

Rethinking “Women” in Forced Displacement

By

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Background

Most studies on internal displacement have shown that women (who are often enumerated together with their children) make up 70 percent of the total internally displaced population. What is common in the studies is the depiction of women’s suffering due to forced displacement. Women are rendered one of the most vulnerable by situations of forced displacement. They have to bear the brunt of the changing situation as caretakers of young and old, as earning members of the family, as wives who have to put up with emotional and often physical backlash that the husbands unleash upon them due to frustration resulting from their economic and psychological inability to sustain the expected gender roles.

But what is equally important, is to see women as important subjects in these situations. The above mentioned scenarios are rather focused only on the condition of women. This picture is incomplete because it fails to see the women as actors – as important subjects in the situation. When we fail to see women as subjects, we fail to see that women have taken all these situations in their stride and continued their struggle for betterment of the livelihoods of the families and community. Most discussions on internally displaced women seem to ignore this agency of women. The objective of this paper is to show this relatively unnoticed part of internally displaced women. The paper looks at the agency of women in displacement situations by looking at the change of their space and base due to displacement. It aims to analyze this change of base and space of displaced women both within their family and in the wider community and the state structure. This paper argues that the change of livelihood bases and space should be taken into account when addressing the situation of

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internally displaced women and it remains more in the macro policy and programme making level where this change needs to be realised.

Methodology

The findings are based on a doctoral study conducted in the urban areas of five districts¹- Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, Lalitpur, Dang and Banke of Nepal and a further women-focused study on internally displaced women living in rented houses and slums in Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. These districts according to the existing data hosted the highest number of IDPs. The doctoral study was carried out between 2006 and 2009 and the focused study from October to December 2010. The research used micro-macro integration approach (Ritzer, 2000). As the study mostly dealt with non statistical realities it used qualitative methods and approaches for data collection and analysis. A total of 12 internally displaced women who belonged to different generations within the family were interviewed in the focused study period while 270 IDPs (150 women and 120 men) were interviewed in the doctoral study.

The paper is based on the assumption of the micro macro integration approach. i.e., there is a dialectical relation between the agency of human beings and the structure of the social field where their livelihoods are embedded. The study uses concepts of agency and structure from "Structuration theory" (Giddens, 1984) and the concept of social field from the "Theory of practice" (Bourdieu, 1977). Both theories are based on the micro-macro integration approach. The paper analyses the agency of women by looking at the space and base in daily livelihood practices of displaced women in the urban area. To look at livelihoods it uses the concept of base and space from the Rural Livelihoods System (RLS) framework (Baumgartner and Hogger, 2006). The basic concepts used in the study have been briefly described in the following section.

Base

The base, for this study consists of the total capitals that family possesses from their knowledge and their activity. It refers to all such activities which have an economic purpose, but at the same time are also tied to traditions, emotions and specific forms of self-esteem. Similar to the RLS framework, the study takes base in three categories: the public base (macro) which is the assets held in the community, the family base and a more individual centred base (micro). For the study, the individual base implies a person's individual capacities and individual capitals such as skill, knowledge and emotional entities such as fear, attachments and memories of place of origin, and experiences during different phases of displacement. In community base, the study takes the resources, services and infrastructures that are present in the community and are related to economic aspects of livelihoods.

Space

For this study, space means demarcation, based on different attributes like gender, age, generation and the status of being an IDP in the host community. At the macro level, space denotes the socio-economic space of the IDPs in the host area, for example, the relationship between the host and the IDPs, participation of the IDPs in the social, political and economic activities in the host area, and their integration into the host area. At the micro level, space refers to factors such as the gender relation within the family, position of the individual within the household that is based on responsibility, age, relations within the family, and on some personal considerations and qualities like integrity, awareness, courage, and the capacity to accept change and to integrate. Before analysing the base and space of internally displaced women, it is however, necessary to understand the Maoist conflict and the situation of women in the conflict and internal displacement.

