still dependent on their husbands. It was surprising to note that only one woman, Maiya Thami, owns property (land) together with her husband, despite the fact that her husband faced displeasing remarks from other family members while maintaining joint land ownership. Yet Sarita Rai's narrative told a different story about how she was unable to invest her cash compensation to buy property due to a lack of alternatives and the need to fulfil her family's needs, and now she is still struggling to survive. Despite women's gains in terms of empowerment through the process of war, the structural foundations seem not to have changed in the post-war period. Women experienced insecurity while buying property and faced systematic

barriers derived from marriage relationships/family relations, cultural norms and legal practices.⁸⁴

The explanations further show how women encountered different challenges next to the land issue. Although women were able to transform into new roles as soldiers during the war, this did not equate to achieving 'equality' in the period after the war. The cases of Padma Thapa, Bimala Thapa and Sanu Tamang show how their husband's treatment is ambiguous. On the one hand, these men were Maoist ex-combatants aware of Maoist ideology on gender equality and they chose to marry women ex-combatants who challenged the normative cultural boundary, unlike non-combatant men. On the other hand, their willingness to exclude their wives' ownership of the shared property reflects patriarchal norms. Other scholarly work has similarly found that conflict does not necessarily change the mind-sets of individuals in the aftermath of war, rather patriarchy is maintained.⁸⁵ The narrative of Maiya Thami discloses how her husband encountered pressure from his family to retain the property under his sole authority. However, they both challenged the patriarchal practice and issued the property ownership jointly. This suggests how they are fighting back to establish gender equality in everyday life in the post-war era. In addition, the story of Sarita Rai shows that cash-compensation is a short-term option for reintegration which does not assure long-term survival and might produce a longer-term crisis.

This study also shows how the cash-centred compensation method is not beneficial in addressing women ex-combatants' needs. From the narratives, several common factors are identified in how the female ex-combatants utilised the cash compensation. Common factors include relocation to a new area, lack of alternative support (such as family or parents) and the job crisis. To this point, cash delivery without guidance or training on how to use it is problematic. For many years this group of women was living in a collective manner, under military training, away from the job market and the community. During that period, the party was responsible for the combatants and they were not exposed to societal norms such as how to run a family, how to find a job or how to deal with daily challenges that might arise without party support. Also, the cash compensation delivery method in two instalments played a role in shaping women's post-war decisions. The first instalment provided half of the amount, and women were unable to immediately afford to invest in property with that money; the second instalment was delivered one year later, by this time property prices were already climbing compared to the previous year. Therefore, few of them were able to purchase more than a tiny piece of land in a remote area, while others ended up spending it on their basic needs.

Women ex-combatants: visible in conflict and invisible in the aftermath of conflict

This section shows how women ex-combatants felt they became invisible in post-conflict Nepal and how they are renegotiating their roles in the Maoist political landscape and identifies some mechanisms that contribute to their marginalisation in the reintegration period.

As previously mentioned, the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) became the core instrument guiding the DDR process in Nepal, yet the development of the CPA was highly male-centred, and no women were included in negotiating the comprehensive

peace agreement.⁸⁶ Similarly, when a six-member committee was formed to develop an Interim Constitution in 2006, initially no women were included either from the Maoist or the government side. Eventually, after continuous pressure from female politicians and protestors, the committee expanded to include four women.⁸⁷ Representation from women was also lacking in the committees that were formed to implement and manage the DDR process.⁸⁸ At the same time, the UN could have played an important role in making the DDR process gender inclusive by bringing experiences from elsewhere. However, Nepal's peace process was locally owned, shaped by the decision of the political parties and even if the presence of UNMIN seemed quite noticeable it had a limited mandate.⁸⁹

This larger story of the exclusion of women from the highest level of political decision-making is reflected in the stories of individual women within their communities. For instance, Mala Thami describes how she was re-marginalised from Maoist local politics after returning to her community:

