Chapter V
Political Impact
In the preceding chapter the focus has been social and economic impact of Maoist insurgency on Nepalese women. This chapter will focus on the political impact of Maoists insurgency on Nepalese women that result from the researcher’s discussions, interviews and correspondences with the Nepalese during field trip to Nepal. This chapter will look into the challenges of how everyday violence has led Nepalese women to shoulder additional responsibilities in dealing with a range of issues such as security, peace, negotiation, etc. besides their traditional role as mothers and daughters. It will examine how Nepalese women as combatants have reconstructed new meaning in their lives. It will critically examine how these women have identified themselves with the orientation and common aspirations of the Maoists. It will also deal with the different mechanism women adopt in dealing with violence and analyse the growing challenges posed by conflict to women in addressing the issue of dualism in restoring to violence and making peace.

In Nepal, the Maoist Insurgency was highest in the remote villages of the five districts where it started (Rukum, Rolpa, Jajarkot of the Mid-western Development Region, Gorkha of Western Development Region and Sindhuli of Central Development Region) and run across the whole country. People living in these remote villages are among the poorest and most disadvantaged groups in Nepal. The various political parties who came to power failed to fulfil their desire for democracy leave alone their aspirations for major social and economic changes. Instead, the political instability and socio-economic underdevelopment continued, providing the Maoists much-needed political space to convince the people that the only way to end neglect and exploitation was to get rid of political system.

As the Maoists began to take their ideology promising justice and better lives to the villagers, representatives of other political parties headed to the district headquarters or the centre because that was where they saw their political future. In the villages, the police increasingly began to arrest the Maoist workers and their atrocities increased. A large number of women were raped while in police custody. People who demanding justice and
better lives found that the only way to avoid arrest was to go into hiding and avenge the police highhandedness was through violence. The Maoists won the confidence of the people by demanding justice and change after mobilising those people already on the run and declared the ‘People’s War’ in February 1996. Maoist influence grew with the withdrawal of police posts from the villages.

The seesaw battle between the Maoists and the police has resulted in a large number of casualties.\(^{522}\) According to INSEC (2006) report, the rate of killings during the last stage has been astonishing 12.2 per day, an escalation unparalleled in the eight years of fighting.

In the western hill districts of Nepal, there were no men. These remote, backward hill districts were transformed into guerrilla zones and ‘base area’ that provoked massive police repression on the poor, peasant and minority ethnic groups. To escape being picked by the police or targeted by the Maoists, men became *farari* (escapee), fleeing into the surrounding jungles or melting into the cities of Nepal and across the open border into India. Left behind were women, who in the space vacated by men started negotiating with the police and the Maoists to keep the family and community alive in the midst of conflict.\(^{523}\) In such a situation women became the heads of households— as providers for their children and the aged to keep the family and the community alive. Women were forced to shoulder ‘extra’ responsibility breaking the tradition and take up ‘male’ jobs. For instance, women were found ploughing agricultural fields that were not religiously permitted. Women who now plough the land do not rationalise this action as necessitated by the absence of men. Today, they can be found roofing their houses, something that is not culturally accepted. Women explain this as a practical demonstration of ‘there’s nothing women can’t do, if they have to do it’. Mirule\(^ {524}\) village has opened up new opportunities for women to step into public life. In the absence of men, women were left to negotiate not only with the police but also with those remnants of the state that had not fled

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522 It is estimate that more than 13,000 lives has been lost in the Maoist ‘People’s War’ since 1996.
524 Mirule is a remote and inaccessible village. It is eight hour walks from the district headquarter in Libang. It is a Kham Magar Village of around 265 houses and in the first year of insurgency, Mirule held the largest number of killing in Rolpa district
Mirule like drunken schoolteacher. Moreover, the sharing of communal labour and responsibility facilitated women's access to debate and decision making in the public sphere. So, when elections took place for Mirule Village District Council (VDC), there were no men to contest the election. Therefore, illiterate peasant women came forward and all six-elected member of the ward were women including the chairperson.525

The specificity of 'People's War' in Nepal is that it took the policy of integrating women in people's army right from the beginning. As Onesto (2004) said, "Unlike most other movements women were not drawn into the armed force as the last resort, or as tactical move but as part of strategy to unleash their fury."

To this Yami said:

"...People's army became a powerful tool to transform women within short period of time that the ruling classes were alarmed by this particular transformation that has not only challenged the traditional image of women but has also made them jittery about its effect on traditional family structure. It has unleashed the medieval oppression that women have been carrying ideological, physiologically, physically, sociologically and economically in various forms."

People’s Army’ is one arena where one could see the fast transformation of women in CPN (Maoist). The message from Maoists was clear that they were fighting for the benefit of the poor, socially and economically backward people - indigenous peoples, dalits and women. To fulfil the aspirations of these people, Maoists undertook lots of activities aiming to ensure social justice which provides relief to the victimised people. Moreover, the campaign launched by Maoists for community based market system, collective work in agriculture, cooperative labour such as 'parma' system at larger scale, building new and maintaining old roads, installing community water sources, community based fodder or fuel collection, installing new 'Chautara' (public rest places) etc. brought together many people to support the movement. Collective farming particularly helped those de facto single parent households whose husbands were either away to serve 'People's War' or have gone away to work in remote urban centres. In some places it even

525 Empirically based on the field investigation of an all-women team of Nepalese and Indian journalists who tour Rolpa and Rukum in May 1998.
526 A traditional labour-exchange practiced within few farm households.
527 One such 'Chautara' was constructed at the border of Rolpa and Salyan districts by local villagers in remembrance of local women (Kumari Budha, Sunsara Budha and Lali Rokka) martyrs.
managed to win the heart of such families whose male members were serving the State's and police forces.

