Transitioning post-conflict

Negotiation of gender roles by ex-combatant rebel women soldiers during and since the civil war in Nepal
# Table of Contents

I. **Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 3
   - Background ......................................................................................................................... 4
   - Literature Review ............................................................................................................... 7

II. **Methodology** .................................................................................................................. 9

III. **Analysis** .........................................................................................................................
   - Observations ....................................................................................................................... 10
   - Discussion of results .......................................................................................................... 13
   - Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 27
   - Further research ................................................................................................................. 28

IV. **Appendix** ....................................................................................................................... 30
   - Works Cited ......................................................................................................................... 30
Introduction

During the Nepalese Civil War (also called People's War or the Maoist Revolution) fought between His Majesty's Government and the Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (CPN-M) from 1996 to 2006, many women, almost all of them from rural areas, joined the movement to fight for equality and empowerment. Comprised mainly of early teenagers, perhaps tired of oppressive gender roles in which women and girls were consistently sidelined, these young women were lured by the Maoist rhetoric of transformative politics and change. Over the course of the war, a disproportionate number of women enlisted as rebel soldiers taking up military roles typically reserved for men. In fact, some researchers like Rita Manchanda suggest that the Maoist rebel army—People's Liberation Army (PLA) consisted almost 30% women. Such a massive scale of active engagement of women beyond the confines of the home was a first in Nepal's history and thus had drastic social repercussions for the women of Nepal, both within the Maoist party and out.

The peace process of Nepal is now almost a decade old with the army reintegration process ending in 2011. Given the lack of attention paid to them in recent years, it seems that the fates of the ex-PLA combatants have been sealed, at least so far as the government and international bodies are concerned. There have hardly been any news-reports in the media nor have there been any new government programs targeted to them. The government, the Maoist party and the UN have declared resolution to the reintegration of rebel army, and the UN body assisting it—United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN)—has been dissolved. However, out of the 19,692 fighters deemed “eligible” by UNMIN (of which 5000 were women), only 1,045 have been reintegrated into the national army. The rest chose to

2 Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 5
3 Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 6
pursue a second option offered: one of voluntary retirement with compensation according to their military rank.

The ex-combatants constitute a significant militarized demographic in Nepal who, in many ways, echo the national level peace process at an individual level. This is especially true for the ex-combatant women for whom joining the army and carrying arms embodied a drastic betrayal of the existing patriarchy. Their transition today is thus, not just a personal move from war to peace but the navigation of shifting societal ideas of gender as well. Despite the importance they hold in the overall transitioning state of Nepal then, not much is known of the soldiers since their retirement and ‘open entrance’ to their public lives. What have been the challenges, what do their lives look like now, and how do their hopes and goals today compare to those before and during the war? It is this seeming gap in literature that my research hopes to fill. The research is highly gendered in that I seek to understand how the women are negotiating their gender roles in light of the shift first from a subservient (as a young woman from a rural setting in Nepal) identity to an arguably more empowering military identity, and then back to a civilian one.

Given the both personal and political nature of the stories, it is important to hear from the combatants themselves. The agency in storytelling is powerful and the experience itself can be cathartic. Thus, within my research, I employ personal interviews and other conversations with the ex-combatant women to collect my data. More specifics of the nature of the interviews are further explained in the methodology section. Regarding the different sections of the paper, given the large scope, I have divided them into two parts. In the first part, I will start with the background of the conflict and then conduct a literature review. After a brief discussion of methodology and observations from the field, in the second part then, I will begin my discussion and analyses of the results. Finally, I present the conclusion and potential spaces for further research.
Background

The Nepalese civil war officially began on February 4, 1996 with the declaration of the revolution by CPN-M\(^4\). However, its roots, as a communist movement in Nepal, go as far back as the 1960s\(^5\). Nepal was no exception to the global debates around communism during the Cold War. Comfortably discreet, with very few ripples to show internationally, it had its own communist awakening amidst a changing political climate favoring the democratic process. Communist parties and groups formed and grew in scale over the next few decades, even participating in the historic elections of the 1990s\(^6\). As the left—comprising of two main parties, Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) and United People’s Front (UPF) and other smaller groups—grew steadily, they were the biggest opposition to the Nepali Congress (NC), the party in government in 1994. However, internal disputes, both political and ideological, plagued the left. Amidst several dividing factions, a hardline faction with Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) as the leader emerged for an “armed uprising”\(^7\). The Dahal-led group, the Unity Centre, lost the elections in 1994 with an absolute zero\(^8\). So, Unity Centre came together with another faction of UPF led by Baburam Bhattarai (that was not recognized by the election committee and had thus boycotted the polls), to form a new party Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) in 1995\(^9\).

Their demands unresolved in the main political arena, CPN-M formally “adopted the doctrine of armed struggle”\(^10\) beginning a communist revolution whose chief goals were the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a Maoist Republic, Constituent Assembly elections to draft a new constitution,

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\(^5\) Deepak Thapa, Understanding the Maoist movement of Nepal, 2003, ix

\(^6\) Thapa, Understanding the Maoist Movement in Nepal, x-xi

\(^7\) Thapa, Understanding the Maoist Movement in Nepal, xi

\(^8\) Thapa, Understanding the Maoist Movement in Nepal, xi

\(^9\) Thapa, Understanding the Maoist Movement in Nepal, xi

\(^10\) Thapa, Understanding the Maoist Movement in Nepal, xii
the liberation of the poor, ethnic minorities and other oppressed groups, and secularism among others. All of these they laid out in their 40-point demands published at the same time11.

