

Women's Motivation for Joining the Maoist Movement in Nepal: A Study of Ex-PLA Participants in Janaki Rural Municipality, Kailali

Kanshi Prasad Adhikari¹

¹APhD Scholar, Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal

¹Corresponding Author: kpadhikari@tufohss.edu.np

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the motivations of women for joining the Maoist movement and strives to challenge outdated beliefs about women's issues. It delves into their socio-cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds, as well as their pursuit of gender equality, leadership, and self-worth while working alongside men on equal terms. The study focuses on 15 Ex-PLA women in Janaki Rural Municipality, employing a purposive sampling method and an anthropological approach involving interviews and observations. The research unravels the challenges in analyzing female participants' experiences and opinions, considering the sensitivity and confidentiality of the subject matter and the cautious approach to human rights and privacy. The discussion reveals the deeply entrenched patriarchal system in Nepal, which has historically relegated women to a subordinate position and deprived them of power and knowledge creation. Despite legislative measures granting women citizenship and some representation, informal barriers and societal attitudes continue to impede their progress. The study highlights various factors motivating women to join the Maoist movement in Janaki Rural Municipality, including the historical patriarchal nature of Nepal, limited property rights for women, extended male absences, the dual burden of coordinating with both Maoist and security forces, and the impact of the Kilo-2 operation's brutality and upheaval. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the transformative potential of women when given opportunities and challenges the prevailing societal norms, offering insights into the factors driving their participation in the Maoist movement and advocating for their rights and recognition on equal footing with men.

Keywords: Ex-PLA, Maoist, People's War, right, patriarchy

Introduction

Nepali women have long been excluded from power and knowledge production, perpetuating male ideology as universal knowledge. This has led to the oppressive caste and class hierarchical division of society, with women never having a self-identity outside patriarchal relations. The People's War (PLA) led by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has transformed women in both essence and form, giving them meaning, value, respect, and dignity. Different women have different experiences of being a PLA participant, with some feeling empowered and empowered after joining. The decision to make at least two women mandatory in each defence squad led to their participation, and women were given different responsibilities.

This research aims to explore women's motivation for joining the Maoist movement, helping to eliminate outdated beliefs about women's issues, their socio-cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds, and motivating them to work alongside men on equal terms and prove their worth.

Objective of the study

This study aims to understand women's motivation for participation in the People's War, focusing on educational, socio-cultural, economic background, gender equality, leadership, and their prospects.

Methodology

The study examines 15 Ex-PLA women in Janaki Rural Municipality, using a purposive sampling method. It uses an anthropological approach, involving interviews, and observations. The study reveals challenges in analyzing female participants' experiences and opinions. The study may not represent all women's experiences or opinions, and research in Janaki Rural Municipality due to confidentiality, sensitive issues and a cautious approach to human rights and privacy.

Discussion

Nepal's patriarchal system has historically excluded women, treating them as second-class citizens and excluding them from power and knowledge creation. This shows that perpetuates male ideology as universal knowledge, while portraying women as reliant, docile, and inferior. Nepalese women have no legal claim to parental property until they reach 35 and are unmarried. Despite legislation granting women citizenship, 33% reservation does not exist at the local level and women continue to suffer informal impediments to citizenship.

Women make up one-third of Maoist armed forces, joining for political reasons, seeking revenge on security forces, and as social outcasts. Politically educated women from various groups join the movement, while others seek revenge for police atrocities and rape. Social outcasts often face harassment and forced fleeing, creating their own security within society. Joining the Maoist movement allows women to create their own security within society (Gautam, 2002).

Parvati, a Maoist central committee member and head of the women's department, discusses the party's challenges in developing women's leadership. Women have joined the PLA in extraordinary numbers, but only a few have developed into leaders in the military struggle. She again argues that women's participation in revolutionary struggle decreases or stops after marriage and having children. Factors like feudal traditions and patriarchal structures hinder women's equal participation in society. Women cadres are sometimes pressured to get married, and unmarried women are treated with suspicion.

In another, Nepalese women lack self-identity and authority, leading to oppressive caste and class divisions. The oppression of women has led to the People's War, a violent outlet for the age-old ideology of women's subordination. Over 40% of women in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have been involved since the People's War, transforming their lives and dignity (Yami, 2007).

Women's active involvement in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, with 30-40% of the military force. Women come from ethnic and Dalit groups, including bahun and chettri castes. In 2002, women's participation increased to 50% in Rolpa (Sharma, 2006).

