

MAKING WOMEN COUNT FOR PEACE

**GENDER, EMPOWERMENT AND CONFLICT
IN SOUTH ASIA**



Gender, Empowerment and Conflict: Experiences from Nepal

**Workshop on
GENDER, EMPOWERMENT AND CONFLICT**

27-28 September 2013

Hotel Himalaya

Kathmandu

Nepal

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CONTENTS

The research project: 'Making Women Count for Peace'	2
The workshop: 'Gender, Empowerment and Conflict'	2
Workshop activities	3
Morning session: Key issues for women and how they are being addressed	3
Session I: Is participation in militaries empowering for women?	
Session II: Has conflict resolution empowered or disempowered women?	
Session III: How can peace be empowering for women?	
Afternoon breakout session: Group work	6
Is participation in militaries empowering for women?	
What are the difficulties in the transition of female ex-combatants?	
Is the role of women in party politics to work for gender equality?	
Does international assertion of women's rights help or harm?	
Workshop conclusions and output	7
Annexures: Participant list and Workshop programme	8

THE RESEARCH PROJECT: 'MAKING WOMEN COUNT FOR PEACE'

The project 'Making Women Count for Peace: Gender, Empowerment and Conflict in South Asia' is a collaborative effort by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) together with six partner institutions in India and Nepal: Malaviya Centre for Peace Research (MCPR) at Banaras Hindu University, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, WISCOMP in New Delhi, the North East India Studies Programme at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Omeo Kumar Das Institute for Social Change and Development in Assam, and the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South in Nepal. The project addresses the role of women in Northeast India and Nepal in local governance and politics, particularly within the context of peace and security processes. The primary aim is to generate new knowledge on what empowerment means to women in situations of conflict. The project will produce both academic and policy-relevant output, including recommendations to policymakers on how women can play a more prominent role in peacebuilding, and how such a role may be linked to the goal of women's empowerment. Through coordinated research including fieldwork and workshops, the project investigates how women might be empowered by engaging actively in peacebuilding, whether in the context of protracted conflict in Northeast India, or in the post-conflict setting of Nepal. Two target group workshops have been organized since the project started in July 2012. The first was held in Shillong, Northeast India, 2-3 August 2012. This report covers the second target group workshop held in Kathmandu, Nepal, 27-28 September 2013.

THE WORKSHOP: 'GENDER, EMPOWERMENT AND CONFLICT'

The aim of this workshop was to discuss and share information about the efforts of women in post-conflict Nepal to promote peace and women's empowerment, whether as activists, members of social movements, politicians, writers, or in any other capacity. The objective was to gain a better understanding of the efforts and challenges, and the meaning of 'empowerment', as seen by women themselves, in order to more fully inform the forward work of the project, as well as establish concrete dialogue avenues for participants with and within Nepal's activist, policymaker, and practitioner communities. The format was a high-level, closed event, attended by approximately fifty members of Nepal's civil society, politics, international community, and other relevant actors. The participant list with affiliation and e-mails is attached in the annexures.

WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

Morning session: Key issues for women and how they are being addressed

The first session started with a keynote address to facilitate discussion, followed by three roundtable discussions and a breakout interactive session. Jason Miklian with the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) served as moderator. Following brief welcome remarks by Kristian Berg Harpviken (Director, PRIO) and Ranabir Samaddar (Director, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group) a keynote 'kickoff' lecture was held by Aruna Rayamajhi, journalist and Executive Member of Sancharika Samuha. Ms. Rayamajhi highlighted her experiences covering the Maoist conflict from the war's inception through to the peace process, discussing in particular how both the conflict and peace process empowered – and dis-empowered - women in Nepali society and at the individual level, including in her own role as a journalist during the conflict.



During the discussion period, several participants discussed how Ms. Rayamajhi's experiences were relative to the experiences of women throughout Nepal, and how 'empowerment' and 'self-confidence' related not just to the experiences of participants in Nepal's 'People's War', but also to the witnesses. There was also consensus that after the Peace Agreement, women and women's issues have been sidelined, and gains made (in terms of empowerment) during the conflict have largely been lost.

For each of the roundtable discussions, a moderator led the participants in an open-ended discussion, with specific themes and guiding questions designed to facilitate discussion. The session themes were as follows:

Session 1: Is participation in militaries empowering for women?

Session 2: Has conflict resolution empowered or disempowered women?

Session 3: How can peace be empowering for women?

For additional information and sub-questions, please see the workshop programme. For each session, participants raised several key points and discussions were robust.

Session 1

In the first roundtable session, a key theme of the discussion was on the relationship of the number of women participants to the relationship of those participants to the broader community. As one participant mentioned: "are we just counting numbers (of combatants) here, or are we attempting to be doing more?", speaking to the difficulty of extrapolating change in a community based upon the experiences of a vocal (if inspiring in some ways) minority of individuals. Also, the notion of 'empowerment for whom, and what type of empowerment' was heavily discussed. Participants focused particularly on what we (in the sense of the academic and international community) mean by 'effective' empowerment, and how this 'effective' empowerment is not necessarily *lasting* empowerment when projects end and international actors leave the scene.

Session 2

In the second session, participants again returned to the theme of temporary versus lasting empowerment. Of key importance was contextualizing sexual violence in Nepali society before, during and after the conflict ended – and how domestic violence fit within the narrative of ‘national conflict’ vs. ‘domestic conflict’ as the war’s time period strained traditional familial and community bonds. Session Two closed with a discussion of how conflict and violence at the national level was rationalized, and how similar rationalizations are also heard within the family and community as justification for actions. In this sense, to speak of either ‘conflict resolution’ or ‘empowerment’ as absolutes is incorrect, and does not adequately speak to the variance amongst citizens as to their experiences with conflict resolution or empowerment, and does not account for the fact that the empowerment of a given group does not mean that group’s permanent empowerment as forces against the progress continue to fight to chip away gains.

