Experiences of Female Ex-Combatants in the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Endless Battles and Resistance

by

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

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-Keshab Giri
ABSTRACT

Recent literature on women and war has put to rest the persisting question of whether women’s participation as combatants is just an aberration. However, the question also arises if all female combatants experience the war in the same way. We can go further in this direction by exploring their diverse and complex experiences before, during, and after the war. Therefore, I try to answer the question- What are the varied experience of female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and after, and how do these experiences compare to their varied expectations upon joining the group? I found the intersectional theoretical framework combining ‘matrix of domination’ within black feminism (Collins, 2009) and decolonial thinking (Shilliam, 2015) along with a poststructural narrative approach informed by the feminist methodology best-suited to answer the question. I used the case of female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006). I extend the messiness and complexity of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal in three major ways- First, female ex-combatants experienced, understood, and perceived the war and its aftermath heterogeneously often conditioned by their rank, caste, class, social location, educational status, and geographical location in intricate ways. Secondly, the pre-during-post compartmentalisation of the war is incompatible with the diverse and complex experiences of female ex-combatants. The experiences and stories of female ex-combatants show that they were fighting the war even before the insurgency had started in terms of exploitation, oppression, exclusion, and discrimination again shaped by their various identities and systems of oppression. While fighting with the enemies during the war, they simultaneously fought the patriarchy and hegemonic narratives psychologically within the group. Even at the time of ‘peace’, the battle within continued coupled with the fight against the re-marginalisation, neglect, alienation, and ostracisation. This brings to the final finding which shows that in having to fight endless battles- within and outside, and before, during, and after the war- also uniquely positions female ex-combatants to see the war deeply and differently. Their experiences are the deep seabed which contains the alternative ways of seeing, knowing, learning, and understanding the war to resist the hegemonic narratives and discourses.
ABBREVIATIONS

ANWA (R): All Nepalese Women’s Association (Revolutionary)
CDR: Community Developed Reconstruction
CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of the All Forms of Discriminations Against Women
CHHE: Caste Hill Hindu Elite
CHHEM: Caste Hill Hindu Elite Males
CPNM: Communist Party of Nepal Maoists
CPN-M: Communist Party of Nepal- Maoists
CPN-UML: Communist Party of Nepal- Unified Marxist Leninist
DD&R: Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration
DRC: Democratic Republic of Congo
EPLF: Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
FAO: Food and Agricultural Organisation
FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
FMLN: Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
FPTP: First-Past-the-Post
FSLN: Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front)
FWLD: Forum for Women and Legal Development
GDP: Gross Domestic Product
HDI: Human Development Index
ICG: International Crisis Group
ICTJ: International Centre for Transnational Justice
INGO: International Non-Governmental Organisation
ISIL: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levante
JAS: Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah Liiddawah wal-Jihad
LRA: Lord’s Resistance Army
LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NCCR: Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research
NESAC: Nepal South Asia Centre
NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation
OSCE: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PCF: Participant Consent Form
PFLP: Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine
PIS: Participant Information Statement
PLA: People’s Liberation Army
PR: proportional representation
SAARC: South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SLC: School Leaving Certificate
SLR: Self-Loading Rifle
UN: United Nations
UNDP: United Nations Development Programme
UNIFEM: United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNMIN: United Nation’s Mission in Nepal
UPF: United People’s Front
WGSG: Women and Geography Study Group
WID: Women in Development
YCL: Young Communist League
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1. **Introduction**

Women have either been rendered invisible from the military and war or, at best, their participation has been viewed as peripheral and largely irrelevant (Enloe, 2000). Prevalent perceptions of war within society and in the existing literature are often gendered. In particular, there is often an assumption that only men are combatants while women are invisible from the conflict as fighters (Enloe, 2000, Mackenzie, 2015; Darden, Henshaw, and Szekely, 2019). These assumptions leave huge gaps in terms of our understanding of civil wars and their dynamics. When they are visible, women’s victimisation in war is overwhelmingly dominant in the literature on women and war. Usually, the emphasis is placed on women civilians living in war zones, who are characterised as displaced, vulnerable, sexually abused, bearing the burden of household duties, and struggling to survive the brutality and destruction of the war (Delargy, 2013; Turshen and Twagiramariya, 1998; Ridd and Callaway, 1986; Clark and Moser, 2001; Mertus, 2000). The female combatants have often been considered to be the product of extraordinary military circumstances, overshadowing or ignoring their capacity for rational decision-making (Goldman, 1982, p. xii). When women’s agency is discussed, the lack of choices for women becomes a dominant concern (Viterna, 2013, p. 13, Coomaraswamy, 1997, p. 9). Even when the focus is put on women’s agency in war, it is presented as a signal of women’s extraordinary resilience to survive the ravages of war, which perpetuates their participation as abnormal subjects, and/or as an aberration (Moser and Clark, 2001; McKay and Mazurana, 2004; Utas, 2005; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 2008).

In response to the limitations of this literature, recent studies explore a universal pattern of women’s participation as combatants in civil wars around the globe (Henshaw, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Thomas and Bond, 2015; Thomas and Wood, 2017; Haer and Bohemelt, 2018). However, women’s association in war as more than mere victims is not new. It is proven to be a fallacy to portray women only as external actors or as an aberration to the business of warfare (Sweetman, 2005, p. 3). MacKay and Mazurana (2004) estimate that women and girls are part of active fighting forces in at least 57 countries around the world since 1990. Women combatants in a civil war, not including auxiliary roles, are present in sixty percent of total civil wars spread across all five continents (Mazurana, 2004). Moreover, current cross-national studies have definitively concluded that women have participated in the majority of civil wars as combatants (Henshaw, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Thomas and Bond, 2015; Thomas and Wood,
2017; Haer and Bohemelt, 2018). They participate in civil wars for reasons and conscience as diverse and as similar to men, as active agents making rational choices, with critical perspectives on their situation, and collectively responding to those circumstances in many civil wars and armed conflicts around the world ((Henshaw, 2016a); Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). Furthermore, other works have offered in-depth analysis of how women (both combatants and in support roles) have been instrumental in fighting and resisting opposition forces in both interstate wars and intrastate wars (De Pauw, 1998; Goldstein, 2001; Luciak, 2001; Kampwirth, 2002; Cook, 2006; Alison, 2009; and Parashar, 2009, 2011).

While such research has advanced our understanding of women’s experience of war by highlighting women who engage in political violence hitherto neglected in the field of International Relations (IR), these studies often understand women engaged in political violence to be a homogenous category having similar experiences of war and the post-war period. A prevalent assumption in the research on women and war is that the female combatants’ experience can be fit in either one of two ‘boxes’: they are either characterised as victimised and vulnerable (Ridd and Callaway, 1986; Turshen and Twagiramariya, 1998; Mertus, 2000; Clark and Moser, 2001; Delargy, 2013); or as empowering and fulfilling. (Ortega, 2012; Henshaw, 2016 (b); Thomas and Wood, 2017; Luciak, 2001; Kampwirth, 2002; Parashar, 2009, 2011) Even amongst those authors who acknowledge the ways that women might experience both agency and victimhood (Goldblatt and Meintjes, 1998; Jacobs, Jacobson, and Marchbank, 2000; Karam, 2001, p. 7; Zarkov, 2007; Mackenzie, 2009, 2015; Coutler, 2009; Kaufman and Williams, 2010; Grey, 2014), there has been little attention paid towards the heterogeneity of backgrounds, social status and locations, and other hosts of identities that these women carry, which inevitably condition their experiences and perspectives of war and post-war reintegration.

To fill this lacuna, I explore how diverse identities, backgrounds, social status and locations, and other vectors of socio-economic and political positioning of female combatants in armed conflict relate to their motivations and expectations of war, experiences, and perspectives of war, and post-war life. My research question, therefore, asks- What are the varied experience of female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and after, and how do these experiences compare to their varied expectations upon joining the group? In answering this question, I prioritise the voices and experiences of the female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple oppressions and discriminations. For example, I interviewed female ex-combatants who face multiple disadvantages in terms of caste, class, social status, educational status, and locality in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996- 2006). The
Maoist insurgency in Nepal saw a higher level of women participating as combatants, comprising diverse social backgrounds, including caste, class, ethnicity, social status, education, and geographical locations (Des Chene, 1997; Cameron, 1998; Gautam, et al., 2001; Manchand, 2004; Tamang, 2009). My cultural and linguistic competency and the recent availability of research materials on female combatants in Maoist insurgency in Nepal (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012) made the case study of female combatants in Maoist insurgency in Nepal an ideal focus area for my thesis. As I explain further in the methodology chapter, I spent three months in Nepal interviewing thirty-nine people (twenty-seven female ex-combatants, eight Maoist leaders, three experts on the female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, and one retired brigadier general from then Royal Nepalese Army) for my fieldwork. In my research, I sought to include interviewees previously marginalised in post-war studies and underrepresented in previous research, and hear personal accounts from those who have not been interviewed before. Therefore, I travelled to rural areas, away from urban centres to cover ten districts of Nepal sprawling from the East part of Nepal to the Mid-West, and from mountains to the North to plains to the South. In the analysis, I pay particular attention to low-ranking female ex-combatants recruited often from remote communities and belonging to lower castes, lower class, uneducated, and from remote rural areas. My inquiry also extends to former Maoist female leaders, not only those who were in superior positions and, generally, also came from upper castes.

In this research, I adopted a distinctive intersectional stance, centring on the experiences and perspectives of those who perceived themselves to be at the intersection of multiple disadvantages and discriminations (class, caste, ethnicity, social status, and geography) in a socio-political system characterised by hierarchy and dominations. As I elaborate on in the theory chapter, I used an intersectional theoretical framework that draws from the ‘matrix of domination’ from Patricia Hills Collins (2009) and the decolonial theoretical framework outlined by Robbie Shilliam (2015). This intersectional theoretical approach frames the research question for my thesis—What are the varied experiences of

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1 The actual numbers of female combatants in Maoist insurgency in Nepal are contested. Maoists claimed that the proportion of women combatants was as high as 40 or 50% of the total (Manchanda, 2004). However, after the verification process of the Maoist combatants by UNMIN (United Nation’s Mission in Nepal), the proportion dropped to about 20% (Arino, 2008, p. 8). Yet, my interview with Lila Sharma, head of the former Brigade Vice-Commandar in PLA (People’s Liberation Army), and Hisila Yami, the topmost Maoist female leader, revealed that the numbers are much smaller than the actual number. Many female combatants opted out of UN verification process to assume political roles (Thapa and Ramsbotham, 2017, p. 53). While others left after being wounded, disabled, and disqualified (Ibid).

2 These districts were Rolpa, Rukum, Banke, Dang, Arghakhanchi, Rupandehi, Chitwan, Sunsari, Lalitpur, and Kathmandu.
female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and after, and how do these experiences compare to their expectations upon joining the group? I present the diverse and divergent experiences of female ex-combatants both during and after the civil war in answering this question. Similarly, a feminist research methodology directs my focus on the experience of the research subjects, with a clear stance on the issues of beneficence, ethics of care, reciprocity, moral responsibility, and transparency in research through the stand-point and positionality of the researcher. Finally, the poststructuralist narrative approach was instrumental in presenting the diverse and varied experiences of women who participated in rebel groups during the war in Nepal. My methodological approach, therefore, draws attention to the voices of the female ex-combatants facing multiple disadvantages and discriminations (class, caste, ethnicity, social status, and geography) through an intersectional theoretical approach and poststructuralist narrative analysis.

The main chapters (Chapters six to ten) in my thesis show that the experiences of female ex-combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and in the post-war period are diverse and complex which becomes further amplified when focusing on the female ex-combatants at the intersection of various systems of oppression and identities such as rank, caste, class, social location, geographical location, and educational status. The dominant trope of Nepali women as oppressed in a patriarchal system and in the need of rescue by the Maoist leaders ignores the wide diversity of women in different communities in Nepal where other systems of oppression even more damaging than patriarchal restrictions (Des Chene, 1997; Cameron, 1998; Manchand, 2004; Yami, 2007; Tamang, 2009). Nevertheless, the findings from the research show that there is a greater convergence in the women combatants as agents and their extraordinary contribution to the war between the female ex-combatants and their leaders. However, digging beneath these narratives of agency and contribution, there are complex experiences and stories. The experiences of ‘double consciousness’ and ‘double jeopardy’ illustrate such experiences. Even within the same rank and file female ex-combatants, the experiences, and expectations of the insurgency and post-war ‘peace’ mark significant divergence conditioned by caste, class, educational status, social location, and geography in myriad ways. Intersectional theoretical framework with the poststructural narrative approach allowed me to reach out to the female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and explore these complexities through their complex stories and unique perspectives of the insurgency.
The convergences also blanket the complexities and discordant experiences which can be explored in a long-view of the conflict not restricted to the segmented view of the conflict in pre-during-post periods. The interviews with the female ex-combatants at the margin show many discrepancies in terms of the framing of the Maoist insurgency, including their ideas around marriage, post-war liberation and the achievements of the female ex-combatants. These divergences highlight the battle within their mind while also fighting the enemy. However, many female ex-combatants consciously chose to fight the dual-battle to bring equality, respect, and dignity to themselves and other women in society. Having to choose the uneasy war also indicates the level of various structural violence and oppression they had to face in a so-called peaceful pre-war society. Similarly, Maoist leaders emphasised on the remarkably positive impact of the Maoist insurgency on women in the post-war period. However, stories and experiences of female ex-combatants at the margin show that even at the time of ‘peace’, the battle within did not subside. Rather, it got intensified further with having to fight against the re-marginalisation, neglect, alienation, and ostracisation in their family and in the society.