Amrita Thapa\textsuperscript{528} also talks about how the party effectively transformed a religious Hindu celebration "Teej" into a revolutionary platform to propagate support to expose state repression of Nepalese women. Not only that, women started challenging widowhood ceremony when their husbands were killed by the police force. Absence of men in the village and the atrocities meted to women by the security forces and police only promoted cooperation amongst themselves to fight the oppression. The party – CPN (Maoist) consciously tried to transform the loss of male family members (who were killed by the police) into a source of strength, to avenge the killer. One such case cited by Thapa was, “Sangeeta Budha, a resident of Rolpa whose husband was killed by police force in the year 1997 joined guerrilla warfare to avenge her husband’s killers.”

Moreover, the party addressing the issue of domestic violence who have been physically assaulted and repressed during the counter insurgency attacks were found joining Maoist wholeheartedly and were found directly involved in armed conflict. Lack of equal access to parental property, non-inclusion of women in the decision-making process, as victims of environmental degradation, forest and biodiversity loss, etc. were other reasons that pushed women to join ‘People’s War’ in a significant number.

Most of the people in the rural and remote areas believed that Maoists were waging war for the benefit of the poor and socially and economically backward people, and with war they will be able to exercise their rights. Slowly, these women, especially poor, peasants, illiterates and \textit{jan jati} (tribal) who have not known the ‘p’ of politics achieved political visibility like never before in Nepal or elsewhere in the world. Majority of these women in the Maoist movement come from the Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups. Relatively speaking, they are culturally less oppressed than Hindu upper-caste Aryan women and their identity is not constructed around a religious ideology. However, like any community, women have the least rights apart from class, ethnic and regional oppression, and gender oppression.

\textsuperscript{528} Based on the interview with Amrita Thapa on 20\textsuperscript{th} June 2008 at the time of researcher’s visit to Kathmandu after 2008 election. Amrita Thapa is the General Secretary of All Nepalese Women Association (Revolutionary), CPN (Maoist). She is also the Member of Constituent Assembly.
Establishment of ‘People’s Court’ in the revolutionary stronghold was another factor that especially had a massive impact on women joining Maoists. Along with other cases, cases against women’s exploitation were brought to book with the combined effect of Village Defence Committee (VDC), women’s mass organisation and the people. Many cases of land usurpation of widows or single women, sexual exploitation, polygamy, domestic violence etc. were also handled through such courts.

Jwala Kumary Sah, an active member of ANWA (R) in Terai region cites one such case thus:529

"...In Parvat district, a school teacher who was known to exploit women sexually while promising them to help find matches for their marriages was brought to people’s court and was made to stand up and down, holding his ears for several minutes and was made to apologise for his crime. He was let go after warning him of greater consequences, if he continued…”

During Operation Romeo and Kilo Sierra II (1998), there were reports of many women being taken to police posts and sexually abused and physically tortured. It was publicly known that many women who were suspected of supporting the Maoists were ill treated and even raped by the police. Moreover, the defunct local administration, rampant injustice, poverty and neglect drove many people towards the Maoists. While there was Maoists terror there were also justice and community support activities like collective farming and redistribution of grain ‘looted’. The Maoists through their attacks on the symbols of rural debt of the Agricultural Development Bank and local usurers and burning of debts bonds and misappropriated title deeds garnered lots of popular support, especially among the women.

According to the Administrator and Land Revenue officer in Rolpa:530

"In Libang, the district headquarters of Rolpa, he did not witness any new cases for months after the “People’s court was established. The people instead of going to the district headquarter, went to the parallel administration offices opened by the Maoists in many VDCs. Out of the 52 VDCs in the district, 26 VDCs were said to be in the control of the Maoists.531 As a demonstration of their hold over

529 Based on the interview with Jwala Kumary Sah on 20th June 2008 at the time of researcher’s visit to Kathmandu.
530 Researcher’s visit to IHRICON Resource Centre, op.cit., No. 466.
531 The Kathmandu Post, 14th May 1998
the people, the Maoists did not allow local election to be held in 87 VDCs in 1997. Again in August 1999, in a bid to strengthen its parallel administration, the Maoists conducted its own local VDC elections in Rukum districts.\textsuperscript{532}

Villages like Dhawang, Mirul, Ghartigaon and Korchawang have the majority of Khas Magars groups. These communities along with others such as blacksmiths and tailors were treated as outcasts and looked down upon by the society. Maoists made use of the opportunity and reached out to these people and launched campaign against the evil practices thereby won their support. Similarly, in areas like Jajarkot and Rukum, although, there are substantial numbers of upper class people, Maoists succeeded in gaining women’s sympathy by raising voices against the oppression against women.

Hisila reiterates:

“...The ideological thrust of the Maoists movement is oriented towards expanding the rights base of the poor and the marginal, including women. In a predominantly rural society, the New Democratic Revolution is essentially an agrarian revolution, where land reform is at the centre, both for women and for men. The movement has a strong appeal for women as its 40-point charter supports property rights for women.”

In the beginning, Maoists concentrated on students and teachers as a priority sector. But their ideology seeped in not only in school and adult literacy classes but also among women’s work groups. There were even reports of Maoist ideology seeping into the prisons. As Manchanda cited in her articles\textsuperscript{533}

“...on the walls of Libang prison, life-size portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao were found....all the 57 ‘political prisoners’, men and women, may not be Maoists when they went in, but they would come out as Maoists when they are released.”

In addition, Maoists also mobilised many villagers through its political and cultural activities. For instance, Pro-Maoist publications have projected images of heroic Maoists and their pro-people activities. Their famous anecdotal grapevine, in constructing the myths of the popular history of the ‘People’s War’, has picked on how in one of its first

\textsuperscript{532} The Kathmandu Post, 1 and 8 August 1999
\textsuperscript{533} Manchanda, Rita (2001), op.cit., No. 335, pg. 1957
attacks on a police post, Maoist insurgents tied up the police and left covering the men with quilts because it was bitterly cold that night.\textsuperscript{534}

INSEC (1993-2003) in their report also cited one such instance, "In Kavre district, a group of Maoists knocked at the home of an old peasant woman late at night and demanded food and shelter. She had nothing but a small bag of seed. They made her cook that and left her in despair. A week later a sack full of grain was left outside her home and Rs.10,000."

