

# Do All Women Combatants Experience War and Peace Uniformly? Intersectionality and Women Combatants

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Do women combatants experience war and post-war “peace” in the same way? Existing studies on gender and war treat women combatants as a homogeneous group with similar identities, interests, and statuses experiencing the war uniformly. I argue that women combatants’ experiences of war and post-war “peace” cannot be detached from their multiple statuses, positions, and identities. I follow the stories of five women ex-combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal at different spatial and temporal spaces out of thirty-nine semi-structured interviews that I conducted in Nepal (2017–2018). The women ex-combatants come from the same rank but from different caste, class, ethnicity, marital status, social status, education status, and geographical location. I use a feminist intersectional framework inspired by “matrix of domination” while using intersectionality also as a method. My research shows that women ex-combatants’ experiences of the insurgency and post-insurgency lives have been molded by their intersectional positions and identities in complex ways. This work not only contributes to the holistic understanding of the war in its complexity but also has implications for designing the policy interventions aimed at the prevention of armed conflict and building sustainable post-war “peace.”

¿Las mujeres combatientes experimentan la guerra y la “paz” de la posguerra de igual manera? En estudios existentes sobre género y guerra, se considera a las mujeres combatientes como un grupo homogéneo, con identidades, intereses y estatus semejantes, que experimentan la guerra de manera similar. En esta investigación, sostengo que las experiencias de las combatientes sobre la guerra y la “paz” de la posguerra no pueden desvincularse de sus diferentes identidades, posiciones y estatus. Realicé un recorrido por las historias de cinco excombatientes de la insurgencia maoísta en Nepal, en diferentes situaciones espaciotemporales, mediante treinta y nueve entrevistas semiestructuradas que llevé a cabo en Nepal (2017–2018). Las excombatientes tenían el mismo rango, pero diferían en ciertos aspectos como su casta, clase social, etnia, estado civil, estado social, nivel de educación y ubicación geográfica. Utilicé un marco interseccional feminista inspirado en la “matriz de dominación” en combinación con la interseccionalidad como método de análisis. En mi investigación, demuestro que las identidades y posiciones interseccionales de las excombatientes moldearon, de manera compleja, sus experiencias de vida en la insurgencia y posinsurgencia. Este trabajo no solo contribuye a lograr una comprensión integral de la guerra, en toda su complejidad, sino que además tiene implicancias para diseñar intervenciones sobre políticas que eviten conflictos armados y construyan una “paz” de posguerra sostenible.

Les femmes combattantes vivent-elles la guerre et la « paix » d’après-guerre de la même manière ? Les études existantes sur le genre et la guerre traitent les femmes combattantes comme un groupe homogène dont les membres ont des identités, des intérêts et des statuts similaires et vivent la guerre d’une manière uniforme. Je soutiens que les façons dont les femmes combattantes vivent la guerre et la « paix » d’après-guerre ne peuvent pas être détachées de leurs multiples statuts, positions et identités. J’ai suivi les histoires de cinq femmes ex-combattantes de l’insurrection maoïste au Népal à différents moments et en différents lieux par le biais de trente-neuf entretiens semi-structurés que j’ai menés au Népal (2017–2018). Ces ex-combattantes avaient le même grade mais leur caste, leur classe, leur ethnicité, leur situation maritale, leur statut social, leur niveau d’étude et leur origine géographique n’étaient pas identiques. J’ai employé un cadre féministe intersectionnel inspiré de la « matrice de domination » ainsi qu’une méthode d’intersectionnalité. Ma recherche montre que les façons dont les ex-combattantes ont vécu l’insurrection et l’après-insurrection ont été modelées de manières complexes par leurs identités et positions intersectionnelles. Ce travail contribue non seulement à la compréhension holistique de la guerre dans sa complexité, mais a également des implications pour la conception des interventions politiques visant à prévenir les conflits armés et à établir une « paix » durable après la guerre.

## Introduction

How do women combatants experience armed conflict and the post-war “peace”? The answers from the literature on gender and war are diverse. Some women combatants feel victimized by being made to fight war initiated and commanded by men and forgotten in the post-war peacebuilding; some become agents of change both during and after the war and even might benefit from the armed conflict; or some experience a complex mix of victimhood and agency. Yet, existing literature does not say much about the factors that lead to the diverse experiences of war and the post-war “peace.” Accounting for the differences of experiences of women has a serious implication for the prevention of the armed conflict and post-war sustainable peacebuilding.

This not only helps us understand the individual circumstances and structural conditions driving women to political violence and their experiences of war but is also essential in designing post-conflict policy interventions that are responsive to their diverse and complex needs and experiences.

Literature on gender and war highlights multifaceted nature of women combatants’ experience of war and “post-war” peace. Some show women combatants’ position as followers rather than leaders, i.e., “*cogs in the wheel*” (Coomaraswamy 1997, 9), victims in long-lasting conflicts (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002; MacDonald 2008), and victims of sexual abuse and rape in war (Nordstrom 1999; Leatherman 2011; Bazz and Stern 2013), while some question the tendency to frame women combatants within a victimhood

narrative in post-conflict programs (MacKenzie 2009, 2012). In contrast, some feminist scholars have stressed the need for feminist international relations (IR) to be inclusive by incorporating experiences of women combatants' agency and empowerment into feminist analysis (Parashar 2009, 2014). Feminist IR scholars have also shown that women's participation as combatants is widespread and not an aberration (Henshaw 2016, 2017; Wood and Thomas 2017), and war can be a transformative experience for women (Yadav 2016) opening up new knowledge and opportunities (Yadav 2020a). Further, there are some other studies on gender and war that attempt to capture the complexity of war moving beyond the binary of victimhood and agency in various armed conflicts around the world (Jacobs, Jacobson, and Marchbank 2000; Zarkov 2007; Coulter 2009; MacKenzie 2012).