Finally, beyond the convergence and divergence of stories, themes, and perspectives, the analysis of the interviews and related materials (official documents, speeches, pronouncements, manifestos, and other research works on the topic) also showed elaborate patterns of dominance and resistance embedded in the language and discourse. Dominant narratives and discourse around marriage and post-war liberation and empowerment of women expose these patterns. Speaking to the female ex-combatants at the various intersections of oppressions and discriminations also showed the possibility for alternative knowledge from their diverse experiences and varied perspectives. Their experiences, stories, and perspectives deviate from the existing hegemonic theoretical paradigms. My thesis shows that colonisation can also occur within the boundary of a state. In addition, the diverging perspectives on the key discourses and narratives of the Maoist insurgency such as marriage and post-war achievements of women underscore the intellectual independence and agency of the female combatants during and after the war, through the organic resistance to the hegemonic discourse and internal colonisation of their thinking spaces.
1.1. Structure of the Thesis

This study consists of eleven chapters. I have organised the core chapters in the thesis (chapter six to chapter nine) in chronological order. Chapter eight is an exception, focusing on marriage during the insurgency. Chapter ten further expands on this by incorporating the stories of two female ex-combatants from pre-war motivations and expectations to post-war life trajectories. However, I emphasise that the categorization of the chapters are not impervious to the analytical seepage, as we cannot compartmentalise war in pre, during, and post temporal spaces, nor can we compartmentalise the experience of those who witness and participate in the war. Rather, the experiences of female combatants in Nepal should be looked in the continuum and, despite my best attempts at the analytical tidiness, my chapters in some cases necessarily blur pre, during, and post temporal distinctions.

Chapter two reviews relevant literature exploring a wide spectrum of experiences of women in war, their conceptual framings to make sense of these experiences, and the theoretical frameworks that problematise universal category of women and show ways to incorporate diverse voices, complex and heterogenous experiences of women during and after the war. The first section frames the development of literature on women’s involvement in armed conflict. It probes how disproportionate focus on the victimhood narrative of women, and essentialization of their experiences during armed conflict belies the significant participation of women as actors in armed conflicts. Another sub-section explores the reasons that have enabled women to undertake masculine roles such as fighting as combatants in civil wars. The chapter will also erode the victim-agent dichotomy and highlight the multitude of roles women play in armed conflicts around the world including combatants and spies. Furthermore, it highlights the literature that problematize the victim-perpetrator binary of women’s representation in war. The second section of the literature review provides an overview of relevant literature on intersectionality to emphasise the voices, experiences, and perspectives of women combatants at the multitude systems of oppression. Particularly, this section sets the foundation for the intersectional theoretical framework for my thesis in the theory chapter.

The third chapter constructs the intersectional theoretical framework that I use to answer the research questions for my thesis. My research questions for the thesis is- What are the varied experience of female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and after, and how do these experiences compare to their varied expectations upon joining the group? This intersectional theoretical framework
combines black feminist theory (‘matrix of domination’ (Collins, 2009) and a decolonial theoretical framework (Shilliam, 2015). Similarly, it also builds on the agency debate regarding the participation of women in the war between liberal and radical feminists. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal drew women from heterogeneous social backgrounds in terms of caste, class, ethnicity, social status, educational background, and geographical location (Tamang, 2009; Manchand, 2004; Des Chene, 1997; Yami, 2007). Their diversity predisposed them differently in relation to the challenges/opportunities before the conflict, during the conflict, and reintegration challenges/opportunities after the conflict. The diverse experiences of female combatants during and after the Maoist insurgency are, therefore, foregrounded through the intersectional framework.

The fourth chapter outlines the methodology, which, informed by feminist intersectional theoretical and methodological approaches and feminist methodology, is well-positioned to bring out the voices and experiences of female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. The feminist research methodology is appropriate for my research because it focuses on the stories and experiences of the research subjects. It has the clearest position on important issues of beneficence, ethics of care, reciprocity, moral responsibility, and transparency in research. This is partly reflected by the emphasis on the stand-point and positionality of the researcher. Similarly, the poststructuralist narrative approach allows me to present the diverse and varied experiences of women who participated in rebel groups during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. My approach focuses on the voices of female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple oppressions and disadvantages (class, caste, ethnicity, social status, and geography). As a whole, the intersectionality as a theoretical framework and methodological approach adopted for this research informs my methodological approach which constitutes the feminist research methodology and poststructuralist narrative analysis.

As the background chapter on Maoist insurgency in Nepal, chapter five gives a brief historical account of the Maoist insurgency, and factors that pushed the women to the Maoist fold as combatants. This chapter begins with a brief historical analysis of the formation of unitary, centralised, exclusionary, and exploitive socio-political system of Nepal. The following section in the chapter discusses the puzzle on the occurrence of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal despite the political and economic conditions being conducive to peace and economic growth. It considers the issues of poverty and inequality, mobilisation of grievances by the Maoists, among other necessary conditions, in the years of run-up to the insurgency. The second part of the chapter explores the involvement of women in the political
movements in Nepal before a brief discussion of the enabling conditions that helped to bring about the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

Chapters from six to ten constitute the core chapters of my research that present findings from the interviews during my fieldwork in Nepal. Chapter six draws from the interviews with the Maoist leaders and experts to analyse the pre-war experiences of Nepali women which the Maoist leaders defined as patriarchal oppression- a dominant theme in the interviews with Maoist the leaders and experts. Maoists utilised patriarchal domination as a tool to mobilise women in the insurgency, legitimise its fight against the state, and even used as an instrument to benefit the insurgency. However, as my research shows, patriarchal restriction and domination of women in Nepal are not uniform across various social and ethnic groups. Subsequently, this chapter examines the connection of patriarchy with the liberation of women in Nepal through the intersectional theoretical tool promulgated in the theory chapter. It explains the Maoist leaders’ attempt to frame the patriarchal exploitation within the intersectional theoretical framework in three ways- construction of the singular identity of Nepali women as victims, lack of critical tools to explore diversity and complexity of Nepali women’s experiences, and designing of the programme based on flawed premises of uniformity and homogeneity. Such framing reflected more on the Maoist leaders than the female combatants often from less privileged and marginalised backgrounds whom they promised to liberate.

Chapter seven highlights the convergence between female ex-combatants, and their leaders and experts, on the remarkable contribution of women combatants in the growth and the success of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. This chapter illustrates the difficulty in navigating the agency of female combatants in political violence including the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Yet, interviews with female ex-combatants show that they defied the prevalent myth that women cannot be good combatants. Similarly, the interviews with the female ex-combatants on the combat cohesion also disrupts the dominant myth that combat becomes inefficient when women are included in the male-dominated fighting unit. While interviews from both the female ex-combatants and their leaders and experts conclude that women were honest, loyal, and disciplined, interviews with the female ex-combatants also highlight that their loyalty results from the lack of options, and not necessarily as a part of their nature. On the other hand, the Maoist leaders explain in greater detail on how female combatants contributed to the prolongation and success of the Maoist insurgency by enhancing legitimacy, spreading the Maoist political agendas, improving public relations, and providing vital support work.
Despite these factors, this chapter underlines that talking to the female ex-combatants, particularly those under the ‘matrix of domination,’ offers a unique perspective to the conflict. Many facets of female ex-combatants’ experiences of war— their understanding of agency, their experiences of path-dependency and lack of options after joining the war manifested in the boundedness with the rebel group, and cohesion in rebel group and subsequent delusion— must be seen in the context of their being at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. In this light, the intersectional framework provides a critical theoretical lens to explore the female ex-combatants’ experiences of war in its depth and breadth.

Chapter eight explores the marriage characterised as ‘scientific and progressive,’ another dominant theme to arise from the interviews with both the female ex-combatants, and their leaders and the experts. While these terms were used by many of the female combatants interviewed, there was a significant divergence on the understanding and interpretation of the terms ‘scientific and progressive’ marriage during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal between the female ex-combatants, and their leaders. While seeing the ‘scientific and progressive’ marriage as different from the traditional marriage in many ways, female ex-combatants likened the ‘progressive and scientific’ marriage during the insurgency in congruence with the moral codes and discipline rather than the radical rupture from the tradition. They were equally critical of the radical nature of marriage during the insurgency because it resulted in ostracisation, exclusion, and untold misery despite adhering to strict moral codes while adopting some progressive values and practices. Within this contradictory space, the female ex-combatants came up their own reproduction of meaning of the discourses by resisting the radicalness on the one hand and simultaneously avoiding the full submission to the tradition that oppressed them on the other. On the other hand, Maoist leaders highlighted the ‘scientific and progressive’ marriage to strengthen their credential as the most progressive political force in Nepal in emancipating Nepali women. The Maoist leaders emphasised the progressive, modern, and unique nature of their decision to allow marriage and reproduction within the rebel group. Yet, such distinction also hid their attempt to use the marriage as an institutional control and manipulation of the combatants on their attempt to come to the power. The intersectional theoretical framework with its emphasis on the decolonial thinking (Shilliam, 2015), portrays this discrepancy in tandem with the agency of female ex-combatants in the form of intellectual resilience during and after the war by resisting the hegemonic colonisation of conscience and thinking by their leaders within the rebel group itself. In addition, the ‘matrix of domination’ framework by Collins
(2009) within the intersectional theoretical framework designed for this research is able to capture the divergence in the context of power and vulnerability intricately associated with the meaning and interpretation of ‘scientific and progressive’ marriage. This can only be achieved by prioritizing the voices of women ex-combatants at the margins.

Chapter nine connects the dominant portrayal of the post-war achievements for the female ex-combatants as liberation from the patriarchal domination in terms of what I call ‘internal colonization’ and hegemony. This concept of ‘internal colonization’ and hegemony is different from the traditional conception of colonisation and hegemony usually perceived in terms of territorial expansion beyond the borders of a state. It focuses on the colonisation of knowledge, thinking, and intellectual spaces by a dominant group that may also occur within the borders of a state. In the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Maoists brought women into the Maoist rebellion without thinking about the backlash that the vulnerable women at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression were likely to face. Similarly, the hegemonic discourse on the success of the insurgency drowns the different experiences of the post-war period for the female ex-combatants that significantly deviates from the governing narrative on the positive impacts of the Maoist insurgency on the female ex-combatants in Nepal. Talking to female ex-combatants at the margin displays divergent views from the dominant narratives and discourses. The interviews with the female ex-combatants show that the Maoist insurgency has defaulted on its promise of liberating female ex-combatants from the oppression and discrimination in the society. Rather, in many cases, this has resulted in further marginalisation and double victimization. Nevertheless, these alternative perspectives also indicate the resistance of female ex-combatants to the authoritative narratives. Finally, this chapter stresses the importance of decolonial thinking- identification of the hegemonic narratives and amplification of the voices from the marginalised or the colonised- along with ‘matrix of domination’ from black feminism (Collins, 2009) and false universality of women’s experience (Mohanty, 1988) for the complete understanding of the impact of the war on lives of female ex-combatants that does not end with the termination of the war.

The final core chapter, chapter ten, further utilises the intersectional framework inspired by ‘matrix of domination’ (Collins, 2009) and ‘decolonial thinking’ Shilliam (2015) to explore the two stories of female combatants in the same rank and file but from different social backgrounds (class, caste, social status,

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4 I extrapolate this concept from Robbie Shilliam’s decolonial thinking.
education level, and geographical location). The dominant theoretical framework examines experiences of female combatants in war, such as rational choice and radical feminism, to portray how their complex stories cannot be understood within the victim/agent binary. Furthermore, these theoretical frameworks tend to take the short-view and do not incorporate full ranges of experiences before, during, and after the war. Using the ‘matrix of domination’ conceptual framework by Collins (2009) within the intersectional framework and decolonial thinking by Shilliam (2015), this chapter explores the diverse experiences and stories of the two female ex-combatants before, during, and after the war. It illustrates the myriad ways various matrices of dominations intricately interact, collide, and combine to condition the lives of the two female ex-combatants before, during, and after the war despite being in the same rank during the insurgency. Only prioritizing the voices of female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple oppressions and fostering alternative ways of knowing the war can challenge the hegemonic, universal, and singular narrative and discourse of war. Again, the intersectional theoretical framework proposed for this thesis is the effective framework in exploring this possibility within the complexity and messiness of war.

Finally, the concluding chapter summarises the findings from the analysis of the interviews. It begins by chronicling my research journey which I consider as complicated as the war itself. Reflection on my research journey itself highlights the value of the theoretical and methodological approach that can be replicated in similar studies of the war and post-war period. I draw three broad conclusions by synthesising the findings from my main chapters. First, my research further extends the complexity and messiness of the war. Second, to make sense of the complexity and messiness of war, we need to start from looking at the lives and experiences of women marginalised by the war at the bottom of social hierarchies. Finally, another broader conclusion from my research is that the delineation of pre-during-post temporal boundaries is not helpful in the accurate portrayal of the reality of war after analysing the experiences of female ex-combatants at the margin. My research suggests that along with researchers, the policymakers should also take the intersectionality seriously. This is more so in the context of the war. Especially, the post-conflict reintegration programmes for the female ex-combatants should be designed to respond to the matrix of domination they face. Finally, the chapter also suggests that my theoretical and methodological framework can be extended in studying the motivation of women joining the violent armed conflicts and also to study female suicide bombers.
2. **Literature Review**

2.1. **Chapter Introduction**

The experiences of female combatants in armed conflict are often boxed within a victim-agent dichotomy (Mckay, 1998; Jansen, 2006; Ni Aolain, et al., 2011, p. 40; De Largy, 2013). However, recent literature goes beyond the simplistic victim-agent binary to bring out the ‘messy’ reality of war (Turshen and Twagiramariya, 1998; Jacobs, Jacobson, and Marchbank, 2000; Zarkov, 2007, p. 212; Parashar, 2009; Mackenzie, 2009; Coutler, 2009; and Kaufman and Williams, 2010; Grey, 2014). While these studies disrupt the misleading dichotomy by complicating women’s agency in war, they often assume that the female combatants who participate in armed conflicts are homogenous category and, therefore, have uniform patterns of victimhood and agency. While female combatants may have many commonalities in terms of motivation, ambition, identity, and ideology to participate in war (Henshaw, 2016b; Wood and Thomas, 2017), not capturing the multitude system of identity and oppression prevents us from delving deeper into multi-faceted dynamics of their expectations, motivations, experiences, and perspectives. These various systems of oppressions such as caste, class, social status, ethnicity, and geographical location often condition the female combatants’ expectations, motivations, experiences, and post-war life-trajectory.

