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Abstract

The goal of this research paper is to analyze concepts of armed conflict and peacebuilding from a gender perspective using a feminist epistemology approach[1]. I examine the impact of armed conflict on women, and the implications of women's roles in armed conflict and in peacebuilding processes post-conflict. In doing so, I raise the question of how situations of armed conflict and peacebuilding influence women's empowerment and contribute to the social transformation of predominantly patriarchal societies post-conflict. Combining both a media and textual analysis of secondary sources, I explore this question in the case of Nepal, a country that experienced armed conflict from 1996-2006 and is undergoing reconstruction. Using these methods, my main findings are that while armed conflict afforded women greater roles and opportunities for empowerment, these enhancements were not sustained in the post-conflict period. Furthermore, while peacebuilding was perceived as a unique opportunity for women's empowerment, gender inequalities persisted. These findings highlight the need for a better understanding of the implications of women's contributions, agency, and empowerment for the prevention of future conflict and societal transformation that warrants future research.

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[1] This term is explained in a later section.

I. Introduction

"Women hold up half the sky." This proclamation made by Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong affirms that there could be no emancipation of humanity without the emancipation of half of society – its women. It insists on the importance of gender equality as a necessary foundation for a better society. According to its definition, gender equality is achieved when women and girls are provided with equal access to education, health care, employment, and representation in the political sphere. Put simply, equality is achieved when women are empowered (United Nations [UN], 2017). While the world has made progress towards gender equality, women and girls all over the world continue to suffer violence and discrimination.

It should be remembered that gender is a social construct, and thus creates structures of difference and inequality. Over the last fifty years there has been an increasing interest in exploring the relationship between gender, armed conflict and peacebuilding. Overall armed conflict and violence has a negative effect on the lives and perspectives of women and men who experience it. Both men and women suffer from trauma, abuse, and loss of access to resources. However, researchers have addressed the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women. Furthermore, the role of women's agency, as well as the potential of women's participation in peace processes is also being recognized (UN, 2017).

Examining conflict from a gender perspective has wider implications for women's equality and empowerment insofar as it makes visible how gender inequalities are often exacerbated during and after conflict. Furthermore, recognizing the contribution of women during and after conflict is vital to creating policies that empower women and prevent

future conflict. In this way, gender relations and gender norms have the potential to be influenced or even transformed. This paper aims to further understand the gendered nature of conflict and peace. More specifically, how situations of armed conflict and peacebuilding influence women's empowerment and contribute to the social transformation of predominantly patriarchal societies post-conflict.

I will engage critically with topics of gender and conflict in the case study of Nepal from a feminist point of view. The armed conflict that took place between 1996 and 2006 is analyzed from a gender perspective, paying attention to the consequences of the war and women's active involvement in it. Additionally, the peace process that put an end to the conflict is analyzed from a gender perspective. Nepal is a paradigm for understanding conflict from a gender analysis approach because it challenges traditionalist assumptions of women in conflict, and offers insight into the impacts of conflict and post-conflict situations on women and gender issues more broadly. Did the conflict and post-conflict period provide Nepali women with greater opportunities for equality and empowerment? Some scholars (Gul, 2007) have claimed that the conflict was instrumental in promoting women's empowerment. Others have claimed that these institutional gains were not fully realized after the war.

Although both claims have been reasonably studied, I argue that women are transforming their society outside of structural arrangements and political institutions. The most valuable transformations have come amongst themselves and within their communities. The aim of this paper is to explore both conflict and peacebuilding as opportunities for social transformation and the promotion of a more gender-equal society. To do this, I define concepts of armed conflict and peacebuilding in the context of gender.

Next, I discuss these concepts in the case study of Nepal. Lastly, I use my findings to promote the inclusion of women and norms of gender equality.

II. Literature Review

Gender and Armed Conflict

The purpose of this research is to adopt a gender analysis of conflict and peace processes. Gender refers to ascribed dimensions of masculine and feminine identities as it pertains to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. Gender, as a category of analysis, is intended to demonstrate the historical and socially constructed nature of sexual differences (Claske, 2001). Because structures in society are gendered, these structures produce inequalities that are often reinforced during periods of armed conflict. Men and women are placed in different circumstances and assigned different roles. As a result, men and women are impacted differently (Gul, 2007). Furthermore, the process by which gender structures exacerbate inequalities has been found to continue during post-conflict periods (Swiss Peace, 2012). A gender analysis seeks to expose how these changes unfold over time and helps to assess the impact of those changes on men and women. In this paper, I take a feminist epistemological standpoint, which is defined as theory of knowledge that emphasizes the need to examine the world from a women's perspective. In other words, women's experiences are at the center of analysis (Yadav, 2016).

