JER
KUSOED

Journal of Education and Research
2025, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 89-112
https://doi.org/ 10.51474/jer/19862

Article History: Received: 15 Sept 2024; Revised: 15 Feb 2025; Accepted: 16 Mar 2025

Original Article

Social Reintegration Challenges of Female Ex-Combatants in Post-Conflict Nepal

Debendra Prasad Adhikari*
Quest for Development Initiatives Kathmandu, Nepal

Abstract

This article presents the lived experiences of female ex-combatants in Nepal. The study explores the transition from militarized identities to civilian lives in the post-conflict context. It is an ethnographic study which was conducted with former members of the CPN (Maoist) People's Liberation Army (PLA). The researcher uses feminist theory to examine the multifaceted struggles of social reintegration. Education, infrastructure and peer networks serve as pull factors for reintegration. Family rejection, caste-based discrimination and cultural stigmas act as persistent barriers. The article highlights how these women convert themselves in new social roles in politically charged and patriarchal environments despite their revolutionary pasts. The findings challenge simplistic DDR models and argue for a feminist reimagining of reintegration. The study contributes to larger debates on peacebuilding and gendered reintegration. It also shows that community acceptance alone does not guarantee transformative reintegration.

Keywords: female ex-combatants, social reintegration, post-conflict, DDR, Nepal

* Author Email: adhikaridpa@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4074-6822

ISSN: 2091-0118 (Print) / 2091-2560 (Online)
© 2025 The Author(s).
Journal homepage: https://jer.kusoed.edu.np/

Published by Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal.
This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-SA 4.0) license.

Introduction

The ten years long armed conflict waged by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN (Maoist)] between 1996 and 2006 marked an unprecedented moment in the Nepal's history. It was unprecedented because of the significant participation of women in armed conflict. Women assumed roles not only as combatants but also as leaders and political agents. While CPN (Maoist) initiated the war they promise of radical transformation, gender equality caste and class emancipation (Upreti et al., 2018). However, their transition from military to civilian life has been troubled with contradictions. Post-conflict peacebuilding processes in Nepal have largely failed to recognize the gendered dimensions of reintegration. They are left in rebuilding their lives in communities that continue to stigmatize their wartime participation (Ketola, 2020).

This article explores the social reintegration of female ex-combatants in post-conflict Nepal. Social reintegration is the process by which former fighters re-enter society by restoring relationships, gaining community acceptance and rebuilding their social identities in post- conflict. It focuses on rebuilding trust and enabling their meaningful participation in family, community and social life. The article is drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Sukumbasi Basti, Chitwan district. It explores how these women mitigate the tensions between their militarized pasts and civilian presents. They need to mitigate within the contexts constrained by patriarchal expectations, caste-based hierarchies and socio-economic religation. The existing Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) literature has predominantly emphasized institutional frameworks and programmatic interventions (Bowd & Alpaslan, 2013), however, this study centers the everyday lived experiences and agency of female ex-combatants within community settings.

Anchored in feminist perspectives, The article argues that reintegration is neither a linear nor a purely policy-driven process. It is relational, contested and deeply gendered while looking in feminist perspectives. This framework challenges dominant DDR paradigms that reduce women invisible or portray them solely as victims. As it calls for a feminist reimagining of reintegration that centers the voices, struggles and subjectivities of women themselves. The guiding research question is: How do female ex-combatants in Nepal experience and negotiate social reintegration in a post-conflict

society? By addressing this question, the article contributes to broader debates on gender, post-conflict reintegration and peacebuilding.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the feminist theory use for the key analytical tools that question how gendered norms and values shape post-conflict realities. As the feminist approaches highlight the persistence of gendered power relations across war and post- war contexts. The theory treats women's participation in war and their participation in post-war reintegration as separate phenomena. They highlight how reintegration strategies may reinforce, challenge, or transform these relations. This article is grounded in three interrelated claims: (1) gender is a socially constructed category (2) patriarchy and structural inequalities are central to shape women's experiences and (3) multiple and intersect identities impact the dynamics of reintegration. The above-mentioned claims provide the theoretical basis for the empirical data analysis and meaning making.

Feminist scholar discards essentialist notions of women's roles. They frame gender as a socially formed element that continued through societies and everyday practices (Beauvoir, 1949; Butler, 1990). In post-conflict contexts, this perspective highlights how reintegration programs push women back into traditional domestic roles. And how it disregards their wartime contributions and the skills they acquired during the war. The policies and plans that prioritize return to family and livelihood opportunity often rely on normative principles. They do not give attention on women's expressed needs or aspirations. From a constructivist standpoint, such gender analysis underscores how reintegration measures reproduce expectations of women. It further explores how women respond to these measures through compliance, negotiation and resistance in the context of livelihood opportunity Benefits and community initiatives.

The central element of feminist analysis is patriarchy because it shapes power relations between public and private domains (Walby, 1990; Hooks, 1984). It works through political institutions, social hierarchies, security structures and local communities. It mediate access to resources, recognition and decision-making. The patriarchal dynamics exclude from DDR policymaking for the female ex-combatants. It also neglected their political contributions and limited opportunities for meaningful socio-economic and political participation. Thus, the feminist scholar critique of reintegration and draws the attention away from perceived individual capacity such as

inadequate skills. The structural barriers that continue inequality that contribute reintegration risky and unsustainable.