Many wives have left home with their husbands to join the movement, leaving their children to alternative support systems. Those wives who decided to stay back at home became more independent economically and more politicised because of the circumstances, the subjective efforts of the Party to politicise them and the overall political atmosphere created by "People's War". Repeated search operations, warrants, warning, torture and rape by security forces made women even more defiant and aggressive against the state machinery. Part of the active participation by women can therefore be explained by their desire to react to their situation of oppression and exclusion.

Those who were not get directly involved as fighters in the guerrilla warfare worked as support force for the 'People's War'. Women and children in large number got indirectly involved as cultural activists, members of village defence groups, couriers, guides, nurses' and visitors to jails, to the families of those martyred and those in custody.\textsuperscript{535} Considering the role played by women in the domestic sphere, it is true that women culturally associated themselves with household work and therefore were much

\textsuperscript{534} See Maoist website http://www.maoism.org/misc/nepal/nepal.htm.
\textsuperscript{535} Some of such cases are: \textit{Lali Rokka} – a social activist and health assistance in remote Rolpa district was picked up from health post and shot dead because of her active reactionary role in her areas; \textit{Bindia Chaulagai} – a young woman in advanced stage of pregnancy was tortured in police custody for providing food for guerrillas in the jungles. The torture resulted in pre-mature delivery of the baby, which ultimately led to its death, followed by her own death few days later; \textit{Kamala Bhatta} – a teacher and President of ANWA (R) Gorkha district was raped and killed by the special commando force of the armed police while she was returning from mass work amongst women in the village; \textit{Devi Khadka} – was repeatedly raped in police custody leading to laceration of her womb because she did not yield to police pressure in signing death certificate of her brother who was languishing in jail. Today she is alive and actively engaged in the People's War; \textit{Chiniya Lama, Nirmala Deykota, Manju Kuwar and Suvadra Sapkota} – they along with three other male cultural activists were killed by police for mobilising and organising villagers with progressive culture. IHRICON Resource Centre
more effective in mobilising masses in new areas, where they were easily accepted at a household level.

Dhinrendra Kumare Upadnadayay, a member CPN (Maoist) in Kalikot Dastak constituency who was also involved in such mobilisation said:536

“...most of the women in Kalikot facilitated the Maoists’ access to other members of the family. This helped male cadres to gain access subsequently to households in new areas.”

Prachanda in his interview537 said that, the movement sustained in places where women were well mobilised. Also because of women’s multiple role inside and outside the house, it provided good cover for many logistic and espionage activities for the party cadres and guerrillas.

The questions of domestic violence and alcoholism in rural areas were also raised by Maoists in some of their campaigns. For instance, a campaign for a “dry law” promoted by the Maoists in the rural areas in order to reduce the incidence of alcoholism among men was well received by the people, especially women. Under the ‘dry law’ and along with the establishment of parallel justice systems, men who are accused of abusing their wives were punished more quickly than they would have been by the ordinary Nepali courts.

Amrita Thapa talk about some of the initiatives of ANWA (R) thus:

“...In many villages, we have destroyed large distilleries and production of alcohol was strictly prohibited. With the control of alcohol consumption, villagers themselves (especially women) said that domestic violence, neglect of women within households and fights between youth in the village has decreased. Gambling also reduced drastically in Maoist-held areas because gamblers were fined and publicly humiliated by the Maoists. Because of the provisions of people's trials, women felt more secure at their home and outside as defaulting husbands and roving men were duly punished. Also women became more aware of their legal rights and the oppressive state after 'People's War' was launched.”

But, Shobha Gautam was critical about the ‘dry law’ campaigns because:

536 Based on the interview with Dhinrendra Kumare Upadnadayay on 20th June 2008 at the time of researcher’s visit to Kathmandu. Upadnadayay is an active member of ANWA (R), CPN (Maoist) at Kalikot Constituency. She is also Member of Constituent Assembly.

537 Prachanda’s interview with Kathmandu Post, 28th May 2001
"...in trying to control alcohol use, Maoists have also tried to enforce it by force. Thus, weakened the anti-alcohol movement and thereby tremendously increased the consumption of alcohol outside the Maoists areas," She said.

On the one hand, 'People's War' helped instil progressive norms in people's lives. For instance, in Maoists 'base areas', women activists defied traditional arranged marriage system and opted more and more for love marriages on ideological grounds; women were also encouraged to bore minimum number of children so as to continue their revolutionary activities. Strict monogamy was enforced on men by the Maoists and married men found indulging in illicit relationship were severely punished. Similarly married women found indulging in illicit relationship were also not spared. Those who had reasons were encouraged to divorce and remarry – such cases although limited were encouraged by the Party, especially women and men who lost their spouses.

But on the other hand, reports and study conducted by institute like National Women's Commission (2004) shows that, Maoist women cadres were also sexually harassed and exploited by their male comrades. There were cases of women even being raped by the male cadres because they held a different opinion in the party. It was also reported that every unit had a women to sexually serve the men. But after the dialogue started, such incidents declined in the Maoist party. The Maoists did actually acknowledge one such incident where the Deputy Chairman of the “people’s government”, Kaile Giri, raped a child. Moreover, almost all women guerrillas who have left the Maoists party have complained that they were forced to leave the party due to sexual violence, rape etc. Many such incidents have been kept secret but some were made public.

'People's War' has affected women of diverse nationalities like Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman and others in different ways – by breaking the restrictive life of women. It did not only unshackle the class and gender oppression but also nationality based oppression. It particularly affected scheduled caste society, where women are economically, socially, politically and sexually exploited, by unleashing their hatred against the state. It has in a way qualitatively and quantitatively changed women's movement in Nepal. While it has shifted the geography of women's movement from urban centres to rural areas, within urban areas, it has qualitatively changed women's movement

538 Maoist rhetoric emphasises the 'consensuses of husband and wife in marriage.
from a feminist movement to a broad-based women's movement with class perspective as the key link. Rampant mass rape on rural women perpetuated by the state is seen to affect urban feminist activists as well. Thus, wider issues such as state repression of women, human rights of women, state repression of the masses, etc. came into focus along with other feminist issues.