While these studies contribute to highlighting diverse and important aspects of women combatants' experiences of war, they see women combatants as a homogeneous category experiencing the war uniformly. I argue that a more productive approach would be to focus on the diverse and complex lived experiences of women combatants mediated by their intersectional identities and social subjectivity. Although not in war context, many feminist theorists have argued that a mere focus on gender is inadequate and simultaneous focus should be on race, caste, class, ethnicity, and various other forms of social differences (Valentine 2007; Collins 2009). There is a need for theorizing how their diverse background identities influence or affect the experiences and perspectives of war and "post-war" peace.

To fill this lacuna, I closely follow the stories and experiences of five women ex-combatants<sup>1</sup> in temporal (before, during, and after the Maoist insurgency in Nepal) and spatial (kitchen, municipality office, and grocery store) contexts, out of thirty-nine semi-structured interviews that I conducted in Nepal between 2017 and 2018. The ex-combatants come from different caste, class, ethnicity, marital status, social status, education status, and geographical locations. I use an intersectional theoretical framework that draws from "matrix of domination" theoretical concept by Patricia Hill Collins (2009) to capture the intricacies of the stories of the women ex-combatants while showing how their multiple identities and subjective positions intersect at various temporal and spatial spaces in intricate and dynamic ways to complicating dominant ideas of empowerment/agency of women ex-combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. My paper also makes a theoretical and methodological contribution to the literature on gender and war by using intersectionality as both a theoretical framework and a methodological approach that is suitable to capture the complex experiences and diverse voices of women combatants at the intersection of multiple identities.

The structure of my article is as follows. The next section underlines the value of centering women combatants' lived experiences of war and post-war period mediated by intersecting multiple identities in gender and war feminist scholarship. After that, two sections lay out the theoretical framework and methodological approach for the paper. Then, the paper provides an overview of women combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and how major policy interventions like National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) on UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 fail to recognize diverse experiences and needs of women ex-combatants in Nepal. This section is followed by the dominant narratives of women

combatants' empowerment in Nepal, which omit everyday lived experiences of women ex-combatants from marginalized backgrounds. I proceed to analyze and discuss the stories and analyses of five combatants in different temporal (before, during, and after the Maoist insurgency in Nepal), and spatial (kitchen, municipality office, and grocery store) contexts followed by the discussion. Finally, I conclude that intersecting oppressions and identities unavoidably condition women combatants' lives to produce variegated and complex expressions of disadvantage/privileges and oppression/empowerment in everyday lives. This understanding is essential for holistic understanding of the conflict as well as devising better policy response to the needs of women ex-combatants at the margin.

### Everyday Lived Experiences of Women Combatants

This research adds to the demands by some feminist scholars of gender and war on the need to center actions and choices of individual woman combatants beyond the narrow focus on individual agency and empowerment. Particularly, feminist scholarships question the notion of agency intrinsically tied up with politics and war (politics by other means) (Auchter 2012). Auchter (2012, 134) maintains that it is possible to explore motivations of a woman engaged in violence by not trying to prove their agency in the violence they commit, or they have been coerced to commit, but rather by understanding the actions themselves. Similarly, Zarkov (2007, 225) questions if agency, emancipation, and empowerment concepts fully capture the women's diverse positioning within violent conflicts, including their participation in the fighting. In the context of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Lauren Leve (2007) argues that culturally dis-embedded valorizations of autonomy, agency, and choice influenced by neoliberalism do not help us explain agency of Nepali women in the war where their idea of agency and empowerment is based on morally grounded ideas about social personhood in which self-realization is bounded up in mutual obligation and entails self-sacrifice.

Further, many scholars have explored complex lived experiences of women during and after the war in the view of their multiple identities and dynamic social positioning. Existing work examines how social differences like gender, class, and caste intersect and create dynamic subjectivities that play out in different spatial spaces of everyday activities—forest, home, fire hearth, water source—over the time to blur and question symbolic categories (Nightingale 2011). In the same manner, scholars like Pettigrew and Schneiderman (2004) and Leve (2007) examined how personal, sociocultural, and political factors interact in intricate and individualized ways to motivate women's choices and actions during the Maoist insurgency.

While I extend the strong intellectual foundation laid by these works to the experiences of women ex-combatants in Nepal, I take a more systematic approach where I use intersectionality as both theoretical framework and methodological tool to explore how women combatants' multiple identities and complex social subjectivities within the society structure their everyday experiences at different sites of power and over the time (before, during, and after the war). I discuss how gender, caste, class, ethnicity, marital status, social status, education, and geography dynamically interact and mutually co-constitute women combatants' experiences along temporal and spatial locations. Only taking up few social categories and skipping others, as existing works do, may look parsimonious but it is false economy preventing richer and fuller understanding of how multiple identities

<sup>1</sup> Their names have been changed for confidentiality.

and social inequalities dynamically interact to shape women (ex-)combatants' everyday experiences.

### Theory

My theoretical framework draws upon the Patricia Collins's (2009) "matrix of domination" concept. "Matrix of domination," in the context of Afro-American women in the United States, refers to an intersectional lens in which interlocking, complex, and dynamic axes of race, class, and gender interact with each other and work toward oppressing Afro-American women in the United States. Intersectionality was used to bring to attention the multidimensional nature of black women's experience in response to the unidimensional framework to describe Afro-American women's experience either as women or as members of the black race, but not in their mutuality (Crenshaw 1989, 139).