Methodology

This study adopts an ethnographic methodology which is based in feminist research principles. The researcher uses ethnographic methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, cultures and social practices in their natural settings. The data which is collected during the study has rich meanings and covers local social contexts that cannot be understood through numerical data alone.

The researcher conducted fieldwork in multiple locations in two phases over the summer in Chitwan district of Nepal between 2017 and 2018. The first phase was carried out from March to May 2017 and the second phase from May to July 2018. The researcher has given a particular focus on Sukumbasi Basti of Padampur Village Development Committee , where many female ex-combatants resettled after the dissolution of the cantonments. The in-depth interview were conducted with 20 participants including 10 female ex-combatants, five community leaders and five school principals. The female ex-combatants selected for this study were classified as "Yogya" (qualified) and did not belong to the category of Verified Minor and Late Recruits (VMLRs). VMLRs refer to those ex-combatants who were considered "Ayogya" (disqualified) because they were recruited after the ceasefire agreement or were under the minimum eligible age at the time of recruitment.

The researcher provided pseudonyms for all the participants in accordance with the ethical standards of qualitative research to ensure the security. Participant observation was a key method to understand the nuances of daily life, interpersonal relationships and social dynamics within Sukumbasibasti. For the triangulation and contextualize the data of the formal interview, informal conversations, attendance at community meetings and site visits were conducted (Swain & King, 2022). The interviews were conducted in Nepali language and transcribed into English. Thereafter the data was coded thematically using NVivo data analysis software to identify patterns and contradictions in reintegration experiences. The results of the data analysis was used to help further analysis and support the interpretation and meaning-making of participants' lived experiences.

A feminist lens was central to the research process that help to narrate of women and to acknowledge the researcher's own positionality. Research ethics such as informed consent Do-No-Harm to the participants, and sensitivity to trauma and exclusion were carefully applied during the research The feminist theory were used in narratives development, and understand how former combatant identities were reshaped, resisted and shadowed in the civilian life.

This methodology help to understand how female ex-combatants experienced reintegration not as a single event but as an ongoing and uneven process. It was shaped by intersectional factors including gender, caste, class, disability and geography. It also emphasized the boundaries of top-down reintegration models and emphasized the importance of community-centered, gender-just approaches to post-conflict peacebuilding.

Findings and Discussion

Education in the Reintegration

The post-conflict livelihoods and social mobility of ex-combatants significantly linked in access to education (Rhea, 2014). Their limited educational opportunities often constrain the ability to secure sustainable employment and social recognition. The convenience of basic quality services played a significant role in determining the reintegration decisions of female ex-combatants in post-conflict Nepal (K.C., 2019; United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, 2022). These services played a vital role as either motivating or demotivating factors that help the ex-combatant's willingness to resettle in particular communities (K.C., 2025; Pauls, 2023). Among the many motivating and demotivating factors some were the presence of development infrastructure, improved security conditions. In addition to that access to quality education for their children was another motivating factor (Macfarlane, 2023; United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR, 2022). Female ex-combatants find potential communities for reintegration by comparing these factors to those in their birthplace (K.C., 2019; Ketola, 2020).

The female ex-combatants evaluated the quality of education available in the reintegrate place before planning to return to birthplace. A participant explained that despite having a deep psychological attachment to her birthplace village, she ultimately chose not to return due to its poor education system and lack of infrastructure. For

many, emotional and psychological connections to their place of birth did not compensate practical concerns. Rather, the presence of essential services especially education served as the primary motivating factor in their reintegration decisions. As K.C. and Gemma (2018, p. 449) observe that those women who were politically aware made mindful decisions about their marriages and children's education. Further, they could well identify their everyday gender needs.

Many women were interested in ensuring better opportunities for their children because they faced challenges in their life due to lack of education. For instance, another participant expressed that her decision to settle in a new community was influenced by the presence of a reputable English-medium boarding school. She explicitly linked the educational opportunities available in the reintegrated area to her children's future. She knows that such facilities were absent in her place of birth. Her children now attend an English-medium school where her children getting a high-quality education. Thus, for the social reintegration of female ex-combatants' access to quality education appeared as a crucial motivating factor.

In contrast, inadequate educational facilities and poor infrastructure in rural areas discouraged many women who were particularly affected by longstanding inequalities in access to quality education. The female ex-combatants who experienced weak educational systems during the conflict now they are resettled in Sukumbasi Basti to secure better schooling opportunities for their children.

Most of the female ex-combatants prioritized their children's education despite their poverty Both public and private schools were available in these communities. The private schools i.e. English medium teaching boarding school were often located farther away and charged higher fees. The public schools were free. However, many parents opted to send their children to private institutions. They believe that private schools provide superior education. One participant remarked:

> *I want to educate my children in a reputable school for the quality education. The fees are expensive in the boarding school and no cost in the public school. However, I send my children to English Medium teaching boarding schools.*

This statement indicates a broader transformation in attitudes toward education among female ex-combatants. During the conflict, many perceived private English-medium schools as unsuited with their Maoist ideology They took it as barriers to

equitable education. In contrast, these women in the post-conflict context came to recognize the role of such schools in delivering quality education and it help to get better opportunities for their children in the future.