In the current literature, there is an implicit assumption that conflict is a "gender-neutral" concept. Analyzing conflict from a gender perspective, I believe this assumption to be incorrect. According to Claske (2001), "war [or armed conflict] is a gendered activity" (intro, para. 3). This concept mainly focuses on men's role in society and their diverse

experiences in conflict. Typically, men are expected to fight in battle and provide security, which is also a gendered concept because it tends to focus on military aspects of conflict such as taking up arms and physical acts of violence. Ideally, the only way security is attained is when these actions no longer exist, and an agreement has been signed between the two parties in conflict, in other words, when there is "peace."

This conceptualization of conflict is partial and incomplete for three main reasons. Firstly, it implies that men's experiences are most important to consider when analyzing conflict. It fails to address how men's and women's respective roles in society are made visible in situations of armed conflict. Because women's roles are often limited to the private domain (i.e. taking care of the family), their experiences during conflict are rendered invisible, and therefore paid less attention to compared to men.

Secondly, this concept of war does not take into account that ending armed conflict "does not necessarily end a culture of violence and does not necessarily establish a culture of peace" (Claske, 2001). This is an oversimplified view of conflict, and it assumes that men and women experience conflict the same. Because armed conflicts have a different impact on men and women, it is important to recognize the specific challenges facing women. There is evidence to suggest that sexual violence against women continues or even worsens after conflict (2001). The absence of armed conflict does not automatically translate to peace.

Lastly, a "gender-neutral" discourse of conflict may conceal the fact that the post-conflict period may also have gender implications. Addressing the specific needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities of women in post-conflict situations requires a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences during conflict. Over the years,

international organizations and security councils have stressed the importance of women's participation in the prevention and resolution of future conflicts (UN, 2017). It recognizes women's agency as fundamental to the peacebuilding process. Analyzing post-conflict situations without taking in to account women's experiences can further exacerbate gender inequalities in which fundamental decisions regarding peace and security are decided for women by men.

The way that structures in society are gendered to favor men inevitably influences our concept of war, such that the experiences of men are considered representative of all human beings. Consequently, women's experiences are hidden and depicted in ways that keep them disempowered.

Women in Armed Conflict

The discourse on women in armed conflict has largely focused on human rights violations against women. Despite their remarkable capacity to adapt and survive war, women have traditionally been portrayed in conflict as "vulnerable and helpless victims" (Haeri & Puechguirbal, 2010, p. 105). This perception of women, although necessary for their security and assistance, likewise disregards a holistic understanding of their roles and experiences in conflict, including as combatants and peacebuilders.

As discussed before, how gender differences are made visible in conflict has more to do with power structures and less with biological differences between men and women. Although, the distinction that men are *physically* stronger than women has too often been used as a justification for omitting the role of women's intellect, agency, and ability in the context of conflict (2010). A gender analysis seeks to deconstruct the myth that women are "weaker" and, thus, have little to contribute to conflict dynamics.

Most humanitarian reports depict women as victims in needs of protection and security. According to the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (2000), parties in armed conflict often rape women as a tactic of war. Women are subjected to other forms of sexual violence including sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and forced sterilization. Additionally, the growing number of violations against women have resulted in an increase in forced internal displacement and refugee flows.

The impact of armed conflict on the lives of women and young girls is undeniable. However, the depiction of women as helpless victims assumes a lack of agency and a lack of attention to the complex and diverse roles that women can play in times of war. In recent years, there has been a shift in focus from the victimization of women to a spectrum of women's participation in conflict and post-conflict contexts (Gul, 2007).   One of the most overt ways that women have dispelled the "helpless victim" myth is through their active participation in armed conflict.

Feminist scholars are divided on the issue of women's participation in armed conflict. While some believe that women should not be recruited to higher ranks, others say that women should be recruited, but confined to limited roles such as information gathering and administration. In many cases, women have participated as combatants. Women join conflicts for various reasons: "to gain political empowerment, economic freedom, to support their men, defy suppression, sometimes considering it their moral duty and sometimes they are forced" (Gul, 2007, 70). Sometimes it may be a combination of these. In case studies on African civil wars (Turshen & Twagiramariya, 1998), it has been found that discrimination and oppression are often compelling reasons why women decide to take up arms, contributing largely to the development of the conflict itself.

Understanding the role of women from a gender analysis approach affords women their agency that the traditional literature overlooks or oversimplifies.