Session 3

In the third session the discussion of the cyclical nature of ‘peace’ was expanded upon as regards empowerment. Just like in war, peace can be polarizing as winners and losers from the conflict are either empowered or dismissed. In Nepal, the lack of high-level roles given to women by members of any of the major political parties, and a general lack of indigenous initiatives designed to address many of the concerns of women’s activists, female ex-combatants and women’s groups during peace negotiations, had a rather chilling effect on the gains made by women during the conflict in terms of individual and community empowerment. Further, the role of the international community was discussed in detail, and many local women’s organizations feel that although the aid money has bought expanded operations, the international community has also done significant harm to many elements of the women’s rights agenda by coming in and overlapping their own agendas over the top of local agendas without the required understanding of local cultural factors, thus in effect hampering efforts to concretize empowerment.

Afternoon Breakout Session: Group Work

For the interactive session we broke into four self-selected groups, each group tasked with coming up to a *consensus* answer to one of the following questions:

- A. *Is participation in militaries empowering for women, is it a permanent empowerment, and does it empower all women in the community, or only the combatants?*
- B. *What are the particular difficulties in the transition of female ex-combatants into politics, activism, governance, or the security forces – and how can they be overcome?*
- C. *How can the role of women in party politics truly work for women's issues and gender equality?*
- D. *How the assertion of women's rights and gender equality by international organizations contribute to women's empowerment, and where can it be counterproductive?*

The breakout session was designed to illustrate the challenges of consensus in policymaking (how most agreements in Nepal have been constructed post-2006), even when like-minded groups sit together. Individual personalities also played a significant role, as those with varied perspectives and experiences at times had competing visions of the most constructive answers. After 45 minutes of discussion, each group presented findings to the audience, describing not only their answers but also their method of achieving consensus. Some groups were more successful at this consensus than others, but all spoke with one voice for the presentations.



Three of the four work groups stressed the value of education for women, and how delivering education can be a more constructive form of empowerment than the (real) empowerment given through participation in an insurgent movement can provide. Specifically, Group A mentioned the boosts in self-confidence and the ‘follow-on’ effects of equality that military participation provided, in addition to the positive, entrepreneurial outlook that it gave to many women, opening the door for later opportunities. Group B stressed the psychological components of transition, and how despite efforts to provide these services, they remain lacking in Nepal to the detriment of former combatants – both women and men. Group D lamented how often, the international community’s proclivity to proclamations (which is also done by local audiences) is not followed through to meaningful action, and how socio-cultural norms need to be better taken into consideration and conducted with more sensitivity when implementing interventions designed to influence practices that are themselves heavily determinant on existing culture.

WORKSHOP CONCLUSIONS AND OUTPUTS

We received a good deal of positive feedback on the workshop, as participants felt that it was interesting and rewarding for both our project team and the Nepal experts that participated. The *Kathmandu Post* also wrote up an article on the workshop, available at:

<http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2013/09/28/nation/women-empowerment-losing-momentum/254155.html>

The entire proceedings were also recorded, and an audio recording is available upon request (please contact Jason Miklian: jason@prio.no). In terms of wrap-up and forward agenda, it was again communicated at the close of the workshop to the partners and participants that a key goal of the event was to bring together both groups in order to better inform the Nepal experience for the project ‘Making Women Count for Peace’ – and to enable partners to share their experiences from other parts of South Asia with their counterparts or colleagues in Nepal.

ANNEXURES

LIST OF WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Participants name	Organisation	E-mail
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Making Women Count for Peace: Gender, Empowerment and Conflict in South Asia

Workshop on Gender, Empowerment and Conflict

Hotel Himalaya, Kathmandu
28 September 2013

Programme

09:00 Welcome and introduction
09:30 Participants' round of introduction

Roundtable discussions on WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND CONFLICT

10:00 SESSION 1: Is participation in militaries empowering for women?

Questions: In South Asia today, more women are joining the armed forces as well as peacekeeping missions, but with what consequences?

Is participation in militaries (state or non-state) empowering for women?

Was there a transformative power in the Maoist gender ideology, and were gender values positively transformed during the Maoist conflict?

10:30 *Tea break*

11:00 SESSION 2: Has the conflict resolution empowered or disempowered women?

Questions: In post-conflict Nepal, what has happened to the female ex-combatants, and do women in non-state militaries have anything to

contribute to the rebuilding of a more peaceful, tolerant, just and secure society?

What are the particular difficulties in the transition of female ex-combatants into politics, activism, governance, or the security forces?

Can women's participation in peacebuilding bring in a 'transformative agenda' and expand the post-conflict space for rights and justice?

11:30 SESSION 3: How can peace be empowering for women?

Does affirmative action (quotas or reservation) for women make political parties more responsive to gender equality issues?

Does reservation help create constituencies with an interest in gender equality and women's empowerment?

Can we expect women assembly/committee members to promote women's empowerment when their role is to promote the interests of their constituency?

12:30 *Lunch*

13:30 Group work: Questions to explore

- A. Is participation in militaries empowering for women?
- B. What are the particular difficulties in the transition of female ex-combatants into politics, activism, governance, or the security forces?
- C. Is the role of women in party politics really to work for women's issues and gender equality?
- D. Does the assertion of women's rights and gender equality by international organizations contribute to women's empowerment, or can it be counterproductive?

15:00 *Tea break*

15:30 Presentation of group work (Group moderators - 15 minutes each)

16:30 Summing Up