In post-conflict Nepal the female ex-combatants sought leadership roles in School Management Committee (SMC) with public schools rather than participating only as parents. They used these spaces to renegotiate identity and re-establish political relevance. It reflects Podder's (2012) observation on post-conflict struggles over selfhood and agency such as social mobilization and political influence

One participant recounted that in the immediate post-conflict period, members of the CPN (Maoist) combatants sought to dominate public school governance structures. They assert their claim to leadership positions such as the chairpersonship of the SMC. However, these ex-combatants enrolled their own children in private English-medium boarding schools Further, they remained active in public schools mainly for political purposes. Many initially entered school spaces through political engagement and they seek leadership positions such as SMC chairperson. In the mean time they expressed concern about the politicization of education, stating:

> *I outright reacted against the party politics in the public school. When I opposed the ex-combatant and the CPN (Maoist) leaders, I faced mental torture and the threat of physical punishment.*

This evidence highlights the unacceptable and sometimes coercive nature of political engagement in schools. They viewed schools as platforms for social legitimacy and influence Their efforts to consolidate power forcefully often generated tensions, resistance and unintended outcomes within the community.

Immediate after the reintegration process, the behaviour of many ex-combatants particularly female combatants was perceived as unfortunate and disturbing by community members. This was largely because these individuals continued to show attitudes and behaviour because of their experiences during the armed conflict. The female ex-combatants showed their armed conflict time attitude, power and activities when they came to the school. One participant expressed that:

> *When they came for the first time to the school, then they threatened that they could blow up the school with a bomb. They used to say they can change anything if they*

want. However, nowadays they do not use those sorts of threatening words. Instead, they ask for support.

In the early stages of reintegration, some ex-combatants attempted to assert dominance in community spaces, particularly in public schools. They ways of dealing of them shows the authoritative and militarized attitudes they brought from the armed conflict period.

Later their behavior gradually declined as institutions started oppose. When they losed SMC elections following democratic processes, they realize on the real community power. This started the beginning of ex-combatants' social transformation when they slowly internalize their behavior to community norms out of a sense of badhyata (compulsion or necessity).

The parents (i.e., ex-combatants) strongly aspired for their children to achieve literacy and English fluency and took pride in these skills. However, public school teachers often expressed concern about their limited capacity to meet these expectations. As one teacher remarked, it is difficult to satisfy parents in public schools due to the high student-to-teacher ratio, limited resources and inadequate infrastructure. Unlike private English-medium boarding schools, public schools were often overcrowded and under-resourced. It negatively affected the quality of education.

The political and community leaders expressed publicly the significant of the public school. However, the public schools were neglected by the same leaders in practice. Although the government required teachers' children to attend public schools to improve accountability (Ghimire, 2020). In practices many bypassed this policy by choosing private English-medium boarding schools, reinforcing perceptions of falseness and structural inequality within the education system.

Family Influence in the Reintegration

For the Female ex-combatants, the family dynamics during and after the armed conflict significantly shaped the reintegration experiences. Many of them encountered unexpected and hostile reactions from family members. As a result, the family behavior it influenced their decisions where and how to reintegrate. As the family support plays a crucial role in supporting emotional stability, economic recovery and social acceptance

among former combatants (Subedi & Jenkins, 2020). The family humiliation can reinforce further marginalization and delay reintegration.

One participant recalled the uncertainty she and her husband faced after being discharged from the cantonment. There was a confusion whether to return to Gorkha or Kavrepalanchowk districts. At the end they decided against returning to their places of birth due to the negative response from her father-in-law. She explained that they had visited their family once after the ceasefire and again during a school examination. Those visits were disheartening, as they were not warmly received and were instead treated as burdens on the family.

This experience was common among many female ex-combatants. To those who returned to families marked by silence, disapproval and emotional distance. As Özerdem (2012) notes that such fragmented relationships hinder reintegration. The parental disapproval of their involvement in the armed struggle often created lasting alienation. It makes return to their hometowns emotionally and socially difficult.

Many female ex-combatants faced difficult choices between returning home and resettling elsewhere. It was largely due to weak parental support and unresolved family tensions. As Podder (2012) notes, those who had joined the CPN (Maoist) without informing their families often faced greater humiliation and rejection. It further deepens familial conflict and emotional distress.

Some ex-combatants had neglected family obligations during the war. It further straining relationships. One participant recounted that, in her community, women and girls were traditionally not allowed to leave home unaccompanied. She had joined the armed movement challenging the traditional norm Unfortunately, she was rejected during the verification process for integration into the Nepali Army. When her rejection became known in the community then it was perceived negatively. She feared that if she returned home, community members would ridicule her, mockingly asking, "Kekenagarne bhanera hideko khaish?" – meaning "What did you accomplish by wandering off like that?"

Many female ex-combatants could not justify their wartime involvement to their families and communities because of the lack of tangible progress in post-conflict reintegration. The rejection, stigma and pressure of the family to conform to traditional

gender roles (Berghof Foundation, 2012) often pushed the ex-combatants to leave their birthplace in search of acceptance and stability.

