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To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1521296

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Published online: 19 Nov 2018.

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Living Maoist gender ideology: experiences of women ex-combatants in Nepal

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ABSTRACT
Studies of women’s participation in civil conflict as armed combatants have attributed diverse motivations to such participation and examined the implications of participation for women’s empowerment in the aftermath. The authors contribute to these studies through an in-depth analysis of female combatants’ struggles for equality and empowerment during and after Nepal’s decade-long Maoist conflict. Scholars have argued that the emphasis of Maoist ideology in Nepal on the emancipation of women and on ending gender discrimination attracted a large number of women to the cause. Based on narratives of Maoist female ex-combatants, the authors investigate women’s engagement with Maoist ideology during and after the conflict. These narratives reveal that despite discourses of gender equality in Nepal’s Maoist struggle, promises around gender equality remain unkept in the period after the war. A reintegration program has offered women ex-combatants few options and has pushed women back into traditional gender roles. Struggles continue in this terrain. Incorporating intersectionality, the paper highlights how women ex-combatants’ gender identities intersect with caste and other social locations to produce diverse challenges for their lives.

KEYWORDS Maoist armed conflict; gender ideology; empowerment; women ex-combatants; post-conflict Nepal

Introduction
Women combatants were heavily involved during the decade of Maoist armed conflict in Nepal. Estimates suggest that women made up 30–40 percent of the total Maoist combat force (Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001; Sharma and Prasain 2004). Why the Maoist movement attracted such high numbers of Nepalese women has been mostly attributed to the Maoist gender agenda and the prospects for women’s empowerment.

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Some feminist readings contend that the Maoist movement afforded rural women an option to escape narrowly confined gender roles and the exploitation they experienced in their daily lives (Thapa 2003; Manchanda 2004; Goswami 2015). Similarly, it has been argued that women were attracted to what they understood as a struggle against women’s oppression and discrimination based on gender, caste and class (Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001; Manchanda 2004; Sharma and Prasain 2004). Some authors have suggested, however, that the Maoist gender ideology was merely rhetoric and did not imply real empowerment of women (Pettigrew and Shneiderman 2004; Tamang 2009). This explanation fails to explain why women would stay on in the movement, as many of them did. This paper traces women’s motivations and experiences during and after the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

Among studies that examine women and Maoist conflict in Nepal, little attention has been paid so far to women’s own motivations and the role of ideological commitment. Research on this topic with any ethnographic detail has been rare. Did women have an ideological commitment from the start, or did they develop such commitment once they were part of the movement? How did this commitment resonate with more private ambitions? And what happened to women’s ideological drive in the post-conflict period? Based on narratives of female ex-combatants, this paper shows how these women relate to the particular ideological positions of the Maoist movement and how they connect this to what they describe as women’s empowerment. The women described the sense of empowerment they experienced in their own words as: “mahila sasahktikaran” (women’s empowerment), “where they could raise their voices” (awash uthaunne), “women’s voices were represented” (mahilako awaj ko prat nidithyo) and “understanding women’s grief” (mahila ko dukka bhujnne).

Zooming in on women’s own narratives allows us to show how private experiences of oppression and discrimination gain significance in the broader Maoist ideological framing and to trace how women’s appropriation of this ideology carries over into the post-conflict context. With this explicit focus on women as ideologically motivated actors, this paper aims to contribute to the significant body of comparative literature on women, gender and armed conflict that has shown that women are not just victims of violent conflict but active agents (Jacobs, Ruth, and Marchbank 2000; Moser and Clark 2001; Kampwirth 2002; Enloe 2004; Cockburn 2013). Using the perspective of intersectionality, the paper considers women’s diverse experiences during the war and in the post-war setting (Ruwpanpura and Humphries 2004; Ramnarain 2014). Women taking up combatant roles are not a homogeneous category. As we will show, differences in caste, ethnicity and class shape their experiences both during the war and in its aftermath. This is one of the few studies that includes “upper caste” women’s perspectives.
Background: gender discrimination and the Maoist Agenda

Gender, caste and ethnic-based discrimination have been pervasive in Nepalese society (Regmi 2007). Women in particular suffer from all forms of discrimination (Parvati 2003; Tamang 2009; Yadav 2016). The position of a woman is contingent on her male family members: father, husband or other male head of the family (Regmi 2007). These practices are reflected through the Nepalese inheritance system, family relations, and patrilocal residence and patriarchal descent, all of which are further reinforced by the legal system (Dhungana 2014). Marriage plays a key role in a woman’s lifetime because it determines her destiny and livelihood options (Dhungana 2014). Traditionally, Nepalese women and girls have been restricted to the domestic sphere and excluded from the decision-making (Dahal 2015).