His Majesty’s Government, Royal Nepal Army (RNA) and other political parties initially paid no heed to this emerging threat. As such, the rebels started organizing and establishing bases in the Mid- and Far-west, traditionally the regions furthest from the reach of the government and the most underdeveloped. The rebel army—People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was formed and recruitment began. The minimum state apparatuses present in these villages: schools, health centers and police stations were destroyed and taken control of. In many places, the rebels even established their own courts and rule of law. Militarily, they also began acquiring weapons from the royal army through raids in army bases and barracks. As the movement grew traction in the late 1990s, the no. of attacks and counterattacks soared. The government resorted to higher levels of force with bloody and brutal operations like Operation Romeo and Operation Kilo Sera II12 which turned the locals in these areas away from the royal army. The rebels were also labeled as terrorists and after a few temporary cease-fires, a state of emergency was declared in 2001.

A breakthrough of sorts came when King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah dissolved the parliament and assumed direct rule as the monarch in 200513. All the political parties, including the two major ones, NC and CPN-UML, united with the rebel group CPN-M, to oppose King Gyanendra’s dictatorial move. Thousands took to the streets in Jana Andolan II (People’s Movement II) in 2006 protesting the undemocratic rule of the King. A month later, King Gyanendra restored the parliament which subsequently stripped the monarchy of much of its political power. The military was reassigned as Nepal


12 Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 109

13 Thapa, Understanding the Maoist Movement in Nepal, xii
Army (instead of the royal army) and the King was no longer the Supreme Commander of the army. Nepal was also declared a secular state. CPN-M, finding more flexibility for their demands in the aftermath of the turmoil, signed a Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) with the new Nepal Government (previously: His Majesty’s Government) on 21 Nov, 2006\(^{14}\). This CPA resulted in the resting of the arms by the Maoists and signaled the official end of the war. It also prescribed the reintegration of the rebel army—PLA to the national army, Nepal Army (NA) under the supervision and verification of the United Nations (UN). A Constituent Assembly was also to be held for the drafting of a new constitution\(^{15}\). All was supposedly well again and hope generally soared high. The PLA was then put into cantonments to be verified by UNMIN—first for six months and then gradually the stay was extended to six years.

Finally in 2011, amidst controversy and discontent in the PLA soldiers over the eligibility criteria for verification, the resolution was declared complete and UNMIN ceased its operations. 1,045 of the 19,692\(^{16}\) PLA soldiers were integrated and others given voluntary retirement. A third option of skillful training and workshops was not pursued by anyone. It is the transition of this second group that chose to pursue civilian lives with the compensation they received that this research studies: what their reality looks like in the aftermath of their decade-long struggle.

**Literature Review**

There exists some literature on the Nepalese Civil War, post-conflict reconciliation and even some on women combatants during the civil war. The war, the peace process and the resolution itself is very

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\(^{14}\) Ani Colekessian, *Reintegrating Gender: A Gendered Analysis of the Nepali Rehabilitation Process*, (UN-INSTRAW, 2009), 4


\(^{16}\) Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 6
well-documented too—both from inside and outside the party. The scholarship on the rebel women combatants and their lives after the war however, is very limited.

One of the seminal pieces of writing on the issue of Maoist Revolution in Nepal is *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal* by Deepak Thapa\textsuperscript{17} which chronicles and contextualizes the conflict. I relied primarily on this book for my background research.

Of the few that do speak to the issue of gender in particular, I found Ani Colekessian's report for the UNWOMEN\textsuperscript{18} hint at similar questions, but even it does little more than provide a descriptive account of the women's situations during the UN verification process. It focuses almost entirely on the rehabilitation packages (targeted at the UNMIN audience) and recommendations of how to better them. Hers is thus, a practical approach that makes predictions about the challenges the women would potentially have during civilian transition. My research would be a follow-up that can substantiate and/or contradict her claims. As such, mine is more conceptual, trying to understand the realities of the women rather than trying to prescribe recommendations to any NGO or political party about how to handle their rehabilitation.

The Gautam et al.\textsuperscript{19} piece is another background piece that provides a gendered narrative of the conflict—its history, chronology of important events, the demographic of women and analysis of the same. The authors’ discussion of the motivations of the women to join the movement is particularly relevant to my own. They stipulate that the women were so keen to join not just because of the women’s liberation agenda in the Maoist struggle but because war offered new spaces open for participation that were previously closed to women\textsuperscript{20}. They argue that especially for the poor illiterate

\textsuperscript{17} Thapa, *Understanding the Maoist Movement in Nepal*
\textsuperscript{18} Colekessian, *Reintegrating Gender*
\textsuperscript{19} Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”
\textsuperscript{20} Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 109
women in rural Nepal with violence all around them, the reasoning rings since you have to die sometime, die for a noble cause. My research will draw heavily from their analysis, and my interviews also seem to support many of their claims.

Similarly, the Rita Manchanda paper has a lot of overlaps with my own question. She is studying rebel women combatants too, but she is looking to the future (an optimistic one at that) and questioning whether the Maoist revolution’s tumultuous “ripples”21 of social change will stay. While hers is an examination of the role of the women in the women's movement and possible policy directions, mine is more ethnographic in nature: studying the women’s stories for their own sake rather than any overarching theory.

Next, as a first-person narrative journal, Tara Rai’s diaries provide some valuable insider perspective to my study22. However, when I talked to my participants about their views on the book, many exhibited a negative reaction to it. They did not feel like the book represented their experience, many going so far as to call Rai not a soldier but just a “fake”23 because she was captured by the army almost right after she joined the PLA and thus lacked experience.

A PhD dissertation by Lohani-Chase24 also looks at gender and the Maoist Revolution but it deals mainly with how the war influenced gender in Nepal and not necessarily how the women participating in the war’s lives have changed since, or even the intersections between the two. Finally, the news-report from Himal South Asian25 also provides relatively comprehensive outline of the veteran women’s struggles.

\[21\] Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 16
\[22\] Tara Rai, Chhapamar Yubatiko Diary, (Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 2010).
\[23\] Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
My research would be a nuanced study of the same. It would begin to fill in the gaps of emotional, political and social complexity of the issue that it either barely hints on, or completely miss out on owing to its space.