Particularly, Black feminist scholars and scholars from Global South have stressed on the diversity of women’s experiences, interests, and needs in both in national and international levels since late 1980s and 1990s (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2015; Mohanty, 1989). Globalisation and new information and communication technologies have challenged classical theoretical and analytical approaches, inviting feminist thinkers to reflect upon the new developments and encompass historical, national and cultural realities of women in relation to war and armed conflict across different disciplines (Zarkov, 2006). Feminist intersectional theory focuses on the interconnectedness of gendered identities, structures of domination, exploitation, oppression, and violence (Davis, 1983; Crenshaw, 1991; Mohanty, 1989 & 2003). This theory was in response to inability of mainstream feminist theories and movements to account for the experiences of women of colour, lesbian and gays, working class women, and women in the Global South (Sharoni, et al, 2016: 8). They argue that their history, colonial experiences, race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other dimensions must be included while analysing women’s experiences.
In this milieu, recent feminist scholars in International Relations have not only focused on conceptualising the geo-politics and situated experiences of women in relation to war and militarism, but also have studied the relationship between gender and gender-based violence, and different political and social positionings based on race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, age, and disability (Begikhani, Hamelink, & Weiss, 2018: 9). Still, the differences within Global South feminisms and their various compromises with neo liberal instincts, identity politics and hegemonic practices continue to privilege some women’s experiences at the centre over others at the margins (Parashar and Shah, 2016: 458). This remains largely unexplored topic in conflict and post-conflict settings in the Global South. Analysis of female ex-combatants’ experiences of the Maoist insurgency and its aftermath in Nepal provides a unique opportunity for further exploration and analysis of the ways in which such chasm leads to the discursive violence and exclusion based on various markers of identity and systems of oppression such as class, caste, ethnicity, geography, education, and social status. My thesis makes a concrete contribution in this regard by bringing out experiences of female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple oppressions and discriminations including caste, class, education, social status, ethnicity, and geographical location.

My thesis also contributes to recent corpus of literature in gender and peacebuilding that emphasize on the importance of experiences of social integration of female ex-combatants in post-conflict settings. Recent literature on reintegration of female ex-combatants in post-conflict settings shift focus from individual technocratic bench marks such as economic employment (in public sphere) to social integration with attention to less visible interactions and relations (in private sphere) (Friedman, 2018: 634). While the most significant contribution made by feminists has been in highlighting how war bodies are gendered and how militarised masculinity and wars reinforce each other, attention has been, albeit to a lesser degree, paid to everyday lived experiences in war, and to emotions that produce war’s violence and in turn are also produced by it (Parashar, 2014: 8 & 9). I stretch this line of enquiry to explore emotions and everyday lived experiences of those at the margin to whom war strikes first and never leaves or even everyday lived experiences are cascades of battles for dignified survival.

This chapter reviews relevant literature which show how women are perceived in the context of civil war, explores a wide spectrum of experiences of the women in the civil war, some conceptual framings to make sense of these experiences, and female combatants’ impact in the civil war. While an overview of existing literature shows the diverse and important contributions of the existing body of literature on
the women and war, problematizing the homogenous assumption about identities and experiences of the women who participate in an armed conflict needs further research.

The first section will explore the diverse experiences of women in the armed conflict and many ways that women have participated in the war. This section frames the development of literature on women’s involvement in the armed conflict. It probes how disproportionate focus on victimhood narrative of women and essentialization of their experiences during armed conflict belies the significant participation of women as actors in the armed conflicts. Final sub-section in the first section explores the reasons that have enabled women to undertake masculine roles such as fighting as combatants in civil wars. It will, therefore, erode the victim-agent dichotomy, and highlight the multitude of roles women play in armed conflicts around the world including combatants, spies, suicide bombers, supporters, and even perpetrators of heinous crimes.

While existing literature has made a great academic contribution towards highlighting the complexity of war by drawing attention to myriad roles that women play in an armed conflict, the second section of this chapter reviews literature showing the impact of female combatants in the civil war in terms of longevity and outcome. It discusses two major ways female combatants impact civil war duration and outcome- numerical value and retention, and tactical advantage and political/propaganda value. Diversity of female combatants’ roles in the armed conflict and likely impact of their roles in civil war dynamics pave the way for my research to focus on whether the war impacts all the female combatants in similar ways to produce similar experiences during and after the war.
2.2. Overview of Literature on Women in Armed Conflict

This section offers general categories of literature on the issue of women's involvement in armed conflict to chronicle the development of the literature. The literature ranges from the initial failure to recognise women’s participation in armed conflict as actors, to contemporary recognition of women’s involvement in the war as actors to the critical take on the of agency in the political violence. The next sub-section identifies and outlines three explanations on why women combatants did not immediately become the topic of serious study as actors. The following sub-section reviews literature focused on why female combatants manage to get involved in civil wars as actors despite all the barriers they face. Next, literature problematizing the dichotomies of victim/agent and victim/perpetrator is reviewed, to offer a critical perspective on the very idea of agency. The next sub-section provides brief accounts of the multiple roles women play in civil wars- female combatants, spies, suicide-bombers, supporters, and even perpetrators. The final section will highlight the tendency to question the idea of agency linked to participating in the war.

The invisibility of Female Combatants: Default Victims in Armed Conflict

Women have been in military combat since the pre-modern time (Goldstein, 2001; De Pauw, 1998; Cook, 2006). The pattern and trend of female combatants’ participation in civil wars around the world have been significantly common and uniform (Goldman, 1982, p. 4). This is remarkable considering that women seem to have to wage a war to partake in wars. In other words, women have had to overcome prejudices and stereotypes about men and women’s rightful and natural places in war. Such prejudices include assumptions about the inherently peaceful nature of women, arguments that all-male units are more cohesive, and claims that men’s physicality makes them better soldiers. Despite evidence that women have participated in civil wars throughout history and across the globe, women’s involvement has often been regarded as ‘a temporary aberration in time of extremity’ (Teckla Shikola quoted in Ni Aolain, et al., 2011, p. 44). Women in combat roles in the past have been attributed due credit more as the result of immediate pressure of military circumstances, and less as the result of deliberate decisions (Goldman, 1982, p. xii). Despite women being vital to advance militaristic objectives, their role has been overlooked within the social sciences; thus, in the worst-case women
have been rendered invisible from the military and war, while at best their participation has been viewed as peripheral and largely irrelevant (Enloe, 2000).

The imagery of women in conflict is often epitomised by the female refugee, the woman as mother, widow, or woman experiencing loss, or woman as a victim of sexual violence (Ni Aolain, et al., 2011, p. 40). Many studies deal with sexual violence, rape, torture against girls and women during the war while some other studies show harmful impact of armed conflict on health of girls and women (Mckay, 1998; Jansen, 2006; De Largy, 2013). Those works have been vital to show the vulnerabilities affecting the lives of many women and girls living in the conflict zone and have an important influence on policymakers to act swiftly. At the same time, they too, advertently or inadvertently contribute to the hegemonic discourse that women are only victims in war.

Similarly, post-conflict programs also tend to reinforce the image of women in armed conflict within a victimhood narrative through securitization of masculinity and de-securitization of women’s conflict experience as soldiers (Mackenzie, 2009, 2012). Looking at post-conflict justice mechanisms, some feminist scholars have pointed out that based on international court jurisprudence (particularly the International Criminal Tribune for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda), the process of holding perpetrators accountable is focused on men who have committed crimes including crimes of sexual violence (Engle, 2005; Sivakumaran, 2007; Vojdik, 2014; Simic, 2012; Grey and Shepherd, 2013).

In the foreign policy realm, women have been stereotyped as compassionate, pacifist and being critical of foreign policy that is associated with arm, alliances, and war (Togeby, 1994), and women leaders in the international crisis scenario are not found to be initiating or triggering the crisis (Caprioli and Boyer, 2001, p. 505-508). With the use of International Crisis Behaviour dataset and much more confidence in their results, the authors find that greater domestic gender equality reduces the severity of violence in an international crisis. The results hold even in an environment that exhibits a high propensity towards violence. However, one can argue that the selected cases are too few to be conclusive, and the results

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might have been influenced by many other factors apart from the role of female leaders. Earlier, research by Caprioli (2000) also found that gender equality in a country has its pacifying effect on state behaviour regarding the international crisis.

**Essentialization of Women's Experiences in War**

Women are often considered to be the default victims in armed conflict. The prevailing assumption in the scholarship in psychology researches on wartime violence, and even the studies of combatant themselves suggest that women are victims and men are perpetrators (Gerecke, 2009). The capacity for belligerence is regarded as an essential ingredient of manhood, while the proclivity for reconciliation is thought to largely be a quality of woman (Morgan, 1989, p. 27). This is based on the Freudian psychoanalytical theorization that argues men as ‘not gentle creatures; they are ‘creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness’ (Freud, 1961, p. 58). Simultaneously, the imagery of women in conflict is often epitomised by stereotypical representations of the female refugee, the woman as mother, widow, or woman experiencing loss, or woman as the victim of sexual violence (Ni Aolain, et al., 2011, p. 40). Women are considered to be the potent victims of militancy emanating from long-lasting conflicts (Macdonald, 2008; Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). As mentioned before, bulk of research works highlight sexual abuse and rape of women and girls in wars (Nordstorm, 1999 (Mozambique); Bazz and Stern, 2009, 2013 (DRC); Leatherman, 2011 (cross-national); De Largy, 2013 (cross-national)) while some other studies show the harmful impact of armed conflict on the health of girls and women (Mckay, 1998; Jansen, 2006; De Largy, 2013). These works have vitally shown the vulnerabilities affecting the lives of many women and girls living in the conflict zone, and have been an important influence on policymakers. At the same time, they too, advertently or inadvertently contribute to the hegemonic discourse that women are only victims in war. Women are considered to be the most vulnerable citizens that require rescuing or saving. Furthermore, post-conflict programs also tend to reinforce the image of women in armed conflict within a victimhood narrative through securitization of idle men and de-securitization and dismissal of former female combatants (Mackenzie, 2009, 2012).

Moreover, regarding sexual violence, women are not seen as suspects and perpetrators. Breaking the norm of women victimhood during armed conflicts, many studies, however, have questioned the myth

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6Sylvester (2005, p. 865) argues that women are forever being rescued for some cause (e.g., religion, state, the family).
of women-only recipient of sexual violence during armed conflict (Cohen, 2013). Cohen finds that women combatants participated in widespread conflict-related violence including sexual violence in Sierra Leone. Further, she finds that the case of Sierra Leone is not an anomaly. Women combatants, as their men counterparts, face similar peer pressure involving gang rape (ibid). Similarly, after observing torture and sexual abuses by female soldiers in Abu Ghraib, Iraq; Ehrenreich (2004) expresses that women can be equally complicit in violence during the war by quoting ‘uterus is not a substitute for a conscience’. On the other hand, despite sexual violence against men occurring throughout history, sexual violence against men is classified as ‘torture’ and ‘mutilation’ rather than rape or sexual violence. Yet, some international tribunals only recognise sexual violence against women as a weapon of war, crime against humanity, or the genocide (Vojdik, 2014, p. 923-24).


Denial of male victimhood is equally matched with scepticism on the women agency during armed conflicts. Even when stories of female combatants draw public attention or receive academic interest, their agency is sensationalised in a way that their representation becomes ambiguous and marginalised (Nilsson and Thapar-Bjorkert, 2013, p. 110). Paige Whaley Eager (2008) adds that the representation of violent women in armed conflicts in both academic literature and popular media is problematic. She argues that women who commit acts of violence are often portrayed as ‘aberrant’ and ‘less than a woman’ (Eager, 2008, p. 3). Moreover, the portrayal of female combatants as monsters implies the need for a woman to hold unnatural capabilities to be the soldier (Nilsson and Thapar-Bjorkert, 2013). These representations also foreground women’s gender and sexuality rather than their role as a
combatant or a female soldier which undercuts women's agential capacity to act questioning their competency to perform soldiering duties (Nilsson and Thapar-Bjorkert, 2013, p. 110).

Similarly, even when evidence of women's participation in political violence surfaces, they tend to be laced within the narratives of 'mothers, monsters and whores' to emphasise their singularity and undermine violent women's agency (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007). Women's violence is often attributed to something disordered born from maternalism, mental instability or deviant sexuality as opposed to a grievance that exists within a broader socio-political context (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2015, p. 41). They argue that acts of political violence by a woman are assumed to be the result of one of three possible explanations. First, women might be violent as a result of maternal instincts for protecting their loved ones from harm or to avenge the loss of a loved one (for example Medea\(^7\)). Secondly, violent women might act out of pathological deviance from the feminist niche (for example Boudicca\(^8\) and Gorgons\(^9\)), or as a consequence of sexual depravity (such as Jezebel\(^10\) and Amazons\(^11\)).

Furthermore, the ‘whore narrative’ reduces women to their sexuality. Violent women are considered to have abnormal sexual behaviour, and sexual nature of their clothing, physicality, and mannerisms. These aspects are emphasised instead of the violence committed by them. This frame presents violent women as debauched, foul, and pornographic (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008, p. 5-6). In other words, the locus of the cause of her violent actions is considered to be the violent woman’s excessive sexual desire rather than her independent rational thinking. According to this narrative, violent women live for or act from, sex with the underlying assumption that a ‘normal’ woman has a discreet and controlled sex drive (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008, p. 10).

The ‘whore narrative’ is cross-culturally and historically prevalent. Looking at the war on terror, both warring sides- Americans and Fundamentalist Islamists- have engaged in ‘radicalised whore narratives’ to discredit the agential capacity of women by only emphasizing their sexual deviancy (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008). A female terrorist commits violence because she is sex-crazed or in a sexual relationship

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\(^7\)Medea’s ability to help Jason on his quest and her ability to kill children out of revenge.

\(^8\)Queen of a British Celtic Iceni tribe who led revolt against the occupying Roman Empire in Britain in 60AD.

\(^9\)Three monsters in Greek mythology, daughters of Echidna and Typhon.

\(^10\)Wife of King Ahab who is known for abandoning religion of Israel and replacing with her religion, Baal and Asherah. She is also associated with prostitute.

