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The Struggle of Female Ex-Combatants in Nepal

BISHNU RAJ UPRETI AND SHARMILA SHIVAKOTI

The armed conflict initiated on February 13, 1996 by the then (Maoist) Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-M) against the state, ended on November 21, 2006 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). During the armed conflict the CPN-M had formed a guerrilla force, 19,602 people strong, to fight against the state, 3,846 (19.63 percent) of which were female.

The decade-long armed struggle caused the nation enormous human and economic losses. According to the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction, 17,886 people were killed, 1,530 were disappeared, 79,571 persons were displaced, 3,142 persons were abducted, 8,935 persons were disabled, 9,000 women became widows, 620 children became orphans, and the property of 17,484 people was damaged, causing the country multi-billions in economic losses.

One provision of the CPA was to manage the combatants—a most challenging and complicated task. Within the Maoist ex-combatants, the management of female ex-combatant was even more challenging. Since managing a peace process and combatants was new to Nepal, the prime minister and the CPN-M chairperson approached UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for help, especially for dealing with the arms and armed personnel of both sides. As a result, the United Mission to Nepal (UNMIN) was established

After signing the CPA, the government and CPN-M signed another accord, the “Agreement on the Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies” (AMMAA), on December 8, 2006, which was milestone for managing ex-combatants. In addition, the government also created the Special Committee (SC) for Supervision, Integration and Rehabilitation of Maoist Army Combatants. The Maoists, however, demanded to be part of this process, and so the Joint Monitoring Coordination Committee (JMCC) was formed, representing both the Nepalese Army and the Maoist Army Combatants in order to verify the CPN-M combatants under the UNMIN. One of their tasks was to verify whether ex-combatants of CPN-M were

qualified to remain in the cantonments created under the AMMAA provision of the peace agreement. Roles and responsibilities for monitoring, reporting, and coordination of the cantonments of the JMCC was defined. Another “Technical Committee” was formed to assist the SC in the supervision and overall control of Maoist Army Combatants.

In consultation with the SC, the UNMIN began the verification process. A total of 32,250 Maoist ex-combatants were lined up, from which the UNMIN verified only 19,602 as qualified ex-combatants. Of those, 15,756 (80.37 percent) were male, while the remaining 3,846 (19.63 percent) were female—contrary to the CPN-M claim that 40 percent were female. A total of 4,008 ex-combatants were disqualified from the verification: 2,791 were male and 1,217 female, and 2,973 were minors (below the age of 18 years on May 25, 2006), among which 1,987 (66.85 percent) were male and 986 (33.16 percent) female. The remaining 1,035 were identified as late recruits. Among those, 804 (77.07 percent) were men and 231 (22.31 percent) were women. Altogether, a substantial amount of women was disqualified, and therefore not fit to be kept in cantonments—the military camps. Hence, their management became not only psychologically difficult, but also highly contested as they started to protest against the process. Frustrated, the ex-combatants formed a committee from among themselves to more systematically raise their demands with the government to ensure descent livelihoods.

Once the verification process was completed in 2007, the Maoist ex-combatants were put into seven main and twenty-one satellite cantonments in different parts of country. The originally planned six-month time frame for completing disarmament, demobilization, and, reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants took nearly seven years. During this period the combatants kept in the cantonments were strategically and tactically mobilized by CPN-M for mass protests and political demonstrations; in addition, the cantonments were used as politically motivated, ideological training centers that had ultimately implanted deep mistrust and suspicion of other main political parties and of the government against the CPN-M.

Consequently, the political environment became tense, hostile, and directly affected the DDR process. The role of UNMIN was sharply criticized, especially when it developed and circulated a document on “Integration Model with 52-Week Plan” without consulting the government. Further, the report submitted by the Head of the UNMIN to the Security Council was officially objected to by the government. Thus, the relations between the government and the UNMIN deteriorated. Consequently, the government did not request that the UN Security Council further extend the UNMIN. As a result, its tenure was ended on January 15, 2011, and the office was closed without completing the DDR process.