**Methodology**

My research is primarily ethnographic in nature. In order to try to form a general narrative of life after the war for the rebel women, I met with and interviewed about 26 women, all ex-PLA soldiers. Instead of the straightforward way of procuring participants by contacting the Maoist party, I engaged in a more roundabout way. This was firstly, to steer clear of any key informant who might have a vested agenda in my research and secondly, to be able to cast out a wider net. Thus, I turned instead to journalists, NGO workers and researchers on the ground to get me in contact with ex-combatant women. While the contacts often overlapped given the small size of the capital – Kathmandu, this approach proved successful as I got to meet up with women from various backgrounds and experiences from all across Nepal. Almost all of them hailed from rural backgrounds however—unsurprising given the rebel strongholds—but currently lived anywhere from rural villages to the capital. Moreover, to ensure as representative a sample as possible, I traveled across Nepal and interviewed people from all development regions. However, I did not necessarily go about it methodically because while it was a concern, it was secondary to the stories that I was collecting.

The interviews themselves, I conducted through an open-ended life-history format. This approach was primarily to gain trust and access to the story of the people—to hear it from the women themselves, rather than a power-vested institution like the Maoist Party or outsider third parties like NGOs. The interview was also kept conversational in order to allow me to get on the level of the participants, and

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26 Political divisions of Nepal not dissimilar to provinces. There are five developmental regions: Eastern, Central, Western, Mid-Western and Far-Western. The last two were the chief Maoist strongholds.
give the women the opportunity to express what they want to. For almost all of them, I met the woman through a key informant, talked to her on the phone to schedule a time and place of her choice and comfort, usually her house/room, and talked to her there.

With regards to note-keeping, I audio-recorded the interviews with the participant’s permission as well as took notes. If the women were not comfortable recording, I just did the latter. The final recordings and notes, neither of which had any identity information in them, were kept completely confidential—the recordings were saved in my password-protected laptop and both the recordings and the notes were removed after transcribing.

Observations

During the interviews, as is often in research, I noticed many dynamics at work. While some of them might have implications for some of the findings of the research, others were merely fascinating to learn. Overall, I think these observations from the field add more to the stories collected.

Firstly, there was a certain disjunction between me as a city-born and raised, relatively educated, urban researcher and the women who had mainly rural backgrounds, relatively little education and military experiences. As a Nepali citizen myself, the language, culture, history and tradition of the places and people involved in the project were familiar and accessible to me. I am privy to the factors of “gender roles and intergenerational differences, as well as some usually closely guarded secrets about social mores, domestic violence, and political authority” that are integral to an ethnographic research such as mine

27. However, coming from two subsets of demographics that very rarely interact, there was sometimes a certain disconnect between me and the participants. This, I think, played both well for me:

27 Susan Thomson, "Getting close to Rwandans since the genocide: studying everyday life in highly politicized research settings." *African studies review* 53, no. 03 (2010), 27
by providing me with a healthy distance, and against me: perhaps in hesitations to confide in me. Next, my perceived identity as an American-educated "cosmopolitan" woman also worked in my favor with my participants for the most part. I benefitted from the enamored outlook many Nepalese typically harbor towards the US. It translated to more energized and ready participation. In fact, participants were often surprised and proud that despite leaving my country, I was still interested in Nepal's history and cherishing their part in it. As Sabita noted, “I liked that you are writing our history and our stories even though you have gone to the US. This is why I agreed to talk with you.” Not to say that there were not challenges associated with my American-ness, especially alienation. As a person who has been away from the country for a while, I was not as up-to-date on my technical Nepali, the language me and the participants communicated in. I was also largely unaware of the war-vocabulary, particularly in Nepali and that probably showed in the interviews and limited the conversations. I did put an effort to learn and I got better with each interview.

Another really palpable dynamic was the gender one, of the assigned and assumed roles I, as a woman, often introduced to the women through a male key informant, and the women themselves, played. In those situations, social cues dictated that I let the male key informant explain to the participant what my research was for me. While I usually counteracted it with my own explanation in my alone time with the participants, the participants' first impression of the research was more often than not, provided by a man—one who often felt he had the liberty to state my research as he understood it, whether or not it be that. Other times, this patriarchal-slanted dynamic worked in my favor, for at least one of the participants mentioned that had it just been me approaching her, she would not have talked to me, but because it was a man and one that she knew, she trusted the research. Contrasting however, I often wondered if the women would have been as frank with their experiences had it been to a male

28 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
researcher. I doubt it, especially given the particularly gendered topics of harassment, discrimination, pressures to marry, rigid gender roles among others that the interviews comprised of.

Furthermore, speaking of voluntary and unsolicited participation by males in the research, in a few interviews, some of the family members of the women would feel free to sit in on the interview. In other cases, they would ask to sit in, or not leave us alone when asked to, getting defensive about giving us space. While I usually asked them to step out if it was possible and made sure they did, sometimes it was unavoidable because it was a one room apartment. In such cases, the participant permitting, some other members were present in the interviews—often which consisted of her husband, her brother or her brother-in-law. In these rare cases, the sit-in males also often volunteered answers, sometimes silencing the female participants and other times, the participant looking to the sit-in male for affirmation and assurance before answering a question.

Next, there was another vexing concern that often presented itself wherein the participant felt compelled to answer not just as herself but as a representative of the party as a whole. It is unsurprising given the big role the party plays in many of these women’s lives, but it was often frustrating when I would ask a very pointed "I" question to which they felt compelled to reply (often subconsciously) with "we". This was especially the case for participants in higher ranks in the party. In fact, the higher the rank, the more tactical, diplomatic, and empty political guff of “social change” the answers became.