\(^11\)Tribe of women warriors.
with a male terrorist or such violence could be the atonement for the adultery committed. On the other side of the war on terror, Islamists often portray violent Western military women as whores in order to demonstrate the superiority of their moral frameworks (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2008, p. 10-13). Similarly, references on the sexualisation of women’s violence can be tracked Biblical stories and Greek mythologies, the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, and continues to the present day (Ibid). Even in the non-war context, violent women are often represented in hegemonic discourses as either ‘mad’ (resulting from the hormonal or biological anomaly and psychological consequence of tragedy) or ‘bad’ (evil) treats violent women as ‘doubly deviant’ (Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002, p. 54). Such dominating and problematic representation of women shifts the focus of analysis from women’s political motivations of violence to their compliance with the normative female sexuality.

Similarly, in many civil wars, women have been presented as ‘cogs in the wheel’ of masculine war where they are consumers, not the producers of the violent political movements (Coomaraswamy, 1997, p. 9). They have also been erased from national archives, authoritative histories, and post-conflict transition programs (Henshaw, 2016a, p. 41). Mainstream political science often either under-represents or completely ignores the wide range of experiences of women in war. When their participation as combatants is acknowledged, they are often only assumed to participate in junior positions and less likely to be in the position of leadership. Moreover, their participation is assumed to be the result of force and coercion by the rebel group rather than the result of conscious decision-making (Henshaw, 2016a, p. 42). All these assumptions fail to acknowledge that women are capable of making a rational decision and act collectively towards the political objective. Still, the prevailing assumptions in the existing literature consider female combatants as an aberration.¹²

The next section will further this inquiry through the natural association of masculinity with combat which prevents imagining women as actors in violent conflict.

¹²Henshaw (2016a, p. 41) points to the lack of reference of female combatants in works such as Gates (2002) and Collier Hoeffler (1998) which implicitly assumes that females do not participate in civil war as combatants or their participation is aberrant and negligible.
Masculinity and Combat Exclusion of Women Combatants

Men and masculinities are associated naturally in war while women and femininity are more readily associated with peace (Elshtain, 1995). Such marginalisation of women’s agency in war has been mostly attributed to Masculinity, Militarization, and War in society and further perpetuation of their experience as victims (Enloe, 2000; Cockburn, 2010). The involvement of men with the military is considered proof of their masculinity, and war is the ultimate test of their masculinity. State military, unlike other institutions like the judiciary or the universities, is commonly regarded as the paradigmatic model of masculine organisation. The behavioural codes activities and objectives of the military organisation have assumed masculinity as the basic value. Experience in the military has been in the past regarded as the transformative process in which a boy graduates to manhood, wherein his masculinity is tested and confirmed (Cohn, 1999, p. 460). War is often waged to protect women and children. To conceptualise women as actors, rather than victims, then, disrupts this cycle of associations. In this context, the presence of women can erase this symbolic construct, leading towards structural, psychological and organisational adjustments (Addis, et al., 1994, p. xii-xiii).

Likewise, war is thought to be the business of men and only men are considered to be the actors, agents, and architects of war (Enloe, 1993); only men could commit atrocities, exhibit brutality, and pursue ruthless violence and women are the ones who are on the receiving end of such atrocity, brutality, and violence (Niarchos, 1995). Elshtain argues that the idea of war has been seducing us with ‘constellation of enshrined emblems and identities’ that state’s violence is sanctioned to men as avatars of ‘Just Warriors’ and women are ‘Beautiful Souls’ as described by Hegel who are supposed to work at home and weep. These identities are blueprints for decision and action in society, for they encircle us within boundaries of expected thoughts, action, and reaction in relation to our notion towards gender and war (1995, p. 3-4).

Concurring with this argument, Mackenzie (2015, p. 1) considers the construct of military identity around ‘band of brothers’, ‘comrades in arms’, and ‘a few good men’ imageries consciously and subconsciously give impression of the male troops as natural, capable, and rightful protector of society and the nation. The entry of women in the military is seen as weakening and corrupting the military culture that is guaranteed to produce defenders of society from outside threats. However, combat exclusion as an evolving set of rules, guidelines, and ideas used to support all-male combat unit as elite, essential, and
exceptional is not based on research and evidence, but rather on stories, myths, and emotional arguments (Mackenzie, 2015, p. 3). Despite all the institutional and structural barriers, strong assumptions, vivid metaphors, and powerful myths, women have participated as combatants in what Chinkin and Kaldor name ‘new wars’ (2013). The next section will discuss the conditions that enable women to participate in these wars as combatants despite all aforementioned odds.

**Transgression of Masculine Hurdle**

While conventional interstate wars are dying out, they have been replaced by ‘new wars’ whose unique nature have enabled participation of women in unorthodox roles such as combatants. War, in general, is a potential site for the change in patriarchal designation of gender roles (Karam, 2001, p. 2). Kaufman and Williams (2010, p. 128) suggest that war sometimes provides an opening for women to enter the political process. Particularly, ‘new wars’, the term used by Chinkin and Kaldor (2013) to denote contemporary political violence in contrast to traditional wars, make it possible to challenge the construction of masculinity and femininity in a traditional war - ‘new wars’ construct masculinity that is contradictory and insecure. Although women have participated both in old wars and new wars, their participation in the unique case of new wars is much easier compared to traditional wars (Chinkin and Kaldor, 2013, p. 169 &181).

Luisa Maria Dietrich Ortega (2012) further explores the uniqueness of such fusion of masculinity and femininity that does not restrict women from participating in violence as actors. Moreover, a different form of masculinity which is less rigid in terms of gender hierarchy and more amenable to femininity is found to have enabled male-female bonding in many civil wars in Latin America. Ortega (2012), based on her study of gender relations in guerrilla movements in Latin American countries of Peru, Colombia and El Salvador, proposes that creation of multiple, flexible, and diverse ‘insurgent masculinity’ dilutes the gender dichotomies through alternative role models for armed struggle. It allows female-male bond and prioritises comrade identity over gender-binary consciousness (Ortega, 2012, p. 489-490). The idea of shared humanity is stressed, and more complete expression of emotions is enabled, to erode the male/female dichotomy (Ortega, 2012, p. 494). Moreover, the drawing of women in the non-traditional role as a soldier also requires the formation of functional models of insurgent femininity which are different from ‘civilian women,’ and departs from stereotypical associations of women with maternity, peacefulness, and passivity (Ortega, 2012, p. 494). The female comrade, a new identity for a woman
in guerrilla warfare in Latin America, is characterised by her political motivation, ideological conviction and her agency for the change; capacity and skills are stressed over gender identity and she is acknowledged for her courageous actions and merits (Ortega, 2012, p. 494).

On the same vein, an alternative form of masculinity is found to be more effective in the peacekeeping operations. A study by Maki-Rakhola and Myrttinen (2013) on the Finnish male peacekeeping forces shows that the peace-keeping forces can have multiple-masculinities. Such form of masculinity could exist that combine professionalism, responsible behavior towards family and society, and the essence of traditional masculinity, toughness (Maki-Rakhola and Myrttinen, 2013, p. 485). Such representation of masculinity challenged the stereotypical hegemonic form of militarised or warrior masculinities and femininities. These reports substantiate the earlier claim made by Chinkin and Kaldor (2013) that ‘new wars’ enable more women to take soldiering roles by focusing on professional skills and capability rather than the gender of a soldier.

Moreover, modern technological warfare necessitates that combat knowledge, sophisticated weapon operating skills, and effective communication skills are more relevant than ever. As the Gulf War demonstrated, soldiering duty now requires more brain than brawn (Addis, et al., 1994, p. xv). This ideology of professionalism rising above one’s personal, political, religious and cultural positions— including gender— influences the way work is done no matter who does it (Addis, et al., 1994, p. xv). Sophisticated modern weapon technology requires educated personnel and a continuous two-way flow of information between lower ranks and the decision-makers which, in contrast to a one-way flow of information (orders) from senior to the low-ranking soldiers. Here, gender difference becomes insignificant and the difference in skill, expertise, and knowledge becomes crucial (Addis, 1994, p. 18).

The following three sections will discuss various roles women perform in armed once their participation is enabled. These include roles as combatants, spies, suicide bombers, and in support roles.

**Female Combatants**

Women have participated in various armed conflicts as combatants under diverse capacities. Female involvement in violence is not seen as an aberration, and it stems from the capacity of women to make conscious choices. As Henshaw (2016b, 2017) points out, women have fought in civil wars for varied reasons which are comparable with men. Similarly, their experiences range from assuming the leadership role in armed conflict to their omnipresent support role (Henshaw, 2017). This is significant
considering the greater social restrictions on women, despite their role in direct instigation to complicity in violence (Jacobs, Jacobson, and Marchbank, 2000). Cook (2006) also finds women’s participation in all types of war ranging from traditional territorial war to national liberation war, guerrilla warfare, and internal wars from ancient times to the modern times in different roles.

Studies on the post-WWII and the post-Cold War period have shown even greater numbers of civil wars employing female combatants. It coincides with the Second Wave (starting in the 60s through 70s to late 80s) and Third Wave of Feminism (starting in early 1990s). This has been noted in comparative case studies of female combatants in ethno-nationalist civil wars in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland (Miranda Alison 2009) and in Sri Lanka and Kashmir (Swati Parashar 2009). Among many other works, Shekhawat (2014) and Parashar (2014) focus on the involvement of female combatants in Indian administered Kashmir. Similarly, Manchanda (2004) and Pettigrew and Shneiderman (2004) provide an in-depth analysis of female combatants in Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) in Nepal. Likewise, Siapno (1994) and Lanzona (2009) on the Philippines, Shehadeh (1999) on Lebanon, Acik (2014) on Turkey bring to light women’s participation in political violence. One of the major characteristics of ongoing civil war in Syria has been the significant participation of female combatants- those supporting the Syrian Government to Kurdish women fighters fighting ISIS- is gaining a lot of media coverage.13

In American continents, significant research has been done on female combatants fighting in civil wars from Mexico to Bolivia. Ilja A. Luciak (2001) did a comparative study of gendered nature of guerrilla movements in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala collecting data and evidence on the extent and nature of female participation in those movements. She also explored whether democratization process after civil wars have improved gender equality and empowerment of women. Kampwirth (2002) studies women’s involvement with guerrilla movements in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas (Mexico) and Cuba. She assesses the structural, ideological, political and personal factors that influenced women’s participation.

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decisions to join guerrilla movements. Ortega (2012) has also studied the gender regime in the guerrilla insurgency in El Salvador; Peru, and Columbia. All these studies point towards the prevalence of female combatants in most of the civil wars in the American continents.


There are various comparative, and cross-sectional works that have been done on female combatants. Some works explore why women take part in armed conflict by using cross-sectional large-N data (Henshaw, 2016b). Henshaw (2016b) finds that selective incentives and desire for political participation along with usual economic and ethnic or religious grievance factors are accounted for the participation of women in armed conflict. The most comprehensive cross-national data on women in armed rebellion has been compiled by Wood and Thomas (2017) that includes information on female combatants for a sample of 211 rebel organisations active between 1979 and 2009. Additionally, Clark and Moser focus on diverse issues that range from contextual issues, analyses on politics of victimization: violence and sexual abuses, to women’s power and agency in political violence and armed conflict and in the peace-building process. The chapters cover different geographical locations from India, Israel-Palestine to South Africa, Croatia, Northern Ireland, Colombia, El Salvador, to Guatemala (Clark and Moser, 2001).

To sum up, research shows that women’s participation in the civil war is not an aberration and prevalent across all geographical regions. They have heterogeneous motives behind their participation in conflict.
and they have reached a leadership position in many cases. However, their roles extend beyond combat. Next two sections will explore their other roles such as spies, the suicide-bombers, and in the supporting role.

**Women as Spies and Suicide-bombers**

Women not only fight actively in wars, but they have also shown to be effective in other important roles such as suicide bombers and spies by exploiting prevalent gender stereotypes. For this reason, women have been increasingly used by insurgents and terrorist groups in recent times to carry out suicide attacks (Schweitzer, Levin, and Yogev, 2015; Onuoha and George, 2015; Bloom, 2011). The stereotypical image of women as soft, innocent, caring, and compassionate being has ironically helped terrorist groups to effectively employ women without raising any suspicion and generating greater shock value (Ness, 2008). Similarly, Bloom (2011) challenges conventional assumption about women that they are inherently non-violent stressing that the women have the capability to carry out violent acts through organised violent networks outside the formal structure of the state. Moreover, she argues that our own patriarchal ideologies and expectations have blinded us from seeing an increasing pattern of women participation in those violence and terrorist attacks. Critiquing simplistic assumption of women’s participation in political violence being shaped by coercion and volition; Bloom explains that there is not a single path to terrorism nor one terrorist profile but rather an involvement in terrorism determined by a series of choices.

The case of Nigeria has been used to argue that women suicide bombers can be effective tactically inflicting damage to the target. The argument is that women have the potential to generate greater shock value and cause maximum fatalities (Zedalis, 2004, 2008; Bloom, 2007, 2011). Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah Lliddawah wal-Jihad (JAS), widely known as Boko Haram has been employing suicide bombing as their terrorist tactics against the Nigerian state since 2011 (Skinner, 2015). In the five years between 2011 and 2015, there were 23 suicide attacks (involving both male and female suicide bombers) resulting in 212 deaths with fatality rate 9.2 average deaths per attack.\(^\text{14}\) However, in 2016, at least 177 people were killed in suicide bombings by female suicide bombers in only 9 suicide attacks with fatality

rate almost 20 average deaths per attack.\textsuperscript{15} Suicide attack could be a strategy adopted by weaker Boko Haram that lacks the capacity to mount a conventional attack on Nigerian military rather than being the sign of strength, the focus here is on the use of girls and women in the war for the tactical purpose.

Women apart from carrying out suicide missions, have proven their worth in gathering intelligence, acting as a messenger, acting as a facilitator for those groups. Sjoberg and Gentry (2011) note,

\begin{quote}
Women’s active involvement in militant and terrorist organisations-such as support personnel; as logistic personnel; as kinetic resources; as attackers, kidnappers, and hijackers; and as ‘martyrs’ has grown substantially and become a matter of public attention and record across the globe -Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry (2011, p. 2). \end{quote}

Existing gender norm and stereotype that fails to comprehend the role of women as potential agents of violence has enabled rebel groups and terrorist groups to use of women in carrying out acts of violence and engaging in activities that facilitate violence.