'People's War' also provided space to young women whose lives were traditionally set in a repeated pattern of reproductive activities i.e. marriage being arranged at much younger age; domestic violence etc. Moreover, those women who ventured out of the villages meant almost get trapped into the flesh trades or being trafficked to India and other parts of the country. 'People's War' has provided challenging opportunities to these women to work side-by-side with men on equal term and prove their worth mentally and physically. It gave prospect to those socially abandoned women who were abandoned by their husbands; who have been raped and who could not afford to get married. Thus significant numbers of women were found in various capacities helping the 'People's War' - for them heroic death in the course of "People's War" was more attractive than every death imposed on them by the society.

Sita Bee-Kah (popularly known as Com. Samjhana), Vice Commander of a Battalion in the PLA shares her desire of how she would like to be remembered like other martyrs who died in the war thus: 539

"...I joined the Maoist army around nine years ago when I was 18-years-old. I am vice commander of a battalion and there are around 450 personnel under my command. We have quite a few females in the higher ranks in our army, even up to the level of a brigade commissar. When junior males look at us, they see us as a leader and a commander rather than a woman. The age of women in the army ranges from 18-32 or 33. There is an ongoing war in Nepal as the people are oppressed and there exists social injustice in this class divided society. I joined the Maoist army for liberation and equal rights for women and to fight against social oppression.... many women have died during the course of the 'People's War', even high ranking women like platoon and company commanders.... many women in the Maoist army have died. I don't have the exact numbers but the number of women killed is definitely high.... when we die during the course of war, our party declares us great martyrs. I recall all those who have died in war and I wish to be remembered like

539 Based on the interview with Sita Bee-Kah (Com. Samjhana) on 29th June 2008 at the time of researcher's visit to Kathmandu. Com. Samjhana. Samjhana is one of twenty-nine women appointed by her party to Nepal's three hundred and thirty seat interim legislatures where the country's future is being decided after King Gyanendra was forced to give up power following a mass people's movement in April 2006.
"...We don’t love to carry guns... We too want an everlasting peace, to end the suffering of the poor, and to see that no more will die due to war. But there is a lot of killing and terrorism spread by the King’s Government. Our party even declared ceasefires in the past but we have been forced to pick up weapons. Circumstances have led us this far....Yes, a lot of innocent people have died. We do not want anyone to get killed during the war. But sometimes an unexpected skirmish occurs at odd places when the King’s army and we meet. Some stray bullets hit civilians. We have declared those killed by the security forces martyrs. It is unfortunate but a result of circumstances."

Health is one of the general problems face by insurgents in any conflict due to limited availability of medical facilities. In Nepal both men and women combatants faced such problems during the movement. Women in the ‘People’s army’ were found to be suffering more from malnutrition than men as the rigorous life style of combatants, together with irregular food supply made women them more vulnerable - especially during menstrual period. However, awareness of women’s health related problem seems to be present in the Party. There were reports where women combatant had to deliberately hide their problems (despite concerns showed by their male commanders and commissars) fearing that they might miss chances of big training camps, military operations, etc. Women often felt that their source of weakness is their womb i.e. the menstrual period that makes them weaker than men. But, Yami had a different view on women considering themselves as weaker sex during menstrual period thus:

"...what needs to be understood is that, self cleansing system of menstrual period and the biological protection womb gives to women against any epidemic disease in its pursuance to save expected fertilised eggs makes them biologically stronger than men. Similarly while men exhibit more strength in short duration, it is women who retain energy for longer period. Thus, the concept of women as weaker sex is as much notional as the concept of accepting men as the stronger sex, whereas the reality is that, it has its own specific areas of strength and weaknesses. Therefore it needs to be more complimentary in its association than competitive.

In Nepal, the number of human rights atrocities and violations has increased due to armed conflict and the ultimate effect falls heavily on women and children. After ‘People’s War’ was declared, Maoists (and even police) used people for food and shelter on a daily basis where the burden of providing food and shelter fell on women. The economic status of the people concerned was not a matter of significance to them (both Maoists and
(CHILDREN – Nepal) said that Maoists used children for carrying loads such as arms, food and other war materials from one place to another in processions. “This has caused many deaths due lack of minimum knowledge of safe handling of explosive material.” Similarly, police/security forces also used local people during their patrols and forced suspected Maoists supporters to sleep in the police station in the name of safety. Both groups used women and children in large numbers during such situations competitively. According to Geneva Convention (2002), people are not to be used as shields for purposes of war but in Nepal both the both Maoists and police used children repeatedly as shields during ‘People’s War’.

In areas where they had full domination, Maoists created lots of obstacles for other political parties. For instance, said, Maoists banned all the other parties like CPN (UML), Nepali Congress, CPN (ML), Mashal and Unity Centre in their ‘base areas’. They did not allow other political activities to be undertaken in their areas fearing that their hegemony will be lost. Moreover, if any political party tried to be active locally, the Government was hostile to it, on the pretence of its collaboration with the Maoists.

One of the student activists of CPN (UML)\textsuperscript{540} said as a result of Government hostility and Maoists attack more than 70 CPN (UML) members and supporters (including student) were killed during the insurgency period due to violence and police suppression.

III

In Nepal, women in the Maoist armed conflict have shown the world that they can actually play an active role as protagonists. The active participation and involvement of women in the armed Maoists opposition groups and its political structures, including certain areas of the leadership, has received some attention, particularly from the media. But, despite the growing incorporation of women into both regular and irregular armed organisations, women’s presence in such institutions (political structures) continues to generate both suspicion and surprise.