Finally, the changing political landscape of Nepal also played well for me. About three years ago, the Maoist party broke into two factions over disputes regarding the reintegration of the PLA into the Nepali Army. A significant group of disgruntled members who felt that the party had veered away from its original goals and was showing weakness, formed a new party under the leadership of Mohan Vaidya
Kiran naming itself the real Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M)\(^9\). The faction with the original leadership renamed itself United Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M). Both factions currently enjoy significant support and my participant sample contains a mixture of both. Since both the factions are vying for popular support, I think that competition helped me gain participants because both sides were open to sharing their experiences in order to gain publicity. It should also be mentioned here that given their political motives, the women supporting CPN-M (Kiran) were more openly critical of the party and the reintegration process than the women supporting UCPN-M. Nonetheless, I have a good balance in the number of women in each camp so that difference should matter less.

**Discussion of results**

*Entrance into the movement*

“Let’s start from the beginning. How did you come to join the movement?” “Well, I was a part of the student association...” began many of my interviews. Student associations in Nepal operate quite differently from what a student run organization would in the US for example. It is less of a student club and more of a student-wing of a political party. What is more striking is that students begin joining these as early as 6\(^{th}\) grade—basically pre-teen and teenage years. For a majority of my participants, the entry into the movement was similar: learning about the association from upperclassperson and joining it. Student associations were also where they learnt about communist ideologies. Thus, once the revolution was declared, these associations came to be hotbeds for recruitment.

However, the broader narrative of entrance of the women into the movement is not so simple and straightforward. It has intersectional dimensions of class and caste, both of which take huge forms in

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\(^9\) For clarity’s sake, in this paper I use CPN-M to mean the party until the recent fracture. The new emerged faction under Vaidya Kiran, I will refer simply as CPN-M (Kiran).
Nepali society and thus have significant implications on the women’s experiences during the war. Logically, student associations are generally the gateway for young women who attend schools, so typically women hailing either from families with enough social awareness to send their girl child to school and with the economic means to do so. It prerequisites a certain socio-economic status that is accessible only to some: mostly Hindu and Aryans, both higher castes rom the Central and Eastern areas. These narratives of entry differ significantly from those in the Mid-Western and Far-Western regions, both traditionally less-developed and Maoist strongholds during the war. That is no coincidence. In those areas, the story of joining the movement is far more violent and survivalist: to escape police oppression. Being the rebel stronghold, the operations that the government launched in the area were massive and the consequential police brutalities were almost inescapable. Many from the region then, joined the movement in order to live. Especially during the years of Operation Romeo and Operation Kilo Sera II, the harshest of counterattacks on the insurgents, the rebels actually saw a spike in the recruits from the region. So too was the story of Sarita. “The police came to our house every day. They took me out of school to question me in the police offices and followed me around. I was harassed in my own room when they came to search our house without a warrant. If we are to experience such cruelty as innocent bystanders, we might as well support the other guys. It got to be enough. So, one day I just went underground and joined”, she recounts. Gautam et al. identify these two categories of women recruits to the war and my research seems to support their claims. However, this difference between the recruits based on their region (and subsequently caste and class) also plagues the party in a much broader and perhaps more significant sense: most women leaders within

30 Thapa, Understanding the Maoist Movement in Nepal, 12
31 Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 104
32 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
33 Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 94
the party are disproportionately from the Aryan and Brahmin castes while most of the foot soldiers consist of non-Aryan, Magar and Rai castes.

**Women’s liberation as an agenda**

“Before the Maoist movement, there were no women in the army”\(^{35}\). The sheer number of women that brought this fact casually to my attention without there necessarily being a straight question about it, reveals the immense pride both the party and the women take in their part in achieving this historic ‘accomplishment’. The party also frames it as a huge step in the women’s movement in Nepal. The repeated incidental popping up of this fact during my brief time in Nepal is also subtly revealing of the training that probably went on behind the scenes in the party—both conscious and unconscious. The intensity with which the party pushes the large number of its women recruits as one of its successes could very easily have convinced them (both the party and the women) of the false sense of egalitarian view within the party. In fact, as Manchanda explores in her paper, there is a huge difference between visibility and protagonism\(^{36}\). While the movement was visibly women-inclusive, the narratives of women reveal that heavy roles were not easily handed to women. This is not to discount the involvement of women in the party. Indeed, the party had more women in some leadership capacity than any other party in Nepal prior to that. However, it is important to note that even though the numbers themselves were higher, the ranks that women climbed did not necessarily reach to the top. The highest military rank fulfilled by a woman in the PLA was that of a Battalion Commander\(^{37}\) and there are at least three other positions of Division Commander, Platoon Commander and Chief Commander\(^{38}\) above that—not

\(^{34}\) Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 94
\(^{35}\) Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\(^{36}\) Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 6
\(^{37}\) Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
to mention all the vice-commanders to all of those positions. As Shanti recalled, “We fought (within the party) to fight in first ‘assault’\textsuperscript{39}. Some begged, others cried and didn’t back down. Imagine! To sign up to be the first ones to die!” The fond recall of her own ‘hot blood’ of the youth aside, this anecdote sharply contradicts the official narrative of the party that supposedly “opened up the fighting ranks to women”\textsuperscript{40}.

In fact, Gautam et al. suggest that women soldiers were “ideologically and programmatically incorporated”\textsuperscript{41} into the agenda by the party once it was seen to be profitable. They find that the leader of CPN-M, Prachanda, admitted that before the People’s War, the “women’s question” had not been taken “seriously”\textsuperscript{42} by the party. It might well have been that the party’s advancement of the women’s agenda to the forefront came in as a result of the pressure from increasing number of women recruits. In fact, it aligns with the momentum of the movement. Once the number of women recruits to the movement peaked around 2000 and 2001,\textsuperscript{43} it is around this time that we see the party propaganda feature women’s liberation more heavily. In fact, Pettigrew and Schneiderman cite that only 16%\textsuperscript{44} of the women soldiers maintained that they joined the party because it promoted gender equality. My own research seems to support this since none of the women I interviewed recalled it as one of their reasons of joining the movement.