After returning to the community, I was interested in continuing my career in Maoist politics. I started building a network with the local Maoist leaders and community [...] and also participated in their local companions, but later during the time of the Maoist party's internal election they said that I lacked the political experience and knowledge to hold any position in local level politics. The reasons they gave me is that I served in the Maoist combat force, and my previous war experience does not fit to qualify in doing local politics. The exclusion is also because the mainstream politics of Maoist party are mostly led by people who were not previously combatants.⁹⁰

Other factors explaining why women ex-combatants were side-lined and excluded from local politics are a lack of access to monetary resources and too many household responsibilities:

Since the beginning I wanted to join Maoist politics and become a leader. I went into the war to fight for rights, now after the war and having small children and a household my husband and family do not allow me to participate in politics [...] also I realised for doing politics or to win election (for any position) it requires resources like money, and I do not have access to such resources [...] these things kept me away from the local politics and beyond.⁹¹

Gita Lamichane also shares her story about why she was excluded from the Maoist mainstream politics:

I am an ex-combatant, and our leaders think that we are only good for fighting, that's why they do not include us in the mainstream politics [...] also to come into politics and to gain a position one must be close to the Maoist top or local leaders, but after demobilisation, I mostly contacted Maoist ex-combatants and live within the surroundings of our war peers, and to get such political access is very challenging and particularly for a woman it is very difficult. There are many prejudices for women going into politics.⁹²

These stories illustrate the everyday mechanisms that marginalise ex-combatant women after demobilisation and, in particular, the difficulties they experienced as they tried to enter local politics. Mala Thami's story reflects how Maoist leaders discounted her war leadership skills, challenged her acquired knowledge of politics in the war and blocked her participation in local politics. As she pointed out, the party came under the leadership of people who had not taken up combatant roles during the war and tended to discredit the ex-combatants. Likewise, the accounts show how

women may face a gender hierarchy in their own households and find it hard to act independently from their husbands who hold authority over them in everyday life. These stories corroborate the findings of Upreti and Shivakoti, who argue that due to Maoist party negligence female ex-combatants had to undergo various struggles in the post-war period.⁹³

The narratives support the argument that conflict-related changes in gender roles are limited to the timeframe of the war, and afterwards women are pushed systematically into traditional roles.⁹⁴ To this point, Shekhawat suggests that: ‘it is the male-dominated leadership of a movement that decides what women will do and what not’.⁹⁵ MacKenzie also found a similar situation in Sierra Leone and explains: ‘even when women participate in the activities of high politics or sectors traditionally categorised as security priorities such as conflict, they are effectively shuffled out of the public political sphere and into the domestic realm through post-conflict development policies’.⁹⁶

Family matters: re-connection, dis-connection and the everyday realities of reintegration

This section analyses how women’s personal experiences during reintegration were related to family acceptance or rejection. I show how regular/irregular family ties and reciprocal relationships before and during the insurgency affected the women ex-combatants’ everyday lives after returning from war. I also show how their war-peers form a sort of alternative ‘family’ and support network, especially when the women did not return to their villages of origin.

The Maoist woman ex-combatant, Sapana Tamang, shares her experience after her return and the role of the family in this process:

During the Maoist insurgency, I contacted my family (mother, father, uncle) by phoning, sending letters and messages via friends, also a couple of times I borrowed money from my family, later I also sent money home through my Maoist friends. I informed my family about my arrival and they welcomed me after coming home. I stayed with them along [with] my husband and son for almost four months before we decided to move to Chitwan and settle. Family support gives lots of strength to continue ordinary life. When people know I have my family support they don’t dare to say anything easily upfront, if I have any problem I share to my parent and sibling. I live in Chitwan because my husband run small grocery shop, and sometimes I support him, mostly I look after my households, including I want to live here due to my son’s education.⁹⁷

Another explanation, from Sanu Bam, emphasises reunification with her family in the aftermath of war and how, due to her mother’s support, she was able to restart her life:

In the war time, I always updated my mother about my situation through friends and contacted her frequently, we always had very close ties. Since the beginning my family were loyal to the Maoist party [...] in my family first my uncle had joined, and I also got motivated. When I came home after demobilisation, I became extremely sick during that time my mother took care of my baby. Also, she helped me financially; for example, partially paid my hospital bills, including in my other hard times she stood along with me.⁹⁸

