

Women of war



Post-conflict, women combatants are viewed as ‘victims’ of war. They should instead be seen as ‘change-makers’

Sita Sodhari (now 30) was 16 when she joined the Maoist PLA. “I gave up my studies, my family, and most importantly, I invested eight summers of my life in the war,” says Sodhari. In 2012, Sodhari and her husband, also was a Maoist combatant, opted for voluntary retirement and accepted the government rehabilitation package. “The money provided by the government was not enough. We bought a plot of land, but we struggled to sustain ourselves as we had neither the skills nor the right education to feed ourselves.” But economic struggle was only a part of their hardship.

“If we had been part of the then Nepal Army, Nepali society would have celebrated our retirement, but as we were part of the PLA and we were treated like social outcasts.” The society boycotted Sodhari family from joint events and restricted their involvement in decision-making platforms. “We were told to maintain distance. People thought we were violent, corrupt and without moral values.” The social backlash frustrated her. Her husband finally decided to work abroad to support the family. “I still have a photo of me and my husband working as PLA soldiers. We used to take pride at our involvement in

the PLA.

However, due to the social stigma, I now keep the photo hidden,” she says and her eyes moisten.

Sodhari’s story represents the plight of women combatants who steered the Maoist revolution for social change. But as happens in post-war scenarios, the contribution of women was undermined, and their involvement was minimal after the war is over.

Post-conflict, women combatants are often viewed as ‘victims’ of war. However, it is important to view women as ‘change-makers’ if we are to properly address the plight of former women combatants. It is essential to revise our approaches and provide female combatants adequate skills to enable them to share their experiences, and empower them to seek opportunities to influence policies and programs. Research shows that economic freedom, knowledge about rights and creation of safe communities help curb social discrimination. Entrepreneurial skills, knowledge on women’s right and seed grants for small-scale ventures are proven to be beneficial for the confidence of women directly involved in war.

“The Strengthening Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Nepal (SIWPSAN): Towards Implementation of the National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820” project spearheaded by UNWOMEN, and funded by the Government of Finland, is one such project that focuses on women, peace and security issues. The project provides women combatants with specialized entrepreneurship skills and knowledge that protect them from harm. “We provide business start-up support to former women combatants, and also give them localized training on women, peace and security,” shares Sama Shrestha, Peace and Security Unit Manager of UN Women Nepal.

A recent survey conducted by Search for Common Ground in Bajhang, Doti and Kailali districts provides evidences that creative interventions that encompass skill building trainings, knowledge about women rights and relevant UN conventions empower women and strengthen their participation in local and national decision-making. It also helps them minimize conflict and stigma and to act as peacemakers in the society. According to the survey, 55 percent former women combatants reported their involvement in skill building trainings to hone their entrepreneur skills and live a dignified life.

Sodhari received seed grant under the SIWPSAN project, and was provided a three-month beautician training. According to her, the entrepreneur skill training not only made her economically stable, but also heralded social change. “People who used to discriminate against us now come to my beauty parlor for haircut and grooming. They seek my opinion on different things, and also encourage me to be a part of social gatherings.” She along with other former women combatants have started a conflict-affected women’s group where they discuss reconciliation, economic and social challenges and ways to integrate socially. They also discuss the rights women have been provided by the law, and they aren’t afraid to reach out to government channels to make their voices heard. These social gatherings have empowered Sodhari, and the other former women combatants who previously used to feel isolated.

There’s a need to invest in former women combatants, by providing them with knowledge regarding their rights, education, entrepreneur knowledge, and skills which are vital to channel their experiences in policy and decision-making circles. Collaboration between government and organizations working for the interest of women is a must, as opportunities should be created to ensure active and meaningful participation of women combatants. This, in turn, will not only empower them, but also build their confidence to actively take part in democratic discourses.

The author is a Development Communicator