**Women in Support Roles in Armed Conflict**

Although only a few pieces of literature on armed conflict represent women as actors, many such literature associate women with armed conflict for their support roles. Despite their invisibility in the regular army, it is incorrect to conclude that the armed conflicts were alien to women in which they had no part (Karam, 2001, p. 2). Women’s role in the war economy, their support structure for individual soldiers, the birth, and the propagandistic use of women in the context of publicity to mobilise military constitutes a vital part of militarization in addition to their auxiliary service during war (Addis, et al., 1994, p. xvii). Women often create social and economic networks that support and enable violence to

continue. Research on women’s roles and war economies has started to explore subterranean relationships that intertwine women’s agricultural and industrial labour as well as their functioning within the shadow economy accompanying war, as relevant to enabling conditions conducive to the maintenance of cycle of violent interaction (Peterson’s supra note cited in Ni Aolain, et al., 2011, p. 6). Shrestha and Schipper (2009) make a similar observation in Nepal during the civil war where women became the backbone of household income after men fled homes or joined the warring sides. The support role of women during conflict remains indispensable.

In violent mobilization, support and logistical apparatuses play a critical role. Continued functioning of rebel organisation not only requires the foot soldiers but also a wide array of politically, economically, and logistically focused subdivisions. Without these subdivisions, the armed rebellion forms only a short-lived violent protest. Female-dominated forces clandestinely supplying, financial, and information networks for Palestinian Militant Groups in Lebanon in the 1980s were found to be systematically overlapped between formal militant hierarchies and quotidian social networks (Parkinson, 2013). Quotidian networks led by women significantly added to the resilience of the rebel group in the face of excessive repression, displacement and fragmentation of the male members of Palestine militant organisations in Lebanon. Such entanglement between social structure and the militant organisation has a nuanced relationship with the sustained rebellion (Parkinson, 2013). Similarly, women have been indispensable part of the logistics and support networks in the rebel organisations in Irish (Alison, 2004; Ryan, 1999), Algerian (Amrane-Minne, 1999), Salvadoran (Viterna, 2006), Eritrean (Bernal, 2001; Wilson, 1991), Zimbabwean (Lyons, 2004), Sri Lankan (Alison, 2003, 2004, 2009), and Sierra Leonean (Coulter, 2009, p. 135-136) rebel organisations. Since women are involved in armed conflict less conspicuously, it is hard to observe from outside, and hence, the support role of women in rebel organisation is less likely to be recorded despite a varying degree of risks involved (Ryan, 1999, p. 264). In this sense, women become ghost warriors in rebel organisations.
Women as Perpetrators

Women may have been engaged in acts of violence in various roles and capacities with the equal propensity to inflict damage to others in war but they are rarely presented as perpetrators during armed conflict. Gendered interventions (inclusion of women in security) were considered to civilise and enlighten male soldiers in order to reconfigure their violent masculinities into a responsible soldier and disciplined protectors of the civil population with a duty to protect women and children (Yami, 2007, p. 56, Ruddick, 1983; Elshait, 1995). However, a few research studies have changed such perceptions. Dara K Cohen (2013) studying female combatants in Sierra Leone, discovers that women combatants can also be complicit or perpetrate war crimes like rape which was until very recently considered to be the crime that could only be committed by men during civil wars. Similarly, according to Maria Baaz and Maria Stern (2013) who surveyed conflict in DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) through eyes of female soldiers found that the female combatants had an equal propensity for violence as male soldiers as a willing combatant displaying a strong sense of agency.

The absence of women’s involvement in crimes against humanity is perplexing despite strong evidence of their complicity in such acts. Women were mobilised before and during the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. They played an active role in the Rwandan genocide. Yet, they did not feature in the dominant narrative. Nearly 100,000 women were brought to the trial by Gacaca Courts but female perpetrators were overlooked by common scholarly and popular narratives about the genocide (Brown, 2014). Given the powerful role of the family in Rwanda where ideology is passed from parent to child; neglecting women’s role in genocide might have a serious impact on future generations nurtured by these invisible female perpetrators.

Eroding the Victim/Perpetrator Dichotomy

The victim/perpetrator and the victimhood/agency dichotomies fail to capture experiences of female combatants in the multi-faceted reality of armed conflict. Recent studies of the agency of women in armed conflicts have eroded the dichotomy between victimhood and agency in trying to uncover myriad roles played by women during wartime. Although female soldiers in civil war might be considered to be in a position of power and agency, Grey (2014) stresses that despite seeming to be actor in armed conflict, girl soldiers often endure sexual assault, rape, and they are enslaved and used as ‘bush wives’ by their commanders and fellow soldiers. Correspondingly, despite being victimised by civil war in Sri
Lanka, many Tamil women in paramilitaries in Sri Lanka created fearsome notoriety for being ruthless and brutal (Punaka de Silva quoted in Karam, 2001, p. 7). On a similar note, Goldblatt and Meintjes (1998) note that whereas some women fought against the apartheid regime in South Africa, many supported apartheid while others organised prostitution, and yet others were involved in inflicting torture to both men and women. Coulter (2009) also shows the transformation of rape victims into girl soldiers in Sierra Leone who are ready to inflict torture on entirely new victims as compensation for the pain they went through. Further complicating the victim/perpetrator dichotomy and their usual associations, Coulter argues that even Sierra Leone culture does not view women as ‘peaceful’ but as inherently wild. Coulter analyses agency with relative power, so that it is understood in relative terms, rather than seeing it in absolute terms.

In the same way, carefully analysing the (mis)representation of men’s/women’s experiences of nationalist wars in certain media in Serbia and Croatia during the break up of Yugoslavia, Zarkov (2007) questions the validity of media and international feminists’ writings that re-victimised the women by reducing their diverse experiences of war to that of the ‘raped woman’. What is more, a key representational strategy in the media war was ‘the persistent linkage of the raped female bodies with specific ethnicity and territory’ (Zarkov, 2007, p. 153). Women took arms- for just as it was not only women who were raped, so it was not only men who fought as soldiers. However, media representation gave much visibility to fighting men and the ‘raped women’ (Zarkov, 2007, p. 212).

Equally, Kaufman and Williams (2010) put women at the heart of their examination of conflict. They acknowledge women’s dual positioning as both victims and agents, even within patriarchal structures (2010, p. 132). The authors explore various experiences of women in armed conflict- victims of sexual violence, as refugees, as activists in a conflict situation and as political actors seeking sustainable peace in post-conflict societies- at all stages in the continuum of conflict. Jacobs, Jacobson, and Marchbank (2000) also depict women not simply as the targets, but also as the perpetrators of violence. Likewise, Turshen and Twagiramariya (1998) describe and analyse varied experiences of women in African civil wars ranging from combatants, victims to their activism for peace in the post-conflict society.

In addition, Schemanaeur (2012) impugns ‘victim and vamp’ discourse in the context of the US ‘war on drugs’. She argues that the victim and vamp discourses are the performative enactments of a security state operating under the racialised logic of masculine protection (2012, p. 83). Schemanaeur brings
out the lived experience of Paula, a Columbian woman caught while smuggling drugs into the US, and problematises the tag of victimhood inscribed on her by US security agency that fails to take into account the degree of autonomy and authority Paula exercises for her actions (2012). The author urges the need to dig beneath the constructed narratives to not just engage ideas of the agency but also to the source of narrative (who produces narrative) and the deconstruction of it (why and how it is produced).

In summary, although women’s experience of war has been largely invisible and their experiences are essentialised as victims when visible, recent literature shows women participating in armed conflict in various ways. The proliferation of ‘new wars’ has enabled women’s participation through the construction of masculinity that doesn’t contradict with femininity. As a result, women have participated in various roles- from combatants, spies, suicide bombers to non-combat support roles. Moreover, their role as perpetrators of heinous crimes has been the topic of research lately. Recent literature have problematised and questioned the pre-constructed norms of agency and victimhood and present women’s experience in war as ‘messy’ and complex spectrum. The subsequent part of the chapter will offer an overview of various conceptualisations of women's participation in war by various feminist scholars.
2.3. Female Combatants and Impact on Civil War

This section discusses the two major ways that existing literature shows female combatants helping rebel groups in their resistance against the state in the civil war- human resource and retention, and tactical advantage and propaganda value. First, the strategy of recruiting female combatants provides the rebel groups with a large pool of fighters who are most likely to stay longer with the group, and also influence male combatants to join and stay in the group. Secondly, they help the rebel group with much-needed publicity and propaganda and offer a tactical advantage and organisational efficiency to resist government forces. Through these two mechanisms, rebel groups not only can fight the state longer but also can pressurise the state for the political concessions.

A. Human Resource and Retention

The rebel group’s strategy to recruit female combatants can greatly expand the potential pool of fighters and cadres, get hold of committed and loyal fighters, and help them to retain male combatants within-group longer. At a fundamental level, a social movement’s power lies in the numbers and types of participation it can amass. It shows how individuals initially come to participate in a movement, why the early risers choose to stay or defect, and how new recruits are generated along the way (Viterna, 2013, p. 6). Fighting forces constitutes a core component of the rebel group’s human resource in a civil war. It is the sine qua non of the rebellion without which armed opposition from rebel group to the government ceases to exist. Moreover, given unique socio-cultural circumstances surrounding a female combatant’s recruitment, their entry into the rebel group tend to bind towards long-term stay in the rebel group.

Furthermore, research shows that female combatants are found to be highly motivated and committed to serving the rebel group. Recruitment of female combatants holds a symbolic value that can serve as a recruitment tool to recruit men into the rebel side. While being a valuable asset in themselves, female combatants enable the rebel group to tap into a larger pool of social capital and retain them longer.

Strength in Number

One of the reasons that rebel groups might include or actively seek out women in their ranks is simply to increase their numbers. Rebel group needs people or human resource as sympathisers, supporters, followers, cadres, and combatants. The recruitment of female combatants allows more resource pool for rebel group which is essential for the nascent armed opposition (Barter, 2014). It is one of the best strategies for rebel leaders and commanders to tap into vast human and social capital (women) in the
society to swell rank and files and enhance support for the group (Gizelis, 2009, p. 509). Shortages of men within the organisation, due to personnel being captured, killed or unwilling to participate, makes this strategy indispensable part of the insurgency (Sutten, 2009, p. 17). Even when there is no shortage of male fighters and even in the context of Islamic society such as Palestine, such strategies have been adopted so as to provide the rebel group with vast ‘reserve army’ (Sixta, 2008, p. 268). The large pool of ‘reserve army’ allows the rebel group to turn to such pool of human resource whenever necessary.

Similarly, in many armed conflicts around the world, women have been primarily recruited into combat role to make up for the shortage of young men to fight when men flee homes or are targeted by security forces (Goldstein, 2001; Alison, 2009). Women soldiers in the 19th century the Dahomey Kingdom, the Soviet Union in two World Wars (De Pauw, 1998) and civil war in Sri Lanka (Alison, 2009) are some of the representative cases. In some cases, they have been used to make army size appear larger to the enemy (Goldstein, 2001, p. 61).

Furthermore, female combatants in war hold symbolic value to sway hesitant men in society to fight for the rebel cause. While shaming diffident men for not joining military service and contributing to the conduct of the war, female combatants also incite masculinity in men in the conduct of combat operation (Goldstein, 2001, p. 73-74). Women in terrorist groups can spurt recruitment drive for the terrorist groups; women’s inclusion may be a radicalizing (and/or shaming) event for some men, urging them to be in the group they otherwise would not (Bloom, 2005, p. 144). This motivation factor, in many cases, serves as a recruitment tool inspiring many youths to join the rebel group. It helps rebel leaders and commanders to grow the organisation and build a stable, dependable, and tough battle unit.

**Determination and Loyalty in Female Combatant**

Along with quantity, the rebel groups pay attention to the quality of their recruits in war. Rebel groups that can recruit a permanent pool of highly committed loyal cadres can be more effective in the protracted battle against the ruling system which involves risks of injuries and deaths for the combatants. Any group with a large number of fighters, but without a strong sense of loyalty, can be depleted rapidly resulting in a corrosive impact in their fight against the adversary. At the battle of Waterloo, the Dutch-Belgian and minor German regiments refused to fight the battle for the Napoleon resulting in Napoleon’s defeat. The rebellion of French divisions on the Western Front in May 1917, the Russian Army in July 1917, the Italian Second Army in November 1917, dispersion of the British Fifth
Army in March 1918, and the refusal of the German army in the West to fight in October 1918 are some of the few notable examples. All these instances had a significant dent on the fighting capability and campaign of the group whose soldiers lacked loyalty (Costa and Kahn, 2003, p. 519).

This problem intensifies when combatants do not get material benefits, and punishment strategies for defection are not stringent. Fighters without loyalty to the rebel group could be counterproductive for the rebel group. For example, in 2004, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam commander in Eastern Province, Colonel Karuna, switched sides and went to the Sri Lankan Government side along with fighters under him. This defection proved fatal for the LTTE. Karuna and his fighters provided their deep knowledge of jungle regions and the LTTE supporters within them to the Sri Lankan Army (DeVotta, 2011, p. 134), and LTTE was subsequently defeated in 2009. Costa and Kahn (2003) studying American civil war also find that creating group loyalty through the promotion of social capital is essential in those situations. Retention is important not only to keep experienced staff but also to prevent intelligence leakage and division in the rebel group. So, along with making up numbers, female combatants are proven to be a vital asset for the rebel group to resist the government forces in armed conflicts around the world.

Various research of female combatants on the rebel sideshow that female combatants are highly committed and devoted to the cause of the insurgency. Through the study of the former women terrorists from diverse geography and interviews with twenty women terrorists, Eileen MacDonald concluded that women first have to win a war to be in a war which makes them more determined and devoted to the cause of rebellion than any other (MacDonald, 1992). To be a female combatant, they need to overcome gender stereotypes casting doubt or disapproving women’s participation in masculine roles such as soldiering. Similarly, they are constantly ostracised for living with male combatants in a group (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 235-36; Manchand, 2004, p. 242). Moreover, research indicates that female combatants are more focused on the mission than male combatants due to more costs associated with the mission failure for female combatants, and constant need to prove their worth in an organisation dominated by men (Jaber, 2003). Torture and rape often await women who fail to accomplish the mission and get caught (Jaber, 2003; Bunster-Burotto, 1994, p. 168). Hence, strong will power and greater levels of resolve are frequently associated with the female combatants.
Besides, for the female combatant, path-dependency towards combatant life within rebel group is stronger than male combatant because of the social and cultural expectations and boundaries that tend to limit their options other than staying in the group once having entered. Due to the social stigma attached on female combatants in their return to normal life in society, female combatants in many cases choose to remain within the group than to defect (Nordstrom, 1999; McKay, et al., 2006). Traditionally, men have been more mobile than women changing places looking for work and a better life for them and their families. This continues to be the case at present, making it easier for men to escape conscription, or to defect the group by leaving the place they are living and getting resettled in a new place (Shrestha-Schipper, 2008/9).