The central objective of what became known as “the people’s war,” that lasted from 13 February 1996 to 21 November 2006, was to abolish the monarchy, in essence a feudal system, and establish a new democratic republic (Karki and Seddon 2003). The Maoists had a strong agenda of emancipation for the oppressed rural population, lower castes and women (Sharma and Prasain 2004). Women and men of all castes, classes, ethnic backgrounds and education levels joined the movement (Manchanda 2004; Sharma and Prasain 2004). Most sources agree that the majority of women who joined the Maoist movement were from so-called lower castes, and were economically, socially, politically and sexually exploited (Parvati 2003; Manchanda 2004). Less known is that “upper caste” women also faced similar restrictions and even worse gender-based discriminations.

Women’s issues were central in the Maoist movement. The Maoist ideological manifesto, the so-called “40-points demand document” integrated a strong message on gender equality, especially reflected in points 19, 20 and 21:

19. Patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women should be stopped, girls should be allowed to access paternal property as their brothers.

20. All racial exploitation and suppression should be stopped. Where ethnic communities are in the majority, they should be allowed to form their own autonomous governments.

21. Discrimination against downtrodden and backward people should be stopped. The system of untouchability should be eliminated. (Karki and Seddon 2003, 185)

These three points epitomize the Maoist ideology, are closely interrelated and show how Maoist ideology claims to desire an end to patriarchal, gender, caste and all other forms of discrimination.

The Maoist agenda on gender and caste/ethnic equality was communicated by means of mobilization on the ground, a key element of the Maoist
strategy to gain support amongst the rural population (Lawoti and Pahari 2009). During village-level rallies, action was taken on justice for women: punishing rapists; wresting back the usurped land of single women; penalizing men for polygamy; and prohibiting the sale of liquor as a way to prevent violence against women (Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001). Within Maoist propaganda, the *jan adalats* or “people’s courts” were lauded as upholding the rights of women on issues of social and domestic violence (Manchanda 2004, 248). In addition, in the areas under their control, the Maoists offered various positions to women, as well as Dalit,3 indigenous and representatives of other marginalized groups who previously had never been given the chance to take up political positions. This approach contributed to ending untouchability and discrimination issues (Lawoti and Pahari 2009). Due to the Maoist grassroots struggle, women were increasingly visible in the public sphere, something that previously had been limited to educated women from one of a few strong political families (Yami 2010).

**Theoretical framework**

*Gender, women and armed conflict*

Globally, gender is increasingly being recognized as a fundamental issue in armed conflict (Enloe 2004; Alison 2009; Sjoberg and Peet 2011). Beyond an understanding of the gendered effects of war and how women become victimized, scholars have sought to understand gendered agency in war, showing how women navigate insecurity and seek opportunities (Jacobs, Ruth, and Marchbank 2000; Moser and Clark 2001). An important strand in the literature explores how violent conflict may involve shifting gender roles and power relationships, as well as shape gendered identities (El-Bushra 2003; Cohn 2013). The literature also examines why women may join conflict. Drawing on research in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique, McKay and Mazurana (2004) present a range of reasons which inspire women and girls to enter armed forces: to seek revenge; to express political opinions; to uphold religious identity; to ameliorate poverty; and/or to seek protection from violence. Studies from other regions introduce the prospect of women’s emancipation as a motivating factor for participating in armed conflict. Kampwirth’s (2002) study on Latin American guerrilla movements found that family traditions of resistance as well as early networking in church, student youth groups and revolutionary networks played a role, but so did age, as younger women without family responsibilities were more likely to join. Similarly, Alison’s (2009) study in Sri Lanka proposes five reasons why women join the Liberation Tamil Tiger Eelam (LTTE) as fighters: nationalist sentiment; suffering and oppression; educational disruptions and restrictions; sexual violence; and the desire for women’s emancipation.
What these studies reveal is that women may join fighting forces as an escape route from a mix of (gendered) pressures, but also due to ideological and political motivations. Armed struggles may offer women the prospect of empowerment, both at the individual level and more broadly. Work to date has shown how women might gain power in armed groups, search for their voice, claim equality, renegotiate gender roles and engage with advocacy and struggle for women’s rights (Hilhorst 2001; Niner 2011; Denov and Ricard-Guay 2013). Research into women’s ideological motivations with any ethnographic detail has been rare. This paper explores what the Maoist ideology of (gender) equality meant to women, and how it not only attracted them to the movement, but also kept them engaged as they connected it to their own personal struggles for empowerment. In the narratives of women ex-combatants, it is the Maoist discourse of gender equality in combination with the practical organization of a more equal division of labor, which allowed for transformative experiences. By zooming in on the narratives of women who joined the Maoist struggle, this paper provides ethnographical depth that allows us to show not only what this ideological commitment and empowerment meant to them, but also how they sought to carry it forward after the peace agreement which they hoped would bring lasting gender transformations. As we do this, we trace how caste, class and gender identities intersect.