Introduction: Maoist Conflict and Internal Displacement

The Maoist conflict in Nepal started with the call given by the Maoists to the people of Nepal to “march along the path of the People’s War to establish a peoples’ new democratic state and to extend to it all forms of support and help”. This new democratic state, they thought was necessary because Nepal had reached a stage in production relation where it was impossible to reform the crisis ridden old production relations which had blocked the development of the productive forces and created constraints and distortions in society (Bhattarai, 2003). Thus, the conflict was inevitable if one had to give space to new producers and remove the old ones. However, there are perspectives from other analysts, who have looked at the conflict from their own discipline-related school of thoughts. For the perspective of the general people, I quote here an analysis by Gersony (2003) of why local youths from Rolpa- one of the two districts where the armed conflict started, took part in the conflict:

“People hear that communism is about the redistribution of wealth, and as most people in the area are extremely poor, this notion is very appealing, especially to disillusioned youths who turn to Maoism because it promises to better their living conditions” (Millard, 1997, as cited in Gersony, 2003, pp 293).

However, as said earlier, the call for support was not a call for ‘voluntary participation’ and the promised betterment of livelihood was not to come easily. People were forced to participate in the conflict one way or the other and with the gradual advance of conflict livelihoods became insecure, more so in the rural areas. On the part of Maoists, there was blatant abuse of insurgent-binding parameters like disregard of humanitarian laws, arbitrary use of forces physical and non-physical, looting and forced

donations, killings and abduction. This created havoc in the livelihoods of the people. This caused a lot of people to leave their place of origin for safer cities and urban areas. On their part, the Maoist had devised the conflict into three stages; Strategic Defence, Strategic Stalemate and Strategic Offence (Prachanda, 2000). Each strategy had specific phases and there were specific tactical plans for each phase. Displacement of different categories of people (for example, rich landlords, and occupational groups) and dimension of displacement varied according to the consecutive stages of the Maoist war strategy and the response it elicited from the Government². The Government also operated beyond all the obligatory human right frontiers. Displacement was also caused due to the general consequences of war like disruption of infrastructure and services related to livelihood. In all these phases, the mode of Maoists-government conflict directed women’s experience and their roles in the conflict and displacement.

Women in Conflict and Forced Displacement Situations

The ten years of armed conflict in Nepal have displaced around 0.2 percent of its population from rural areas to the urban areas of Nepal (IDMC, 2006). According to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (GPID) and Nepal’s National Policy of the Internally Displaced Persons, these people are called Internally Displaced Persons. Though majority of the literature on internally displaced persons identify that women (together with their children) make up 70 per cent of the displaced population, in Nepal, there is no estimate on the number of internally displaced women in Nepal. However, it is known that the population of women in Nepal is more than 50 per cent of the entire population. Thus, it seems inevitable that they were as affected if not more. Women had a prominent role in sustaining the livelihoods of the left behind families during different phases of development. Right from the beginning it was the male members of the “enemies” (the social, economic and political elites) who were the target of the Maoist operation. In that stage, women were left to negotiate with the Maoists while leading the families that comprised of children, women and old. It was up to the women to keep the family going as able men left for the relatively secure urban centres. On the other hand, as the government mostly took the poor as enemies suspecting them to be Maoists. Women of this class were similarly left to deal with the government forces. However, we do not have the comfort of such a clear cut line of who had to deal with whom. The women were left to deal with both the Maoists as well as the Government. The Maoists came at night, and the women not only had to provide them with food and manage shelter but also had to be responsible for economic provisions. The government forces came during the day to interrogate if and why the Maoists were being sheltered. Thus, women who were hitherto not used to going beyond their traditionally defined physical and non physical roles were now dealing with the state and the insurgent forces in an uncomfortable situation of war. They

were thrown into the new space and forced to play by the rules of a broader macro force. There was no experience on both sides- the women and the warring sides, regarding the women’s space and rules in these interactions. The warring sides did not abide by any general rules of human rights and humanitarian concerns and the women were confused and too weak to protest against any form of injustice.

Case 1: Into an unfamiliar space

“With my husband and son gone, and hearing only threats that they would be killed as soon as they were caught, I could not think sanely at all. But the police would come, the Maoist would come, I had to deal with them and oblige with their demands and protect my young girls. I had to manage food and other necessities for the Maoists and for my family. I did what came to my mind at that moment— no rational thinking, no planning”.