In the societies where women are systematically discriminated, becoming a female combatant may be a rational decision to gain a career and equality where there are limited options available (Nilson, 2005, p. 71-72). War can be an empowering experience for many of them trying to escape patriarchal oppression imposed on them (Alison, 2009). Becoming a female combatant, for some, is a matter of great pride and self-confidence (Nilsson, 2005, p. 72). Staying with the rebel group might look the better option for some female combatants and return to traditional roles may not look appealing option (Nubler, 2000, p. 54). Additionally, existing exploitation, oppression, marginalisation, and moral outrage in many cases has prompted many to resort to arms for liberation or to change the system which often requires collective action through ‘participation’, ‘defiance’ and gives them the ‘pleasure of agency’ where personal engagement in conflict is seen as an ‘adventure’ or way of ‘travel’ through which one gets recognition as a ‘political subject’. Wood states that it is, “the positive affect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride that comes from the successful assertion of intention” (Wood, 2003, p. 231, 235).

In contrast, leaving armed conflict and reunion with the family and community after participating in a civil war as a combatant could be an ordeal for female combatants. After the Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DD&R) process, female combatants have been subject to domestic violence at the hands of their husbands in post-civil war countries of Nicaragua, Chad and Namibia (United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs, 2001, p. 1-2). In Eritrea, about one-third of the female ex-combatants divorced after their marriage in the post-civil war period (Kingma, 2000, p. 231). Similarly, reunion with their families and community may not be a pleasant experience for many female ex-combatants because of resentment in family and community since they broke societal norms by
joining the civil war as a combatant. Furthermore, in many societies, gender prejudice and stereotype depict female combatants as whore and prostitutes (Baaz and Stern, 2011; Colletta, et al., 2004, p. 89). Therefore, it is found that while male combatants married non-combatant women whereas female combatants generally only got married to the male combatant in Sri-Lankan civil war (Alison, 2009, p. 173). Lack of support and recognition of their soldiering role is also evident in many DD&R processes when compared to male combatants, even in the countries that are considered to be relatively successful in DD&R process (Mackenzie, 2009; Colletta, et al., 2004, p. 177). It may give female combatants fewer incentives to enter the formal DD&R process. In some DD&R processes, male ex-commanders are sometimes reluctant to recognise the soldiering role played by female combatants during the civil war to undermine their recognition as ex-combatants (Barth, 2002, p. 2-8; Mackenzie, 2009, p. 251). Moreover, female ex-combatants are constrained by gender-specific obstacles in post-war societies. They tend to have less access to knowledge, skills, information, resources and employment opportunities compared to their male counterparts (Nilson, 2005, p. 72-73).

The increased Retention Rate for both Male and Female Combatants

The inclusion of female combatants in a rebel group can have a positive impact on the retention rate of the male combatants as well. Presence of female combatants offers male combatants the possibility to start new conjugal life even in the time of conflict to make them feel home by giving them the chance to build relationship within the group. In fact, many examples can be found where relationship is allowed to develop into marriage between combatants in the rebel group despite open relationships been discouraged in many cases (in LTTE in earlier stage and National Council of Resistance of Iran) (Annan et al., 2009; Herath, 2012; Alison, 2009). Many rebel groups seem to have adopted this policy over time for different reasons. However, the creation of necessary structure, organisation, and bondage for the realization of their political project of nation-building remains the primary objective, as demonstrated by LRA (Lord’s Resistance Army), Uganda (Baines, 2014). Forced marriage has been used to foster loyalty in the group in LRA (Carlson and Mazurana, 2012). Similarly, forced marriage was common during civil wars in Sierra Leone and Cambodia (O’Brien, 2016, p. 289-391).

In summary, female combatants have not only been able to fill up the rank and file and leadership position within the rebel group, but they are also more likely to stick with the rebel group longer. They hold potential to function as a glue for not only to draw but also to retain the male combatants in the
rebels. In this regard, the next section explains the diverse qualities of female combatants fitting to the context of the conflict setting.

**B. Tactical Advantage and Political/Propaganda Value**

Rebel groups can harness the utility of female combatants in multiple ways. Female combatants, given their typical set of social and communication skills, can serve well to spread political propaganda of the rebel group. The use of female fighters or suicide bombers in operations often elicits greater public attention and wider media coverage which serve to publicise political agendas of the rebel group. The recruitment of female combatants can also be of strategic value in terms of gaining legitimacy by demonstrating the rebel group's commitment towards equality, inclusivity, and larger support base. Likewise, female combatants are vital assets in terms of tactical flexibility and success. Finally, the rebel group can exploit a range of skills coming from the inclusion of female combatants to make it's fighting force more efficient. Overall, female combatants within the rebel group can be a vital asset in tactical, political, and propagandist operations.

**Publicity for the Political Utility**

Having female combatants in the group can produce substantive political utility for the rebel group through positive publicity. The use of female terrorist is deemed to attract larger media coverage and psychological impact because of the violation of orthodox understanding of women, femininity, and violence (Narozhna and Knight, 2016). Even places where recruitment of female combatants or suicide bombers are prohibited religiously and culturally, they are still likely to be used in terrorist attacks for the publicity. Ideological constraints do not appear to restrict the inclusion of women in modern terrorism (Davis, 2017, p. 21). Also, through their social and communicative skills, female combatants can be effective to get across their views and ideology of rebels to society. Research by Carol Gilligan (1982) shows that empathetic, negotiable, interactive, and co-operative merits in women can help them to build a social relationship. Public, especially women and children feel less intimidated while interacting with female combatants and more comfortable in interacting with the group. Moreover, cultural programmes and propagandas that include female artists in the rebel group attract more recruits in the group (Mottin, 2010).

Similarly, there is now well-established consensus that there are greater strategic benefits for the rebel group if female suicide bombers are deployed (O'Rourke, 2009; Narozhna and Knight, 2016; Sixta,
In the immediate aftermath of the attack, attention is diverted towards the plight of the woman who carried out attack than towards carnage and violence she committed (The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2005, p. 7). It helps the rebel group to draw public attention towards their agendas and yet they are not as costly to the rebel group as their male counterparts (Sixta, 2008, p. 267). This is further illustrated by Eileen MacDonald who highlights the significance of female fighter for a rebel organisation when she observed Palestine Intifada female rebel Leila Khaled,\textsuperscript{16} “Leila Khaled achieved in few hours what the lives and deaths of hundreds of Palestine male fighters have failed to do either before or since: she grabbed the attention of world media and held it enthralled” (MacDonald, 1992, p. 91).

Terrorist groups may also benefit from the media’s portrayal of women terrorists. Suicide bombing draws significant media attention when perpetrated by women. The media tend to emphasise political motivation for men while focusing on personal reasons for women. These portrayals can help a terrorist group achieve some level of approbation from their support base for using women, as their actions can be seen in retribution for some injustice done and not representing the broader politicization of women or acceptance of women’s political agency (Bloom, 2005, p. 144). This often overshadows the level of carnage and atrocity wreaked upon the opposing force by the female suicide bombers. Not surprisingly, female suicide bombers have been frequently deployed in many conflict theatres given their greater political and strategic utility (O’Rourke, 2009; Schweitzer, Levin, and Yogev, 2015; Onuoha and George, 2015). Sutton (2009) finds such increase in alarming rate while studying counts of female suicide attacks in Iraq in recent times.

**Propaganda Value**

Fighters can be an effective propaganda vehicle of the rebel group by enhancing their legitimacy. Battle, especially in civil wars, is fought on two fronts simultaneously- one at the battlefield or war-front and another at the hearts and minds of the people. Both are equally important. The result from one front is contagious for the result in another. Losing support, both internal and external can have battlefield ramifications, and vice versa. Weakness on one front can also be compensated by the strength of another. There are ample examples throughout the histories on the importance of propaganda value.

\textsuperscript{16}Leila Khaled received wider public attention around the world for her involvement in 1969 plane hijacking of plane as a operative for Palestine left-wing organisation, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).
for boosting the morale of the side or gaining wider publicity and even legitimacy. As mentioned earlier, Leila Khaled in PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) and Dhanu in LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)\textsuperscript{17} are few of the prominent examples. By recruiting female combatants and increasing the overall number of the fighting force, the rebel group can claim that they have horizontal support in society. And this image of wider support in the society can be used as a bait to enhance vertical ties (international support) (Braithwaite and Ruiz, 2018, p. 2; Parkinson, 2013). For example, in cases of Palestine Militant Organisations in Lebanon during 1980s (See Parkinson, 2013) and Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) (See Thomas and Bond, 2015, p. 489) and helped them to maintain logistically and support apparatus in the local community that sustain the vital supply chains to local society for the rebel groups. Similarly, gender inclusiveness in The South West Africa People’s Organisation helped them to establish vertical ties with UN that allowed them to receive the much-needed aid (Norway) and create safe-haven (Angola) under auspices of UN General Assembly (Braithwaite and Ruiz, 2018, p. 2).

Despite the notoriety of female terrorists, the inclusion of women combatants in the rebel group also signals some positive message in terms of their inclusiveness against competing rebel groups and government. Giving example of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) Sri Lanka, Alison observes that recruitment of females in LTTE not only gave them strategic edge, it also fulfilled ideological need to present its policies and activities as a mass social movement espousing voices of women neglected by other rival groups and government of Sri Lanka (Alison, 2009, p. 125; Wang, 2011). Shrestha and Schipper (2008/9) make similar notes regarding the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

Inclusion of female combatants portrays the larger support base for the rebel group and their resolve to achieve their objectives. Female combatants are the tip of the iceberg, revealing the depth of their support base, and the overall appeal that group has within a society (Davis, 2017, p. 14). Permissibility of women in the combatant role also means women’s participation in non-combatant and support role. As it is easier for women to be recruited in a support role than in a combatant role, this factor evinces the greater participation of women in the support network. For example, despite women being used rarely in tactical operations, there were larger logistic and fund-raising networks of women in Hizballah and in Palestinian terrorist organisations (Davis, 2017, Chapter 2; Parkinson, 2013). Similarly, although

\textsuperscript{17} LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) Sri Lanka got wider international publicity after Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a female suicide bomber, Dhanu, from LTTE in 1991 (Bloom, 2005, p. 4).
ISIL (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levante) has rarely used women as operatives, they have been featured prominently in ISIL’s overall strategy of populating the caliphate with like-minded individuals, as wives for its fighters, mothers for its children, and outspoken advocates for the organisation (Davis, 2017, p. 6). Secondly, along with the signal that the group has widespread appeal, that women have a place in their ranks; female combatants also indicate the determination of the rebel group to go to great lengths to achieve their political objectives (Davis, 2017, p. 24). In other words, they hold their political objectives so sacrosanct that both male and female combatants are willing to die for the cause.

**Tactical Advantage**

Employing female combatants enhances tactical diversity for the rebel group as well. Successful suicide mission requires accessibility to the target and element of surprise in the attack. Both prerequisites of success have been enjoyed by female suicide bombers (Zedalis, 2004). In many cases, the accessibility to the target can supplement the weakness of the rebel group (Davis, 2017, p. 2). Biological features of women’s body making them more suitable for hiding ammunition and bombs. Women can disguise the weapon in the guise of pregnancy under their clothes (Jaber, 2003, p. 6). In addition, accessibility could be the factor behind the use of female combatants in intelligence gathering, surprise attack, and deception is on the rise (Friedman, 2008, p. 43). The prevalence of traditional view of woman as mother, nurturer, peacemaker eludes their role as likely agents of terrorism or violence and thus they can carry out attacks more easily and effectively than male (Cunningham, 2007, p. 113). Nacos (2005) also emphasises that gender clichés influence the tactical considerations and decisions of terrorist groups. Tactical consideration, accessibility, stealth, and effectiveness were the major considerations for the groups such as the LTTE to use female suicide bombers for high-profile assassinations such as Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Even in places where the use of female suicide bombers has been a frequent occurrence, women are still less likely to be an object of suspicion even if they are terrorists. Despite the increased level of security, Chechen groups also used female suicide bombers in Russian subway bombings (Davis, 2013). Furthermore, female suicide bombers are low cost, require less preparation and low technology, and are a low-risk weapon (Nolen, 2016, p. 30).

[Is this another paragraph?] The use of female suicide bombers and female operatives has been an evolving tactic for terrorist organisations to evade security forces and continue their operations to attain their political objectives. This phenomenon is not new. The Anarchist in Europe during the late 19th century incorporated women into their ranks partly out of tactical necessity. The attack that involved
women took place also later in the revolutionary period, closer to the end of the anarchist wave of terrorism (Davis, 2017, p. 20). They were mostly used in assassinations or in major terrorist incidents. It has been evident in the growing use of women and girls by various terrorist groups around the globe. Al Qaeda (Bloom, 2011; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2011); Boko Haram (Schweitzer, Levin, and Yogev, 2015; Onuoha and George, 2015; Zen and Pearson, 2014, p. 49); and in Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Palestine (Bloom, 2011; Ness, 2008; Nolen, 2016) are some of the examples. Such tactics have been instrumental in sustaining the rebel groups despite a heavy campaign against them by the respective governments.