**Integrating intersectionality**

Crenshaw (1989) is accredited with originating the notion of intersectionality to address the experiences and struggles of women of color who fell in between the feminist and anti-racist discourse. Since then, intersectionality has become a key concept used to analyze the multiple forms of discrimination affecting women, as well as the differences between them. In the case of Nepal, a growing body of feminist scholarship has focused on intersectionality and moved to reconsideration of differences and inequalities between women (Tamang 2009; Nightingale 2010; Ramnarain 2014). Tamang (2009, 10) critically examines the participation of Nepalese women in different political processes including the Maoist struggle and provides a strong contribution to theorizing intersectionality in Nepal, offering an explicit exploration on how gender intersects with caste, class, religion, ethnicity, politics and geography, and argues why portraying Nepali women as a universal category is inappropriate. Furthermore, Nightingale’s (2010) study in Mugu, Nepal, explores how gender and caste intersected in the daily lives of Dalit and non-Dalit women and reproduced hierarchy. At the same time, an empirical study by Ramnarain (2014) points out how widows’ identities intersect with gender, caste, class and age in their struggle for survival in post-conflict Nepal.
This article draws upon these frameworks on intersectionality to examine women ex-combatants’ differentiated experiences in Maoist conflict and post-conflict Nepal. As we will show, their narratives reveal that their struggle for empowerment engages gender, caste and multiple forms of discrimination within a broader critique of poverty and exploitation. The Maoist emphasis on gender and caste equality was experienced as liberating by women of all castes.

**Methodology**

This paper employed in-depth interviews, key-informant interviews and focus-group discussions. The interviews were conducted by the first author, a Nepali, in the framework of PhD research. Thirty-five Maoist women ex-combatants were interviewed for this study. In addition, four focus-group discussions were conducted with women ex-combatants and two focus groups were conducted with their husbands (also Maoist ex-combatants) and local community leaders. Finding female ex-combatants for interviews proved very challenging. Respondents were living in Chitwan district where they had settled after completing demobilization, but none were from Chitwan originally. At first, Maoist political leaders were contacted by drawing on earlier networks. They provided the contact details of five former Maoist commanders, who then provided contacts of a few women ex-combatants in various districts of Nepal. Chitwan district was then selected because the women ex-combatants there seemed more willing to participate. Additionally, women were then approached through snowball sampling. Respondents interviewed originated from various districts including Gorkha, Kalikot, Rukum, Salyan, Kavre and Sinduli. They belong to a variety of castes and ethnic groups – Tamang, Magar, Thami, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Tharu, Dalit – with two women from high castes (Bahun and Chettri).

The fieldwork lasted from January 2014 until February 2015 and was conducted in various episodes. Before starting the fieldwork, two exploratory visits were made, in December 2013 and January 2014. During these visits, the author introduced herself, offered her background and family information and answered participants’ questions. This helped to build trust with the women.

The interviews lasted from two to three hours each and follow-up visits were made to the same women several times. The interviews were conducted entirely in Nepali and audio-recorded. Notes and photographs were taken only after getting consent from the interviewees. The main researcher had the advantage of being Nepalese: interacting in the Nepali language made the interviews more lively and in-depth, and the researcher was able to understand the local slang, which gave cultural and contextual meaning to the topic. Furthermore, sharing a context regarding history,
culture, food habits, clothing, marriage, religion and local festivals enabled
the researcher to become an insider. After collection, the data was translated
into English then interpreted and analyzed using Atlas ti software. To main-
tain confidentiality of the interviewees, all the names in the paper are pseu-
donyms, however, the participants’ gender, caste and ethnicity are retained
in the surnames.

Maoist ideology: the prospect of empowerment

This section analyzes how women ex-combatants narrate being attracted to
the Maoist struggle. Ideology and aspirations of empowerment played a pro-
minent role in their narratives. In the Maoist discourse, the people’s war is
clearly framed as an avenue for women’s emancipation. In her article
“Women’s Participation in the People’s War” Parvati (2003), a high-level
female leader, argues that the Maoist revolution empowered rural Nepali
women to dismantle feudal structures. She illustrates this with an example
from Rolpa district, where a women guerrilla squad removed a feudal tyrant
who had abused women sexually. Other scholars likewise confirm the empha-
sis in Maoist ideology on the emancipation of women and on ending gender
discrimination (Manchanda 2004; Sharma and Prasain 2004). In addition, as
mentioned, the forty-point demand document released in 1990 is considered
particularly vital to understanding Maoist ideology (Karki and Seddon 2003). In
its points 19, 20 and 21, the position of women is addressed, along with the
need to transform state and customary laws to redress gender inequality at all
levels. In 2002, in recognition of their female constituency, the Maoists intro-
duced the so-called “Prachanda Path,” creating a women’s department in the
Central Committee (Manchanda 2004, 248).