Next, Arjun Karki and David Seddon (2005), highlight the positive aspects of women's participation in the Peoples' War, stating that it provided equal opportunities for women to work alongside men and prove their worth. Li Onesto (2005), a journalist, also supports this view. CPN (Maoist) claims to empower women and provide equal access and opportunities for female cadres within their party. They also claim to implement initiatives to eradicate gender inequality in society. The Maoist movement portrays Nepalese women as propagandists, immobilizers, party cadres, district secretaries, and guerillas, contrasting with rural women's daily life (Shneiderman, 2003).

For these reviews, the authors present the women's motivation to join the People's War and aim to achieve significant goals, and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) provided equal consideration for women against patriarchal exploitation and discrimination, including access to parental property.

Woman's Ex-PLA Motivation to join people's War

- Women's participation in the People's Liberation Army challenges traditional belief systems, with motive being the most intriguing factor studied.
- Interviews with 15 Ex-PLA women in Janaki Rural Municipality reveal reasons for joining the movement, including social, economic, and political reasons.
- Nepali society was historically male-dominated, with women limited to sub-massive roles. A 40-point charter demanded property rights for women, leading to their motivation to join the People's War.
- Male women faced double burdens in remote areas during the People's War, coordinating with Maoist and security personnel. Women were tortured, interrogated, and raped by police, leading to their joining the PLA. The Kilosera-2 operation fueled violence, driving many people towards Maoists, with every third guerilla being a woman.
- PLA members attracted to combat dress, modern weapons, and Maoist propaganda in the district.
- Women motivated by Maoist slogans, believing they must die for a new order.
- Women joined the movement to prove equal access and opportunity to men, as Hisila Yami stated, "The people's war gives all women a meaningful life and a meaningful death, allowing them to prove their worth is equal to the men.
- Women joined the movement to change society, gain new roles, and be empowered.

Out of 15 interviewees, 7 Ex-PLA women joined the movement due to whims in Maoist stronghold areas, while 6 women joined due to historical oppression and dominance. Some joined for new roles, empowerment, or revenge. 2 women joined for self-will. The reasons for joining include friend's rumors, attraction to combat dress, and ideology.

Ex-PLA women joined the movement due to their dissatisfaction with the party, unwillingness to respond, and opposition to its ideology. Maoist slogans, such as "you have got to die sometimes

so why not to die for a new order," "one house one man/women," and "empowerment and gender equality," are used to attract women. However, these slogans are limited to the party's slogans. Maoist leader Hisila Yami claims there is no discrimination against women at the political level, but there is a lack of women in the central committee and equal access and opportunity compared to men. For example, when a Maoist woman cadre becomes pregnant, she is forced to quit the movement. The issue of gender equality, caste, and class discrimination is seen as a whim for the attraction of women to the party or movement (Yami, 2007)

Social Background of Women Ex-PLA

The development of a nation is influenced by various ethnic and social factors, including the presence of multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-cultural communities. In South Asia, such as Nepal, the constitution of the kingdom of Nepal 2047 aims to strengthen national unity by promoting healthy and cordial social relations, castes, tribes, communities, and linguistic groups. However, Nepal has designated itself as a Hindu kingdom.

The democratic government's role and responsibility are oriented towards the upliftment and development of indigenous ethnic communities. However, few ethnic communities were represented in various echelons of the political structure and policy level. The dominance of Brahmin/Chhetri in society, exploitative labor system, and deprivation/marginalization of low castes were the root causes of insurgency. Both men and women are forced to maintain old ties and kinship, with few or no opportunities for continuing their livelihoods. Women face new demands in providing for themselves and their children, with increased workloads and limited access to and control over the benefits of goods and services.

Losing family members inflicts suffering for women and men alike, but women are affected in particular ways due to their family roles as primary caregivers to children in gender-specific ways. The loss of husbands and sons may not only mean emotional loss but also loss of economic support and social legitimacy. Women with no male family members often lose all rights to protection, employment, benefit, or guarantees to security.

The Maoist movement has further exacerbated the inequality faced by women, as they are forced to bear double physical and mental stress to manage their families. The social hierarchy is very hierarchical, and the same psychology of people has been adopted by the Maoists, who have aimed to destroy all types of discrimination, including caste and gender. The interim constitution of Nepal 2063 made the provision that no discriminations shall be made against any citizen in the application of law as ground of religion, race, sex, caste, or ideological conviction. However, this provision did not yield any favorable results. Traditionally dominant and high-ranking Brahmins/Chhetris controlled the political power, and other castes were excluded from governance, leading to inequality and conflict among ethnic minority groups.

