

**CENTRE FOR GENDER AND
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ROLE OF WOMEN IN NEPAL'S PEACEBUILDING

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Introduction

Women's participation in armed insurgencies is a complex issue in the context of women's "empowerment" because there are differing viewpoints in evaluating their involvement as indicators of increased agency and self-determination. They are often subjected to high levels of sexual violence and do not receive proper health and sanitation facilities. Even their roles in armed conflicts as fighters and commanders do not lead to necessarily a direct corollary in positions of power because of the gendered power dynamics. Looking at this dichotomy, it is essential for us to understand their role and influence in peace building.

Another important reason for analysing insurgencies or peace building movements is to view history through the women's gaze. More often than not, we write these historical accounts by looking at a men's frame of reference and their personal experiences focusing on waged work and politics, ignoring the lived experiences of women and the struggles faced by women fighters. Thus, it is about time we revisit our history with a feminist lens. Given women's long history of exclusion from leadership positions within the institutional structures of armed uprisings, it is important to point out women's involvement in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and the impact of their participation.

On February 1st of 2005, King Gyanendra of Nepal announced a state of emergency in Nepal, assuming direct rule over the kingdom for a planned 3 years. Political leaders, including the prime minister and opposition leaders, were placed under house arrest. Many student leaders, human rights activists, and pro-democrats were detained. They censored news media with security personnel patrolling the streets on high alert. This dramatic event attempted to strengthen the Royal Nepalese Army, an army that has already been accused of serious human rights violations and had heightened the possibility of further violations in Nepal. What followed that was a continuous period of political instability paired with regional influxes for power. The 10 years of armed conflict in Nepal involved widespread ethnic groups in most districts, affecting the country's socio-economic performance and bringing greater effects to women's lives (Asian Development Bank, 2013).

Nepali women's movement is completing a century, however women's role in Nepali nation building is yet to receive the attention it deserves. Moreover, even today women stood up against injustice and violence during the recent protests as a part of the Brihat Nagarik Andolan. Spontaneous resistance to the travel ban for women during covid by activists and their allies, mark the active women's rights activism in Nepal.

In this article, we analyse the role of women in Nepal's peace building process in different time frames ranging from the Rana regime to the new Constitution in 2015.

Women Leaders' Agenda: Democracy

The first women's movement in Nepal emerged in protest of the oppressive actions of the Rana regime. While World War I was drawing to a close in the West, a small group of women led by Dibya Koirala (wife and mother of two of Nepal's leading democracy activists) established the Women's Committee (Mahila Samiti) to mobilise women against the regime.

Later on, women during the Maoists' insurgency helped redefine the roles of women and paved their way to the Constituent Assembly. Referring to the Maoist leader Hisila Yami, we can conclude that during the period of the Maoist insurgency, over 30% of women were involved as political commissars or fighting militia in the People's Liberation Army (Upreti, B. R., Upreti, D., & Ghale, Y., 2020). The political history of women has also witnessed the activism and struggle during the Nepalese Civil War such as Kamla Bhatt, Devi Khadka, Binda Pandey, Onsari Gharti, Chitra Lekha Yadav, and many others guerilla fighters. The major reason for women's participation in the armed insurrection waged by the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN), according to the then Maoist leader Hisila Yami, was class and sexual oppression, two factors that propelled women to revolt.

Building Foundations of Democracy

While the democratic forces of the country were preparing for a second people's movement in 2006, women stood with a single voice in front of men-led political forces, presenting nine points gender agenda including (i) equal right to descent, (ii) equal right to ancestral property, (iii) at least 1/3 women's participation as critical mass, (iv) campaign to end violence, abuse and malpractice against women, (v) full democracy, sustainable peace, and human rights, (vi) rehabilitation of women of conflict victim, (vii) reproductive health and right, (viii) special provision for women education and (ix) affirmative action emancipate women, under the name of Inter-party Women's Action. Political parties agreed to fulfill them after the restoration of democracy.

Women from different parts and sects took part in the anti-monarchy uprising in April 2006 poured sweat and blood to create the foundation for republican Nepal (Pandey, 2016). After introducing affirmative action in 2007, the new constitution of 2015 guaranteed 33 percent of all seats in the Constituent Assembly to women, previously unimaginable (something which is yet to be achieved by other South Asian countries).

In implementing the new constitution, three women were elected in the highest positions of the state mechanism in 2016; Bidhyadevi Bhandari as president of the country, Onsari Gharti as speaker of the Parliament, and Sushila Karki as Chief Justice in the Supreme Court. It is an enormous leap for women in taking the state position, which may motivate and strengthen women psychologically and build a community among them. After all, it will contribute to changing the homogenous perspective of society.

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Women for Politics is an initiative where we are working towards free and fair participation of women in South Asian politics through research, awareness, and advocacy.

In the past 1 year, we grew from a team of 2 to over 50 volunteers who contributed/ have been contributing to the initiative. We are on our way to building this as South Asia's first think-tank on gender and politics - Centre for Gender and Politics (CGAP).



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