(Mrs S, Bankali, Kathmandu, 2007- 2009)

Secondly, women were forced to decide whether they can still withstand the situation and if not, had to arrange to shift the family, sometimes together or separately. Some women who were widows had more difficulties; while some women who had moved together with their family but are now alone are also in a dire situation.

Studies on forced migrants in Nepal show that like in other cases across the world, women have faced several problems due to forced displacement. A change in familiar environment and internalized social institutions and safety structures, change in the roles and rules in a new social field creates uncertainty and leads to stress. The loss of stable livelihoods base and space posed against the inability to sell their existing skills for livelihood income in the new environment may make them economically vulnerable which in turn leads to other family and social problems. Though studies on urban structures (Farrington et. al, 2002; Koberlain, 2003; Satterthwaite, 2002; and Schutte, 2006) show that such proximity is beneficial, the benefits are not equally distributed among men and women. Due to their previous dispositions pertaining to their roles defined by the rural structures, most of these women are unable to use the benefit provided by their proximity to the governance structures in the urban areas. Women are often found to have a disadvantaged position regarding access to services and provisions (MSF, 2005; Borton et. al, 2005; Zaat, 2005). Most often women were found to be unable to access those services due to lack of knowledge and experience or as shown in Case 2, due to their internalization of gender roles as inculcated by the previous rural environment.

Case 2: The dilemma of "Participation"

"We do not know about "sanstha" (organizations) in the market. If we are needed our men take us there. Otherwise, they go by themselves. It is their job. We look after household chores and they take care of such "bahira ko kam" (outdoor work).

Interview with Mrs. D. Rajhena Camp, 25 November, 2007.

Besides this, the Maoist conflict in Nepal has created many single women—women who have lost their husbands. They are displaced and are destitute (WCRWC, 2008; Gautam et. al, 2001). Sometimes, the displaced women have been left as the sole supporters of children and other dependents in a new environment where their skills are not very relevant for getting jobs. These single women are traumatized due to the loss of their husbands and the support they bring. Those who have past experience of torture by security personnel's and Maoists' were reported to feeling insecure in the urban areas too. To meet their daily livelihoods need many displaced women were reported to have resorted to vulnerable works in hotels and bars (Rai, 2006; Kernot and Gurung, 2003).

a) Re-Orientation of Space in the Family

In many cases of forced displacement, because the basis of livelihoods for rural areas like land and cattle is lost, women have had to take up formal jobs (when informal stand for household chores which women traditionally take) outside the house. Unlike in the rural areas where traditions like “Paincho”³, “Parma”⁴ and different systems of barter and client-patron relationship means that immediate cash income is not as essential for goods and services, in urban areas cash is needed for daily use. For many, this is a new situation to cope with. This new structure in the host area meant that these women transgressed their traditional gender roles and started moving to various sub fields as earning members of the households. Internally displaced women were engaged in the economic niche in small tea stalls, as vegetable vendors, small shops (sometimes accompanying men, where men were the chief workers) or at times accompanied by the male (for example, the male would bring the required vegetables from the main market and the women sold it in local outlets). This caused a significant change in their appropriateness to space within the household.

Case 1: Changing spaces in family

Mrs R.D. was displaced from Sindhupalanchowk. The Maoist demanded that her husband who was working as a migrant in India give regular money as a punishment tax (levi) for her husband not joining the struggle. At first she paid regularly. But as their demands grew she could not pay. Due to constant threat, she with her mother-in-law and her two children came to Kathmandu where her brother was living with his family. In Kathmandu, she realized that her husband's earnings were not enough to keep the house going and there was no regular income to meet the household expenses. So, she decided to work as a mobile vegetable vendor like her sister-in-law which was initially disapproved by her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law slowly accepted the idea of her working daughter-in-law as their economic condition improved as well as when she saw other women working as well. She started to look after the household and support Mrs R.D. Now, Mrs R.D. runs a fairly good vegetable shop in a rented space in the main market. Her husband left his work in India and now works in the same shop. Their children now go to a boarding school and they have been able to buy a small space in one of the slum settlements in Kathmandu.