\textsuperscript{540} Based on the telephonic interview with one of the CPN (UML) student activist 4\textsuperscript{th} July 2008 at the time of researcher’s visit to Kathmandu. The student is pursuing her Bachelor in Tribuvan University.
In Nepal, women got directly involved in ‘People’s War’ as protagonists and guerrillas. ‘People’s War’ again demonstrated what had already been evident in Peru and other revolutionary movements - the tremendous outpouring of the revolutionary potential of women. Women discovered what it was like to be an equal fighter in the struggle for liberation. Traditional weapons, such as stones, sickles, stick and khukrees (Nepali knife) and literally double barrelled guns\(^{541}\) with which women threatened their enemies in the beginning of the movements were upgraded to rifles, automatic weapons and explosives and rocket launchers. Similarly, the defence squad also expanded to the level of two division, 7 brigades, 19 battalion, several companies, platoons, sections and hundreds and thousands of militias. In the initial stages, defence forces were engaged with local police force but as ‘People’s War’ began to mature, the fighters faced American backed Royal Nepalese Army (RNA).\(^{542}\) Maoist’s women promoted the recruitment policy which established that each family must provide a member for the organisation. The recruitment of women and its initial political training was done by All Nepal Women’s Association (Revolutionary) (ANWA –R). But they got the military training from the Maoist army.

The process of recruiting women in the PLA was explained by Com. Samjhana:

"...we seek recruits with strong ideological beliefs. Recruiters for the army consider a number of factors including physical fitness, strong ideological beliefs, and height. Some recruits maybe quite short for the military but they are selected as long as they believe in the ideology and are able to cope with a tough military lifestyle."

It must also be made clear that inequalities between men and women persisted throughout the armed conflict within the organisation itself: “While men continued to develop in the military field even after crossing an age of 40, women were hardly seen to continue in this field beyond 25 years”. According to National Women Commission (2004), majority of Maoist combatants in rural areas were aged under 20, particularly girls aged between 15 and 18. However, as per Com. Samjhana, “...the age of women in the army ranges from 18-32 or 33” María Villegas Ariño (2008) argue that the recruitment – so selective by age – could have been a result of the Maoists’ intention to have a network of households available to provide supplies during the conflict, which would mean women of a certain age not being recruited so that they could maintain these households. This

\(^{541}\) Out of the two guns only one was functioning and it was popularly called WT (Whole Time)
\(^{542}\) Also called Royal American Army
practice would reveal the persistence of sexist structures in the division of labour among the Maoists themselves, a statement reinforced by the fact that equality between men and women was never achieved in the Maoist leadership structures. However, it should be highlighted that the Maoist leaders placed an emphasis on the issue of gender inequality and women’s emancipation was not relegated to second place compared to issues central to the Maoists discourse and political agenda such as the class struggle, although they did recognise that women’s liberation would only be possible after class liberation.

Women’s participation in PLA, particularly in direct combat, was one of the most important characteristics of the movement. Media report shows that of the 800 people martyred during the ‘People’s War’, nearly 100 were women. Along with hundreds of men, women also underwent rigorous imprisonment terms, many went missing and many were raped and tortured. For instance:

Com. Phul Maya B.K, who was a section commander of a battalion in the historic Dang Barrack attack on November 23, 2001, was martyred along with her husband Com. Bijok in the same battle.

Com. Shilpa, was first a commander in a guerrilla squad and later a sub-regional committee member of the Party and vice-chairman of a district level people’s committee. She had a heroic death while laying an ambush against the reactionary armed forces in May 2002. She dared to denounce and divorce her husband who had reneged against the revolution after being captured. There is an increasing trend of widow remarriages [condemned by orthodox Hindu tradition, ed.]. The definition of the family of martyrs has now been extended to those wives of martyred comrades who have remarried without forsaking the revolutionary cause. This has indirectly helped widows of martyred men to remarry without feeling guilt.

This phenomenal participation of Nepalese women in ‘People’s War’ was also acknowledged by the Government.

Recognising the double exploitation of women, the CPN (Maoist) rightly targeted them, to unleash their repressed energies to attack the system that was responsible for their sorry state. Led by the proletarian party, women fought for a new kind of society. Nepalese women changed with the course of the historic ‘People’s War’ aiming for political power so as to uproot all of the oppressive relations of the old society. Maoist leaders admitted that the biggest attraction of women was towards the people’s militia. Dhirendra Kumare

543 http://www.maoism.org/misc/nepal/nepal.htm
Upadnadyay, Members of Constituent Assembly (MCA), CPN (Maoist) from Kalikot Constituency, tell how girls as young as 15 years came to join the people’s militia because they were denied education.

During the course of the armed conflict there was speculation that the proportion of women combatants in PLA was as high as 40-50 percent of the total. However, figures offered by UN Political Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) after the process of verifying the Maoist combatants, revealed a much lower proportion, making it clear how this issue had been used by the armed group in order to legitimise itself. United Nations (1998) data also shows that, of the 19,602 people making up the PLA, 3,846 were women, that is, approximately 20 percent of the combatants. Although this is a much smaller figure than the one put about by the armed group during the armed conflict, it is a significant figure, and the fact that the Maoist armed organisation should itself emphasise this participation by women is also significant. In the third expanded meeting of the CPN (Maoist) in 1995, it was decided that at least two women will be made mandatory in each defence squads. In PLA, it was reported that every third guerrilla is a woman and among them 70 percent of women guerrillas are from indigenous ethnic communities.

Yami reiterates during the interview thus:

“...every village has a revolutionary women organisation and usually two women in each unit of 35-40 men. For instance...there are several women in the Central Committee, dozens of women at the regional level and hundreds in the district levels, and several thousands in the area and cell levels in the party. In the PLA there are many women commanders, vice commanders in different sections within the brigade, platoons, squads, and militia. There are separate women’s sections in the brigade: women platoons, women squad teams, women militia teams functioning in the field. In the United Revolutionary People Council, which is an embryonic central people’s Government organizing committee, there are four women out of 37 members. Women’s participation in all levels of People’s Council has been made mandatory.”

Another positive impact of PLA was that it broke the traditional division of work, for instance, by involving women combatants in otherwise male dominated construction

544 Commissioner of people’s militia in Jajarkot district, Comrade Ananta, also said that 40 percent of the militia in the district consists of women.
545 In each Maoist guerrilla squad, CPN (Maoist) has made the policy of recruiting at least two women guerrillas (in each guerrilla squad there are about 9-11 members).
work such as building roads, bridges, houses irrigation channels etc. and by involving men combatants in otherwise women dominated work such as collecting fodder, fuels, food processing, mess work etc., thus helping the masses to identify with the new progressive culture.