\textit{Burdens of ‘Image’}

Over and over again in my interviews, a familiar concern came through. When the women were asked about their difficulties during the war, one that almost inevitably came up was of their ‘image’. Usually

\begin{enumerate*}[\textsuperscript{39}“First assault” refers to first line of combat in PLA vernacular.\textsuperscript{40} Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 5\textsuperscript{41} Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 116\textsuperscript{42} Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 117\textsuperscript{43} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014\textsuperscript{44} Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 10]
defined in terms of ‘sexual purity’, the women reported always having to be on their toes about not sending the wrong message to any men, both inside and outside the party. At times of war, when women’s bodies become prime targets, there is an added stigma for women soldiers attached to their entering the jungle: extreme “sexual licentiousness”\textsuperscript{45}. The women soldiers were not unaware of this. As Sarita recounted “Even inside the same party with the same ideals, not everyone is disciplined. I mean, our codes of conduct were very strict but even then if we weren’t cautious, things could go bad. There was also the view of society. In a society where a woman cannot even freely talk to any man, to travel at night under a team of men—sometimes as the only woman—through forests and villages...people get suspicious. I can understand that, but I cannot let them be right. So, I was constantly aware.”\textsuperscript{46} Given that the propaganda against the rebels specifically targeted the women soldiers’ sexuality: portraying the Maoists as “corrupting” the women, fake reports of condoms found in Maoist bases to allude to sexual hedonistic behavior\textsuperscript{47} among others, this is hardly surprising.

Another related concern that came up a few times and underlined almost all of the experiences of the war, was a rarely vocalized need to protect their “honor”. I say rarely vocalized because while it was discreetly present in all of the interviews, very few of the women uttered it out loud. To the ones who did, “honor”—defined in terms of an unviolated body (both physically and emotionally)—overshadowed everything else during the war. “My overriding concern going into any combat was that I would rather die than get captured. I would actually pray that I get shot, because once you’re shot, you are down and it is done. But if you were to be alive still...”\textsuperscript{48} This concern was a legitimate one. Accounts of rape by the enemy abounded in the news they received. However, personal stories from women who did get

\textsuperscript{45} Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 14  
\textsuperscript{46} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014  
\textsuperscript{47} Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 120  
\textsuperscript{48} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
captured—like Rai in her book—report that physical harassment itself was uncommon. However, in times of trauma and enormous pressure like the conflict, it matters less what the facts are and more what the people perceive them to be. Linked to this enormous fear is the generation of the same, and perhaps even its exploitation by the party. In casting the enemy as haphazard assaulters—the worst kind in the women’s minds—the party gets the deepest of passion and wrath from the female soldiers. That is not to say that rape didn’t happen. Scholarships have established that women’s bodies are targeted during any conflict without fail. I am merely trying to expose the twisted way the Maoist party benefitted from the seemingly exaggerated perception of rape.

Furthermore, for a party that capitalizes on its “radical” persuasion, CPN-M surprisingly (or not) still equates the “honor” of their soldiers with their sexual purity. This is most well demonstrated in the party’s guardianship role in the romantic and sexual lives of the soldiers. All romantic relationships needed to have been approved by the party. In fact, the party, towards the latter half, even started nudging single soldiers towards marriage, veering dangerously close to matchmaking. In fact, even the weddings had to be “Maoist-style” to be considered legitimate. Maoist –style meant that it was not lavish and extravagant but simple, usually doubled up in a party event where the bride and groom often exchanged guns instead of the traditional flower garlands. Many of the women I interviewed had married through the proposal of the party. “I had not even seen him before I got the proposal from my supervisor. I had no intention to marry any one, I just wanted to devote my entire life to this cause. As the pressure started to mount both from my supervisor and my friends, who were all getting married as well, I thought ‘Well, I guess you have to marry sometime’, so I agreed. And then we had a Maoist style

49 Rai, Chhapamar Yubatiko Diary, 23
50 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
51 Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 120
wedding together with three other couples"\textsuperscript{52}, one of my participants Shanti recounted her marriage story. As Gautam and Manchanda note, this "leader-patriarch"\textsuperscript{53} role played by CPN-M is regressive to the party’s stated aims of women’s liberation. Not that the stated aims of the party with regards to women’s liberation are not flawed further. The party, and as the result the women, all have a very biological definition of gender. All the people I met ascribe rigid gender roles and think entirely in the gender binary, going so far as to reason everything male/female back to their biology. This statement by one of the participants, Rakshya demonstrates it perfectly: “Even when their eyes were burned alive, the women didn’t spill secrets..because the women had more capacity to endure.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textit{War-torn loyalties}

As Manchanda points out, in her survey, almost 74\% of the women in the party said they had felt discriminated against at one point or another\textsuperscript{55}. My research seems to echo her stance: most of the women denied any outright harassment but admitted to feeling a subtler form of discrimination. Most of these involved the leadership hesitating to give responsibilities to women, feeling or acting difficult, annoyed and/or uncomfortable when there were women teammates among others. What was more striking about the discussion to me was how the women almost inevitably came to defend their fellow male soldiers by reminding me that they “were also people who had come in from the same patriarchal oppressive society, so it was hard to let go of ingrained prejudices”\textsuperscript{56}, often with the exact same phrasing. This hints at a repeatedly-fed answer to an oft-asked question to the soldiers. It also showcases the loyalty the women still harbor for the party; the rush to defend it is so strong.

\textsuperscript{52} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\textsuperscript{53} Gautam et al., “Where there are no men”, 112
\textsuperscript{54} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\textsuperscript{55} Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 7
\textsuperscript{56} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
Speaking of loyalties, the strength of devotion and positive feelings towards the party seemed to differ highest across differences of ranks. For the women that I interviewed who were in higher positions in the army, not only were they more likely to still be working for the party and make the party their occupational focus, but they were also more likely to commemorate and recall the war experiences more fondly. One participant Sarita for example, had her entire flat proudly laden with the party flags, framed pictures of her and her husband in their uniforms as well as framed picture of their battalion. This was not the case everywhere. In contrast, another participant Luniva who had been in the army for almost equal number of years serving as a foot soldier was completely wary about the party and had no relic whatsoever in her room. “These days I support whoever can help me improve my condition, Maoist or not Maoist”\(^{57}\), she said shrugging.