Dilemmas in the Reintegration

Reintegration processes in Nepal have been concluded through verification despite policy ambiguities. It createdifferent access to benefits and social inclusion (Subedi, 2014). These dilemmas have generated frustration and resistance among excluded ex-combatants. In an informal discussion with female ex-combatants revealed that many had consulted with colleagues on whether to reintegrate into their places of birth or relocate to new communities. It was discussed during their awaiting discharge from cantonments. One participant recounted that she and her comrades collectively decided to settle in Sukumbasi Basti after through discussion about the various option:

> *We discussed in a team of comrades and agreed to settle in Sukumbasi Basti. We had already talked about the settlement while staying in the cantonment. Some comrades suggested moving to Dang district, but we eventually chose this place because it was more comfortable for us. None of our villagers are here. If we went to go Dang, our relatives and villagers would probably find out about our situation, since it is close to our birthplace.*

This account reflects how female ex-combatants strategically considered the social consequences while returning home. It was against the benefits of anonymity and identity reconstruction in new locations. The combatants wanted to distance from stigma and past associations while making the resettlement decisions.

Robins and Bhandari (2016) argued that women who had experienced equality with men during the conflict may find it difficult to readjust to the traditional domestic roles prevalent in rural communities. This tension may have further motivated the decision to seek reintegration in unfamiliar settings. Although some family members occasionally visited them in their new communities. However, many female ex-combatants remained emotionally and physically distant from their relatives.

In some cases, the decision to settle away from their places of birth was also influenced by the preferences of their spouses. While some women expressed a willingness to return to their hometowns, their husbands were often reluctant. For example, one participant described her failed attempt to convince her husband to move

to Rolpa, his place of birth. As a result, they opted to remain near the cantonment and constructed a home there. She expressed this choice not as a preference but as a badhyata (compulsion). The process of building homes together with male ex-combatants further delayed their ability to reconnect with their families and relatives. It further deepen their emotion and create problem of logistical arrangements.

The challenges of reintegration were further compounded by deeply entrenched social norms and hierarchical family structures. The authority exercised by male guardians in traditional way such as fathers were problematic. These dynamics created additional barriers to reconciliation and family reintegration. As a consequence, many female ex-combatants refrained from visiting their families. It was happened even after their formal discharge from the cantonment.

During the armed conflict, the CPN (Maoist) gathered widespread community support because of their ideological promises of structural transformation and social justice. However, as one participant noted, the post-conflict period failed to deliver tangible improvements in the social sector. The lack of meaningful change disappointed both the former combatants and the communities that had supported them. Consequently, the female ex-combatants struggled to justify their involvement in the conflict to their families and communities. The combatants themselves were uncertain about the outcomes and legitimacy of the promises made to the community people.

Thus, reintegration was not merely a logistical and economic issue but was deeply embedded in familial, social and political dynamics. The interplay between personal relationships, social expectations and ideological disappointment significantly shaped the post-war realities of female ex-combatants in Nepal.

A wide gap between the promises of the CPN (Maoist) armed conflict and its actual outcomes made it difficult for former combatants to justify their actions to their families and communities. Unfulfilled expectations led to widespread disappointment and social detachment. One participant recounted:

> *When I first returned to my community, the community looked at me differently. People asked why the armed conflict had ended without achieving the goals? Upon my return, I noticed that nothing had changed because people's lives were still the same. It was difficult to answer all the questions posed by both my family and the community.*

In the post-conflict transition, heightened community expectations especially among CPN (Maoist) supporters were not matched by improvements in daily life which hinder for the reintegration. As Özerdem (2008) notes, socio-political and cultural contexts play a significant role in shaping ex-combatants' return to civilian life.

Female ex-combatants' reintegration decisions were strongly shaped by bonds formed during the conflict It provided emotional, logistical and economic support in civilian life. One participant explained "I had no idea where to settle. But we comrades talked and decided to live together. We needed each other's help in our daily lives" These wartime friendships extended into peacetime and encouraged them to remain together at the community level. The sense of solidarity and mutual dependence they had built helped as a coping mechanism in their reintegration journey.

Female ex-combatants continued to face struggles within their homes even after the official end of the conflict. It was of their relationships with husbands. The DDR process created disparities among ex-combatants, as some were able to resettle and establish homes earlier. It also motivated others to follow the same. A participant described:

> *My husband and I were looking for a place to settle. While searching, we found that many of our comrades were already living in this area. Some Ex-combatants from Rolpa district and others from different districts had already bought land here. So, we decided to live in this place. We were thinking we would get support during difficult times.*

Female ex-combatants like Nirmala choose reintegrate into areas where other former combatants had already settled. The familiarity and shared history they had developed during the conflict provided them with a sense of comfort and closeness.

Despite this, many female ex-combatants expressed fear and insecurity in reintegration into society individually. Their lack of confidence in self-reintegration came from their past involvement in the armed conflict. Moreover, it was the reason of failure to achieve the transformative goals they had once defended. One participant noted that many chose to live collectively with their peers in order to access mutual support. Some even found reintegration opportunities through the networks of friends and relatives. In this context, personal relationships, particularly those forged during the conflict, played a critical role in facilitating social reintegration.