Gender and Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Like armed conflict, peace is a gendered concept. Greenberg and Zuckerman (2009) explore the gender dimensions of post-conflict reconstruction in terms of social, economic and political development. They propose a model that addresses women's issues as a fundamental aspect of social transformation. The goal is not to just *re*-construct a society, in other words, putting back what was there before the conflict, but "capitalizing on opportunities presented by new rules, institutions and resources (3)" in order to build stable, prosperous societies that promote equality.

Social transformation as a concept has been increasingly used in social science literature. In the current literature, most scholars see social transformation as "top-down, and intentional, which often has specific and defined goals" (Yadav, 2016, p. 1). The focus is on structural developments and institutional arrangements. Yadav (2016) critiques traditional notions of social transformation because it assumes a modernist framework based on Western economic models and values. Furthermore, it suggests that social transformation is a process that can only be performed by experts and outsiders rather than the individuals and communities affected. Yadav wrote: "structural transformation is certainly one possible approach when considering transformations that have taken place in society, but it ignores the subjective aspects – the lived experiences – of social life" (6). In other words, the agency of people in society is forgotten or ignored.

This has wider implications for women in armed conflict and peace situations. As social mobilizers, "women have the capacity for dialogue and transformation" (6). Whereas

traditional notions of social transformation are focused on replacing existing structures and arrangements, Yadav and others emphasize the need to examine the ways in which transformation and peacebuilding can be achieved through attitudes and ways of thinking – non-structural frameworks. I explore this concept further in the case of women in Nepal.

III. Case Study & Background

From the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) (UN, 1996) to Security Council Resolution 1325 (SC1325) (UN, 2000), the world has increasingly recognized the impacts of conflict on women – and of women on conflict. With women's agency at the center, the international conventions "marked the defining moment for the quest for women's empowerment" (Gul, 2007, 71). Though women have performed a variety of roles during conflict, scholars are paying close attention to women's participation in formal peace negotiations, decision-making, and reconstruction processes.

Nepal

Nepal, a small country landlocked between China and India, is an ideal case for the study of gender, conflict and peace. Since its inception, women were most affected by the armed conflict (1996-2006) that left over 13,000 people dead and some 100,000 people displaced (UN, 2012).

For thousands of years, royal dynasties governed Nepal. Traditionally, social life in Nepal is stratified, marked by caste and other social systems which shape much of the country's social, economic and political life. Women, who make up nearly 50% of the population, often face systematic discrimination, particularly in rural areas, where feudal and patriarchal traditions, lack of education, and poverty remain severe impediments to basic human rights and equality for women (Gul, 2007).

In the early 1990s, several political parties launched a popular pro-democracy movement.   These political changes raised expectations of progress and greater equality, but people remained poor and dissatisfied. As a result, the armed insurgency, or so-called "People's War", was launched by the Communist Party in Nepal (Maoist) in 1996 against the State in efforts to raise issues of economic development, political instability and equality. Over the course of the following decade, the country suffered from widespread violence and abuses from both sides; displacement; and there were large-scale disruptions to education, health care and other basic government services. In 2006, the monarchy relinquished power and the insurgents and the government reached a peace agreement. Today, the country is working to resolve remaining tensions and address the long-standing issues of inequality.

In her research on Nepal, Gul (2007) encourages us to examine the role of women in conflict as well as the consequences of their involvement. According to the National Women's Commission, "women made up one-third of the Maoist People's Liberation Army in some districts, and as many as 50% in the most highly mobilized areas, assuming roles ranging from combatants to members of cultural troops" (Kolas, 2017, p. 3).   Women also served as members of Party organizations and as activists.

The case of Nepal has wider implications for the prevention of future conflict and women's empowerment, insofar as it highlights the ways in which situations of conflict and peace can present women with opportunities for gains in equality, to ensure that policies are relevant to women and their needs, and to transform a society.

IV. Methods

This research paper emerged out of former research on the armed conflict in Nepal I

conducted in the winter quarter of last year. For this project, I would like to use a mixed-

method approach – both quantitative and qualitative. Firstly, I would like to conduct an

exploratory interview with someone from Nepal to better understand the social and

political context of the country. Additionally, I plan to do a quantitative analysis of

government reports and data on the political representation of women before and after the

war. To complement that, I will be doing a textual analysis of secondary sources such as

newspapers and scholarly articles. There are drawbacks to using this method such as

"description bias" which involves the accuracy with which journalists report events

(Currier, 2010). However, given that I am not native to Nepal and do not speak the

language, secondary reports on the topic will be necessary. Some of the authors of these

reports and articles are Nepali, or have spent significant time in Nepal. This can work in my

favor by filling in gaps of information and insight. Furthermore, I will be doing an analysis

of YouTube videos which document some of the transformation happening in Nepal after

the war. By analyzing interviews of women in Nepal, I can identify the transformation

taking place outside of structural explanations and the political sphere.