An interesting dimension to this particular issue of loyalty and experience is one of regret and nostalgia. All women, when asked if they regretted anything about their war experiences, responded that they had no regrets. Phrased a slightly different way, the answers to “Would you do it again knowing what you know now?” garnered slightly different responses. Most people said yes again, but added that they would have perhaps joined in their later years and not when they were so young. A few of them, however, changed their tune and responded that they probably would not have joined the movement. “Had I not had been married off at 13\(^{58}\) to a draconian mother-in-law, I probably would not have joined the movement”\(^{59}\), Anita said. Whatever their answers to a hypothetical turning back of time, there is an immense pride that all women take in the war experiences they have had. “If I wasn’t in the movement, I would have just had a simple life: pleasing my husband, my mother-in-law and nothing else. But I got to

\(^{57}\) Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014  
\(^{59}\) Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
rise above that and scrutinize society and define it and understand it. It is all because of the war. I made experiences and history. Otherwise I would have been married off at 17. I am really proud of my life“60, Bishnumati summed it up. Others echoed similar sentiments of pride in fighting against injustice. As such, their relationship and love for the party (and more broadly the ideals they fought for) often seemed to me to be not very different from how a mother feels about a misguided child. The party and the movement did not necessarily keep all of its promises or achieve the goals they had hoped to. Some members even got derailed along the way, but almost all of the women still feel very protective about the party and their ideals.

**Tumultuous Transition**

a) **Disjunction between their ideals and Nepalese society**

Colessakian warns in her report that the rebel soldiers might find it “difficult to adjust to traditional experiences”61. The stories in my research seem to substantiate her predictions. Of all the daily trivialities, engaging in social festivals was said to be simultaneously the most important and the most difficult to navigate. Given the huge role festivals, rituals and traditions play in building and maintaining the communal nature of Nepali society, this disconnect between the ex-combatant women and others is of high relevance. The ex-combatant women reported that they have had to avoid some festivities and gatherings because of one or more of these reasons: negative public perception of them, a personal disbelief in the rituality and a lack of means to attend them.

Firstly, the stigma attached to Maoist soldiers especially the women, restricts the ways they choose to conduct their lives. The aforementioned stigma of sexual hedonism prevails extensively in both cities

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60 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
61 Colekessian, *Reintegrating Gender*, 12
and rural areas. So does the idea of the ex-combatant women being more “aggressive” and unruly, so unlike the stereotype of the obedient women of Nepal. In fact, many people still fear them. As such, the reintegration efforts into their relocated communities is not always easy or particularly successful. As Salina shared, "What I do now is, I only go to the events if I know the host is somebody who knows our history and understands and respects it." 

Secondly, most of women soldiers have little regard for ritualistic festivals, especially superstitions and traditions that perpetuate conventional women’s roles—gender-consciousness, a distinct product of the war. As such, their choice not to participate in those often stands out negatively among other women in the community. The ex-combatant women are thus in a very delicate position, needing to choose between keeping their beliefs and gaining acceptance into the society. Shanti recounted her plight: “For example, where I am living in rent, the landlord has different beliefs than me. Just to make myself seem ‘normal’ to her, I have to compromise on a lot of things! I do not agree with all these traditional beliefs, conservative rituals, be it celebrating festivals lavishly or deeming myself ‘untouchable’ during my period. But I have to conform to it even if I disagree. So many times I have felt compelled to tell her I went to the temple when I didn’t. Sometimes on religious holidays when I am supposed to have bathed, if I do not have the time, I will bathe some other day, but I cannot tell that to her. I have to pretend that I have already bathed. Not for myself, but for her sake! Lie, just to be able to live on rent from someone..to conform to society, such unfairness!

This dilemma extends itself to the materialistic and superficial nature of communal celebrations and gatherings too. So much of Nepali festivities hinge on people dressing up, with women often sporting expensive jewelry, almost to a competitive degree. "The problem is...we came from one world to

62 Colekessian, Reintegrating Gender, 13
63 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
64 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
another...that’s what I feel like. Because during the decade-long war, we had nothing material that was ours, no things, not even our life. There was no way of knowing when we would die; whenever we went for battle, we went prepared in case we died. For a person with a life like that, personal selfishness, luxury and relaxation are nil,“Sabita added. To the women soldiers then, the materialistic aspirations of ‘normal’ Nepali housewives seem petty. Many of them do not wear jewelry or makeup or any accessories—sometimes not even the bare minimum of the sindoor (red powder put at the parting of the hair that signifies marriage). This is again a change in the gender norm of Nepali society but this act of non-conformity, again, puts the ex-combatant women in an uncomfortable position with their non-combatant women peers. "Our life since voluntary retirement is one of intense suffocation. Neither can we return to the old lives and society, nor has the society embraced the new ideas we rallied for. It is in a transition phase. We cannot accept many of the deep-rooted old traditions of society but to just live, we need to take it in with us every day”Shanti grieved.

b) Regression?