The next story from Rekha Limbu details her situation after going home:

My father died I could not attend his funeral. Also, I joined Maoist party against my family's agreement, and they rejected me after I returned home, they feel I am still harmful, now I rely upon the network of Maoist ex-combatants. Currently, together with my husband I operate a small grocery shop, initially I could not invest my entire cash-compensation money into my business because I utilised this money also for child education, paying the rent and other daily expenses while settling to a new place. Therefore, to start a grocery business I borrowed some money from my Maoist friends.⁹⁹

Next, former combatant Sunita Rai, explains how she faced exclusion after returning to her native village. Her experience is particularly relevant to the issue of gender-based discrimination in the community as it existed in the pre-war situation and how such practices continue in the aftermath of war:

After going back home I am living with my Maoist war peers. I was away from my house for almost seven years, I did not dare to contact my family as I knew they would never accept me. My family doesn't want to see me now, they hate me because I went to the Maoist war, without their permission. Being a girl, they think that war is only for men. Woman must work at home. My neighbour also thinks that being woman and going to war I committed a sin. In case of my husband, he is also a former Maoist combatant, but my neighbour and his family treat him respectfully, talk with him, and listen to him, very different from what I experience.¹⁰⁰

From the descriptions of women ex-combatants, it becomes clear how the recruitment process impacts on their everyday experience of reintegration, and how significant the role of family is during the reintegration period. Family support or lack of it may make the experience of returning to civilian life very different. Women who joined the Maoists with their family's consent sustained relationships with their families during wartime, and/or those whose families kept liberal views towards the Maoist party found that family reception became a source of security and help to restart a 'normal life'. However, women whose families were against the Maoist party or disliked their female members entering the party were unable to maintain family relationships during the war or resume them in the post-war period and consequently were more likely to find the reintegration period more difficult. In the case of Sapana Tamang, she maintained strong family ties during the insurgency, sending letters, money and updating family members on her situation. In response, she received a warm welcome when returning home together with her husband and son. In fact, she was able to return home and did not even encounter the pressure of immediately paying rent, which allowed her time to consider a new location to settle. Similarly, the story of Sanu Bam shows that she joined the war due to her family's loyalty towards the Maoists, and her mother's support became an extra strength helping her to rebuild her life after returning, emotionally and financially. It is obvious that family support offered her protection in facing hardships while returning to normality. These findings resonate with the patterns of reintegration processes elsewhere.¹⁰¹

In contrast, in the case of Rekha Limbu, resuming a family relationship became a challenge. Her recruitment into the Maoist party was against her family's wishes and, as a result, she was unable to maintain ties with her family during the war and faced rejection after returning. To restart her life, she used the cash compensation money to pay for her rent and other needs and she borrowed money from her Maoist network to start a business. Similarly, Sunita Rai also joined the Maoists against her family's will

and subsequently was not able to retain her family relationships throughout the war and in its aftermath. After going home, her family and the community accused her of breaking traditional feminine roles, whereas her husband (who is also Maoist combatant) did not face such stereotyping. These narratives of rejection and estrangement also highlight how the absence of family support produced a new form of isolation, and the women's successful reintegration became mostly reliant on the network of Maoist peers.

Conclusion

The paper provides a gendered analysis of the post-war situation of Nepal, showing what realities Maoist women ex-combatants faced during the reintegration process. Firstly, the paper displays how the reintegration process remained strongly male-centred, particularly in terms of the comprehensive peace accord (CPA) and the reintegration programme itself. Not taking up a serious gender agenda in the reintegration programming had the following consequences: reintegration programming failed to include women ex-combatants' voices on issues that women were most likely to face, such as finding employment, physiological challenges, access to childcare and health services, building relationships, marriages including social stigma and prejudice. For instance, if women moved to a new area, the dislocation often resulted in a lack of alternative support in caring for children, which had a negative impact on their ability to find employment or build a career. The military skills gained from the war were neglected while their feminine roles as mothers or wives were emphasised and welcomed in the post-war context. Likewise, upgrading women's skills and education were not prioritised, and women found themselves unable to fit into the current job market.