Once the UNMIN operation was closed down, the Special Committee took the sole responsibility of integration and rehabilitation of these ex-combatants, and therefore, it developed three options: first, integration of ex-combatants to Nepalese Army; second, voluntary retirement by giving cash; and third, rehabilitation with a special package of support.

Out of 19,602 verified ex-combatants kept in the cantonments, only 17,052 were present during categorization for integration, volunteer retirement, and rehabilitation, in which 13,494 (79.13 percent) were male and 3,558 (20.87 percent) were female. A total of 2,550 (2,268 male and 282 female) ex-combatants were absent, and 94 died while staying in cantonment. Very interestingly, quite a large majority (15,624 or 91.63 percent) of ex-combatants opted for volunteer retirement in which 12,170 (77.89 percent) were male and 3,454 (22.11 percent) were female. Only 1,422 ex-combatants opted for integration into Nepalese Army, of which 1,318 (92.69 percent) were male and only 104 (7.31 percent) were female. Only six male ex-combatants opted for the rehabilitation package.

A major concern came about during this stage in managing the voluntarily retired female ex-combatants, as a large number of females (3,454) were removed from the cantonment without any proper provisions of their integration into society. Very few of them were engaged in active politics in their chosen party; some of them joined a splinter group from the main CPN-M, and a large majority were left alone. Even the government has no data about them: where they are, what they are doing, how their relations with society are. Some of the female ex-combatants organized and formed a “Former PLA Women Foundation” to fight for their livelihood security.

Even though the rehabilitation package included various trainings like poultry farming, cash crops farming, electronics, and driving, to attract the ex-combatants, this option was chosen by only a negligible amount (6 out of 17,052). The main reason for not choosing the rehabilitation package was the preaching to the ex-combatants by the CPN-M leaders that said that it would undermine the dignity of the brave fighters of the “people’s war” to work in agricultural or poultry farming, or driving. The six male ex-combatants who opted for the rehabilitation package, ensuring their livelihood and security, managed to better integrate into their community.

Among the voluntarily retired female ex-combatants, very few succeeded to secure high government positions like speaker of the Parliament, ministers, members of the Parliament, and middle-level positions in the CPN-M party structures. The situation of the vast majority of female ex-combatants is very frustrating. During our interactions with the ex-combatants in Chitwan and Nawalparasi districts of Kathmandu, the female ex-combatants’ unanimous reflection was that the CPN-M chairperson and

the senior leader heading the government since the signing of the CPA were not interested in addressing the problems of female ex-combatants. Many of the ex-combatants shared that some of them still have bullets in their bodies, many of them are disabled or wounded, and almost all are struggling to secure their livelihoods. They pointed out that even if only 20 percent of the 32,250 ex-combatants presented by the CPN-M for verification are counted as female ex-combatants, then 8,810 are female, and out of this number, 104 were integrated into the Nepalese army, while most of the remaining are struggling to secure their livelihood. In this context, the following statements of female ex-combatants are reflective:

As Ramita Bhandari reflected:

I am from Fulbari VDC of Kailali District. When I was studying in school I joined the Maoist insurgency. I got married with a Maoist combatant of People's Liberation Army (PLA) during the time of insurgency. The reason behind joining the insurgency was to end discrimination in society. I spent around six years in the PLA, including my stay in the cantonment. I was a militia at the beginning and later promoted to the Section Commander, and I fought with the state Security Forces on the battlefield in Kailali, Acham, Bajura, Humla, and Kalikot. I was trained to handle a Short Machine Gun and a Self-Loading Rifle. Regrettably, our fights and struggles failed to bring desired changes mainly because of the opportunist behaviors of our leaders. Now I am frustrated and regretting it. I am insecure for my future.

Similarly, another female ex-combatant Sabitra Magar from Nawalparashi district said,

I was born at Lamjung District. Our financial situation was the worst. I joined the insurgency when I was in class 5 at the age of 15. I was attracted by the slogan of the Maoist about the liberation of minorities and women. I had an inter-caste marriage with a PLA militia while staying at the cantonment, but had to divorce him because his family didn't accept me as it was inter-caste marriage. I got married a second time. Even when I participated in the several attacks in Baglung, Pythan, [and] Kapilbastu I did not get promotion in the PLA. However, all these efforts we made did not produce desired results. Our leaders got benefits, and we are left without any. Now, I am 30 years old and struggling with my daughter and husband for a descent living.