Organisational Efficiency and Effectiveness

Apart from tactical and strategic value, propaganda, and political utility of female combatants, the rebel group can also benefit from the convergence of a greater range of skills and attitudes into the rebel organisation. Such convergence can also be useful in conflict settings. Some sociological studies in organisations have also found that men display more aggression in mixed-gender groups whereas women learn to be more aggressive or become more willing to display aggressive behavior (Schaffer, 1981, p. 90). Although there have been some suggestions that the inclusion of female soldiers in the army could have a pacifying effect by making army ‘peaceful’ (Ruddick, 1983; Elshtain, 1995), other researchers have come up with very different propositions. The notion of such inclusion to civilise the barbaric propensities for violence through the curative moral presence of women does not seem to have intended impact on the army (Baaz and Stern, 2011). ¹⁸ Militaries, in many cases, require men and women to behave in stereotypical ways. Consequently, this may result in men displaying even more masculine behaviour and attitudes through their military training (Turpin, 1998, p. 16 cited in Karam, 2000, p. 4). Furthermore, female combatants in some civil war are found to be well assimilated into the masculine culture of the military. Female combatants are even found to be complicit in and committing sexual violence against men and women for which hitherto men are considered to be sole perpetrators (Cohen, 2013).

Likewise, the mixed-gender group allows for the convergence of the best qualities out of both sexes if harnessed effectively leading towards better performance. There is no dearth of literature focusing on

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¹⁸Baaz and Stern (2011) conducted extensive research of the Congolese National Army on whether entry of female soldiers in the military leads to the feminization of the military.
different aspects of men and women’s behaviour, approach and styles in terms of work-ethic, social-relations, and leadership. Practical, rule-based, analytical and direct, and flamboyant qualities in men and empathetic, negotiable, interactive, and co-operative merits in women can be combined to produce best results (Gilligan, 1982; Rigg and Sparrow, 1994). Similarly, the mixed-gender group performance has been a topic of greater research attention in many corporate and sociological studies where in many cases gender-heterogeneous group is found to be performing better than the gender-homogenous group. In the same milieu, applying MARKSRAT simulation, Fenwick and Neal (2001) study correlation between the percentage of women in a mixed-gender group or the group sex ratio and performance of that group. They conclude that the percentage of women in group or sex ratio has a significant impact on performance in the simulation with the group consisting of a higher number of women having better performance compared to the all-men group.

In the same line, Social Contract Theory also explains how greater participation of minority (i.e. gender) in group alleviates the stereotypical preconception of the majority. As the composition of the group becomes less skewed, the interaction of majority group with minority group becomes denser and characteristics of minority groups are more likely to be incorporated (Tolbert, et al., 1995). By logical extension, greater proportionality of women in a group is more likely to facilitate the assimilation of skills of women such as social-relation, communication, etc. into the group enhancing performance-level.

While assessing the level of cooperation and collective action in Community Developed Reconstruction (CDR) programme in Liberia based on outside intervention and gender composition of the group through a matching funds experiment, Fearon, Humphrey, and Weinstein (2015) find that mixed gender group with external intervention have better mobilization capacity that enhanced their collective action capacity in such CDR initiatives.

Although armed conflicts have different context, environment, and intensity than the above-mentioned studies, some elements of convergence of skills and qualities can still be expected. In this regard, the social skills of female combatants can be used to build good public relations in conflict settings, while the aggression in male combatants may be exploited to set the rebel group steadily on military

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19 For example, Gilligan, C. (1982) and Rigg, C. and Sparrow, J. (1994)

20 MARKSTRAT simulation is a simulation essentially focusing on team-work involving continuous group consultation and social-interactions. It is a process of collecting market and rival data and information, management of available information and data so as to formulate and evaluate options and strategies available to decide upon best strategy for success.
campaigns. However, there is a possibility that such an essential understanding of different characteristics and skill-sets for male combatants and female combatants could be misleading. There are many documented pieces of evidence that female combatants can be as aggressive and brutal as male combatants (Alison, 2009; Cohen, 2013). Still, the convergence of a wider range of skills cannot be denied after incorporation of female combatants in the group. Therefore, by logical extension, the inclusion of female combatants helps rebel leaders and commanders not only to magnify numbers through enhanced mobilization capacity but also enhances quality and efficiency by harnessing greater spectrum of skills and to produce collective action and operational efficiency.

In summary, recruitment of female combatants presents rebel group with greater political, strategic, and tactical advantages at their disposal in the fight against the government. Equally, having female combatants on their side, the rebel group can also be more efficient. In the civil war situation, these advantages hold significant value especially when rebel group adopts a strategy to wear-out government, build a strong support base, propagate the positive image of the group, to win hearts and minds of the people inside the country and international community, and to achieve its political objectives. While this section discussed the impact that the female combatants might have on the civil war duration and outcome, the next section in the chapter will give an overview of the theoretical frameworks that is effective in exploring the diverse and complex experiences of female combatants in war.
2.4. Chapter conclusion

This chapter gave an overview of the literature that portrays the representation of women in armed conflict in various ways and likely impact of their involvement to the conflict dynamics. From default victims to perpetrators of heinous acts of violence, the literature shows diverse experiences of women in armed conflict. There has been an attempt to boxing these experiences in victim-agent binary. However, later literature shows that such binary is unhelpful and demonstrates the complex and ‘messy’ nature of the armed conflict, particularly the ‘new wars’ especially when women play diverse roles. The second section, focused on literature review, shows female combatants influencing the civil war duration and outcome in two major ways- through human resource and of the combatants, and providing tactical advantage and political/propaganda value. Overall, the literature review chapter showed that women in armed conflict play diverse roles and influence civil war in many ways. These findings in the existing research generate further questions- What is the impact of war on them? In other words, what do the female combatants experience in war and how does this experience translate into so-called ‘peace’ after the war? Do all of them come from similar backgrounds and experience the war in similar ways? How do their experience of war and ‘peace’ in the post-war period compare with the aspirations and expectations? These questions are synthesised into my research question for the thesis- What are the varied experience of female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and after, and how do these experiences compare to their varied expectations upon joining the group? The gap in the existing literature to answer this question sets the foundation for my research. My thesis makes a concrete contribution in feminist International Relations scholarship by bringing out experiences of female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple oppressions and discriminations including caste, class, education, social status, ethnicity, and geographical location. The following theory chapter builds an intersectional framework which provides a suitable theoretical lens to capture the various experiences of female ex-combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006) from diverse social backgrounds.
3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents the intersectional theoretical framework that I use to understand the diverse experiences of female combatants before, during and after the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006). This intersectional framework is useful to answer the research question of this thesis - What are the varied experience of female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and after, and how do these experiences compare to their varied expectations upon joining the group? Female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal came from diverse social strata and levels of society. The diversity was manifested in terms of caste, class, ethnicity, social status, educational background, and geographical location (Des Chene, 1997; Manchand, 2004; Yami, 2007). Despite being a heterogeneous group, female combatants as a whole were the key protagonists of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. While the peaceful resolution of Maoist insurgency in Nepal brought them back to civilian life, their diverse background meant that they were positioned differently in facing reintegration challenges. In this respect, I construct the intersectional theoretical framework braiding together ‘matrix of domination’ within black feminism (Collins, 2009) and decolonial thinking (Shilliam, 2015) to frame the diverse experiences of female combatants during and after the Maoist insurgency.

The first section begins with starkly opposed views of feminist International Relations scholars surrounding women’s agency as combatants in war. It presents the position of radical and critical feminist perspectives regarding the involvement of women in the war that range between ambivalence and opposition. At the same time, it contrasts the theoretical position of liberal feminists who see the participation of women in war positively by highlighting the agential capacity of women (Addis, 1994). Likewise, it includes an appeal of feminists who have consistently urged the researchers not to marginalise the voices of women engaged in civil war as combatants, and to take their experiences seriously (Parashar, 2009; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007; Kelly, 2000). The section problematises the victim-agent binary regarding female combatants in the civil war and argues that failing to represent voices of women engaged in political violence constitutes their double victimisation and further marginalisation. In doing so, the section stresses that seeing female combatants’ experience either as victims or as actors limit their diverse experiences which do not always fit in these boxes. Furthermore,
some scholars provide an alternative conception of agency that can be delinked from acts of violence in war.

Parallel to the agency debate of women in war among feminist scholars regarding women in war, the second section underlines the inadequacy of existing theoretical frameworks to account for the diverse experiences of female combatants during and after the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006). In this regard, this section proposes that the intersectional theoretical framework reveals the multifarious impact of the Maoist insurgency on the lives of female combatants depending on their social backgrounds and positions. The first part of the second section defines the intersectionality and introduces the three approaches to intersectionality. The second part introduces and weaves together Patricia Hill Collins’s (2009) ‘matrix of domination’, and Robbie Shilliam’s (2015) decolonial thinking into a single intersectional framework to highlight the importance of listening to female combatants to assemble a messy but holistic picture of civil war. This is particularly helpful to understand civil war’s multi-dimensional impacts on female combatants. Collins’s ‘matrix of domination’ alerts researcher to recognise lived experiences and knowledge of women under multitude forms of discriminations and identities. Likewise, Shilliam’s decolonial framework can be extended to include internal colonization where needs, concerns, interests, and historicity of women at the margin are further displaced and transplanted by the needs, concerns, and interests of the dominant group within the boundary of a state.

On the whole, drawing from two theoretical frameworks to create a single intersectional framework emboldens an analysis that can capsulate the complex and messy stories of female (ex-) combatants, and illustrates civil war’s myriad impacts on female combatants.
3.2. Female Combatants: Question of Agency

This section again highlights the inadequacy of existing theoretical approaches, which tend to conceptualize agency into victim-non-agent, and perpetrator-agent binaries. Literature on gender and politics offer diverse and contested conceptions of agency. Feminists often criticize the liberal individualistic conceptions of agency. For example, formulation of agency as relational autonomy by Gentry and Sjoberg (2007: 193) has received criticisms by Linda Ahall (2012) and Auchter (2012). While others define agency as purposive action (Friedman, 2018: 634). Agency may also be conceptualized both in personal and political sphere by contesting or reinforcing gendered social norms (Friedman, 2018: 634). This section reiterates the need to complicate conceptualization of agency into binaries, moving beyond them for a better understanding of women’s experiences of war. Currently, there is a vast gap in the theoretical framing of the dominant ways that women’s participation in armed movements. Significant researches on women in war homogenise the experience of women as victims and highlight many urgent issues to be addressed. At the same time, feminist scholars in IR have lately shown that women also participate in civil war as combatants with regularly and marginalising their voices leads to further victimisation. While both categories of literature give a contrasting picture of women’s participation, they also inadvertently limit experiences of female ex-combatants during and after the war into the victim-agent boxes.

Double Victimisation and Marginalisation

As discussed extensively in the literature review section, women associated with are mostly perceived within victimhood narratives. However, some feminist scholars have argued that the neglect of women in the civil war by IR feminists is another concern that relegates women combatants in the civil war to further margins. Although women’s engagement with political violence does not change the fact that violence remains primarily the masculine reserve and women have to operate within long-standing gendered meaning, focusing only on victimhood narrative will also be the denial of the women as agents (actors capable of rational decision-making) (Kelly, 2000, p. 46-47). Women have participated in wars on a much larger scale than previously thought. Most recent works (Henshaw, 2016a, 2016b; Thomas and Bond, 2017; Haer and Bohmelt, 2018; Darden, Henshaw, and Szekely, 2019) have compiled data to show that women have participated in the significance of civil wars as combatants. Moreover, Alexis Henshaw (2016a) finds that women are combatants in nearly one-third of all groups and they hold leadership positions in over one-quarter of all rebel groups in her sample. In the majority of the civil
wars, female combatants join voluntarily (Ibid). Not listening to their voices renders them voiceless and invisible and results in double victimisation- first, failing to recognise their agency; secondly, failing to incorporate their voices.

Women’s choices and women’s lives matter in global politics and IR and this includes voices and stories of women engaged in political violence as well. Christine Sylvester highlights the neglect of gender in the study of war in IR compared to other trans-historical and transnational institutions, such as family and religion (Sylvester, 2005, p. 855). This has rendered women absent from otherwise well-developed theories about how and why people come to commit violence (Gentry and Sjoberg, 2015, p. 43). In this sense, war has become a marginalised ‘other’ topic for IR feminists. Moreover, military and war are predominantly a state-centric discourse in IR. While warfare can be a masculine affair, ignoring the women involved in armed conflict denies their agency in these acts of violence and leaves a key area of IR and conflict unexplored (Davis, 2017, p. 16). The idea of girls and women in international relations are often excluded from the discourse (Enloe, 2004, p. 95-97). The ‘war on terror’,21 with its conflicting ideologies and worldviews, strongly reinforces gendered understanding and identities and pushes women out of the IR theatre (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007). Therefore, Parashar claims, while non-state actors are ‘still other’, women combatants fighting in a non-state actor are the ‘others within the other’ (Parashar, 2009, p. 250). Such an ambivalent position of women removes them from collective ‘we,’ reinforcing their ‘otherness’. Moreover, women retain the position of an object rather than a subject when they are excluded from the collective ‘we’ of the body politic (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 47). Swati Parashar further admonishes- not representing women combatant’s voice would be a disservice to feminism itself that takes pride in bringing to the front multiple experiences of women whose voices have been suppressed (Parashar, 2009, p. 252-253).

By excluding the voices and contribution from the margins of already marginalised war studies, IR feminists would again run the same risk of ghettoizing the study of women in political violence in the same manner as IR marginalises feminist voices against patriarchy, masculinity, and militarism. Governmental and media portrayals of women’s choices in political violence have implications beyond the gender subordination inherent in those portrayals- they not only distort how we understand (and

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21It is important to note here that not all the rebel groups fighting the government are labeled by International Community as a ‘terrorist group’.
treat) women but also how we understand and try to solve political violence. Therefore, neglecting the voices of women engaged in political voices amounts to limited understanding of political violence, political conflicts or even global politics (Gentry and Sjoberg, 2015, p. 29-30).

Similarly, rendering only certain actions of women as valid and acceptable creates a biased framework of gendered inquiry that neglects women of ‘difference’ and makes their voice powerless (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007 cited in Parashar, 2009, p. 252). As a consequence, the dichotomous category of ‘normal’ and ‘violent’ woman is reinforced, which only perpetuates the idea of both hegemonic masculinity (male superiority in the society), and hegemonic femininity (acknowledgment of male superiority in the society) (Parashar, 2009, p. 251). Only through the problematisation of binary can a complex picture of victim and agency emerge reflecting true experiences of women in war.