V. Analysis and findings

In this paper, I used two levels of analysis. The first was a gender analysis of the armed

conflict, paying close attention to the impact on women, their participation in it and its

implications for women's empowerment. This was done qualitatively and quantitatively

(indicated by women's statistical representation in political decision-making bodies).

Given their previous lack of agency and access to political decision-making processes and

institutions, participation in armed conflict was perceived by women as an opportunity to exercise new gender roles and to promote women's issues on the political agenda. Along with the analysis of such perceptions, I also examined whether women's participation translated from the conflict to post-conflict period in support of gender equality and empowerment.

Taking up arms: gains in women's empowerment *(during conflict)*

According to the National Women's Commission (2003), women made up one-third of the Maoist army, and as many as half in the most highly mobilized areas (Kolas, 2017, 102). While these numbers remain heavily disputed, the number of women combatants was unprecedented for a society that holds rigid patriarchal norms, which indicates a major enhancement of women's empowerment and a significant transformation of gender norms. While some attribute the successful mobilization of women to the Maoists – whose recruitment strategy rested on rhetoric of women's rights and liberation – others attribute it to the perceived gains in equality and agency associated with participation. The plight of women in Nepal and the desire to emancipate oneself were major impetuses for joining the insurgency (Gul, 2007).

In terms of empowerment, women's participation in the Maoist army was significant for three main reasons:

Promotion of a women's agenda

Women's active participation as combatants and as members of political organizations served to promote the institutional presence of women. Women's rights and women's issues became visible on the political agenda. Networks of women's groups and organizations also helped the movement on a much larger scale. Furthermore, it was

documented that the Maoist army utilized media propaganda to highlight women's contributions: "For the first time, oppressed rural women were brought to the forefront" (Kolas, 2017, 112). A growing awareness of women's issues, including the intersectional nature of the conflict, was a major impact of women's participation in the armed conflict.

New gender roles

In the absence of male family members, women took on conventionally male roles in the household, and often this required learning new skills. During the conflict, women took on jobs such as ploughing and economic responsibilities. Women and girls also participated as combatants. This gave women the opportunity to experience freedom outside of their traditional gender roles as care-givers (of children, and sometimes men) and home-makers. It allowed them to express their agency and "challenge customary notions of womanhood" (Kolas, 2017, 101).

It is important to note that women were often still excluded from high-ranking positions, some were not even allowed to carry arms during conflict. This suggests the pervasiveness of gendered perceptions of women as passive participants throughout the conflict. Ironically, even though equality and liberation were main impetuses for joining the conflict in the first place, the persistence or reproduction of gender inequalities and patriarchal norms pushed women back to the margins.

Increased political representation

Soon after the end of the armed conflict, the new government adopted a plan that would increase women's presence in decision-making bodies. In 2007, 33 percent of the Assembly were women were elected to the first Constituent Assembly. "[This] has been portrayed as a landmark for Nepali women's political participation" (Kolas, 2017, 111). For

many women, this was an opportunity to make a tangible impact on the plight of women through a new constitution and new laws. It was an opportunity to "enhance the qualifications, capacities, and knowledge of women leaders" (25) that were present since the conflict's origin.

The transition to peace: challenges to women's empowerment (post-conflict)

According to Ariño (2008), "peace processes represent unique opportunities for societies that have been affected by armed conflicts, not only to put an end to the violence but also as a starting point for more far-reaching transformation processes" (10). In the transition from conflict to peace, women's empowerment was not sustained in Nepal. As evidenced by the following:

Exclusion of women from peacebuilding

It is noteworthy that despite an increase in political representation in politics, women combatants' voices were not included in peacebuilding negotiations and agreements on the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants. In fact, the representation of women in the second Constituent Assembly fell to 30 percent. Men remained in the majority and held most of the decision-making power. Like the Maoist insurgents, the government was no different in their lack of commitment to gender equity and women's empowerment. Sudha, a female ex-combatant, expressed this sentiment when she said: "These resolutions are for the high-ranking fighters and leaders and richer people, for us it makes no difference. We have not felt it trickling down to us, yet" (Kolas, 2017, 43).