As Subedi (2014) notes, the prolonged association of these individuals with the Maoist armed conflict meant that their collective identity as "Maobaadi" or "Purba Ladaku" overshadowed their personal identities. Public perception towards the ex-combatants was shaped less by who they were as individuals and more by their past affiliations. It further complicated their attempts to re-establish themselves in civilian life.

Fieldwork revealed that relationships among female ex-combatants had shifted from wartime solidarity to post-conflict competition for positions, power, social acceptance and community influence. The social reintegration indicate that it involved not only adapting to civilian life but also competing for social capital among peers.

One of the significant motivating factors for the reintegration of female ex-combatants into settlements such as Sukumbasi Basti was the affordability of land which was inexpensive in comparison to the urban areas The government provided voluntary retirement packages including the financial package to ex-combatants was insufficient for establishing a livelihood in urban areas where the cost of land was high. A participant reflected on this limitation, stating:

> *I settled in this area because the land was inexpensive. It was Aailani land (unregistered). The voluntary retirement amount I received was not enough to purchase land in the Numbari area. That is why I chose to settle here, in the Sukumbasi Basti. It was easier for me to integrate because most of the people living here are poor and uneducated. I am in a relatively better position in comparison to them.*

Such testimonies highlight that female ex-combatant found it relatively easier to reintegrate in socioeconomically marginalized and poor areas. In these settings, their prior political engagement and relatively improved economic status allowed them to assume leadership roles because they were economically better than the community people because of the retirement packages Their political capital often translated into greater social recognition. These elements help them to facilitate community acceptance.

However, despite these opportunities, women faced substantial challenges during the DDR process. One institutional barrier came from the policy of the cantonment management committee. They prohibited pregnant women from remaining within

cantonment sites. Such measures were apparently introduced for security and logistical reasons. The female ex-combatants who were there interpreted it as discriminatory. As one participant explained:

> *In the cantonment, many female ex-combatants became pregnant. According to the rules, pregnant women and mothers with children were not allowed to stay there. As a result, we had to live in rented houses outside the cantonment. During that time, I came into contact with the landlords and developed relationships with community members. It gave the locals an opportunity to learn about us such as our behaviour and our values. This interaction helped foster a favourable perception. It ultimately making easier for us to decide to settle in those communities.*

The exclusion of pregnant women from cantonments was perceived by many as an act of discrimination. It inadvertently facilitated early exposure to civilian life and allowed these women to establish social connections with local residents. This unintended outcome contributed positively to their eventual reintegration. It help them develop context-specific strategies for the integration in community even before their formal discharge from the cantonments.

The Female ex-combatants reintegration experiences were shaped not only by state policies and economic limitations but also by social dynamics at the community and individual agency. Some systemic barriers created obstacles and others knowing and unknowing opened new ways for community engagement and acceptance.

Transcendence in the Reintegration

In contrast to the ambitions of the female ex-combatants, the expectations and perceptions of the receiving communities often contradicted their intentions. It obstructed the reintegration process. Villagers frequently questioned the returnees' combatants about the promises they had made prior to joining the armed conflict. These questions reflected the community's disappointment and scepticism. Many of the ex-combatants had left with the vision of transforming Nepal and addressing local grievances. However, upon their return, little political and social change had materialized (Robins & Bhandari, 2016). Some of them re-entered society not as agents of change but with new identities such as disability and diminished capability further complicating their reintegration.

The inability of the female ex-combatants to demonstrate tangible outcomes for the community in the post-conflict period invites disappointment. They returned not as transformative leaders but as "ex-combatants," a label that often carried social stigma and ambiguity. This identity shift made their re-entry into civilian life more complex. However, reintegration did not commence only after the formal closure of the cantonments. In fact, for many female ex-combatants, the process began during the cantonment phase itself.

Due to pregnancy and childcare responsibilities, several women relocated from the cantonments to nearby communities. As one participant recounted:

> *I lived in a rented house after I gave birth to a baby. Over time, I became familiar to the area. I did not want to return to my hometown because I had been living in the Terai for a long time. Life in the hills was difficult, so I chose to remain here.*

The decision to resettle was often influenced by the interplay of various factors such as familiarity with the area, the topography, perceived quality of life, prior interactions with community members. Many had already collected insights into the people and environment. It make them feel more confident about integrating into their new surroundings compared to their place of origin.

In post-war context security of the female ex-combatants into the society is vital. However, some ex-combatants conducted basic assessments of their prospective communities. In contrast many relocated without full knowledge of the local security context. Despite these uncertainties they were willing to take risks and rely on the presence of fellow ex-combatants. As one participant remarked, “We chose this place because our comrades had already settled here.” Another participant admitted, “We came here without much information—jepareparos bhanera baseko.” (We settled here, come what may).

This scenario highlights the lack of structured reintegration planning. In such contexts, sensitization of both the receiving communities and the ex-combatants could have played a critical role in simplifying reintegration. As Gear (2002) notes, many female ex-combatants felt discarded, neglected and forgotten by the very entities for which they had fought. Such sentiments unaddressed it can pose significant threats to long-term peace and post-war development.

Kaplan and Nussio (2015) suggest that ex-combatants tend to reintegrate more smoothly in participatory communities. However, based on my observations, this conclusion appears overly simplistic. Even in participatory settings, ex-combatants often needed to remain organized and vigilant. It is because of lingering threats from former enemies and hostile factions.