Secondly, the paper finds that the reintegration period is obscure as the fundamental structure of society remains unchanged by the war. Earlier Maoist ideology offered a strong message of gender equality and inclusion and attracted high numbers of women to the movement, yet once the Maoist party took political power, they returned to highly patriarchal processes making women ex-combatants invisible in both the national and local Maoist political landscape by discounting their war leadership skills. Some women underwent a two-fold rejection, both from their husbands and from the party leadership. As a result, despite having political interest, these women faced systematic barriers and were forced to live in a structure that operates on masculine power in the private as well in the public spheres.

These practices produced new forms of isolation, inequality and marginalisation in the post-war context in Nepal. The new roles women gained in the war were devalued, which tended to push them into undesired roles. Such practices also pose a question about Maoist 'gender equality and inclusion' which, for the women ex-combatants, seemed to be invisible in the aftermath of the war, reflecting how the culture of masculine power does not necessarily transform due to war. In addition, the paper shows that in most cases, the patriarchy operates in all aspects of everyday life and restrains women to a powerless position.

Thirdly, the paper demonstrates that despite the fact that 'verified' women ex-combatants successfully participated in the entire DDR process, they still faced gender-based exclusion afterwards. Unlike in other cases discussed in the literature, this exclusion does not already happen in the disarmament phase, but later, during the

reintegration phase. This means that there is no guarantee that even after women enter DDR programmes, they will not face exclusion and marginalisation in the period after.

Finally, the paper found that the recruitment process impacts on women's everyday experiences of reintegration. For an example, women ex-combatants who joined the Maoist war with support from the family/community, who maintained reciprocal relations with their family during the insurgency, and whose family remained loyal to the Maoist party faced smoother reintegration and were better able to resume their life. In contrast, women ex-combatants from non-Maoist family backgrounds, including those who entered the Maoists without family agreement were unwelcome during reintegration. Consequently, they faced social isolation and had to rely almost exclusively on the networks of war peers.

Notes

1. K.C. et al., 'Changing Gender Role'.
2. Martin, 'The United Nations'; Subedi, 'Conflict, Combatants, and Cash'.
3. Sharma and Prasain, 'Gendered Dimensions'.
4. Enloe, *The Morning After*; Mazurana, 'Women and Girls and Non-State Armed Opposition Groups'.
5. Cockburn, 'The Gendered Dynamics'; MacKenzie, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', Shekhawat, 'Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace'.
6. McKay and Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls?*; McKay, 'Reconstructing Fragile Lives'.
7. MacKenzie, 'Securitization and Desecuritization'; Mazurana and Cole, 'Women Girls and DDR'.
8. Gautam, 'Nepal'; Thapa and Sharma, 'From Insurgency'; Pandey, 'Security Sector Reforms'; Thomas, 'Between War and Peace'.
9. Subedi, 'Discontents and Resistance'; 'Conflict, Combatants, and Cash'.
10. Ibid.
11. Colekessian, 'Reintegrating Gender'; Dahal, 'Challenging the Boundaries'.
12. Harrowell and Özerdem, 'The Politics of the Post-Conflict'; Knight and Özerdem, 'Guns, Camps and Cash'.
13. Humphreys and Weinstein, 'Disentangling the Determinants'.
14. Knight and Özerdem, 'Guns, Camps and Cash'; Humphreys and Weinstein, 'Disentangling the Determinants'.
15. Knight and Özerdem, 'Guns, Camps and Cash'; Muggah, 'No Magic Bullet'; Podder, 'From Recruitment to Reintegration'.
16. Enloe, *The Morning After*, 261.
17. K.C., 'Conflict, Disaster and Changing Gender Roles in Nepal'.
18. Muggah, 'No Magic Bullet'; Hauge, 'Group Identity'; Podder, 'From Recruitment to Reintegration'.
19. Özerdem, 'DDR'; Podder, 'From Recruitment to Reintegration'.
20. Phayal et al., 'What Makes an Ex-Combatant Happy?'; Muggah, 'No Magic Bullet'.
21. Özerdem and Podder, *Child Soldier*; Podder, 'From Recruitment to Reintegration'; Karame, 'Reintegration and the Relevance'.
22. Cockburn, 'The Gendered Dynamics'; Zuckerman and Greenberg, 'The Gendered Dimensions'.
23. McKay and Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls?*
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. MacKenzie, 'Securitization and Desecuritization'.
27. McKay, 'Reconstructing Fragile Lives'.