The fieldwork in Chitwan district in 2014 and 2015 gave us an understand-
ing of how ex-combatant women had experienced the Maoist position on
gender equality in discourse and in practice. Most of the women ex-comba-
tants interviewed had grown up in rural villages in Nepal and offered their
individual stories, illustrating the appeal of the Maoist ideology. Shanti
Tharu explains:

I am a Tharu woman, I worked at jamindar (landlord) house, had never been to
school could not imagine my life beyond working as maid … One day I
attended a Maoist cultural program; there was a play focused on caste discrimi-
nation … I could situate my everyday reality in that play … Later I attended
some Maoist meetings with my friends, our comrades; in the meetings our
40-point demand was discussed which particularly explained mahila ko
adhikar (women’s rights). I felt the Maoists gave ijat (respect) also to lower
caste woman like me … unlike jamindar (the landlord) who always verbally
abused me and my family. When I was 17 years I became an active Maoist
member … . They appointed me as area secretary, and later I converted to
being a Maoist combatant. (May 2014)
Other accounts show how the Maoist message resonated with experiences of caste discrimination. Manju Bishwokarma emphasized the suffering she experienced as a Dalit woman:

I am a Dalit woman … I remember when I was a child, one day, I unknowingly touched a jug of water at a tulojati’s (upper caste) house. My parents were insulted for not teaching me and my father punished me. Born as a Dalit’s daughter, my father never sent me to school like my brothers. I struggled with my own identity, why I am untouchable. One day I went to the Maoist program in my area and I experienced that I was treated equally as other caste people, so I was inspired to join to end gender, caste and social inequality. The Maoists made me ward vice-president. (September 2014)

The above descriptions demonstrate how women understood the Maoist ideological proposal in terms of women’s empowerment and how this was particularly relevant to women from lower castes. Padma Thapa’s (another participant) story also illustrates this. She told us that when she was only 18 years of age, she saw violence and abuse against poor people taking place in her village. Security officials did not protect the local people, and the media never reported it, as it would mean acting against the interests of the rural elite. She worked at a landlord’s house to fulfill her father’s debt and was accused of not performing her duties as a girl (fetching water early, cooking, cleaning). The Maoist Party came to the region in 1997, and as Padma explains: “I attended Maoist rallies, door to door events, and found that hamro awaaj (our voice) is the Maoist voice, thus I decided to become a Maoist combatant” (August 2014).

In another story, Binita Magar stated why the Maoist ideology appealed to her:

I was married before joining the Maoists. Me, my brother and his wife were suspected of being Maoists in the early 1990s when the Maoist guerrilla just began to form. The wife of my brother was killed in front of my old parents in the village by the government army. There was no justice for poor people like us. My father in-law motivated me and my husband to join and get justice for our loved ones. (March 2014)

The explanations show how women felt empowered by the Maoist ideology as they were able to raise their voice against the suffering they were witnessing and resist the inequalities and discrimination they and their families were experiencing. In addition, these narratives also demonstrate how women’s lives emerge at the intersection of gender, caste and other identities.

In the case of Shanti Tharu everyday suffering was reproduced through an intersection of gender, caste, age and position in the family. For Manju Bishwokarma, her caste (Dalit) intersected with her gender, culminating with her daily oppression of untouchability. Likewise, Padma Thapa’s case reveals how her gender intersects with her age, and hence she is victimized to perform as a
domestic maid, preventing her from experiencing other girlhood opportunities. Similarly, Binita Magar’s story reflects how her gender intersects with her position as daughter-in-law, which shaped her political decision to join the Maoists.

Based on the conversations with women ex-combatants, we conclude that the majority of them made a conscious choice to join the Maoist struggle and either were attracted to the Maoist ideological message or became familiar with it once they had joined. Some women joined the movement due to the family’s loyalty to the Maoist insurgency, which later turned into a personal commitment to fight against gender, caste and other forms of oppression. Such transformation occurred as women experienced the Maoist ideology in their daily lives, as they came to occupy new types of gender roles and caste hierarchies were disrupted. The Maoist message of ending discrimination reinforced their personal aspirations to achieve equality.

The women first became familiar with the Maoist discourse through cultural programs, door-to-door visits, meetings and rallies organized by the Maoists in the villages. Once they had joined the Maoists, women were offered positions equal to men in their local areas; Manju Biswokarma was appointed as vice-president and Shanti Tharu as secretary. Women felt the Maoists displayed respect for women as well as other marginalized groups and this fueled their aspiration and empowerment. The Maoists challenged caste and patriarchal systems by offering equal treatment to Dalit, providing opportunities to women and encouraging them to fight for their rights. This is what made women believe that the Maoists were serious about achieving gender equality.

In the next section we investigate what motivated women’s continued commitment to the Maoist cause.