While intersectionality started encompassing more axes over the time, the risk involved of it being a mechanical additive model that is dangerously essentialist and deterministic (Anthias and YUVAL-DAVIS 2005, 62–63). A more developed approach envisions each system of oppression imbricate in an intersection with the others in dynamic and complex ways (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992; Collins 1993, 1998; McCall 2001; Anthias 2005). In other words, the enmeshing of various identities and identities, processes of continuities/discontinuities, collision/unison, neutralization/intensification, and cancellation/amplification, results in the subjective positions and identities being made/unmade and claimed/rejected. In this way, the focus can also be put on the social processes, practices, and outcomes that impact social categories, social structures, and individuals (Anthias 2008, 14). Intersectionality as a "matrix of domination" incorporates into analysis how the intersecting oppressions are organized and operate in various domains of power (Collins 2009, 18).

I see the utility of this concept to my research in two major ways. First, while it acknowledges common themes of oppression for Black women as a group, it further prompts the researcher to stress heterogenous composition, which is essential in applying intersectional lens to Nepalese context because of its sociocultural diversity (Hofer 1979). It allows what Leslie McCall calls intercategory (between categories) and intracategory (within a single category) intersectional analysis (McCall 2005). Second, the "matrix of domination" concept rooted in black feminist thought is equally concerned with resistance, activism, and politics of empowerment highlighting dynamic tension between individual and society, and between agency and structure. In this way, it not only helps me to explore how the dominant narrative of unequivocal empowerment of women ex-combatants in Nepal translates into the everyday lived experiences of women ex-combatants at the margin, but it also enables a nuanced analysis of their resistances and activism within unequal structures of power.

### Methodology

I use intersectionality also as a method where it fits neatly with my intersectional theoretical approach. Feminist intersectional scholars have offered various methodological strategies to use intersectionality as a method in feminist research. Because research is not a value-neutral enterprise (Harding 1987, 127), researcher's situatedness, awareness of complicated nature of gender construction, and paying attention to blind spots and near-sightedness by adopting a reflexive process of knowledge creation are core com-

ponents of employing intersectionality as a method (Davis 2014). Moreover, key methodological tenets such as identification and analysis of oppression, complexity, context, comparison, and deconstruction are possible strategies to carry out intersectional research (Misra, Curington, and Green 2020).

I translate these tenets and strategies of intersectionality as a method in three major ways. First, I explore my positionality and situatedness in reflexivity throughout the research process. My position as a heterosexual cis male researcher from same cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and in many cases, social background interviewing the women ex-combatants demands a critical reflection of my position in knowledge production as it is socially located and the production is mediated by power relations (Smith 1997; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 112; Flood 2013, 65). I reflect on my partiality and differences (and similarity) in situatedness in between me and research participants on the level of analyst.

Second, I utilize tenets of oppression, complexity, context, comparison, and deconstruction proposed by Misra, Curington, and Green (2020). I incorporate power and oppression linking privilege and disadvantage in exploring experiences of women ex-combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (Lutz 2015, 42). Complexity allows me to examine how socially constructed categories/identities/differences intersect and translate into everyday practices and experiences. Context helps me to explore how these intersections occur in temporal and spatial contexts. I apply complex nature of manifold oppressions occurring in various temporal and spatial spaces through comparing stories of women ex-combatants. In doing so, I attempt to deconstruct questioning simple notions of socially constructed categories themselves.

Finally, geography in Nepal is deeply imbricated with caste, ethnicity, class, access to education, and social status (Pettigrew 2003; Von Einsiedel, Malone, and Pradhan 2012, 10). I travelled widely to ensure that the thirty-nine interviews (twenty-seven female ex-combatants, four experts on women combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, and eight top Maoist leaders including six women leaders) I conducted included interviewees from a range of regions, background, and classes; the focus was on the female ex-combatants at the intersection of various oppressions (class, caste, social status, ethnicity, and geography). This was essential not only to understand how oppression manifests across social differences in complex ways, but also to compare and contextualize the manifestation of oppression in different spatial locations within the same country. This also enabled me some latitude to employ intersectional method. I interviewed Binu and Rita multiple times to explore the dynamic, complex, and contingent nature of knowledge, understanding, and viewpoints often mediated by the timing, context, and the atmosphere of the interviews. I selected them not because their stories were unique, rather their stories largely resonated with the stories of other women ex-combatants that I interviewed.

### Women Combatants, Post-Conflict Peacebuilding, and WPS

The decade long Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996–2006) brought a radical change in gender relations, bringing women out of domesticity into the political whirlpool. The Maoists were the first political party to come up with a radical social agenda that pledged to end all forms of discriminations against women. The nineteenth point of

the forty-point memorandum before launching the war demanded the end of patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women and property right for the daughters.<sup>2</sup> The actual numbers of female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal are contested. Maoists claimed that the proportion of women combatants was as high as 40 or 50 percent of the total (Manchanda 2004). Almost half of the Maoist women combatants came from the Tibeto-Burman group, a social group ranked lower in the Hindu caste hierarchy (Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001, 224, 237; Yami 2007, 204).

Despite their significant contribution in the insurgency, women were notably, or rather notoriously, excluded from the peace negotiation and peacebuilding processes in Nepal after the Maoist insurgency ended in peaceful settlement in 2006 (Manchanda 2010; Shapit and Doneys 2017, 42). Nor were they included in the post-war constitution-making process (Shrestha, Upreti, and Kolas 2017, 106–7). Furthermore, women who came to the position of power and influence after the war were often comparatively well-off women (Shrestha, Upreti, and Kolas 2017, 115).