28. Azmi, 'I Want My Wings Back to Fly'.
29. Annan et al., 'Civil War'.
30. Ortega, 'Untapped Resources for Peace'; Hauge, 'Group Identity'.
31. El-Bushra, 'Fused in Combat'; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 'Between Reality and Representation'.
32. K.C., 'Conflict, Disaster and Changing Gender Roles in Nepal'.
33. Shekhawat, 'Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace'; Tamang, 'The Politics of Conflict'.
34. Dhungana, 'Nepali Hindu Women'.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Shakya, 'Impact of Armed Conflict'.
38. Ibid.
39. K.C., 'Conflict, Disaster and Changing Gender Roles in Nepal'.
40. The '40 points demand' was submitted by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) in 1990 to the Nepali government, and declared official Maoist war on February 1996.
41. Karki and Seddon, *The People's War*.
42. K.C. and Van Der Haar, 'Living Maoist Gender Ideology'.
43. Parvati, 'Women's Participation'.
44. Gautam et al., 'Where There Are No Men'; Sharma and Prasain, 'Gendered Dimensions'.
45. Goswami, 'UNSCR 1325'; Manchanda, 'Maoist Insurgency in Nepal'.
46. K.C. and Van Der Haar, 'Living Maoist Gender Ideology', 9.
47. Ibid.
48. NIPS, 'Nepal's Peace Process'.
49. Ibid.
50. Martin, 'The United Nations', 201–204.
51. Ibid.
52. UN News, 'UN Starts Process'.
53. Subedi, 'Discontents and Resistance'; 'Conflict, Combatants, and Cash'.
54. UN News, 'UN Starts Process'.
55. NIPS, 'Nepal's Peace Process'.
56. Ibid.
57. Subedi, 'Dealing with Ex-combatants'.
58. Ibid.
59. Martin, 'The United Nations'.
60. Subedi, 'Discontents and Resistance'; 'Conflict, Combatants, and Cash'; Bhandari, 'The Reintegration of Maoist Ex-combatants'.
61. Ibid.
62. NIPS, 'Nepal's Peace Process'; Bhandari, 'The Reintegration of Maoist Ex-combatants'.
63. Bhandari, 'The Reintegration of Maoist Ex-combatants'.
64. Ibid., 65.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Subedi, 'Conflict, Combatants, and Cash'.
68. Ibid.
69. NIPS, 'Nepal's Peace Process'.
70. CPA, *Comprehensive Peace Accord*, 3.
71. Bhandari, 'The Reintegration of Maoist Ex-combatants'.
72. Goswami, 'UNSCR 1325', 8.
73. Author Interview with woman ex-combatant, Chitwan, 15 January 2014–25 February 2015.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
77. Bleie and Shrestha, *DDR in Nepal*.
78. K.C. and Van der Haar, 'Living Maoist Gender Ideology'.

79. Goswami, 'UNSCR 1325', 14.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. K.C., 'Conflict, Disaster and Changing Gender Roles in Nepal'; Yadav, *Social Transformation*.
85. Enloe, *The Curious Feminist*; McKay, 'Reconstructing Fragile Lives'.
86. Yadav, *Social Transformation*.
87. Ibid.
88. Goswami, 'UNSCR 1325'.
89. Martin, 'The United Nations'.
90. Author Interview with woman ex-combatant, Chitwan, 15 January 2014–25 February 2015.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid.
93. Upreti and Shivakoti, 'The Struggle of Female Ex-Combatants'.
94. Enloe, *The Curious Feminist*.
95. Shekhawat, 'Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace', 11.
96. MacKenzie, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', 243.
97. Author Interview with woman ex-combatant, Chitwan, 15 January 2014–25 February 2015.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
101. Karame, 'Reintegration and the Relevance'; Kilroy, 'Does a more Participatory Approach'.

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