**Women ex-combatants’ experiences in the Maoist conflict**

In this section, we present the stories of how women ex-combatants experienced the Maoist insurgency and how an experience of empowerment sustained their continued commitment. The way the Maoists were organized in practice crosscut traditional role divisions and stood in great contrast to the life women had been used to. Women highlighted this as empowering. The following quotes serve to illustrate women’s experiences, across castes.

Gita Lamichane found she could take up leadership roles on an equal footing with men:

> I was a company commander. Before I could not imagine that I would perform such roles. It happened thanks to the support and encouragement of my Maoist peers. Especially in the morning training speech our leaders (both women and men) touched upon topics that were empowering: rights, equality, health, local and global politics and many more. I organized workshops, worked at
the communications department, the health department. I carried guns, led attacks, I performed tasks equal to the men. In the village I was prevented from anything outside home due to my Bahun (upper caste) culture and tradition. I never went to school whereas my brothers did, and my parents said girls must maintain shyness. (June 2014)

A Dalit woman, Janaki Biswokarma, provides a similar story:

I was a very shy girl, but after becoming a combatant I led the guerrilla trainings and gave them command. I made fast promotion and got special treatment from our leaders, very different to what I went through in the village. By yudama hidaa (going to war) I could feel that I am equal to all other castes. I realized how before there had been caste and gender discrimination, now my life became free of the everyday oppression [one experiences when] surviving as aachut jat (untouchable caste). (January 2015)

Similarly, Bandana Magar explained:

I performed a medical health technician job in the Maoist insurgency. I was trained for this job in the Maoist war… I had dropped out of school at the age of 13 due to my father’s poor financial condition. After becoming a Maoist, I learned that women could also perform men’s work, decent jobs valued in society. I conducted minor operations: removing bullets, stitching the wounds, and a lot of “medical emergency stuff.” The Maoist movement offered opportunities to me that would never have been possible otherwise. (August 2014)

This picture of women taking up jobs previously only associated with men was corroborated in interviews with male ex-combatants, who were husbands of the women ex-combatants. They shared in the interviews that in some cases their wives had held senior positions to them and described them as strong and bold. They said that many times women performed better in conducting attacks and generating reliable information while spying.

The tasks traditionally seen as women’s work were shared between men and women, as evidenced in the following quote of another woman ex-combatant, Sapana Tamang:

In the yudha (war) I worked together with Maoist men. The daily routine was made up of both public (war) related tasks and private tasks such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water, washing dishes. Men also cooked food washed dishes and clothes and did other feminine duties. I saw with my own eyes that men can also perform household duties like women. In the war I found male colleagues were very disciplined, they treated women with respect. This was striking as back in village men never touched such feminine things (cooking, cleaning), whatever happened. (July 2014)

Women’s narrations reveal that they experienced the Maoist commitment to women’s issues as real on the ground. Our participants reported feeling empowered as they were assigned public roles equal to and sometimes above their male peers, and in some cases, placed in powerful positions:
managing military tasks, and taking charge of various attacks and departments. They reported being in a better position than before the conflict, more able to express their feelings, make their own decisions and live with self-confidence. Women found these new roles challenging but were assigned responsibilities equal to men, were encouraged to take up new positions and, in some cases, even make promotion. These accounts shatter the general assumptions about women’s subordinate roles in violent movements and liberation struggles.

The interviews also demonstrate that the experience of empowerment crossed caste lines. Both upper- and lower-caste women reported escaping the previous limitations of the patriarchal structure and contrast their lives before and after joining the insurgency. Gita Lamichane, a respondent from the upper-caste (Bahun) had faced cultural constraints before the war which restricted her to the home; particularly in Bahun families, girls have less freedom than other castes (Ramnarain 2014), including Gita’s argument which reflects that even a woman of the “upper caste” encounters similar or even worse discrimination. The lower caste, Dalit woman, Janaki Biswokarma, felt empowered when she saw that unlike normal practice in her village, work was not divided according to caste and equal treatment was given to women of all caste.

Our findings on the case of Nepalese women ex-combatants reflect parallels with the LTTE women fighters in Sri Lanka. As Alison (2009) and Azmi (2015) found, women who had joined the LTTE challenged traditional norms and had the chance to perform non-traditional gender roles such as climbing trees, riding motor bikes and participating in guerrilla training. These experiences of women fighters in Nepal and Sri Lanka seem to contrast with findings for cases in Africa where scholars have mostly found women to take up subordinate roles in armed groups, in line with a traditional gender-role division. McKay (2004) observed that girl fighters were subordinated to men, being forced to load guns or be the wives of commanders, lower-rank fighters who loot, first-aid workers, spies and porters. This contrast might be related to the fact that significant numbers of girls and women were forcibly recruited and abducted (McKay and Mazurana 2004), rather than ideologically motivated as in Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Women ex-combatants’ experiences in the aftermath of the Maoist war

After the signing of the peace agreement in 2006, female ex-combatants had hoped to carry the Maoist gender-equality agenda forward into the post-war period. Our interviews show, however, that they experienced the peace process as a big step backwards: in their private lives, they lost the sense of
empowerment they had enjoyed during the insurgency as achievements of gender equality dissipated. Further, they were left politically disenchanted as they felt the Maoist commitment to ending gender discrimination waned. Before addressing this, we start with a brief overview of developments at the national level.

