

# THE CASE OF WOMEN MAOISTS: HOW GENDER EQUALITY CAN TACKLE TERROR

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Addressing the gender injustices that motivate many to join Maoist cadres can help the Indian state contain this insurgency

Last March, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) released a list of 22 martyred women cadres to applaud the contribution of women to its cause. This renewed the conversation around female Maoists composing a substantial 60% of their total cadres and occupying almost all operational and tactical positions responsible for sustaining the Maoist rebellion in India. For a security threat constituting such a sizeable number of female combatants, embracing the woman question should be central to conflict resolution. This is why most of the government's counter-terrorism measures fall short: They consider male motivations as the human default set, and model security responses accordingly. Female Maoists often express different reasons for joining the rebellion than their male comrades, indicating a need to address them separately. The umbrella grievance of women in the movement is that of gender inequality, which worsens problems of sexual assault, police brutality, atrocities against Scheduled Caste/Tribe (SC/ST) communities, and economic inequality.

Many ex-Maoist women, like Krishna Bandyopadhyay, admit Maoism's appeal was rooted in its commitment to women's rights. This commitment manifests in all-women squads such as the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan (KAMS) leading extensive campaigns against forced marriage, abduction, outcasting menstruating women, bigamy, domestic violence, and police brutality. Such initiatives encourage many younger females to join the armed rebellion. The demand for gender equality is so potent that male Maoists themselves cannot escape it. In one instance, female combatants compelled the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) to admit its own patriarchal failings within the party and the overall insurgency.

The most gendered motivator, distinguishing female experience, is sexual assault. Crimes against women are more rampant in Maoist-affected areas than in other parts of the country. Security personnel are known to use body searches, casual molestation, custodial rape, torture, threats of harm upon loved ones, etc., as warfare tactics against combatants and even civilian women. National Crime Records Bureau data shows that Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha alone registered 84,938 crimes against women in 2019. This is in addition to the 118,677 investigations pending from previous years. Despite the large figure, it captures only part of the ground reality. Women face sexual harassment from the state as well as insurgents, with no avenues to seek justice. Many find it nearly impossible to even register a first information report with the police.

Evidently, police brutality and impunity pushes women towards Maoism, creating a cycle of violence. Aside from threats of extrajudicial arrests, detention, harassment, torture and murder, women find it hard to get justice for their loved ones. A female combatant from Odisha affirmed this while recalling her sister's custodial gang-rape by the police; and later, her brother's illegal arrest and extrajudicial killing under "mysterious circumstances" by the same force, she said, left her "no choice but to join the revolution".

The Red Corridor's SC/ST women know this first-hand as they endure layers of gender, caste, and class subjugation. While one in five police personnel believe SC/ST complaints to be false

and motivated, figures suggest that tribal women were victims of 69.6% of violence against women over the past decade. Even within the rebellion, SC/ST women form 40% of the forces but 90% its martyrs. In addition, SC/ST women disproportionately suffer mass displacement and loss of livelihood, as 75.8% of India's mineral production currently comes from their ancestral lands.

Further, marginalization from the rural economy renders women poorer than men of the same households. Therefore, many women perceive Maoism as relief from poverty and unemployment. Rashmi Mahli, an ex-combatant from Jharkhand, confirmed this. Maoists promised regular pay for her low-income family, she said, in exchange for her joining their cadres.

Herein lies the allure of Maoism for women. It acknowledges gender discrimination and works to overcome it. However, radical movements tend to exist within the zeitgeist of their time. Despite sustaining the uprising, female Maoists are rarely at the table during peace talks and ceasefire negotiations. Even within the ranks, they face sexual assault and gendered division of roles such as cooking, cleaning and nursing. Maoists are not immune to patriarchal attitudes and behaviour, suggesting a scope for the state to re-enter the discourse through effective gender-sensitive policies that offer women of the region a better alternative than joining the cadres.

However, currently, state schemes focus on hard-power security responses and not the welfare demands of the populace itself. When asked why Maoists had so many women, the Union ministry of home affairs responded that Maoists coerced Adivasi parents into parting with girls to brain-wash and indoctrinate young women with Maoist ideology to form Bal Dastas. Apart from demonizing Adivasis, that explanation suggests more than half of Maoist cadres had no consent in being inducted, framing all women as victims of male recruiters. However, even if Adivasi parents were solely to blame for the swelling number of female Maoists, it doesn't explain 60% of female Maoists from non-SC/ST backgrounds.

The need of the hour is for the state to adequately address women's ground realities in the region that push them toward radicalization. The cadres' patriarchal set-up doesn't excuse the state's own failings on gender equality. Female Maoists continue to outnumber men, with fresh reports suggesting numbers as high as 70% of their cadre strength.

Failing to address women's grievances around patriarchy renders the state's counter-terrorism response inadequate. The Indian state's priority must be to diminish motivations, not demean them. The driving factors should not only be understood as incentives behind violence, but potential solutions for peaceful outcomes.

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