This was clearly cited by Sunsari a Maoists woman in a guerrilla zone in western Nepal in Onesto’s (1997) report:

"...I feel collective life is happier than living an individual life. I have met many comrades and talked with them. We share our happiness and sorrow. Now I am committed to sacrifice in every way to liberate our class. Before the initiation of the People's War I was oppressed--on the one hand by the Government and on the other hand by the men in the family. All the housework was done by women. After the initiation there have been many changes. All household work is now done by men and women. Beside this, men inspire us to go forward, fight to liberate women and participate in the People's War."

Girls and women who joined the Maoists discarded their jewellery, cropped off their hair short and wear combat dress and the newfound confidence made these ordinary village women rethink their traditional values concerning women. These women systematically subverted the traditional Hindu symbols. They rejected the traditional notion of remaining untouchable during the menstruation period. Use of pote (beads) and sindur (red vermillion) as a marker of married women was also discarded by female guerrillas.

In PLA, qualitatively women even reached the level of commanders and vice-commanders up to company level and as political commissars at the brigadier level. Women were also involved in capturing banks, selective annihilation of enemies and destroying key points of the state in Terai, Kathmandu and urban centre. At militia level, women’s participation was phenomenal, sometime even surpassing men. The policy to militarise the whole Party structure and the masses also helped militarised women to remove the age-old discrimination. In fact, militarisation forced RNA to start recruiting women in their army much against their ideology to face Maoist women. ‘People’s War’ thus enabled women to expand their skill in various fields. It also enabled women

546 The martyrdom of Com. Sapan Shiela, who was a company commander, is August 2003 is one such example. She met a heroic death while retreating from military operation after bravely defending her company to safety.
combatants to return to military structure even after giving birth. Women also constituted important vanguards to protect several district level revolutionary people's councils and at the same time consolidated base areas by participating in several construction activities. Thereby they became part of a spinal chord of the new state. The concept of 'one citizen, one army' brought by the Directory for Administration of People's Power (United Revolutionary People's Council, 2004) made it all the more relevant to militarise 'women who hold half the sky'.

Some of the constructive features of women's presence in PLA were highlighted by Yami thus:

"...women's participation in PLA has made fighting force more tenacious, disciplined, high cultured and more focused. Generally women, take time to decide to join the movement, but once they are into it, they stick to it much firmer than the male cadres. There were only few cases of women who surrendered or ran away from war fields. Women were also found to be least liable to disclose party related secrets thus, found to have greater perseverance and patience than men although they may lag behind men in their theoretical knowledge...this may be due to the fact that women have more to gain from the Maoist movement than men, for them, it is not only the question of escaping away from class oppression but also gender oppression.”

Many things worked against women getting involved in the revolutionary struggle, especially in the PLA. In the areas controlled by the Maoists, there were struggle against institutions and ideas that prevented women from equal participation in society. Entrenched feudal tradition and ideology for example, the view that women should not inherit or own land or that woman should be restricted to particular tasks and not allowed to do other jobs still exert a powerful force, including the revolutionaries themselves. Yami says that, sometimes there were covert or even overt pressures on women cadres to get married as unmarried women draw suspicion from men as well as women. As a result, some women ended up getting married against their wishes or before they were really ready to get married. There was a tendency to look down on women who were single, divorced, or had married more than once.

At the same time, the issue of 'conservatism' in the movement raised by Yami leads to 'relegate women cadres to only women related work, thereby robbing them the chance to develop in party policy matters and other fields.' The party failed to intervene in
the traditional division of labour between men and women whereby men take to mental work while women were left to do physical labour. This was manifested in taking men and women as absolute equals by not being sensitive to women's special condition and their special needs – that became all the more apparent during women's menstruation or reproductive periods.

Feudal family relations and obligations also exert influence on how women look at themselves and how men and women relate to each other in the Party and in PLA. Some women view marriage and motherhood as a break in their political/military career. Most women cadres also 'followed the directives of the Party blindly without questioning, just as traditional women followed their fathers when unmarried, husbands when married and sons when widowed'. Thereby they became victim of circumstances that sometimes resulted in things like unplanned pregnancies that affected them most if they were in the military field.547 It also resulted in following their husband's political line blindly instead of developing their own political line, thereby affecting its independent political life.

While most women faced problems asserting themselves, men had problems 'relinquishing the privileged position bestowed upon them by the patriarchal structure.' For example, men formally accepted women's leadership but in reality they didn't really or completely accepted and respected women leaders. Sometimes men were seen getting 'impatient with women's mistakes and general lack of skill in fields from which women were excluded, and in general did not pay much attention to women's issues although they are aware of it. There was also a tendency for men to revert to the traditional division of labour in which men do the 'mental work' while women were relegated to menial tasks.

Yami feels that these were some of the real problems that arose in the course of trying to developed women leaders in the 'People's War'. At the same time, 'People's War' also transformed the lives of the poor, illiterate, peasant women in the affected areas; from lives of invisibility the women have become visible protagonists. Drawn by the liberating,

547 Women who have been active in 'People's War' have complained that having babies is like being under disciplinary action, because they are cut off from the Party activities for a long period. Thus, many bright aspiring women's leader is at risk of being lost in oblivion, even after getting married to the comrades of their choice. This is specially so in white dominated areas (areas still dominated by the local traditional elite) where women seldom get support system from the mass as well as from the Party to sustain themselves in their reproductive years (Yami, 2007: 36)
gendered ideology of the Maoists, women were flooded into their ranks as propagandists, combatants and area commander.

IV

The end of armed conflict in Nepal happened as a result of a confluence of factors and was the product of a strategic alliance between the political and armed opposition in the country. On 21st November 2006, the Maoist armed opposition group and the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) signed a peace agreement that put an end to ten years of Maoist insurgency. The signing of this agreement was the result of a year of negotiations between the armed opposition and the then political opposition after King Gyanendra sacked the Prime Minister in 2005 and assumed executive powers, imposing an authoritarian regime on the country. In the same year, the alliance of political parties and Maoists signed an initial document of understanding, laying the basis for the peace process which materialised in November 2006 in the form of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The agreement included, as one of its principal points, the calling of elections to Constituent Assembly.