In this scenario, NAPs on WPS agenda implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 in Nepal (2011–2016) offered some hope in recognizing the gaps and shortcomings of earlier peacebuilding process by adopting consultative process that included fifty-two districts (out of seventy-five) of Nepal covering all the development regions (MoPR 2011, vii–viii). The WPS agenda recognizes the disproportionate impacts of conflict on women and girls in the changing war context demanding gender perspective in peacekeeping, reconstruction, and peacebuilding (George and Shepherd 2016). Development of NAPs is a main vehicle through which states implement WPS resolutions (Shepherd 2016; True 2016). Nepal became the first state in South Asia to develop NAPs (2011–2016). The goal and objective of NAPs in Nepal were “to achieve sustainable peace and just society” and to “ensure proportional and meaningful participation of women at all levels of conflict transformation and peacebuilding processes; and protection of women’s and girls’ rights” (MoPR 2011, 24).

Despite all this, the NAPs in Nepal ironically assumed “women and girls affected by conflict” as a homogeneous group and assumed all women and girls affected by conflict as homogeneous category with identical experiences, needs, and priorities in “post-conflict scenario.” The specific action plans for the five pillars (participation, protection, promotion, relief and recovery, and monitoring and evaluation) focus on women’s participation in numbers (MoPR 2011, 25–48) and do not take into account the complex experiences of women combatants based on their caste, class, ethnicity, educational status, and geographical location. This is despite wealth of research that showed that women joined the Maoist movement for variegated reasons (Manchanda 2004; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009; Nightingale 2011), came from diverse caste, class, and ethnic backgrounds with most coming from marginalized backgrounds (Manchanda 2004; Pettigrew and Schneiderman 2004; Tamang 2009), and experienced the insurgency differently based on their various social positions (Pettigrew and Schneiderman 2004; Nightingale 2011; Gogoi 2017; Giri 2020), thus having different priorities and needs in meeting their “post-conflict” challenges.

In terms of public policy, incorporating intersectional lens matters not only during the agenda setting, but also

in the policy formulation, policy implementation, and policy assessment (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011, 222). There is a conspicuous absence of intersectionality in all these four stages while agenda setting (consultation) phase acknowledges diversity of women in passing (MoPR 2011, 21). Therefore, there is a gap between its supposed success and intended impact on the ground where only few women have benefitted from the NAPs (Yadav 2017, 2020b) leading to some activists working on WPS agenda it as a project of some elite organizations (Yadav 2020b, 202).

Here, intersectionality is not just a praxis for social justice, it is equally warranted in leading critical inquiry into women combatants’ experiences of war and so-called post-war peace. However, the dominant narratives on women combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal war and “post-war” peace, as explained in detail in the next section, elide diverse and complex experiences of women combatants from diverse social subjectivities and identities.

### Central Narratives of Women Combatants during and after the Insurgency

A careful textual analysis of the key Maoist statements and policy documents,<sup>3</sup> including interviews and speeches of the Maoist supreme leader Puspa Kamal Dahal (aka “Prachanda”) and the Maoist chief ideologue, Dr Baburam Bhattarai, shows that the Maoists consistently raised the issue of women’s oppression and took the policy to incorporate women into their movement from the very beginning. On the very first leaflet distributed in hundreds of thousands all over the country along with the initiation of the People’s War on February 13, 1996, appeals to women to join the insurgency to eliminate the oppressive system (Karki and Seddon 2003, 193). First annual review of the insurgency in 1997 and the biannual review of the insurgency in 1998 raise issue of rape of women by the security forces in operation against the Maoists and lavish praise on their participation in their movement despite all the difficulties.

Amidst the terror unleashed by government sponsored goons, the police and the army, thousands of labouring women from every remote district are today participating in women’s meetings and conferences, shaking heaven and earth and fighting for their due rights. These initiatives have proved the new relationship between the People’s War and the mass movement. The fact that women are the most inspired group emerging in the last 2 years of People’s War itself indicates a definite victory for the Nepalese revolution. (Karki and Seddon 2003, 221–22)

Other key documents by the Maoists over the years such as “The Great Leap Forward: An Inevitable Need of History” (CPN-M 2001a, 50); “Common Minimum Policy & Program of United Revolutionary People’s Council” (CPN-M 2001b, 6, 12); interview of the Maoist supreme leader Prachanda in 2001; and an executive summary of the Maoist negotiation proposal (CPN-M 2003, 4) also portray women as an indispensable part of the insurgency.

In the “post-war” period, the predominant narrative of women’s participation in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal focuses on the transformative change the war brought in gender relations in Nepalese society. Since the end of the Maoist insurgency, there has been a remarkable quantitative improvement in the participation of women in politics.

<sup>2</sup>Read Karki and Seddon (2003, 183–87) for the full text of the Maoist demands.

<sup>3</sup>These documents are archived in then CPN Maoist Center headquarters, Paris Danda, Kathmandu. I spent a week in December 2017 to do archival research.

Women's increased representation in state institutions was one of the major demands of the Maoists. The Constitutional Assembly election in 2008 after the war stipulated that women should represent a minimum of one-third of the total number of candidates to the Constitutional Assembly (Article 63(5)).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the provision for the mixed electoral system, the combination of first-past-the-post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR), in the Interim Constitution gave a marginalized group like women the opportunity for greater representation (Falch 2010, 21–22). The local election in 2017 saw 41 percent of women in the local bodies along with 34 percent of the seats reserved for women in provincial assembly (UNDP 2017).

Similarly, many literatures have focused upon the transformative impact of the Maoist insurgency on women ex-combatants. Some have emphasized that the war can also open up spaces for women's participation in social, economic, and political sphere leading them to various new knowledge and opportunities transforming their lives (Yadav 2016, 2020). Hanna Ketola (2020) shows that even the withdrawal from the political activities in the post-conflict Nepal has not prevented the female ex-combatants in Nepal to enact new forms of political agency different from active engagement in the post-conflict politics.