In many ways, the ex-combatant women's lives lie in an inconvenient space at a disjunction with the status quo. In order to fit in, then, many have had to forgo their newly educated awareness and revert back. Colessakian warned about the “revert to the status quo of the ‘peace before the war’ common in many post-conflict societies replicating in Nepal too. Indeed, that is seemingly how the situation has unfolded. As Laxmi says, "Once we got out, many women were forced to lead the life of a “pure housewife”. They have kids and are forced to take care of them and do household chores. The husband is more free and can pursue with politics if he wants. But most women have returned back to the same

65 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
66 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
67 Colekessian, Reintegrating Gender, 11
circumstances (as before)."\textsuperscript{68} So much for the changing gender norms. In fact, what is peculiar about this change is that more than the usual hardships of change in underlying attitudes, it is the implementation of their new sense of their gender that is proving harder to these women. As a result, with nowhere to go and no way to support themselves, the women are forced to depend on their husbands and families. Colessakian’s other prediction of the women having “obtained a sense of empowerment” that is “threatened”\textsuperscript{69} upon return also seems exactly on point then.

c) Scarce means

Another painful challenge that almost all of the women currently face is of meagre finances. Having lived most of their lives during and in the war, the women are not equipped to find their way around the job market for financial opportunities. Yet, having chosen the voluntary retirement option, it is exactly what they were expected to do. They received some monetary compensation from the government, presumably to start a foundation to build upon. However, the money is too little to really be sustainable as many complained bitterly. Indeed, out of all the women I talked to, only two had been able to invest their compensation money in starting a business with their family. Everyone else’s had been spent almost entirely on resettlement. This is especially the case for the people who did not return to their original communities but settled in cities instead, which is almost everyone. The motivations for this move-out were to explore better financial opportunities in bigger spaces, but also to avoid the stigma and negative behavior their original communities might have towards them. Indeed, as a result of a push from the party, many marriages in the Maoist party during and after the war are inter-caste, a staggering \textsuperscript{70}40\%. In Nepali society, inter-caste marriages are not always easily accepted given the vastly different ways different castes are treated. This mistreatment is especially worse in rural areas which is

\textsuperscript{68} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\textsuperscript{69} Colekessian, \textit{Reintegrating Gender}, 11
\textsuperscript{70} Colekessian, \textit{Reintegrating Gender}, 13
where the majority of the soldiers hail from. As such, many couples, including many women in my own study, found that their families had not entirely accepted their marriage choices. So, it is even harder for them to rehabilitate since they cannot even rely on their own family for support.

Colessakian actually anticipates this need to "relocate outside their communities"71 in her report. The extra burden of navigating an unfamiliar space, then, adds to the troubles of finding jobs for the ex-combatants. To add insult to injury, having joined the movement at a really early age, most of the ex-combatant women (and their husbands) lack any higher level education, putting them at a huge disadvantage. Laxmi shared of herself, "When we were studying in schools, we were told to boycott the bourgeoisie books and curriculum..to free ourselves. We were told that the degree and diplomas of such a failed system didn't mean much. It was just a scrap of paper. So, we fought against it all, leaving school. But now, I need the same books and the same qualification and paper diplomas to get any job."72

Finally, there are other severe challenges unique to rebel soldiers: injuries and PTSD from the war. Many of the soldiers were wounded in the war, the remnants of which—both physical and mental—still remain to this day. Sita recounted how she still wakes up screaming "Enemy!" in the middle of the night and how it is hard for her to even walk long distances73. Almost all the women I interviewed had some bullet shards in their body still, if not worse injuries. Not all of them are getting treatment however, either because of the lack of money or because of the stigma associated with diseases and mental disorders. Shanti's following half-joking remark reveals a lot about their perilous condition, "If I go to the doctor, they will find too many things wrong with me, so I'd rather just treat the things that noticeably

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71 Colekessian, Reintegrating Gender, 14
72 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
73 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
hurt and not know about the others."\textsuperscript{74} With such a damaging outlook to their health and wellbeing, how are the soldiers then supposed to just go and find jobs to support themselves? This question however does not seem to take priority in the party’s agenda.

d) **Stuck in the puzzle**

Next, many women also harbor a feeling of restless incompleteness with regards to the movement. Having fought for the movement for a decade if not more, it is all they know. It is what they have decided to invest their life in, and they are not ready to let go. As such, it is unsurprising that women would not be inclined to just completely abandon party work and focus on pursuing other economic opportunities. As Sarita puts it, “I am already past 30, so my years of being courageous, strong and an unreluctant optimism that I can do anything, are gone\textsuperscript{75}. All those times went away in the war, in the work of the public. It was service for the public, it was not for us, we didn’t get anything, we still haven’t got anything. Now that I am 31, how to survive is a huge challenge. I don’t know if it the same in other countries but it’s such an incomplete phase of movement here (Nepal). We don’t have full control of the state and we are not fully in the opposition either. The luxuries of public service are only enjoyed by a few within the party. Everyone else is under economic hardship. I am in such a condition, so should I continue politics or find a job? I cannot leave my investment of about 20 years and go start a new job, but I cannot even continue with it economically. I don’t know how to face this challenge. I can go around all day for party activities but once I come home, I will still need to pay rent. Both of us (her and her husband) are still in the party and there are no salaries so we’re stuck.”\textsuperscript{76} Sarita is by no means alone in this peril.

\begin{footnotesize} 
\textsuperscript{74} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\textsuperscript{75} Owing especially to how early women marry (13-19), since women are no longer at a marriageable age at 30, it is considered past their prime.
\textsuperscript{76} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\end{footnotesize}
In reflecting on all these hardships and recounting their past lives, often juxtaposing the past with the present, many of the participants expressed nostalgia for the war days. Salina said that she enjoyed the battlefield far more and would even “love to go back”\(^77\), while Sima said that she would still have fought for long on—“there was still 6-7 years of fighting left”\(^78\)—and was taken by surprise by the declaration of the peace process. Binita succinctly summed up their reasoning, “It was just easier in the war. I almost think it would have been easier if I would have died in the war. Then I wouldn’t be in this neither here nor there state. It would have been something if I had died in battle. Now it just hard.”\(^79\)

\(\textit{Halt in the momentum}\)

A new problem has surfaced in the Maoist party since the peace process began. The number of women in the party, which has typically been one of its strongpoints, has declined drastically, by more than 50% by some counts\(^80\). The deficit in the leadership is especially palpable. This slump in passion in the ex-combatant women is not an accident. Most of the participants when asked, reasoned that it was because once the momentum slowed for the movement, women started getting settled. They got married and had kids. They also bemoaned the weakness of the party in being unable to make the women stick by providing support to help the women continue working in the party. “Taking care of our kids, or having programs where it would be okay if we brought our children would help.”\(^81\), Sanchita suggested. She is not far from Colessakian, who in her recommendations to the UN package asked that to continue the impassioned participation of the women soldiers, the “party should provide packages that don’t reaffirm traditional gender identities and make sure that dependents are taken care of such

\(^77\) Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\(^78\) Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\(^79\) Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\(^80\) Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
\(^81\) Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
that the women can attend trainings \(^{82}\). As of right now, the party shows no signs of any such consideration.