The government and the CPN (Maoist) played a limited role in facilitating reintegration. They focused mainly on discharging ex-combatants rather than comprehensive planning. As Özerdem (2012) notes, the lack of needs assessments, resettlement plan and institutional support increased risks of social exclusion and potential remobilization.

Crucially, the reintegration of female ex-combatants was not prioritized in national policy frameworks. As a result, reintegration decisions were left largely to the choice of the individuals and communities involved.

Inequality in the Reintegration

Structural inequalities related to education, gender and socioeconomic background have contributed uneven reintegration outcomes among former combatants (Rhea, 2014). Particularly, female ex-combatants often face compounded disadvantages during the reintegration processes. Female ex-combatants reported significant challenges in their social reintegration following the conclusion of Nepal's armed conflict. Their difficulties began from the early phase of cantonment and extended throughout their attempts to re-establish civilian lives. For many, returning home involved facing persistent and deeply embedded challenges, including social stigma, lack of resources and a strained relationship with community members (Bowd & Alpaslan, 2013). In particular, those who resettled in the Sukumbasi Basti encountered acute problems related to housing, access to basic services such as electricity and infrastructures.

During the armed conflict, the lives of the female ex-combatants more structured and manageable under the leadership of the CPN (Maoist)., The CPN (Maoist) took whole responsibility for their welfare, logistics and security. However, the post-conflict reality was different. The female ex-combatants were unable to manage domestic and social responsibilities without institutional support immediate after the demobilization and returning to the civilian life. One participant mentioned that, due to her full-time involvement in the armed struggle she was left without personal property. It was

happened due to the party wartime policy not to keep the personal property. As a result when she returned she lacked even basic assets to facilitate reintegration (Özerdem, 2012).

The transition from military life to civilian life was further complicated by social exclusion and structural discrimination. For instance, a participant upon settling in an Aailani (unregistered) land plot described how she faced denial of access to drinking water and community roads. The local residents not only barred her from using a common water tap but also threatened her for using a path that passed through privately owned land. These acts of exclusion highlighted the deep mistrust and stigma toward female ex-combatants by the receiving communities.

Community distrust and negative perceptions restricted female ex-combatants' access to basic services and disturbed their proper reintegration. As Bowd and Alpaslan (2013) mentioned that weak mutual trust, combined with limited support from the state, intensified their vulnerabilities. However, their resilience and agency were strong.

The government and the CPN (Maoist) leadership failed to prioritize the reintegration needs of female ex-combatants such as housing, livelihoods and community reconciliation. This neglect may be attributed to the shifting focus of senior political and military leaders. They became increasingly engaged in post-conflict power struggles at the national level. It sideline the grassroots concerns of former combatants.

Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) have played a significant role in supporting the reintegration of female ex-combatants in post-conflict Nepal. These groups not only offered access to vital resources such as firewood and fodder but also provide a platform for expanding social networks and community engagement. Membership in CFUGs enables individuals to collect forest products essential for daily subsistence that include fuel for cooking and fodder for livestock. However, despite these benefits, many female ex-combatants were systematically excluded from CFUGs due to discriminatory local practices.

A community member mentioned that three CFUGs were present in the area, only a small number of female ex-combatants were granted membership. They were largely excluded from participating in meetings and decision-making processes. One significant barrier was their residence on Aailani land. It not only deprived them of formal land ownership but also created hesitancy and legal uncertainty to be a member

of CFUG. This exclusion continued despite female ex-combatants' legal right to be part of these groups.

The disconnect between national-level policy and local-level implementation further complicated the reintegration process. While broader structural transformations were underway at the State level, these shifts did not translate into meaningful inclusion at the grassroots. As a result, female ex-combatants continued to face obstacles in accessing the benefits of community-based natural resource governance. It is a key element of their social and economic reintegration.

For the female ex-combatant's integration into women's groups was comparatively easier. As one participant noted, numerous women's groups were established in the community by various development organizations that aim to promote women's leadership and participation. These groups were more welcoming and female ex-combatants were encouraged to join. However, research suggests that communities affected by prolonged violence and the presence of remobilized ex-combatants may remain fearful and suspicious of female ex-combatants due to entrenched stereotypes and perceptions of threat (McMullin, 2013). Nevertheless, in some contexts, female ex-combatants were more vocal and assertive than other women. Their vocalness facilitated their acceptance in such community groups.

A few female ex-combatants demonstrated notable foresight and resourcefulness by saving money during their time in the cantonments. Some borrowed from friends and relatives to purchase land before their formal discharge. It helps themselves more favourably during reintegration. One participant reported saving NPR 120,000 during her cantonment period, which she used to buy land. However, due to a lack of education and legal awareness, she was unaware that the land was designated for public and government use. Despite this, she later sold the land for NPR 450,000 per ropani and later construct a home there. It highlights the role of agency in navigating reintegration challenges.

Many social issues raised in the CPN (Maoist)'s 40-point demands, especially gender- and caste-based discrimination, persisted even after the party came to power. As an example, they hinder the reintegration of female ex-combatants. Despite political changing political environment rooted inequalities and discriminatory malpractices remained unaddressed at the community level.