While these works advance our understanding on the agency of women ex-combatants after the war, along with policy interventions like WPS mentioned above, they unintentionally and paradoxically homogenize experiences of diverse groups of women combatants. Next two sections highlight usefulness of intersectional lens in understanding the experiences of war and "post-war" period for women combatants shaped by their social subjectivities and identities over the time and in different sites of everyday practices in complex and dynamic ways.

### Intersectionality and Temporality of Violence: Stories of Binu and Rita

This section maps the stories of the two women ex-combatants (Binu and Rita) from different caste, class, social, cultural, ethnic, and geographical backgrounds to illustrate how the various vectors of identities and systematic inequalities interact and co-construct to shape their decision to join war, everyday embodied experiences of war and "post-war" period. While conflict may reveal a certain common theme of women combatants' experience of war, I argue that it affects each individual differently, leading to different subjective positions during and after the war. Such experiences of war and post-war peace cannot be detached from the various systems of identity and oppression such as caste, class, social status, and geographical location. Here, I seek to understand two divergent life trajectories of women ex-combatants, Binu and Rita, after the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, despite their similar subordinate position in the same war.

The two women ex-combatants represent two distinct sets of identities and social locations despite vast common experiences in the war. Binu belongs to a lower class, marginalized ethnic group in a remote hill locality of Western Nepal that Maoist used as their base area during the war. Women from these communities like Binu constituted a significant proportion of women combatants in People's Liberation Army (PLA) (Goswami 2015). Along with her lower social status, she comes from a remote and poor part of the coun-

try, and her formal education disrupted early by the war. On the other hand, Rita belongs to a lower middle class, high caste, and higher social status; she is also educated and comes from the Kathmandu valley where Nepal's capital city is located.

#### *Story of Binu*

Located at the epicenter of Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Binu was not only pushed into the Maoist fold for security from relentless state atrocities and repression in her area (Thapa and Sijapati 2003, 90; Whelpton 2005; Acharya 2010), but also pulled by their promise of gender equality (Manchanda 2004; Yami 2007). Like many other families in her village, her family encouraged her to join the Maoists for her own physical security. "They [state forces] called us Maoist terrorists. They were killing us, there was no escape for poor and helpless people like us." She continued, "We chose to die as martyr than being slaughtered as dogs."<sup>5</sup> In fact, there was a large-scale internal (district headquarters and city centers) and external displacement (India) during the war (Hennink and Simkhada 2004). Only those who had money could migrate to safety.

In the PLA, the armed wing of Maoists, Binu felt equal, empowered, and grew ambitious. She explained to me,

"Even male comrades would cook while we [women] would be holding guns in the sentry-post. Bullet doesn't differentiate gender, caste, and class. We were all "sarwahaara varga" [proletariats] smashing oppressive "samantavaad" [feudalism]. Before joining the PLA, I would hide if I saw any stranger on the way. They taught us to speak and write in Nepali. In the PLA, I gave speech before 50 people. I could even become a commander!"<sup>6</sup>

It is curious that even after being indoctrinated in the egalitarian Communist ideology, Binu thought that men doing household chores as novelty and aberration rather than a basic practice of equality. Similarly, teaching in Nepali language rather than her indigenous language in the group further created hierarchy and disadvantage for person of her ethnicity whose native language is different. She experienced equality and had the opportunity to rise up the rank. After marriage and having a baby, however, she had to reluctantly leave the PLA to look after her child. The Maoists proclaimed to have the policy to build infrastructures to care for children (CPN-M 2001b, 12). However, in reality, they reinforced traditional gender roles (mothers as prime caregivers), which not only hindered women combatant's promotion in the PLA but also prevented them from benefitting equally in the reintegration packages (Shrestha, Upreti, and Kolas 2017, 106).

As a result, she returned to her village where she has been living since then. Binu is looking after her two kids and also doing subsistence farming to scrape a living. She feels neglected and abandoned by the Maoists. However, she strongly claims her agency in the political transformation in Nepal, which provides her a sense of pride:

Even responsible party cadres and leadership here did not care about me ... the situation is the same (as before the war) ... My husband and me were both in the PLA, he [husband] is overseas now. After fighting for six years, we got nothing ... Yet I take satisfaction

<sup>4</sup>The Interim Constitution is available online at <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/np/np006en.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup>Binu, interview date December 28, 2017.

<sup>6</sup>Binu, interview date December 27, 2017.

in thinking that my sacrifice brought change in the country.<sup>7</sup>

Multiple interlocking social subjectivities that Binu's body inhabits shape Binu's embodied experiences of war and "post-war" periods. The insurgency disrupted her education and brought miseries to already a difficult life. Paradoxically, the insurgency also gave her a sense of equality and agency, and hope of progress. Yet, Binu's intersecting existing systems of inequality such as gender, class, ethnicity, education, and geographical location impacted her life in their simultaneity to place her precisely in a situation that she had joined the insurgency to avoid. Still, she claims her agency through her "ex-combatant" identity (See [Ketola 2020](#)) in the political transformation that eluded her.

#### *Story of Rita*

As born in an educated family, Rita managed to complete her tenth grade education, before being pursued by the army for her alleged connection with the Maoists. Her husband was detained and disappeared by the army for being a Maoist. Inspired by her family and husband, and also for the security reasons, she went underground with the Maoist party as a whole timer.<sup>8</sup> However, she already had a child before going underground that affected her day-to-day duties in the group. Many times, she contemplated quitting. However, since she was educated, the party valued her qualification highly and assigned her to operate Maoist radio station than fighting. Here, she developed network with prominent Maoist leaders.