Interview with Mrs R.D, 2007- 2010, Kathmandu.

The study finds that when family income is low to mediocre, women mostly take up the role of formal financial contributors in the family. This has expanded the space of women within the family. Most women thought that their in-laws and husbands now took their opinion more seriously. For those nuclear families, where husbands are away, women have to be the decision makers. Though the change in space is itself a manifestation of the manifold strategy and struggle that individuals and households have employed to cope earn their livelihoods in the urban areas, it has possibilities to redefine the role of women in a more favourable way.

However, what is important is that not all displaced women have been giving up their traditional roles and taking up services in the host area. The study finds that most women who belonged to affluent families in the places of origin did not go out for jobs if they had not done so originally. Thus, these women did not experience change in their spaces. This was found to be due to the fact that these women were more confined to the traditional gender roles. As described by El Jack (2003), Judy (1999) their role was confined as mothers and nurturers, while men were the earning members. The study found that among the IDPs this was due to their previous disposition and family orientations that took a strictly defined gender role as a sign of upper class families.

Case 4 : Disposition of origin as restriction in mobility and space.

"In our village, we paid other labourers to work for us. We are not used to working for money in someone else's fields, so here we do not go out to work as well."

Personal interview with Ms. S, Rajbena Camp, 20 Nov, 2007.

These were mostly wives of people who were socio-economically well off in their places of origin like wives of landlords, political leaders and

professionals but who do not have a formal education. They did not experience any change in their space within the households. For those families who were living as nuclear families after displacement, women found considerable changes in their responsibility and their space for decision making.

b) Changing Spaces in Labour Market

By virtue of their participation as formal economic contributors in the family, women are also changing the more macro structure of the labour market. On the one hand, more women are entering the labour market, on the other the nature of jobs taken up by them is broadening. Thus, women’s space in the labour market is diversifying and increasing. For example, many internally displaced women have started driving tempos (a local five wheeler vehicle) and mini buses that go around the valley. A few years back, this was done only by men. Women have acquired this skill through their own initiative in getting trained with some funds provided by certain organizations. Now women also work as drivers in some non- government offices. This is a significant change.

Another sector where women increasingly participate is the private security service. Internally displaced women (mostly young women) are also working as security guards in different organizations during the day. Though these sections of the labour market are still dominated by men, the numbers of women in such spaces are increasing. A large number of displaced women also work as street vendors, some have their “nanglo pasal”⁵ on the bus stops selling eatables like fruits, cigarettes, sweets, etc.

An important change in the male dominated section of the labour market is women entering the jobs of vehicle licence brokers (*license dalal*). Since many women have taken up jobs of public vehicle drivers, some internally displaced women have taken up the job of vehicle licence brokers in the ministry of Labour and Transport’s department of licence.

Thus, with the growing number of internally displaced women in certain sections of the labour market and thus changing the structure of the market we can also hope that the labour market becomes friendlier in its rules and resources for women. For the women themselves, this is a good livelihood strategy in face of situations incurred by displacement as well as a dynamics which could lead to their empowerment and inclusion in a more macro space. When compared to the nature of jobs women undertook in their place of origin and the space they occupied in the labour market of the origin, it can be seen that there is a significant change. This change is important in addressing the situation of internally displaced women because their new position in the space has in turn changed their individual base like their personal skills and knowledge, their personal capacities to integrate and adjust with the new environment. It has also changed their emotional entities like fear, anxiety and their orientation towards their future livelihoods.

c) Changing Socio-Political Space in the Community

The study finds that settlement in the host community where the host community itself is undergoing transition in its appropriation of space gives the agents more chances for inclusion in their socio-political space. It applies to the internally displaced women who live in such evolving settlements in Kathmandu, Nepalgunj and Dang. I illustrate my point by giving some examples in the Manahara settlement of Kahmandu.