In the local elections of 2054, only Brahmin constitutes 63.82% in village councils. The minority, including Dalits and women, did not feel ownership in the contemporary political system and attracted towards the political demands of the Maoist movement, such as a republic, abolition of the constitutional monarchy, constitutional reform of the political system through

constitutional assembly, self-determination of ethnic groups, inclusive democracy, and equal participation of Dalit and women in politics.

In Janaki Rural Municipality, 15 Ex-PLA women were surveyed, with 1 from Brahmin, 2 from Chhetri, 2 from Magar, 6 from Tharu, and 4 from lower castes. The majority of the women were Tharu and lower caste Dalit. Most of the women joined the movement at a young age (15-19), with nearly 15 joining during this age. The remaining six were adults (20-25). The motivation factor of the women was influenced by their marital status, with seven married and 14 unmarried. These women married with PLA men after their involvement in the movement, according to their will and party's agreement.

Economic Background of Women Ex-PLA

The district is marginalized from the mainstream of development, lacking essential factors for economic growth such as road access, irrigation facilities, education, and employment opportunities. The land distribution pattern is discriminative, leading to insurgency among Dalits, who lack enough land for their livelihood. This poor economic condition attracts marginalized people to Maoist ideology, which focuses on land reform, ending discrimination by caste, improving services for the poor, and addressing corruption.

Poverty is a global issue, with some developed nations having a more equitable distribution of resources. Poor people often lack adequate food, shelter, education, and health, and face extreme vulnerability to ill health, economic dislocation, and natural disasters. They are often subjected to ill treatment by institutions and society, making them powerless to influence key decisions affecting their lives.

After the restoration of democracy, the government and ruling political leaders have been unable to reform poverty reduction or alleviation strategies for the poor. The rural population in Nepal has been left in a state of underdevelopment due to a semi-feudal economy based on subsistence agriculture with low productivity levels. The urban political elite have neglected political realities, providing the poor with no tangible redress for their frustration. The Maoists have presented themselves as focusing on the needs of the "people of the hill" and hold considerable appeal for these citizens.

Educational Background of Women Ex-PLA

Women make up over half of the population, but their access to and participation in education is lower than that of men due to social, cultural, political, and economic disadvantages. Inadequate access to quality education hinders the expected social transformation process in the country. Women are often viewed as natural care-givers, and attending school is often seen as a waste of time. Home-oriented tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, child-minding, and collecting firewood, take up a substantial percentage of girl children's time.

Seventh Ex-PLA women have received informal education from adult literacy classes, but many have never been to school. Poverty plays a significant role in keeping children away

from school, as well as school expresses such as compulsory dress, books, and unattractive courses. Family socialization into sub-massive roles affects how girls participate in education.

Among 15 interviewed women Ex-PLA, none have passed their SLC. Most have received education only up to primary level. They joined the movement on the school-going age and later disagreed with school education, calling it 'bourgeoisie' education. During the insurgency, school and school children were the main targets of both the Maoist and state. Some school-going girls were raped by police personnel, making it difficult for girls to get access to education. The other reasons behind women's less access to education can be traced to household work burden, income poverty, physical distance, low perceived relevance of education, caste, and ethnic discrimination.

Ex-PLA Women are leading in Peoples War

Conflicts can create conditions where people's rights are violated, impacting their capacity to participate and contributing to economic, social, cultural, and political development. They also reduce the development and political spaces available for those seeking advancement, negatively impacting already poor and excluded groups, including women. Poverty is a contributing factor in the rise and effect of conflict. During the decade-long conflict, rural and marginalized areas, particularly Lumbhini and Sudurpashim Province were affected. The root causes of the People's war can be divided into different dimensions, including economic, political, ideological, social, and cultural isolation, inequality in resource distribution and opportunity, and the inability of the state to deliver services to people.

Nepal, a predominantly rural, agrarian country, has suffered from a decade-long armed conflict characterized by discrimination, inequality, and other disparities. Nepalese women have been on the receiving end of this treatment due to deeply entrenched patriarchy, gendered division of labour, low representation in the education sector, and a wide gender gap in access to basic health facilities. The legal system is also highly biased against women, making them largely voiceless and without influence in government, politics, and other decision-making bodies.