After the war, her family encouraged her to pursue her further studies, and she went on to complete a degree in journalism supported by her family. "Not everyone is lucky to have such [supportive] brothers and family"<sup>9</sup> she acknowledges. Finally, she got a position in a state-run radio in Nepal. Unfortunately, many women ex-combatants like Binu lacked the required educational qualification and employable skills. During war, the Maoists disparaged and disrupted the education system, calling it a bourgeoisie education system ([Adhikari 2006](#), 73–74). They foisted ideological indoctrination in their strongholds instead ([Eck 2010](#)).

In the "post-war" period, Rita says that she faced stigma, rejection, and hardships as a single mother. She was educated and held a respectable job, but her in-laws were worried that she might successfully claim an inheritance from her dead husband's share of the property. While her treatment was unjust, she maintains that she was immune to face caste-based discrimination and violence as some of her comrades from the PLA had to put up. In many cases, the caste of a person determines how the person is accepted in a Nepali society, especially for a woman ([Cameron 1998](#)). Rita explains why:

In the case of inter-caste marriage, no one is accepted: neither mother, nor the child or the husband. If a male is not accepted in his family, he absconds. What will happen to his wife and children? One of my friends was a Tamang [Indigenous group considered to be located lower in the Hindu caste hierarchy]. Her husband was from a Brahmin [higher caste] family. Therefore, her husband got married to a Brahmin girl later, abandoning her. I know many female ex-

combatants in a similar situation like my friend are now working in massage parlours to survive.<sup>10</sup>

The Maoist insurgency was a tragic experience for Rita as it took her husband and other family members from her and it disrupted her higher education for a while. As a single mother and widow, she struggled, and faced discriminations. Despite oppressions, her multiple privileges (class, social status, education, geography, and caste) positioned her in a relatively better situation in the "post-war" society. Within her "success," there are experiences of struggles and vulnerability that problematizes a linear trajectory of empowerment for women.

#### **Intersectionality and Spaces: Kitchen, Municipality Office, and Grocery Store**

This section shows how three women ex-combatants' constitution of multiple subjective positions and identities such as caste, class, marital status, social status, ethnicity, education, and geographical location are defined, materialized, instituted, and blurred in different sites of everyday practices—kitchen, municipality, and grocery store. I do not seek to show which identity/inequality is important or influential, rather how different identities and inequalities mutually operate in their simultaneity to shape everyday lives for women combatants. For this purpose, I present three everyday experiences of Sarita, Bipana, and Shanti in three different spaces of power (respectively, kitchen, municipality office, and grocery store) where they experience both privilege and disadvantage in a complex way shaped by their multiple subjective positions and identities.

#### *Kitchen*

Sarita, a woman ex-combatant, belongs to a higher caste, is highly educated (holding a master's degree), comes from a middle-class background, and lives in an urban center with her family. I had requested her for an interview in a phone call. She said that my accent sounded like that of Western region of Nepal where she belonged. At the time of the interview, she was about to get a major portfolio in the provincial government of Nepal after 2017 general election. I interviewed her while she cooked lunch for her children, husband, in-laws, and me in the kitchen. She accepted my request for the interview. Concurrently, she was attending numerous calls inviting her to various social and political programs. In the midst of interview, her husband arrived home right at the time when she was explaining her challenges with her multiple identities as a politician, a mother, a wife, and a daughter-in-law at home. She suddenly changed the topic. She was cautious and making sure that her husband and in-laws do not hear what she has to say. She explained to me her struggle in a low voice:

After the end of war, I face obstacle in every step.... I need to convince everyone.... I'm also a daughter-in-law in this family. I have very old father-in-law and mother-in-law. I have kids as well... After the Maoist party split, my husband and I represented two rival factions leading to an ideological conflict between us to the point that we were on the verge of divorce. Because of my strong willpower, they [husband and in-laws] began supporting me. Therefore, if we have

<sup>7</sup> Binu, interview date December 27, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Whole-timer member meant Maoist cadres fully committed to the insurgency.

<sup>9</sup> Rita, interview date November 27, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Rita, interview date November 29, 2017

strong will-power, we can solve problems that befall before us.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting that her privileges (and vulnerabilities) play out differently in different spaces as suggested by Lutz (2015). Despite her successful political career, she does not have the luxury to shed her traditional gender role in the kitchen. While performing household chores, she was also maintaining her public personae of a politician by attending to calls from the public. Her success is based on her determination and capacity to undertake “double-burden”<sup>12</sup>—family and political career. Her privileges (caste, class, education attainment, social status, and geographical location) did not translate into her successful political career in a straightforward manner.

#### *Municipality Office*

I met former Maoist platoon commander at a municipality office and interviewed her in an adjacent café. She was there to help an illiterate woman from her village who needed her help to apply for land ownership document. She is a social and political activist who also contested election for vice mayoral post, but she says she lost it because of lack of money and time for the election campaign. So, officers in the municipality recognize her. She is a widow, comes from a lower class and lower caste, is uneducated, and from a remote Eastern part of Nepal. However, after her marriage, she changed her surname after her husband’s caste (a higher caste), which is a common practice among Nepalese women once they get married (Hofer 1979). As a single mother with a lack of stable income, she struggles to provide for her children. She elaborated her difficult “post-conflict” life:

In the beginning, people would doubt whether I was of pure caste to enter the house (her husband’s home). I broke the tradition wherever it was necessary, but I followed them whenever it is justified. Defying tradition, I cremated my husband on the pyre alone after he succumbed to injury he got in the war. I also strictly follow moral values and principles in the society so that no one looks down upon my family.<sup>13</sup>

Despite many disadvantages, Bipana refuses to be defined by them while also simultaneously submitting to them. She faces discriminations coming from lower caste and for being a woman, but she seeks to transgress them through her everyday practices. She blurs, problematizes categories by changing her caste and cremating her husband. However, she also pragmatically follows them. Public places like the municipality office constitute background for her to fight with inequalities and oppressions not only for herself but also for others in similar situation like her. “I used to be sad and lament a lot. Now, poor, helpless, oppressed women like to come to me for their problems,” she adds.<sup>14</sup>

Bipana’s lived experiences demonstrate how different social subjectivities she embodies mold her everyday beliefs and activities. While she pragmatically blurs some identities (gender, caste, educational status, and geographical origin), she enacts others (gender, class, and social status) to deal with adversities in her life and to help others. Public spaces like municipality office enact materiality her constant ne-

gotiation with her diverse social subjectivities and identities with twinning of revolt and submission.