Manahara settlement of Kathmandu is an important space in terms of contestation of different actors—the government, the political activists, different political organizations relating to human rights and issue of landless and homeless people. There have been frequent debates about demolition of the place by the government and a promise of development of the place by the political activists of the same parties in the government. Manahara is frequented by an overwhelmingly high number of nongovernmental organizations, INGO funded smaller NGOs and Christian missionary with each promising to make the place better. On the other hand, there is a large influx of migrants—both internally displaced and others—for whom the chief attraction is a hope of legal ownership of the place which lies in the heart of the capital.

On the initiation of the actors mentioned above, women of the settlement have been very active in the socio-political and economic activities in the place. This also includes internally displaced women. There are a large number of small credits and saving schemes run solely by women. These groups are distributed all over the “four wards⁶” of the settlement each having its own committee but also tied up to a larger single committee. There are 5 such branches across the settlements each having members between 17-56 women. Similarly, there are other independent financial associations or “Mahila Bachat Samuha” (Women’s saving groups) which provides training on saving schemes. These are also solely run by women. Women have come together to form health related organization where women are trained in natal and infant health care. Similarly, helped by an organization, women have come together to establish child care centre to facilitate the women to go out to work. This organization is also run only by women. This centre runs classes for children of pre-school age. As most of these committees are formed by social networks and personal relations and references, a lot of displaced women have been able to enter and are now involved actively in the organisations.

Organized in such a way and integrated through several networks, the displaced women actively participate in important social activities of the community. For example, a displaced woman is among one of the four in an all woman committee which looks after the supply of electricity in the whole settlement. Women, irrespective of their displacement status, come together to report crime against women at the local police station.

Besides activities at the meso community level, many internally displaced women with other landless women have formed “Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj” (Nepal Women Unified Society). It was initiated by “Lumanti”, a UN-Habitat funded NGO. It has now branches in 21 districts with each district having a committee. Through these organizations the internally displaced women with other homeless women across slum areas of Nepal are fighting for the guarantee of shelter. Since it is now mandatory that unions have women members, many internally displaced women occupy important positions in associations like the Maoist Victims’ Associations. Similarly, since displaced women now have a significant presence in certain sections of the labour market, they also participate in the trade union and other political activities.

Thus, internally displaced women through their participation have been able to get a space in the host community. This space gives them a chance to influence the structure of the host community in matters that relate to their livelihoods. This embedding of internally displaced women in the social structure of the host area changes their relative position in the host area. They are now able to access resources and facilities of the community thus increasing their base. Such a process could be institutionalized in a way that women are more empowered to build their livelihoods by themselves and ask for women friendly changes in the structure at the household level, the community level and in the macro- state level.

d) Displaced Women’s Space in Macro Structure

Though there was a significant change in women’s socio-economic base and space in the micro household and community level, the same did not extend to the more macro level beyond communities. The women were unaware of the programs and policies for the IDPs that were provided by the state and non-state actors. The information was provided to them by men of the household or the community. They never visited such organizations on their own. Women who acted as head of their families always relied on their male relatives or kin to go to such organizations when necessary.

Even when women were organized they did not go to offices like the district administration office which looks after the cases of the IDPs at the district level, or the local development offices.

Similarly, in organizations where members include both men and women, women’s membership does not ensure their active participation in the decision making process. Even when women were given significant positions, for example, in the Maoist Victim’s Association (MVA), they were active in activities like demonstrations and gatherings while men at similar positions were engaged in decision making regarding MVA’s agenda, goals and programs. Their posts were influential but women office bearers could not influence the decisions. When women approached the state and non-

state actors, it was only to register the presence of women in the organizations rather than to present the concerns of women.

This shows that, though there is a significant change in individual bases like knowledge, skills, experience and individual spaces like awareness, integrity, identity and responsibility, it has not developed to the extent that women can get decision making responsibilities at the macro level. Policies and programs directed towards women empowerment should take into account these small changes and help in furthering such changes in a way that brings positive change for the women as individuals as well as the structures where women’s livelihoods are embedded.