Things seemed initially promising. After 2006, and the peace process, gender equality was high on the agenda in Nepal. Local, national and international organizations started to integrate gender and women’s issues into their policies and programs (IPTI 2016). This included reserving political positions for female candidates, creating a gender task force, allowing paid maternity leave and equal pay. There were some achievements: Nepalese women came to occupy high-level executive positions and are heading top national-level non-government organizations (NGOs. As such, they are involved in peace-building and the development process.

Women’s rights became an important issue at the national level, at least in discourse. Nepal made considerable steps forward on the issue of women’s rights and political participation. Nepal’s New Constitution of 2015 reserved 33 percent of parliamentary seats for women (Upreti and Kolås 2016). In the first Constituent Assembly of 2008, women made up 33 percent of the members; the Maoists as the largest party had seventy-four women members out of the total 197 women members (Ramnarain 2014). In contrast, in the 1991 elections only seven women had been elected out of 205 legislative representatives (Yami 2007). Women also participate in peace-building through organizations such as the National Women Commission Nepal and the Women’s Alliance for Peace, Justice and Democracy; local women’s organizations, including NGOs, are working for the inclusion of women (Upreti and Kolås 2016).

Despite these advances, there have been serious setbacks. In the Constitutional Assembly (CA) election in 2017, only six female candidates were elected to the House of Representation (HoR) out of 165 members: a significant decline from the first CA elections in 2008 when a total of thirty women were elected to the HoR (Shrestha 2017). Furthermore, the recent Constitution of Nepal (2015) is a step backwards from the Interim Constitution of 2007 in terms of citizenship rights for women. For example, in the current provision, Nepalese women and their children need to be born in Nepal to obtain citizenship by descent, whereas this is not applied to the children of Nepali men (see Constitution of Nepal 2015, Articles 10, 11). Furthermore, while Article 38.6 of the Constitution mentions that “both the spouses shall have equal rights in property and family affairs,” considerable challenges remain to implement such provisions on the ground fully.

Since 2008, the Maoist Party has become one of the largest and most powerful political parties in Nepal, and two prime ministers from this party have served the nation. The Maoist post-conflict priority shifted to addressing
macro conditions, such as restructuring the state and forming a new govern-
ment after the 2017 constitution assembly elections. The Maoist ideology on
women’s empowerment has now become less of a priority. It is true that some
Maoist women now hold leadership positions at the level of Constitution
Assembly, in national and local politics, but at the grassroots level, Maoist
women ex-combatants have encountered an extreme transition back into
the highly patriarchal social structures that they had imagined to be
The stories of women ex-combatants show their disenchantment with the
hardships of everyday life, and at the same time their continued ideological
drive to end gender discrimination.
The story of Bimala Thami (a former Maoist company commander) illus-
trates this:

I see that thanks to the Maoist movement women empowerment is taking place,
and women are given various positions in the country … but what worries me is
that such gender equality is not happening equally. Mostly, only women from
well-off families, educated, and with strong political background are occupying
these opportunities, while women like me are suffering everyday to meet our
basic needs, I am still fighting for women’s equal rights. I am a member of the
former people’s liberation Army (PLA) Mahila prathisthan (women’s organiza-
tion), here we promote women’s voices through conducting local level pro-
grams and rallies to give political pressure to the government … because if
we remain silent our voices can be easily erased, and we will be forgotten.
(May 2014)

Challenges reported by women ex-combatants include difficulties in finding
work, fulfilling basic needs, and being blamed for war violence. In different
ways, ex-combatant women came to realize that the patriarchal structure
has remained unchanged. Sunita Rai narrates:

I came to know about a painter job vacancy from my friends. I was interested to
do painting, I also had some experience. When I reached the employer, he
denied and made fun of me saying “you Maoist woman, go play with guns,
why are you here? If you, woman, will do this painting job it is never going to
finish, I don’t want to lose my business.” It is hard to find a job as an uneducated
woman like me. Other Maoist women are facing the same stigma when looking
for a job. This is a serious issue which prevents women from entering the public
sphere. I will not give up but fight till the end to protect women’s voices. (August
2014)

Sarita Chettri, belonging to a non-Maoist Chettri (upper-caste) family, faced
challenges related to traditional patriarchal mindsets. Her family rejected
her because she had joined the Maoists and had disobeyed the family
rules. Furthermore, her parents disapprove of her inter-caste marriage to a
Magar man. She has two small children and her husband works as a laborer
on a dairy farm run by Maoist friends. She completely relies on her war
peers for any help (Interviewed in December 2014). Sarita’s wartime inter-
caste marriage to a Magar testifies to her empowerment, but in post-war Nepal her inter-caste marriage meets rejection.