Despite these challenges, the participation of Nepal's armed conflict has been well-recognized, with women becoming more empowered and involved in the public sphere. However, after the insurgency, many villages were vacant without men, leading to women joining the movement or leaving to safer urban areas or escalating to India. Women were compelled to take on the roles of their male counterparts to cope with the environment. In 1995, at least two women were made mandatory in each Défense squad, leading to a large number of women participating in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Women were given different responsibilities, such as leading the group and developing leadership capacity. Sunita, a 17-year-old who joined the movement, shared her experience of being given the responsibility of commanding a group after joining the movement.

Prospects for Women's Ex-PLA

In 1995, Nepal experienced a guerrilla phase, with the state capturing mostly male villages based on communist ideology. Women took over as household leaders, and they were

targeted by the police. They were often searched by the police and forced to feed their men. Women were often subjected to frequent visits, interrogation, and torture, making them insecure. They escaped to either revenge for their family members or emancipate themselves from prejudices.

Melina Chaulagain, a 34-year-old Brahmin community woman, joined the Maoist Party (PLA) at 17 years old. She had no formal education but participated in adult literacy programs. Initially, she had no new experiences, but after joining PLA, she gained confidence and awareness. She has no plans or future prospects, but believes that if she is not adjusted to national security, the party will engage in other sectors, such as communal works. Rupa Oli, a 39-year-old chhetri community woman, joined a movement to take revenge on their cousin brother's murder by police. They worked against gambling and liquor in villages, killing a police officer. She married Dinesh, and their family also joined the movement. Despite being tortured and beaten, she remained committed to the cause. They met a god who saved them and helped them escape from the camp.

Sunita Magar, a hardworking woman from Magar community, is a member of a hardworking group who has faced poverty and discrimination. At the age of 8, she works in a landlord's house, working tirelessly and facing torture. After her mother's death, she felt the need to fight for emancipation and freedom. At 14, she joined the Maoist movement, which helped her raise voices against social discrimination and societal maladies. Sunita is indebted to the party for helping her break free from the social discrimination. Sunita remains dedicated to the party and believes that whatever party decides, it will be her decision.

Sandhya Chaudhary, a Nepalese woman from the Tharu community, joined the Maoist party at the age of 17 after her sister was killed by police. Despite being a non-formal education, she eventually became a PLA woman and joined the group. Despite facing psychological and physical torture, than she is fully committed to the party and feels empowered. Sandhya acknowledges the marginalization and discrimination faced by ethnic groups in the past and is now ready to raise her voice against these injustices. She believes in the power of women to change the world and raise awareness about the injustices they face.

Dhanakala Bhul, belongs to the marginalized Dalit community, believes the Maoist party was formed for the poor and aims to eradicate discrimination based on cast and class. Initially, the party tried to maintain equality, but as time passed, it experienced differences and inequalities. Women are not given leading positions and responsibility, and existing inequality in society cannot be easily eliminated. Dhanakala feels proud of being a PLA and believes her sacrifice for the country's sake is important. She believes she has empowered herself and broken gender discrimination.

Thus, above all cases show that at the time of joining the People's Liberation Army (PLA), women were unaware of Maoist ideology, emancipation from social discrimination, political absolutism, economic deprivation, and cultural toleration. Women were motivated by Maoist activities, such as destroying liquor industries and gambling places during the People's War. They also helped return assets lost due to domestic violence, such as polygamy.

Despite their participation in the PLA, today's women felt emancipation and were given the party's decision on where to go, what to do, and where to join. The movement's message spread to remote, illiterate, and marginalized areas, with various programs organized by Maoist propagandists. The 40-point charter of the movement supports property rights for women, but it has not provided satisfaction among those who suffered.

Conclusion

The study focuses on women's motivation for joining the Maoist movement in Janaki Rural Municipality of West Nepal. The research aims to assess the impact of political, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions on women participants who were motivated to join the Maoist movement. Nepal, historically a patriarchal society, has historically given less importance to women, often taking them as the second citizen. Women are limited in sub-mast roles and are given less opportunity. Women joining the Maoist movement, carrying guns, is a challenge to Nepali society, but it demonstrates their potential if given the opportunity.

Several reasons for women joining the Maoist movement include the historical patriarchal nature of Nepal, the lack of property rights for women, the long absence of male women, the double burden of coordinating with both Maoist and security personnel, and the brutality and turmoil caused by the Kilo-sera-2 operation. Women joined the movement to prove their worth and equality to men, as demonstrated by Hisila Yami's statement that the People's War gives all women a meaningful life and death, proving their worth is equal to men.

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