#### *Grocery Store*

Shanti, another female ex-combatant, comes from a similar background as Bipana. However, she has a different post-war experience despite being a single mother from a lower caste, lower-class, and coming from a remote impoverished area of Western Nepal. She left school early because of the insurgency. Now, she is living in a suburban area close to a big city with her daughter where she is also active in local politics.

I met Shanti at her small grocery store where I took her interview. Our interview was frequently interjected by arrival of customers. One of her customers, a middle-aged man, was politely asking her about the all-party meeting about the road project in the local area. Her grocery store was an interesting space for me with all the interactions taking place with various people from different identities and backgrounds in her local community. It was not only a source of bread and butter for herself and her daughter, but she was also using it as a platform to engage in politics in manifold ways. Her interaction would often go beyond monetary transaction and enact complex interplay of different social subjectivities. “There is hardship.” (*Dukha ta chha ni*), she continues, “I console myself looking at other women who are miserable despite having husband or having more money.” I could not ascertain what she exactly meant by characterizing “miserable,” however, it was interesting to see how she delicately navigates her multiple identities and subjective positions manifested in different relationality at the store. She further explains,

Rather than identifying us [former ex-combatants] with our names, they [people] sometimes identify by saying this or that Maoist with mockery and even with contempt... I left my relatives in my village. However, I have established myself here by earning friends and relatives. They help me when needed. They sympathize me for being a single mother. There are other single mothers as well. However, there is huge difference between us. Because of me being in the politics, it has benefitted me a lot. I can speak up for myself and others and people respect me.<sup>15</sup>

For Shanti, her former identity as a woman ex-combatant was a source of strength as well as conflict with some members of the community. She feels that her identity as a woman ex-combatant and current conversion into a peaceful political activist have helped her to deal with everyday challenges compared to other women in a similar situation. Yet, this change has accompanied manifold challenges. She is structurally disadvantaged in terms of gender, caste, class, education, and her place of origin. While she manages to carve out space for her political activism, it entails many sacrifices. Her everyday experiences in the grocery store solidify and blur both symbolic and material social differences at her grocery store.

The three locations—kitchen (private), municipality building (public), and grocery store (public interaction/private property)—show how multiple identities and social subjectivities interplay in embodied everyday experience of three ex-combatants (Sarita, Bipana, and Shanti) intricately to produce materiality of social difference. Further, they not only show complexity of experiences when

<sup>11</sup> Sarita, interview date January 22, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> I repurpose “double-jeopardy” concept from Black feminism (King 1988, 46) to highlight extra level of burden for women.

<sup>13</sup> Bipana, interview date December 11, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Bipana, interview date December 11, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Shanti, interview date January 5, 2018.

intersected by multiple socially constructed categories in their mutuality, but also problematize the categories themselves (McCall 2005). Overall, the way these spaces capture complex experiences of Sarita, Bipana, and Shanti also offer nuanced and complex operations of oppressions, privileges, resistance, and empowerment. “Matrix of domination” seeks to capture this complexity—not only to expose complex and interlocking nature of systems of oppressions, but also to understand nuanced ways women at the margin seek to resist it in the ways that problematize our singular understanding of agency and empowerment (Collins 2009).

### Discussion

The two sections above offered analyses of experiences of five women ex-combatants using intersectionality as a “matrix of domination” concept where I explored how social inequalities and identities intersect in different spaces of power and over time to shape their experiences. Social inequalities have reconfigured in subtle forms in the “post-conflict” period—women can have successful political career but they are doubly burdened (e.g., Sarita), women can contest election, but they do not have a level playing field (e.g., Bipana), women can engage in public sphere but need to balance economic imperative and public activism within a limited platform provided by their grocery store (e.g., Shashi). On the other hand, socially constructed categories of gender, caste, class, educational level, and geographical location are not static, universal, and separate, but dynamic, contested, and interact with each other to produce multifaceted social subjectivities for women where privilege and oppressions constitute in variable intensities and forms. Stories of Binu and Rita just demonstrate that. They show the composition of social inequalities constantly shift needing reinterpretation to reflect the changes. Overall, the stories and experiences of women ex-combatants underline the dynamic and complex relationship between socially constructed structural differences, and symbolic and material aspects of domination and resistances manifested in various domains and stages of social life.

The stories and experiences of women ex-combatants also highlight the complexity of oppression (and empowerment) where the analysis requires the focus on simultaneity and co-constitution of multiple oppressions in various contexts (Collins 2009, 308). Yet dominant narratives of women combatants’ empowerment during and after the war as mentioned early in the paper rely on dominance of one category over other, i.e., importance of class over gender during the insurgency and importance of gender over class, caste, ethnicity, marital status, social status, education, and geographical inequalities in the “post-war” period. These narratives, while highlighting important aspect of women’s agency in adverse phenomena, such as war, offer a limited view of complexity, contradiction, and messiness of war.