**Hope for the future**

Despite the dismal picture painted so far, almost all of the women agreed that gender norms in Nepal had significantly changed after the Maoist movement. They remarked that the changes were most visible in the national political sphere and in the societal perceptions in rural areas.

In national politics, almost directly because of the Maoist revolution, 33\(^\%\) \(^{83}\) of the seats in the parliament (currently the Constituent Assembly) are now constitutionally reserved for women. It was 5\(^\%\) before. \(^{84}\) While it has problems, again, with not always being strictly upheld as well as being a “decoy” achievement that does not necessarily get to the structural roots of inequality, it is definitely a step in the right direction. In fact, before the war, the number of women in political parties—let alone parliamentary positions—could be counted in mere fingers. The situation now looks quite different. As Gayatri put it, “Now look at us! There are so many woman players in the field, so many of them enter right out of the jungle where they served as commanders of the army. We have sisters from Jumla and Dolpa, and sisters who are Dalits and sisters who endured domestic violence, who are now writing our constitution. Even if I myself am not in a good place, I see that these are real progresses, and it is all because of the war, and I feel very proud and hopeful.” \(^{85}\)

Gayatri’s remark also hints upon the radical changes that have happened in the mentalities of rural population surrounding women. The presence of women in combat positions and the stories of their heroism, according to Sabita, “proved to society that women can harness extreme potential and

\[^{82}\text{Colekessian, Reintegrating Gender, 6}\]
\[^{83}\text{Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 2}\]
\[^{84}\text{Manchanda, “Women’s Question In Nepal’s Transition”, 2}\]
\[^{85}\text{Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014}\]
changed the view that women are weak. Maya corroborated saying, “Have you heard the old Nepali saying ‘if a woman touches a rifle, the rifle loses its power’? Who would say that now? During the war, fighting in the jungles, it was these very villagers who provided us shelter and food, and in our conversations, actions, convictions, we know they could see the centrality of the women in the movement and the courage we showed every day. I have no doubt that those interactions are what helped change their views.”

While these outdated stereotypes that reinforce gender roles and ‘places’ of men and women were in no way limited to rural areas, the villages that were the hardest hit are among the ones that have drastically redefined their ideas of gender today. The women mentioned a slew of examples: the average age of marriage is higher, and women are given more room to pursue opportunities of education and work even when that might mean leaving home and moving to the cities. Previously concerns of safety, the ‘purity’ of their daughters, as well as a failure to see the need for their education and independence in the first place stopped a lot of families. Today, such concerns seem less valid. Not to mention, inter-caste marriages, which were vehemently supported by the Maoists, are much less taboo than before. Many of the women I interviewed were in inter-caste marriages themselves and commented on the “hard but not impossible nature of gaining acceptance” in their families and in larger society.

Such visible markers of changes after the war are cherished by the women I interviewed. Almost all of them exclaimed their joy and pride at being a part of the movement. They also remain incredibly hopeful about the future, and the trust in the leaders of the party is also generally high. Rekha cited, “We have gotten so far from where we started, so I have no reason to not be hopeful. If we continue

86 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
87 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
88 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
89 Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
our battle for equality through this new means of the peace process, we will get to the equitable society we dreamed of. I still believe my leaders are fighting for the same mission. We are all fighting for the same mission, during the war and now. Our ideals have not changed and our leaders have not deviated in their thinking. It is just the circumstances and the methods of the fight that have changed.\textsuperscript{90}

**Conclusion**

Despite the often desperate conditions that many of the women are currently living in, all of them share an impressive amount of hope for the future. Framing the peace process as the next step in the revolution, they affirm that the revolution is far from over and that they’re still fighting. The confidence they place on the party and their leaders to not betray their ideals is astounding given how little the party seems to have done to serve their purpose until now. Choosing to look instead at the positives, they celebrate the fall of the monarchy, the establishment of the constituent assembly, declaration of Nepal as a secularist state, all of which they deem the Maoist party to be primarily due credit for. As Shanti puts it, “This journey of revolution is a train. All kinds of people get on this train but the ones to remain to the end are limited. There have been stops and we have fulfilled our partial destinations. We’re hoping that the ones that have stuck to the end are going to keep at it and reach the ultimate destination.”\textsuperscript{91}

**Further research**

While I have tried to shed some more light into the post-conflict experience of ex-PLA women soldiers, there is more room for research. For one, there is room to add in male perspectives that could easily supplement, substantiate or even contradict the female experience. There is much to benefit from a

\textsuperscript{90} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014

\textsuperscript{91} Interview by author. Personal interview. Nepal, 2014
wider set of experiences. My research also leaves out a minor subset of people whose experiences are likely to be significantly different: those who have not settled elsewhere but returned to their original homes before the war.

Moreover, while my research has focused more on the individual experience and qualitative analysis of the same, there could be larger samples to provide a better quantitative analysis. From what I gathered, neither the party nor the government has a statistical database of all of the combatants of the war, their background, experiences, positions and battle chronicles of the conflict as such. So, that entire dataset and scholarship around it is pretty meagre.

Furthermore, there is also room to situate this research in Nepal’s transitional phase and its greater democratization process, as well as in the histories of both Nepal’s communist and feminist movement. Finally, comparative studies of the Nepali uprising and the reintegration and reconciliation process with other countries with similar tumultuous histories can be developed to draw overarching conclusions about conflict and resolution in general. Some of these questions I hope to tackle in my undergraduate thesis dissertation that I am working on this year.
Works cited