Peace processes represent unique opportunities for societies that have been affected by armed conflicts, not only to put an end to the violence but also as a starting point for more far-reaching transformation processes. Despite the fact that these processes have a very far-reaching gender dimension, they tend to be represented as neutral, concealing the gender dynamics that take place during the course of them.

On this issue, it must be highlighted that Nepal was no exception with respect to the trend observed in all the process that have led to the ending of different armed conflicts throughout the world in the recent past. The words of the special representative of the UN secretary general and head of UNMIN, Ian Martin, could not be more eloquent when he declared that:

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548 A study made by the Escola de Cultura de Pau in 2007 highlighted the absence of women at almost all peace negotiations. The Peace Process Annual Report 2008 states that "in 33 negotiations carried out in the last few years, affecting armed groups present in 20 countries, of the 280 people taking part only 11 were women - just 4 percent of the total. The percentage is somewhat higher in government negotiation teams (7 percent), particularly because of the high percentage of women making up the Filipino government's negotiation teams; in armed groups, the presence of women is almost non-existent (0.3 percent), and the situation is little better in facilitating teams (1.7 percent)." (Fisas 2008: 20)
“At all the political negotiating tables I have seen in Nepal during the peace process, not once have I seen a woman at the table. So far in the peace process, decisions are being made by men for women […]”.

So, women were absent from the process and did not participate directly in the negotiation and signing of the agreements reached between the Maoists and the Government. This happened despite the important role Nepalese women played during the popular revolt that took place in April 2006 leading to the end of the authoritarian monarchical regime, the restoration of parliament and, finally, the signing of the peace agreement, as well as their role in the course of the conflict and the consequences it had for them. So, during the course of the negotiations, neither the SPA nor the Maoists included any women in their negotiating teams.

It must be highlighted that the peace process in Nepal has been characterised by being a long, open process; that is, the signing of the peace agreement was not the culmination of the peace process. After the signing of the agreement, various institutions were set up in order to tackle several of the key issues included in the peace agreement, including the National Monitoring Committee (NMC), on which only two of the 31 members were women, and the Interim Constitution Drafting Committee (ICDC), initially made up of six men and subsequently expanded after a campaign led by women's organisations to include six women as representatives.

Although it is true that signing of the agreement was a result of an exclusive participation of men, the actual text includes elements that are important for improving the position of women in the country and in the struggle against discrimination, not only in terms of gender but also for ethnic or caste reasons. So, among others issues, we should highlight the fact that the CPA includes a specific point dedicated to the rights of women and children. Various points in the agreement, including the preamble, mention the need to tackle issues such as problems related to gender differences – as well as differences of caste, class, ethnic group and region – and to guarantee the principles of social justice and fairness. So, it must be recognised that, in the final draft of the CPA, there was capacity to

550 Point 7.6. of the CPA states that “Both sides fully agree to protect the rights of the women and children in a special way, to immediately stop all types of violence against women and children, including child labour as well as sexual exploitation and abuse [...].
incorporate important issues in order to construct peace from a gender standpoint. The fact that, as previously indicated, the issue of women's emancipation formed part of the CPN (Maoists) ideas and practices was probably the factor that determined the inclusion of these points in the peace agreement.

When asked about the political parties recognising the role of women in the interim parliament, Com. Samjhana said:

"...I don’t feel oppressed within our party for being a woman. But we’ve seen how other parties talk about women’s representation but don’t practice it. Other parties have agreed to thirty three percent representations of women but actually have less than ten percent women representation in the Parliament. Our party is much ahead in that regard. We have forty percent women’s representation - more than the set thirty three percent targets. We don’t suffer from any inferiority complex or guilt as we are very much competitive as men and have the entire Maoist party behind us. I’m confident the party will continue to support us."

As has already been pointed out, the peace process in Nepal was much broader than the negotiations between the political parties and the Maoists leading to the signing of the CPA. It is important to make clear that the process was not reduced to this space - in fact, it could be stated that it has not yet been closed– as many initiatives from civil society were developed alongside the negotiations in order to enrich and contribute to the peace process and its final result, and, among these, initiatives those led by women’s organisations should be highlighted. Many women’s organisations raised their voices demanding a greater presence as, despite the scarce presence of women in the negotiation process and in Nepali institutions, the women’s movement for peace and in defence of their rights was quite active and made some important contributions to this process. It was not a sufficiently inclusive peace process and that certain issues linked to improving the living conditions of the population were not as strongly present on the agenda as should have been. It was a process designed by the country’s elites in which dialogue with the different social sectors with the aim of incorporating their demands and needs and the desire to transfer its achievements to the population still remains to be tackled. Many women’s organisations have tried to influence the process and bridge the political class and unorganised society. As Christine Bell (2004) points out, in peace negotiations, the fact that there are clear communication mechanisms between those taking part in the conversations and those who are outside (including women) is often more important than the direct presence of women.
Political Impact

in the negotiations. In Nepal, greater communication with the agents outside the process sensitive to this issue would probably result in a stronger gender agenda.

Concerning the capacity of women's organisations to have an impact on the negotiating table, the creation of alliances between organisations which, before the peace process, had worked in areas as diverse as human rights, education, women's rights, the rights of the *dalit* communities and women's participation in the communications media should be highlighted. However, the desire to transfer women's demands into the peace process led them to establish common platforms from which they attempted to influence the process.