Highlighting the grim situation of the female ex-combatants, former combatant Sima Karki from Udaypur said,

I was born at Udaypur District. Maoists came to our home and asked for food and shelter. My mother and father were compelled to provide food at midnight. The next day the army came and tortured my parents. I was 14 years [old] when I saw them torture my innocent parents. I was angry with the army's behavior, and joined the insurgency to take revenge against the army's brutality. I spent 7 years in PLA, including the time staying at the cantonment. I was an active fighter, and engaged in

the Maoist attack of the state security forces in Taplejung, Sakhuwashaba, Khotang, and Illam. We were told that the Maoist movement is for the rule of proletariat. Our leaders forgot the goals when they got in power. Now they are enjoying a lavish life, exercising power, and occupying high positions. But we, ex-combatants, are left to survive with misery and struggle. Our future is uncertain and we are crying, but nobody listens.

One of the ex-female-combatants said the following:

We were glorified as heroines during the “People’s War” by the Maoist Leadership, but we didn’t get any opportunity when the CPN-M leaders were in power (heading government and ministries). There was also a serious controversy on the label used by UNMIN to the exiting ex-combatants as “disqualified,” which was interpreted by them as a disgraceful term. Lenin Bista, Coordinator of the National Discharged PLA Association, said, “We were forced to leave our family at the age of 12–13 years and asked to carry weapons to fight against the state. We have to leave study, peers and family. Our childhood was ruined. Now we are labeled as ‘*Ayogya*’ (incapable or unfit in Nepali). It is unacceptable. We are continuously fighting against the discrimination we faced.”

For those who wanted to voluntarily leave the cantonment and return to normal life on their own, the government had a retirement package of about 5 to 8 thousand dollars equivalent, depending on their ranks in the PLA (ranging from the combatant to commander), and it was from 6 to 9 thousand dollars equivalent if they had more years of training and education. So, it was the easiest option, and therefore preferred by more than 91.63 percent (5,624 of the 17,052).

Interestingly, only 1,422 of 17,052 ex-combatants were able to meet the selection criteria for integration in the Nepalese Army (NA). Among them, 1,352 ex-combatants were accepted in the non-officer ranks, and the remaining 70 took positions as officers (1 colonel, 2 lieutenant colonels, 13 majors, 30 captains, and 24 lieutenants). Of the females, there are 4 officers and 100 non-officers integrated into the NA. They are the most secured group of ex-combatants and therefore performing well professionally.

Out of 15,624 ex-combatants from 66 districts who opted for voluntary retirement, 3,454 (22.11 percent) were female. Originally, 51.8 percent of ex-combatants were from the hill region, 26.4 percent from Terai, and 21.8 percent from the mountain region, but most of the voluntarily retired ex-combatants (83.3 percent) were settled in Terai; only 15.3 percent returned to the Hill region and a negligible number (1.4 percent) of ex-combatants were settled in the mountain region. It was often reported, however, that the money they obtained from the government at the time of their retirement was either used for the education of children, or to sustain their livelihood needs, or to send their husbands for work abroad (mainly to Arab countries and Malaysia).

During our field study, the female ex-combatants shared that they are vulnerable and experiencing exclusion, hate, marginalization, and disempowerment. They highlighted that they have been thrown away by their party, and that they do not have strong support systems and social networks as they are often staying in new areas. Marriage has become another area of difficulty for them, particularly when they have an inter-caste marriage, as patriarchal society has strong social stigmas associated with such a marriage. Many of such marriages end up broken, and the female ex-combatants have to raise children alone, managing livelihoods as single mothers.

After many of the female ex-combatants faced numerous problems, and their voices were not heard, about 3,000 of them came together, organized themselves, and formed a “Former PLA Women Foundation” to fight against the discrimination they faced from their party, from the government, and from society, as well as to cope with the livelihood insecurity problems. Most of the common problems faced by these women are related to ensuring their livelihoods, lack of resources for the investment for their children’s health and education, and better reintegration in their communities and society.