This finding is consistent with several studies that assert that an increase in women's political representation does not always provide conclusive evidence of their

empowerment. In the case of Nepal, the gains were practically negligible. This gap between ideology and practice also suggests that norms and ideologies tend not to change as a result of conflict, but are "temporarily suspended" (106).

Patriarchal norms and stigma

For many women, the end of the war signaled a return to traditional gender norms and roles. For female ex-combatants, reintegration back to society was met with severe stigma and discrimination. Women were stigmatized for going against societal rules and viewed as "aggressive and overtly sexual" (Kolas, 2017, 106). In many ways this represents a return to the pre-war "status quo", which proved disempowering for women in Nepal post-conflict.

Even the women who were given seats in parliament faced obstacles and stigma. As members of the Constituent Assembly (CA), it was expected that "a woman must overcome the stigma of being like a woman – indecisive and emotional' (ibid.), and still maintain integrity" (108). This finding proves the inherent underlying patriarchal attitudes and behaviors that continued to create obstacles for women even after the conflict. Their perceived lack of experience and exposure meant that women were often excluded from any type of decision-making particular to women and their needs. Furthermore, this stigma was further perpetuated by the lack of a gender-sensitive environment in the CA. Women were expected to attend late-hour meetings and appeal to societal expectations that favored men (27).

Nepal women's activism: continued mobilization for peace and transformation

Although women were heavily involved in bringing the Maoists and the Nepali government to the table, women were absent from the table. However, the mobilization of

women continued. Kolas (2017) highlights a compelling characteristic of women's activism in Nepal: "The success of the Nepali women's movement is neither a conflict nor a post-conflict story. Rather it is a story about women persisting through several decades in their commitment to achieving a better and more gender-equal society" (67).   Despite being absent from important political structures and decision-making processes, women continued to cultivate a social movement centered on women's rights and experiences. The compelling part is that it neither began nor did it end with the armed conflict. In Nepal, women recognized that "working collectively through networks between the grassroots and national-level civil society and political institutions was an important way of raising their voices effectively for political impact" (72), sustained impact.

In my media analysis of the YouTube video, *Participatory Gender Training Documentary – Experiences from Nepal* (2016), I found that women are engaging other women in *rural* communities. Throughout the conflict and post-conflict period, rural women were heavily impacted and were often excluded the most from peacebuilding and decision-making processes. The women presented in this video were not government officials, but community mobilizers. Anita Bhatt, a community mobilizer from far western Nepal admits in the video that "gender is an important issue that we never question."

In the video, community mobilizers like Anita Bhatt, lead a gender-based training that is meant to actively engage participants – men and women – with ideas of gender – gender roles, norms, and relations (between men and women). At the conclusion of the training, participants (especially the men) expressed an appreciation for the training because it allowed them to see from another's perspective and to recognize their privileges as men. This video suggests that social transformation can occur and is occurring outside of

traditional political structures and arrangements. It echoes the importance of addressing gender issues and equality beyond constitutional laws and policies. Krishna, another mobilizer said, "By changing ourselves, we could trigger change in our society."

VI. Conclusion

To summarize, the armed conflict in Nepal afforded women opportunities for empowerment, however, these 'gains' were short-lived. In some ways, gender inequalities persisted and *disempowered* women after the war. Their significant exclusion from peacebuilding and reconstruction processes suggests that promises of equality and descriptive representation in politics are not enough to sustain women's empowerment or promote gender-equality. Outside of this, the continued mobilization of women at the community-level highlights a need to better understand and acknowledge social transformations that are occurring outside of political institutions and traditional explanations of reconstruction and development post-conflict. Future avenues of research include a closer examination of women's activism in Nepal, to include conducting real interviews with ex-combatants and activists.

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Nearly ten years later, Nepal is still undergoing reconstruction, and gender equality is on the political agenda. While the State still lacks adequate mechanisms to provide justice to victims who have faced gender-based violence and those who need rehabilitation, Nepal is presented with an opportunity for radical social transformation.

Radical social transformation means understanding that conflict and peace *are* gendered and should be gender-informed. This framework allows us to understand reconstruction and transformation with the aim of achieving *sustainable* peace, equality,

and security for women. In doing so, we allow peace and equality to become the norm. To conclude, I plan to use this research to promote increased inclusion of women at all levels of society. I aim to promote a more gender-equal society that involves the intentional act of including women and promoting their rights and well-being because as Ariño powerfully points out: "Carrying out a post-war rehabilitation process from a gender perspective does not mean isolated, formal reforms based on political correctness but a radical questioning of forms of social organization that perpetuate exclusion and give rise to armed conflicts." In the case of Nepal, it is clear women, indeed, hold up half the sky.

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