Among others, the Shanti Malika's network is worth mentioning. This network was set up in order to increase women's participation in the peace negotiations, pressurising the Government, the political parties and the Maoists. This is perhaps one of the initiatives that has been best publicised, largely abroad. Shanti Malika has demanded greater participation using UN Security Council resolution 1325 as a tool to bring legitimacy to its demands. Resolution 1325 has served these organisations not only to back demands for a greater presence of women in the political sphere, but also to establish wide ranging gender agendas. The fact that it is an international instrument has also served to raise the profile of these demands, which had previously been widely ignored. The existence of Resolution 1325 allowed women's organisations to set their demands in an international context of requirements to incorporate the gender dimension into the political agenda. In addition, the organisations making up this network have also promoted joint work with the political parties, not only to achieve the incorporation of women into formal politics but also to promote a gender agenda cutting across all political spheres. One of the long term objectives would be to do away with the deep rooted culture present in the political parties which has legitimised and continues to legitimise the exclusion of women and to transform the discourse concerning equality adopted by all parties into hard facts.

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Some of the organisations making up the Shanti Malika network (Network of Women for Peace) are Nagrik Aawaj, Institute of Human Rights Communication (IHRICON), Jajaran Nepal, ABC Nepal, Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD), Didi Bahini, Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) and Sancharika Samuha.
Sanam Anderlini (an expert on resolution 1325) spoke to *Panoscope*, a fortnightly radio magazine in 2006 on some of the major key concerns of Nepali women regarding the current peace process thus:

“I think the biggest concern was that they were very involved in the people’s movement, and have been very active at civil society level in terms of all sorts of human rights, and humanitarian issues and they like other socially excluded groups like Dalits and Janajatis are being left out. That sense of being left out is a very strong one that we’ve certainly seen. And then in addition to that what happens is they are bringing up different aspects of it, so you hear questions of human rights, what’s happening to the young girls who are forced into marriage with Nepali Army soldiers in barracks and maybe pregnant are left behind and are 13 or 14 - that issue comes up. What happens to Maoist combatants that are supposedly going into cantonments? There are meant to be 40 percent women. Some of them are pregnant. Some of them have young kids, some of them are underage clearly, where are they? What’s going to happen to them? We know it’s going to be difficult for them to get accepted back into communities, so how do we deal with that issue, how do we deal with the issue of communities themselves having to bear the burden of reintegration and very often again from other countries we see women taking on that role and it’s a big burden and with it comes often a lot of trauma and a lot of violence and we need to support them. These are some of the things. The questions of the internally displaced population, the poverty that goes with that, the children that have been left out of school, if you place the women at the centre and ask what are the circle of their concern they see all these elements in their lives on a daily basis.”

In Nepal, the work for the inclusion of the gender standpoint in the peace process has been carried out by various international agents, both in the United Nations sphere (including UNFPA and the gender unit of UNMIN) and donors. The Peace Support Working Group on UN Security Council resolution 1325 (PSWG) is one of the four working groups set up in order to boost the peace process. The main aim of this group, chaired and co-chaired by UNFPA and the Norwegian Embassy respectively, since it was set up, has been to promote coordination and cooperation in the implementation of the recommendations included in resolution 1325, and it has operated as a coordination forum between the United Nations and the donor community since it began its work in July 2006.

The PSWG has made an effort to identify the elements of resolution 1325 that are best adapted to the context of the peace process in Nepal, taking into account some of the priority areas of action for incorporating the gender standpoint into this process. So, some of the issues indicated as key ones would include participation by and representation of women (in formal politics), the establishment of an inclusive Constituent Assembly, the
issue of the reintegration and cantonment of military forces, transitional justice and reconciliation, and the responsibility and behaviour of the donor agencies and the United Nations. Although resolution 1325 is a sufficiently general document to serve as a guide in a wide variety of contexts, it is true that certain elements take on greater weight depending on each of these.

One of the much debated contentious issues after the 2008 Nepal’s election has been the question of reintegration of Maoists cadres (including women combatants) in the cantonment. Counselling centre or other services taking into account, the gender consequence of war on ex-combatants and receiving communities should be provided. Without training and support to understand the impact of armed conflict on gender roles, gender relations amongst ex-combatants and their receiving families and communities will undoubtedly worsen. Thus, this issue needs to be addressed for lasting peace and development in the country.

Com. Samjhana shares her concern about her friends whom she have fought the war together said:

"...I’ve been getting the news of my friends from my brigade who are currently staying in cantonments. I am quite concerned as I come here from the battle-field. In fact, I was stationed in Tila of Rolpa and commanding my brigade until a day before I was appointed a legislator. We are facing many problems there and many friends are not well. We’re facing many logistical problems – of food, boarding, clothing. We have seen our soldiers compelled to leave the cantonment in Chitwan to work outside. If the Government doesn’t address this problem, and our army is not taken care of, then they will have to leave the cantonments. The Government needs to address this problem and provide us with similar facilities like the Nepal Army. It is clear for what reasons we fought a ten year war. So I think it’s a valid question - why shouldn’t the PLA be treated the same as the Nepal Army. We’ve raised this in Parliament. Ignoring this issue could have dire consequences."

VI

Some of the suggestion and recommendation that came out during the interaction with the Nepalese both in Nepal and during their trips to India are:

i. Compliance with Geneva convention – restriction on use of people (especially women and children) as human shields for the purpose of war
ii. Equal participation, benefit and opportunity for women in police, security forces, etc.

iii. Reform of the security sector, given the large number of women who have taken an active part in the conflict as combatants

iv. Greater participation of women in peace process using UN Security Council resolution 1325 as a tool to bring legitimacy to their demands.

v. The Government should do away with the deep rooted culture present in the political parties which has legitimised and continues to legitimise the exclusion of women.

vi. Equal participation and representation of women in all (formal) decision making process

vii. Establishment of an inclusive Constituent Assembly

viii. To begin a reconciliation process that includes women because of their experience.

ix. Clear cut gender sensitive Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) that accounts for the shift away from stereotypical roles caused by armed conflict.

x. The Government should recognise the role of women - especially those who were involved in ‘People’s War’

xi. Due importance should be given to women Maoist combatants because these women are often more marginalised than other groups of women in conflict and post-conflict societies due to their involvement in direct military combat, which is stereotypically understood to be a male domain.

xii. Increase role of women’s organisation in peace process.

xiii. Need of strong social debate and intensive campaign on political issues for generating public awareness on protection of human rights.