One study argues that there was some progress on women’s issues in post-war Nepal thanks to the efforts of the Maoist Party. Yadav (2016) studied female Maoist parliamentarians who had been Maoist cadres, and claims that without the Maoist movement these women could never have made it to parliament. Here close vigilance is required. As suggested by Tamang (2009), we need to understand which groups of women have benefited from quotas for gender, caste and ethnicity, and why other groups, like other women ex-combatants, are neglected.

Ex-combatant women remain committed to the idea of gender equality and are frustrated both with the constraints they face in their daily lives and with what they see as neglect of women’s issues by the Maoist leadership. Women are dedicated to their ideological drive for empowerment and bringing overall gender equality to the period after the war. Facing difficulties in finding jobs and new forms of war-related stigmatization they have started to fight back through various protests, targeting the Maoist Party as well as the government. In September 2014, Maoist followers arranged a protest against their own party in Kathmandu, with large numbers of Maoists, including women ex-combatants, participating. One of the women ex-combatants who participated in the study, Renu Tamang, also took part. She explained that the protest raised issues about jobs, skills programs, health and credit facilities, and educational issues. But these issues never became a priority and disappeared from the Maoist Party’s agenda. She added: “I just wasted my savings paying [...] bus and hotel fare” (July 2014).

The return to civilian life has been a challenging experience for women ex-combatants in Nepal. One of the reasons is that Nepal’s post-conflict reintegration7 process remained highly male-centric; the absence of a “gender framework” in the reintegration8 programing failed to legitimize, support women’s transformed roles, and include women’s voices, which offered few concrete options to women (Goswami 2015).

The story of Asha Gurung (a Maoist ex-company commander) illustrates how she felt excluded from the reintegration process:

I was interested to go for the option of entering the Nepalese army, but I could not pass the entry exam because I do not have education. I have never been to school. This is the failure of our Maoist leadership: they did not negotiate our education level, though they knew many women ex-combatants lack education. I totally felt excluded from reintegration process. (December 2017)

Only a total of 104 women ex-combatants succeeded in gaining a position in the Nepalese Army out of 3846 verified9 women ex-combatants (Bhandari 2015). These findings resonate with the patterns of exclusion of women from reintegration processes elsewhere, their specific needs and interests not being taken into consideration (McKay and Mazurana 2004).
Furthermore, the female ex-combatants hardly seem to benefit from the numerous gender programs developed in post-conflict Nepal. There are programs on peace-building, women’s empowerment, income generation and post-conflict reconstruction (K.C., Van Der Haar, and Hilhorst 2017), including in and around Chitwan district, where this study took place. However, these programs largely focus on non-combatant women. To our surprise, only one of the women ex-combatants interviewed received the opportunity to participate in kitchen-garden training, some years ago.

This study shows that although the Maoist movement created opportunities for women and promoted the idea of equality, after the war women felt abandoned. Gender equality endures only at the level of rhetoric and fails to benefit women at the grassroots. Ex-combatants felt women’s issues were ignored and excluded from the peace-building process. Though women experienced transformations such as inter-caste marriages, making their own decisions and voicing their rights in the aftermath of war, they faced setbacks in their private lives. Women combatants felt stigmatized in the post-conflict setting, more strongly than their male peers. All of the women combatants interviewed were married to Maoist men ex-combatants. They felt empowerment through their marriages, forming life alliances with men who support changed gender roles and hence are more appropriate partners for them. In contrast, their unmarried female ex-combatant friends are now faced with difficulties finding suitable marriage partners, as they are not considered suitable wives or proper women. Unmarried male ex-combatants do not have such problems.

Our results demonstrate that the empowerment experienced by women ex-combatants remains ambivalent. Patriarchal structures continued intact and, in some ways, even strengthened. Women’s war-related roles were devalued in the post-war context. There was a lack of commitment from the Maoist Party to issues of gender equality and in particular to the situation of women ex-combatants; a gender framework for reintegration programming was also lacking. Pre-war problems such as a lack of access to education, skills training, property and power resurfaced in the period after the war. To resume “normalcy” women were forced to adjust to the patriarchal structures they had hoped to escape.

This is similar to what has been found in Sri Lanka, where the evidence suggests that LTTE women who performed non-traditional roles and gained empowerment during the armed conflict experienced a backlash in peace time due to their lack of education and training, the unwillingness of society to accept women performing non-traditional roles, incomplete reintegration programs, and a patriarchal system that positions women as submissive (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2004; Azmi 2015). What has been suggested by Hilhorst, Van Der Haar, and Weijs (2017, 4) in a more general sense seems relevant also to gender transformation: the windows of opportunity opened by a
peace process “may be experienced [by different people] in very different ways and to varying degrees, or indeed not be experienced at all.”