Similarly, major policy responses such as NAPs on WPS in Nepal also fail to take intersectional lens in all stages of public policy creating a single social category of “women and girls affected by conflict” (MoPR 2011, 25–48). While NAPs on WPS in Nepal is rightly commended for wider consultative process, it failed to encapsulate how peace and security mean different things to different women requiring differentiated approach attuning to their diverse experiences. For example, idea of peace and security could be different for female ex-combatant from Dalit caste and lower-class background trying to reintegrate back to society.<sup>16</sup> Moreover,

constitution of social categories might express differently in different spatial (kitchen, municipality office, and grocery store) and temporal (before, during, and after the war) contexts. Therefore, understanding them in their mutuality and complexity is important for not just to capture complicated nature of war and “post-war” realities, but also for a nuanced understanding of resistance and empowerment of women combatants, which has deeper implications for WPS in post-conflict societies.

Apart from oppression, complexity, and context, the stories of Binu and Rita also question the naturalization of category of “women ex-combatant” similar to intracategorical approach of McCall (2005). Everyday lived experiences of Sarita, Bipana, Shanti, Binu, and Rita, spatially and temporally, question whether the Maoist movement empowered women ex-combatants enough to succeed in the “post-war” period. They also suggest that the preexisting social structures and socially constructed categories matter significantly in terms of “post-war” opportunities for women. There have been various “unintended” positive consequences of the Maoist insurgency on gender relations in Nepal such as increased participation of women in sociopolitical and economic spheres after the war (Pettigrew 2012). However, a relevant question is which category of women ex-combatants are better positioned to grab these opportunities and deal with “post-conflict” challenges.

As a male researcher, it is a matter of vital importance to be reflexive about my limitations<sup>17</sup> in intersectional research. My gender identity as a heterosexual cis male limited me in the ways that I could relate my lived experiences to that of women. Nevertheless, my nationality (Nepali), class (Peasant family), regionality (Western part of Nepal), language and dialect (Nepali/Western Nepal), cultural background, and lived experiences of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal helped me to build rapport and trust<sup>18</sup> with women ex-combatants for the interviews in many ways. For example, two Maoist women leaders and few other female ex-combatants agreed to my request because I was a Nepali—if I was a foreigner, they said that they would have rejected the request. Yet, my identity as a male researcher also prevented me exploring various unavoidable facets of their experiences of war and post-war period. For example, I avoided asking questions about sexual violence and domestic violence (e.g., Lecomte-Tilouine 2009) because of my gender along with some ethical reasons. Also, to mitigate the power imbalance, I had to interview women ex-combatants accompanied by their friends or family. These factors also could have shaped the things they could share to me.

### Conclusion

This paper sought to problematize the core assumptions of many gender and war literatures that identify women combatants as a homogeneous group having similar interest and identity, and having identical experiences of war and post-war “peace.” It argued that women combatants’ experience of war and post-war “peace” are conditioned by various intersecting inequalities and identities by focusing closely on the lived experiences of five women ex-combatants out of thirty-nine interviews coming from different constitution of identities. Using intersectionality as both theory and method informed by feminist research methodology, I found that intersecting oppressions and identities inexorably impact women combatants’ lives in different spaces

<sup>16</sup>This theme cropped up frequently in my interviews with women ex-combatants, particularly from marginalized backgrounds.

<sup>17</sup>See Reiling (2020).

<sup>18</sup>See Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) for more discussion.



and periods in complex ways. First, everyday embodied experiences and practices of women ex-combatants at different locations of power highlight how intersection of their identities produces variable and relative experiences of empowerment/vulnerability and privilege/oppression. These variegated experiences problematize, blur, and even consolidate socially constructed categories. Second, such variability and relative nature of empowerment/vulnerability and privilege/oppression also have temporal dimension. The stories and experiences of five women ex-combatants, resonating broadly with thirty-seven other interviews from the fieldwork, resist the hegemonic construction of women combatants' experiences in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal as unequivocally and equally "empowered."

My research is unique in a sense it uses the feminist intersectionality as both the theoretical framework and methodological approach to problematize the assumption in gender and war literature that women combatants are homogeneous and experience war and post-war uniformly. Similarly, it further extends the complexity and messiness of the war, adding to the existing conversations in the feminist scholarships that problematize the singular unidimensional narrative of the armed conflict and present its messiness and complexity through lives of women in the armed conflict (Mackenzie 2012; Baaz and Stern 2013; Sylvester 2013; Parashar 2009, 2014). It showed that the before, during, and after compartmentalization of war does not reflect the lived experiences of many women ex-combatants. Similarly, it adds to the existing studies that seek to identify the societal structures and institutions that impact women ex-combatants' reintegration back to the society (Viterna 2013; KC 2019).

My paper has significant implications for the prevention of war and post-war peacebuilding efforts. Recent literature has shown that women constitute a significant part of armed conflict participating in support roles to leadership capacities (Henshaw 2016, 2017; Wood and Thomas 2017). Women combatants' perception and experiences of war cannot be detached from the manifold systems of inequalities and identities they inhabit. Treating women as a homogeneous category fails to account for their interests, needs, and motivations leading to blind spots in policies designed to tackle violent movements. Likewise, the post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding policy interventions must consider the diverse experiences and identities of women combatants for they explain why the policy interventions seem to have such limited effects when it comes to transforming vulnerable women.

How different identities and inequalities "add up" or "interact" in the analysis has not been fully resolved. I offered spatial and temporal analyses of how multiple social differences intersect to produce subjectivities in women's bodies using "matrix of domination" intersectional framework to better account for intersectional oppressions as well as privileges that influence women combatants during and after the armed conflict. This opens up possibilities for future studies to expand it to other conflict contexts and to develop it further.

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