In some cases, female ex-combatants managed to create small businesses like poultry farming, pig farming, small grocery stores, small-scale cottage work, tea shops, netting, weaving, and so on. Some female ex-combatants obtained money from their husbands working abroad, which was often used for sustaining livelihoods, and some of them have invested in purchasing land.

It was often observed that the female ex-combatants do not want to reveal their identity as “former combatants,” as it has social stigma attached. Often, society does not easily accept women leaving their home and engaging in armed conflict, living together with males in the jungle, and killing people in the name of their enemies. Further, the victims of the CPN-M combatants hate the ex-combatants; they either oppose them or do not easily accept them. The female ex-combatants were also viewed negatively by people and members of other political parties who were victims of the CPN-M combatants during war time, as in most of the cases the ex-combatants were brutal (kidnapping, killing, threatening, forceful eviction from homes, picking youth from home to join the insurgency, capturing properties, etc.).

In terms of social integration into their community, those ex-combatants who are more actively participating in social activities and taking membership in cooperatives, water user committees, community forest users groups, mother’s clubs, saving and credit cooperatives, local sports clubs, school management committees, ward citizen forums, and youth clubs are more accepted in society, and those who are alone (without husbands), passive and frustrated, are left alone, and less accepted by society.

One of the main structural reasons for the marginalization of female ex-combatants was the lack of their involvement in any political negotiation related to the integration and rehabilitation process. When government formed the Special Committee to deal with the seven main and twenty-one satellite cantonments and to decide on ex-combatant issues, all eight members were male. Similarly, the government formed the Technical Committee to facilitate integration and rehabilitation of ex-combatants, yet there was no female in the eight-member composition. Again, when the government created a Secretariat of the Special Committee by appointing twelve members to assist the day-to-day work of the Special Committee, there was not a single woman included. Hence, issues and concerns of the female ex-combatants were not properly reflected in the decision-making and implementation process. Neither were female members included in the Joint Monitoring Coordination Committee composed of three parties (UNMIN, representatives of the Nepal Army, and the CPN-M combatants). Hence, needs and concerns of female ex-combatants were not properly discussed during the process of negotiation. So, structurally, they were excluded.

During the war, the CPN-M often used women for supplying food stuff, cooking food, washing clothes, providing sexual services, and assisting Maoist leaders. Many female ex-combatants experienced setbacks as soon as they entered to the cantonments. During the war, female ex-combatants were well integrated with their male counterparts; they ate together, slept together, fought together, and some of them became pregnant and got married. By doing so they had developed a common identity. But once the peace agreement was signed and they were under the scrutiny of UNMIN, Special Committee, the government, and journalists, their life became difficult as they were not allowed to continue to do what they were doing during the war. Further, once they were kept in the cantonments, many female ex-combatants became pregnant and gave birth to children. Consequently, then they were removed from the cantonments and forced to remain outside. Living in exclusion, they were not able to integrate into society, they had no strong social backing, no proper economic support, and no psychological counseling to reconcile and rebuild their lives. They were largely ignored by the government, as well as their mother party—the CPN-M. In such circumstances, it was very difficult for them.

Further, when the women were in active war, they did not care about the caste classes, and they were encouraged by their party to have inter-caste marriages. Once they came out of cantonment, however, they faced severe difficulties, as society did not easily (and wholeheartedly) accept them. In many cases even their parents and relatives did not accept such marriages. Hence, it became quite difficult for the female ex-combatants in society. Therefore, they often moved away from their native places, and preferred to stay away.

In conclusion, the situation of female ex-combatants in Nepal is quite difficult in terms of social integration, economic stability, and livelihood security. Their future is uncertain, they are frustrated, reactive, and the majority of them are hopeless. A few of the women are quite successful in social integration and in livelihood security, mainly because of their individual capabilities (flexible, hardworking, motivated to engage in social activities) and because of the support of their male husbands and family members. The role of CPN-M in addressing the issues and concerns of female ex-combatants was not constructive. The CPN-M abused the female ex-combatants for advancing the insurgency and getting to power, but forgot their commitment once they became rulers.

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