**Conclusion**

The Maoists in Nepal developed an ideology of gender equality as part of their broader struggle against oppression. Women’s rights have also been an important theme in the post-conflict peace-building process, and some noticeable achievements have been made in women’s issues in general. Women felt empowered through the Maoist ideology as they were exposed to non-traditional gender roles; experienced an equal division of labor, power and positions; and enjoyed equal treatment regardless of identity, caste, gender, ethnicity, positions and class. However, in the post-conflict setting, the Maoist ideological commitment to gender equality is still far from being a practiced reality. What Enloe (2004, 226) has observed on post-conflict settings in general seems also to hold true in Nepal: “masculinized exclusion is made all the more intense … as a result, women’s well-being in the reconstructed post conflict society will still be left on the proverbial back burner.”

The women we interviewed identified themselves as being “agents of change” who fought the war to transform women’s lives in Nepal. After the war, these women were politically aware, made conscious decisions about their marriages and children’s education, and could well identify their everyday gender needs. At the same time, women face multiple challenges in their everyday lives in post-war Nepal due to the male-centric reintegration process, the decline of the Maoist ideological commitment to women ex-combatants’ issues, the masculine job market, pervasive patriarchal mindsets, and homogenizing women ex-combatants under one category. Incorporating an intersectional approach reveals the differences between women ex-combatants’ lived experiences.

The development of gender equality in post-conflict Nepal seems very paradoxical. To some extent, the Maoist struggle delivered an avenue to realize the gender ideology for which they fought so proudly, but on the other hand, some of the most fervent fighters for women’s rights are marginalized from the peace process. The post-conflict setting reproduces the discrimination in a different form for these women who were fighting against it.

**Notes**

1. The “40 points demand” was submitted by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) in 1990 to the Nepal government.
2. The caste hierarchy is as follows: the highest is Bahun, then Chhetri, then Baise, and, finally Sudra, known as the “untouchables” or Dalit. Today, the caste system is prohibited by law in Nepal, but still exists in practice.
3. Dalit refers to a group of people in Nepal who are religiously, culturally, socially, economically and historically oppressed, excluded and treated as an untouchable caste. They are also called *paninachalne* (water polluting) and *acchut* (untouchable). Any sort of contact from members of the Dalit caste is unacceptable and contact with them requires a purification ritual.

4. According to the UN (2000) demobilization is the process of the dismantling of military units and the transition of combatants from military to civilian life. This phase also includes: (i) Processing individuals: combatants are settled in temporary centers (such as cantonments, camps or assembly areas), and are given options to transition to civilian life, and their family/community members are contacted; and (ii) Delivering assistance: providing combatants with support or insertion packages (i.e., cash, compensation, basic materials, training and stipends for education) to sustain them during their transition from camp to civilian life.

5. McKay’s (2004, 21–22) work in Africa—Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda—found that girl fighters performed multiple roles. Some were forced to be wives of the commanders; few were trained to load the guns, or be first-aid workers, spies, porters and act as messengers. Likewise, in Mozambique, girls were mostly conscripted or kidnapped, and they performed duties such as those of domestic servants, medics and the wives of captor-husbands.

6. The House of Representation (HoR) is made up of 275 members, of whom 165 are elected through the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system and 110 through closed-list proportional representation (PR). The constitution mandates at least 33 percent female candidacy under FPTP; the provision of the PR system is to be enacted only when FPTP fails to bring about a third of the representation. However, political parties are utilizing the PR system as the only avenue to fulfil the one-third representation of female candidates in federal parliament (Adhikari 2018, 1).

7. Reintegration programing offered three options for ex-combatants: (i) integration into the Nepalese Army; (ii) voluntary retirement with cash compensation; or (iii) a rehabilitation package.

8. To demilitarize, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) approach is deployed. After the conclusion of disarmament and demobilization, the reintegration stage is a crucial component of DDR because ex-combatants acquire civilian status or return home. It is essentially a social and economic process, primarily taking place in communities/families at the local level.

9. Fulfilling the criteria of the Nepalese Government to qualify as Maoist combatant.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge our indebtedness towards all the women ex-combatants and their husbands, families and local leaders who contributed their time to talk with us and shared their experiences of the Maoist armed conflict and post-conflict situation in Nepal. Without their contribution, this paper would not have been written. We also would like to thank Prof. Dorothea Hilhorst, Prof. Jen Marchbank, Prof. Lara Campbell, Dr Tiffany Muller Myrdahl, and three reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this manuscript.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Nuffice The Dutch Organization for International Studies/NFP-PhD-CF8771/2013.

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