However, equally important are the macro structures where women’s agency needs to be recognized and institutionalised to gain from these changes. At the macro structure there is a need to re-understand the changes of women’s base and space after they have spent a considerable time in urban area where structures of interactions are different from the rural area. The state and non-state actors in case of internally displaced assume that human agency is static- but sociological theories have presented ample example that agents on one hand influence the structure of the social field and are also affected by the structure of the field. This failure to see women’s changed space and base is due to the prevalent perspective of the state towards women and displaced women in particular. On the macro level, structures are highly patriarchal in their vision about women. The state and its policy still see women as liability, vulnerable and passive objects— a static entity. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement or Nepal’s IDP policy emphasize women’s protection but not their empowerment to be able to re-build their livelihoods by themselves. Due to such conventional understanding, despite unconventional roles of women in difficult phases, the positive changes that occur during these periods do not last when situation become normal again. Women who had negotiated with the state and non-state actors in places of origin, and had been important for sustaining movements of conflict groups, are expected to go back to their traditional roles. Macro structure like the state organs and non-state organization at the central policy and program making level should promote women’s access to these structures and institutionalize changes through policy and programs.

The all-encompassing upheaval caused by armed conflict and displacement has created the potential to redefine gender relations in the post-conflict period in more gender equitable ways in the case of the internally displaced women. But it is the macro structure like the state’s policy making organs that can institutionalize the changes of women’s base and space at the meso level so that these positive changes turn into sustainable gains. Until the changes gets acknowledged and institutionalised and permeates the policies and programs devised by such macro structures, the present changes cannot bring about significant benefits to the women. Unless the changes of displaced women’s orientation towards their future livelihoods are taken into account in policies and programs devised for

IDPs, they cannot address the situation of internal displacement efficiently. The present return packages has failed because the IDPs are expected to return to their place of origin without the state addressing the issues of secondary occupants, return of property and re-installment of livelihood supporting infrastructures and services in the places of origin and without taking into account the preference of IDPs to stay in the urban area. Any further steps towards addressing internally displaced women should inculcate these changes.

Conclusion

The demarcation based on gender was the most obvious demarcation of space within the family and the community in the place of origin. The need for immediate cash income in the host area meant that internally displaced women transgressed their traditional gender roles and started moving to various sub-fields as earning members of the households. This caused a significant change in their presence in the economic and political space within their family and their social, economic and political space at the meso community level and certain niche of the labour market. This situation has a potential to redefine the structure of those spaces in a more women friendly way.

However, as these spaces are entrenched in institutions of the field within which an individual is situated, and the personal ability to transcend the boundaries set by these institutions, defines the acquirement of these spaces. In such case, the study found that mobility within the host area as a coping strategy played a crucial role in the change of gender space. This form of mobility made way for access to different sub fields like labour markets and community networks to meso level state organizations and increased their space within the host community. However, this change varied across the different categories of IDPs according to their degree of mobility.

However, this change has not extended as strongly to the more macro state level. Though women organizations are present at the macro level, addressing issues of the landless and victims of conflict, they have not been able to get a strong space in terms of decision making. Thus, when these women are included, it is their physical inclusion rather than them as equal agents. This is because of our present understanding of women in internal displacement as only dependent and vulnerable and therefore a liability rather than actors. This perspective towards women does not give a fuller picture of internally displaced women. This incomplete understanding of the situation cannot address the problems of women in an adequate manner. As this form is more acute at the state level of policy and practices, the state needs to revisit its notion towards the internally displaced women and amend its policy and practices by taking into account this changed base and changed socio-political and economic space of internally displaced women. While addressing issue of internally displaced women it should also

take into account the changing perspective and position of internally displaced women such that these new spaces where women have potential to be empowered are institutionalised at the macro level.

Notes

¹ Nepal is divided into 75 administrative regions called districts.

² For a detail analysis of stages relating to conflict and related displacement dynamics see Bhattarai Ghimire, A. 2009, Social Territorial impacts of armed conflict induced displacement and livelihoods of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Nepal. A doctoral thesis submitted to Kathmandu University, School of Arts. Human and Natural Resources Studies department

³ A system of exchange where goods were given on a promise to pay in goods later.

⁴ A system of exchange where services were given on a promise to pay in services later.

⁵ Nanglo pasal is small portable shops where things are displayed on a plate like object made of bamboo or cane.

⁶ The settlement has been divided into four wards by the administration of the settlement.

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