A female ex-combatant narrated her personal experience with inter-caste marriage, which demonstrates the persistence of these structural inequalities. She had married a fellow combatant from the Tamang community. The decision what they made her father-in-law strongly opposed. When they visited him in Kabhrepalanchowk district, he refused to acknowledge their union. He expressed discontent with the fact that the marriage was not arranged according to his wishes. He dismissed them without listening to their reasoning and left the meeting abruptly. In contrast, her own parents welcomed the couple and performed the Tika ceremony. It symbolized acceptance of the marriage.

Traditionally, the caste system in Nepal has prohibited inter-caste marriage, It is largely practices among high-caste families who are devoted in preserving their social status. The young men and women challenged this system during the armed conflict. Here, those who adhered to traditional caste norms and held influence within the community resisted such change. There was widespread hope among CPN (Maoist) cadres that the armed conflict would bring about a transformation in rooted social hierarchies, including caste and gender-based discrimination. However, as one participant noted, such expectations remained largely unmet at the grassroots level. She described how her marriage to a lower-caste comrade created significant tension. Her parents refrained from explicitly criticizing her decision. However, their disappointment was evident, particularly due to the loss of social prestige it entailed. Community members, too, were reluctant to accept her as a legitimate member of society. As she stated, *"Raithane samaj ma chhesko bhaiyo."* (It became a stain in the indigenous community).

Although many female ex-combatants challenged traditional caste-based marriage norms during the conflict. As a consequence, they faced strong social stigma upon returning to civilian life. As Dahal (2015) notes, the combined stigma of militarization and gender norm misbehavior made it difficult for women in inter-caste marriages to regain family acceptance and integrate into their communities.

The sense of guilt and discomfort expressed by some female ex-combatants about their inter-caste marriages in the post-conflict context highlights a deep contradiction. While such marriages were seen as revolutionary acts during the armed struggle. However, in peacetime they were often interpreted as breaches of social politeness. One

participant shared that, based on her own difficult experiences, she advises young people to consider the social realities of their families and communities before entering into inter-caste unions. Another female ex-combatant mentioned that her marriage was encouraged by party leaders and was celebrated through a Janabadi Bibaha (Progressive Marriage) in the cantonment. At the time, they did not foresee that they would eventually return to civilian life and be expected to reintegrate into traditional community structures. They had assumed their revolutionary identities would be sustained beyond the conflict. It was not anticipated the degree of social backlash they would face upon re-entry into civilian society.

This disconnects between wartime ideals and post-conflict realities highlights the broader failure of the reintegration process to address deep-rooted societal discrimination. As the political structures changed at the national level, the persistence of patriarchal and caste-based norms in local communities has continued. It obstructs the meaningful reintegration of female ex-combatants into civilian life.

Conclusion

Despite the presence of both motivating and demotivating factors, the social reintegration of female ex-combatants in the Sukumbasi Basti remains tense with challenges. The lives of these women continue to be marked by stress and marginalization., It is due to the lack of recognition for their roles during the conflict as well as the difficulty of reconciling the values and expectations of civilian life. It was shaped by their experiences as combatants. It reveals that the social reintegration of female ex-combatants in Nepal has been particularly difficult. While access to education, improved infrastructure and the presence of fellow ex-combatants served as important pull factors. The reintegration into new settlements, including the negative attitudes of family members, relatives and community members in their places of birth counterbalanced by push factors

The transition from military to civilian life has required these women to assume roles similar to those of their mothers and grandmothers. It often confined to domestic responsibilities. This shift was neither anticipated nor desired at the end of the conflict. However, many have come to terms with this reality and have attempted to adapt to the expectations of civilian life. Such adaptation, however, has not been without psychological and emotional cost. The meaningful community participation is essential

for sustained social reintegration. Nevertheless, the persistence of patriarchal norms, values, rituals, and power structures continues to restrict the agency and freedom of female ex-combatants. Despite their significant contributions to social and political change during the conflict, they remain marginalized and continue to struggle to find a meaningful place within post-conflict Nepali society.

Acknowledgements

This article is prepared based on Author's PhD in 2021 from Kathmandu University School of Education Nepal which was supported by Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and Nepal Center for Contemporary Research (NCCR). The author is deeply grateful to the ex-combatants and stakeholders who shared their experiences.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's authorship and publication.

References

Aning, K., & Edu-Afful, F. (2013). Unintended impacts and the gendered consequences of peacekeeping economies in Liberia. *International Peacekeeping, 20*(1), 17–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2013.761828

Bhandari, C. (2016). Social reality of armed conflict and peace: Expectations and realities of female ex-combatants in Nepal. In P. Adhikari, S. Ghimire, & V. Mallik (Eds.), *Nepal transition to peace: A decade of the comprehensive peace accord* (pp. 243–259). Nepal Transition to Peace Institute.

de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)

Berghof Foundation. (2012). *Reintegration challenges of ex-Maoist combatants in Nepal*. Berghof Foundation.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Bhandari, R. K., & Robins, S. (2016, November 21). Towards a transformative justice [Opinion]. *The Kathmandu Post*.

Bowd, R., & Alpaslan, O. (2013). How to assess social reintegration of ex-combatants. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 7*(4), 453–475. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2012.727537

Dahal, S. (2015). Challenging the boundaries: The narratives of the female ex-combatants in Nepal. In S. Shekhawat (Ed.), *Female combatants in conflict and peace: Challenging gender in violent and post-conflict reintegration* (pp. 185–199). Palgrave Macmillan.

De Vries, H., & Wiegink, N. (2011). Breaking up and going home? Contesting two assumptions in the demobilization and reintegration of former combatants. *International Peacekeeping, 18*(1), 38–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2011.527506

Gear, S. (2002, September 20). *Wounded healers: The rehabilitation of ex-combatants in South Africa*. Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. http://www.csvr.org.za

Ghimire, B. (2020, August 28). Teachers challenge local governments' decision to mandatorily enroll their children in public schools. *The Kathmandu Post*. https://tinyurl.com/mtmwcj4f

Giddens, A., Duneier, M., & Applebaum, R. (2017). *Essentials of sociology*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Heinemann-Grüder, A. (2002). *Becoming an ex-military man: Demobilization and reintegration of military professionals in Eastern Europe*. Bonn International Center for Conversion.

hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.

Kaplan, O., & Nussio, E. (2018). Community counts: The social reintegration of ex-combatants in Colombia. *Conflict Management and Peace Science, 35*(2), 132–153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894215614506

K. C., L., & Van der Gemma, D. (2018) Living Maoist gender ideology: Experiences of women ex-combatants in Nepal. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*.

K. C., L. (2019). Everyday realities of reintegration: Experiences of Maoist "verified" women ex-combatants in the aftermath of war in Nepal. *Conflict, Security & Development, 19*(5), 453–474. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2019.1658969

K.C., L. (2025). Do local norms affect women ex-combatants' reintegration in the postwar era? *Global Studies Quarterly, 5*(1), ksaf015. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf015

Ketola, H. (2020). Withdrawing from politics? Gender, agency and women ex-fighters in Nepal. *Security Dialogue*, 51(6), 519–536. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010620906322

Kingma, K., & Sayers, V. (1995). *Demobilization in the Horn of Africa*. Bonn International Center for Conversion.

Kingma, K. (2002). Demobilisation and peacebuilding in Africa. In S. Newman & A. Schnabel (Eds.), *Recovering from civil conflict* (pp. 181–201). Frank Cass.

Ketola, H. (2020). Withdrawing from politics? Gender, agency and women ex-fighters in Nepal. *International Feminist Journal of Politics, 22*(2), 205–223.

Macfarlane, K. (2023). Child soldiers in Nepal: Reconceptualizing reintegration and identity. *International Affairs, 99*(3), 1211–1230. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad106

Maringira, G., & Brankovic, J. (2013). *The persistence of military identities among ex-combatants in South Africa*. Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation & University of the Western Cape.

McMullin, J. R. (2013). Integration or separation? The stigmatisation of ex-combatants after war. *Review of International Studies*, *39*(2), 385–414. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210512000228

Meyers, D. T. (1999). Feminist perspectives on the self. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/

Özerdem, A. (2008). *Post-armed conflict recovery: Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration*. I.B. Tauris.

Özerdem, A. (2012). A re-conceptualisation of ex-combatant reintegration: A 'social reintegration' approach. *Conflict, Security & Development, 12*(1), 51–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2012.667661

Pauls, E. (2023). *Gendered reintegration: Women's stakes and agency in post-war contexts* [Policy Brief]. Berghof Foundation.

Podder, S. (2012). From recruitment to reintegration: Communities and ex-combatants in post-conflict Liberia. *International Peacekeeping, 19*(2), 186–202.

Rhea, R. W. (2014). *A comparative study of ex-combatant reintegration in the Great Lakes region*. World Bank.

Robins, S., & Bhandari, R. K. (2016, May). *Poverty, stigma and alienation: Reintegration challenges of ex-Maoist combatants in Nepal* [Participatory action research project report]. Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York.

Subedi, D. B., & Jenkins, B. (2020). The nexus between reintegration of ex-combatants and reconciliation in Nepal: A social capital approach. In *Reconciliation in conflict-affected communities* (pp. 41–56). Springer.

Subedi, D. B. (2014). Discontents and resistance of 'unverified' ex-combatants and challenges to their rehabilitation in Nepal. Agrarian South*: Journal of Political Economy*, *3*(2), 203–237. https://doi.org/10.1177/2277976014550772

Swain, J., & King, B. (2022). Using informal conversations in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 21*, Article 16094069221085056. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221085056

Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behavior. *Journal of Social Issues, 30*(3), 41–78. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1974.tb00706.x

United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR. (2022). *Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS) 4.30: Reintegration*. United Nations.

Upreti, B. R., Shivakoti, S., & Bharati, K. (2018). Frustrated and confused: Mapping the socio-political struggles of female ex-combatants in Nepal. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 19*(4), 32–52.

Upreti, B. R., & Shivakoti, S. (2018). The struggle of female ex-combatants in Nepal. *Peace Review, 30*(1), 78–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2017.1419937

Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell.

To cite this article:

Adhikari, D. P. (2025). Social reintegration challenges of female ex-combatants in post-conflict Nepal. *Journal of Education and Research, 15*(1), 89-112. *https://doi.org/10.51474/jer/19862*