**Problematising the Concept of Agency in War**

While the binary conception of agency has been criticized, recent scholarships have begun to question the notion of agency itself in armed conflict that ties the agency with politics and war (politics by other means). Jessica Auchter (2012) problematises the traditional foundationalist notion of agency and urges re-theorization of the notion of agency, and the relationship between violence and agency. She maintains that it is possible to explore motivations of a woman engaged in violence by not trying to prove their agency in the violence they commit or they have been coerced to commit, but rather by understanding the actions themselves (Auchter, 2012, p. 134). Being open to the reform, re-conception, and performativity on the notion of a woman (and agency of woman) enables feminism to opportunities to face new challenges for political ends. This allows us to detach from the usual concept of the agency from the concept of political participation and encourages us to think of alternative means of political participation (Aucht, 2012, p. 136). Among other things, Auchter’s argument questions the foundationalist design of agency that denies agential recognition to thousands of invisible women who function as artillery of revolutions, nationalist movements, and armed revolts in different parts of the world.

In the same line, Linda Ahall looks into motherhood discourse, which she considers as fundamental to the way in which agency in political violence is enabled (Ahall, 2012, p. 116). She argues that such discourse denies the agency of women in political violence. Analysing the presentation of motherhood through media images, Ahall critiques the feeding of messages of gender, agency and political violence
within the British war on terror culture. She argues that such representations only create subjects instead of individuals, therefore complicating the validation of agency communicated through media images. Furthermore, Zarkov (2007, p. 225) questions the linkage between agency, emancipation, and empowerment with only liberating and progressive movements. She also doubts if agency, emancipation, and empowerment fully capture the women's diverse positioning within violent conflicts, including their participation in the fighting.

In summary, by highlighting the complexity of agent-non-agent binary in the relation to female combatants in the civil war, this research once again posits that female combatants can be both victim and agents in the civil war. Feminist debate on victimhood and agency of female combatants in the civil war is vibrant and informative. However, it does not give the total picture of the complexity of civil war and the agency of the actors involved. Moreover, some feminist scholars in International Relations have also argued that agency not be privileged in terms of direct participation in politics and war only. The problematisation of the victim-agent binary and the problematization of very idea of agency itself sets up the next section where I lay out the intersectional framework to encompass such diverse experiences of female ex-combatants beyond the victim-agent binary during and after the war from various social groups.
3.3. Female Ex-Combatants: Questions of Experience and Achievement

This section first maps out existing intersectional approaches and proceeds to outline the ‘matrix of domination’ conceptual framework within black feminism by Patricia Hill Collins (2009), and the concept of internal colonization and hegemony inspired by Robbie Shilliam (2015). The ‘matrix of domination’ conceptual framework and the concept of internal colonisation form the foundation of the theoretical perspective taken through this thesis. I developed a framework to help encompass and understand the experiences of female combatants who are under multiple axes of discriminations from usual systems of discriminations such as gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion, and geography, to sophisticated forms of discriminations like internal-colonialism.

**Intersectional Approach**

The intersectional approach explains the position of an individual at the various intersections of multiple group identities and systems of oppressions (Minow, 1997, p. 38). In black feminism, intersectional approach came as a response to the single-axis framework to describe Afro-American women’s experience either as women, or as a member of the black race, but not in their mutuality. Intersectionality was used to bring to attention the multidimensional nature of black women’s experience (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). Single-axis framework prevents the conceptualization, identification, and remediation of multiple discriminations that a particular group faces and the way they obscure the damaging power relations. Hence, intersectionality brings to the fore how they construct, while paradoxically obviating, identities of the self (Fernandes, 2003, p. 309 cited in Valentine, 2007, p. 12).

Debates on intersectionality, in the beginning, included conflicting envisioning of intersectionality. Tensions were evident between radical feminism, which emphasised the paramount importance of patriarchy as a system of oppression, and socialist feminism, which sought to understand women’s position as both subject to male domination and also as participants with men in class struggle (WGSG, 1984 cited in Valentine, 2007, p. 11). On the one side, Marxist feminists often used a reductionist model in which different social divisions were connected and argued that class was the most determining factor (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 2005).

The second approach to intersectionality conceptualises the various systems of oppression such as class, sees gender and race as separate but argues that they operate simultaneously (Valentine, 2007, p. 11). However, such additive or multiplication analogy has been criticised in a way where it assumes
one form of oppression would be merely additive upon another (Valentine, 2007, p. 13). This means, for example, if a particular woman is subjected to three sets of oppressions— for example, caste, class, and ethnicity, she is more oppressed than one who is discriminated on the basis of class and ethnicity (McCall, 2005 cited in Valentine, 2007, p. 13). Moreover, this perspective has been considered to be dangerously essentialist and deterministic assuming that each category can be tagged onto each other mechanically. Possibly, one danger with the notion of intersections is found in constructing people as belonging to fixed and permanent groups (e.g. ethnic, gender and class groups) which then all enter, in a pluralist fashion, into their determination. The presumption is that particular intersection will produce specific oppressions (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 2005, p. 62—63 cited in Valentine, 2007, p. 13).

A third approach envisions each system of oppression imbricate in an intersection with the others in dynamic and complex ways (Collins 1993, 1998; Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992; Crenshaw 1994; McCall 2001; Anthias 2002a, 2005). In this way, classes are always gendered and racialised and gender is always classed and racialised and so on (All cited in Anthias, 2008, p. 13). West and Fenstermarker propose that focus should be on how identities occur in the intersections, not on the stable or pre-constructed understandings of social difference (1995, p. 9 cited in Valentine, 2007, p. 13). In other words, the enmeshing of various identities, processes of contingencies and discontinuities, collision and unison, neutralization and intensification, and cancellation and amplification, results in the positions and identities being made/unmade and claimed/rejected. In this way, the focus can also be put on the social processes, practices, and outcomes that impact the social categories, social structures and individuals (Anthias, 2008, p. 14). Ethnicity/nation, gender, and class involve processes relating to a range of economic, political, and social interests and projects, and to distinctive (and variable) forms of social allegiance and identifications which are played out in a nuanced and highly context-related fashion. These may construct multiple, uneven, and contradictory social patterns of identity and belongings along with domination and subordination (Anthias, 2008, p. 14). After understanding intersectionality as a complex and dynamic conceptual construction, attention also can be placed on the understanding of the intersection as a situated accomplishment— each individual’s active agency in the construction, transformation, and erasure of identities and challenging structural and deterministic thinking on the impact of various intersections of identities can be focused and analysed (Valentine, 2007, p. 14). While the third approach in intersectionality provides a good understanding of the complex ways multiple systems of oppression influence the life experiences of a person, the combination of the ‘matrix of
Collins’s Matrix of Domination and Female Combatants in the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal

The ‘matrix of domination’ conceptualisation by Patricia Hill Collins (2009) is instrumental for this research not only to observe the multiple layers of dominations that marginalised group of women may face but also because it engenders why such observation should count as a body of knowledge resisting the mainstream. The matrix of domination in black feminist thought also demands that oppressed/marginalised/disadvantaged groups like black women be treated as agents of knowledge. Akin to Patricia Hill Collins’s matrix of domination for Afro-American women in the USA, this research places subordinate female combatant’s experience and ideas at the centre of analysis rather than focusing only on the narratives of privileged leaders (both male and female). Matrix of domination, in the context of Afro-American women in the USA, refers to the way in which interlocking, complex and dynamic axes of race, class and gender work towards oppressing Afro-American women in the USA. This replaces additive models of oppression with interlocking ones creating a significant possibility for the incorporation of other forms of oppression. For example, this approach has the possibility of incorporating social relations of domination organised along with other axes such as caste, social status, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. It creates a conceptual stance where all the groups oppressed in various ways have various levels of either advantages or disadvantages or even both advantages and disadvantages at the same time. For my research, this makes it possible to understand examples like the following: a Brahmin/Chettrey woman hailing from a higher caste and enjoys certain privileges that come with being in the top of the caste hierarchy; however, she too suffers from patriarchal oppression as women. Also, Dalit/Janjati women in Nepal are disadvantaged in terms of caste because they hail from low caste group and also suffer patriarchy. Similar to the context of Afro-American women, this research portrays female combatants as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting gender, caste, class, and geographical oppression. It speaks to the importance that their lived experience plays in generating knowledge and empowering oppressed people through the knowledge (Collins, 1990, p. 221-238). Domination works by seducing, pressuring, and coercing or forcing marginalised women and members of subordinate groups to replace their individual and cultural ways of knowing with the dominant group’s specialised thought. Resisting the dominant knowledge often
dictated by middle-class, higher-caste and urban-based leaders, and resorting to their lived experiences and organic epistemes, oppressed women generate knowledge true to their self.

**Robbie Shilliam’s Decolonial Thinking and Internal Colonisation**

Colonization and hegemony are not only the processes of power and control in various forms, they also represent deliberate ignorance and non-recognition towards voices, interests, needs, and experiences of the people in the margin who often are in majority. My framework draws from Robbie Shilliam’s (2015) decolonial conceptual thinking. There are three elements to be drawn from Shilliam’s decolonial theoretical approach. First, it argues that colonization and hegemony neglect, discourage, and eliminate intersectional understanding of diversity and difference. Second, colonisation and hegemony are not only limited to conspicuous spatial/material expansion and control beyond borders but also equally represent invisible normative/non-material expansion within the borders of a country. Third, cultural hegemony actually invades and colonise individual spaces and program everyday mundane affairs consistent with the hegemonic meta-discourse. Irrespective of the subjugation and peripheral status, the marginalised community can still find ways to resist the dominant thinking even if such resistance remains discrete, silent, and inadequate. Finally, it is vital for feminist researchers in academia to recognise such muzzled voices of resistance and amplify them.

The lack of intersectionality lenses in the study of phenomena also results in the hegemony of a singular narrative from the dominant group, drowning out diverse stories and perspectives of different groups. It is a colonization of one set of ideology and narrative as a universal, even potentially within the borders of a state where voices from a marginalised social group are displaced by the hegemonic narrative of the powerful group. In this sense, colonisation not only travels international spaces but also travels within internal spaces vertically and horizontally- between elites and non-elites, leaders and their subordinates, between landlord and peasants, between dominant caste and lower caste, between dominant class and lower class, and in many other manifestations. It is important to note that the colonization is not only limited to physical spaces but also involves colonization of the cultures, identities, and bodies (Shilliam, 2015). Under colonization, society as a whole must be acculturated to adopt a particular worldview and a set of cultural beliefs that will generate a certain level of acquiescence to the narrative of elites. Here, subaltern members of society also play a role – either by complying with elite agendas or by resisting them (Pile and Keith, 1997; Thrift, 2000 cited in Bernazzoli & Flint, 2009). Such activities give rise to a subaltern sense of identity, which often – but not always –
serve to perpetuate dominant ideologies and identities (Agnew, 1987; Pred, 1984; Williams, 1977 cited in Bernazzoli & Flint, 2009).

To summarise, the intersectional framework proposed for this research is useful in two important ways—it makes sense of diverse experiences and impact of civil war on female combatants, and it also shows the possibility of alternate ways of knowing away from the centre. The participation of female combatants in civil war does not guarantee the fulfilment of their expectations and aspirations at the end of the conflict. Particularly, an intersectional framework is suitable to identify, recognise, and amplify the voices of female combatants multiple-burdened with various systems of oppression at the margin, and who do not fit into the mainstream narrative of liberation and empowerment of women because of the insurgency. The proposed theoretical framework gives credence to the voice of the female combatants at the lower end of caste, class, social and educational status, and geographical hierarchy. First, it emphasises the multi-layered identities and system of dominations interacting together and influencing the lives of female combatants during and after the war (matrix of domination- Collins, 2009). Second, this framework brings light to the stories, lived-experiences, and perspectives of female combatants that do not comply with the hegemonic narrative of civil war (decolonial thinking- Shilliam, 2015). In other words, the resistance to the dominant narrative itself promises well for the prospect of new thinking and alternative knowledge.
3.4. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter offered the intersectional theoretical framework in connection with the main research question for the thesis - What are the varied experience of female combatants in the civil war and post-war period, and how do these experiences compare to their varied expectations upon joining the group? Existing works on women’s participation in war often tend to bifurcate their experiences into victimhood and agency. However, this chapter sought to problematise such dichotomous understanding of women’s diverse experiences of war. While it is important to incorporate voices of female combatants to prevent their double marginalisation and victimization, incorporating wide ranges of voices within female combatants remains an important imperative for feminist research. Therefore, I propose the intersectional framework in order to encompass broad ranges of female combatants’ experiences before, during and after the war. It is useful in embedding diverse voices and life-experiences of female combatants to map out the holistic picture of the impact of civil war on the female combatants, especially those at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and identities. This intersectional framework also highlights the possibility of alternative ways of knowing about the war that does not necessarily fit into the hegemonic narrative of war and its impact. It might look bulky in the way it combines black feminist scholarship and decolonial scholarship, but it is a sturdy framework incorporating diverse experiences of female combatants living at multiple-burdened and multi-oppressed margins. The next chapter will discuss the methodological framework that is fitting to the research question and the theoretical framework mentioned in this chapter.
4. **Methodology**

4.1. **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter explains why a feminist methodology informed by intersectional feminist approaches is well-positioned to answer the following core research question: What are the varied experience of female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and after, and how do these experiences compare to their varied expectations upon joining the group? In the previous chapter, I proposed the intersectional theoretical framework that contains suitable theoretical toolbox to answer my research question above. My intersectional theoretical framework draws from the ‘matrix of domination’ theoretical concept from Patricia H. Collins (2009), and the decolonial thinking by Robbie Shilliam (2015). While the research attempts to capture the diverse experiences of the female ex-combatants, it centres around the narratives and experiences of the female ex-combatants from the lower class, lower caste, and geographically remote areas who largely expressed feelings of marginalisation after the war.

This research adopts a distinctive intersectional stance, centring on the experiences and perspectives of those who perceived themselves to be at the intersection of multiple disadvantages and discriminations (class, caste, ethnicity, social status, and geography) in a system characterised by hierarchy and many systems of dominations. The intersectional theoretical approach is a fit to the research question that aims to present the divergent experiences of the female ex-combatants both during and after the civil war. I chose feminist research methodology because of its focus on the experience of the research subjects and addressing the issues of beneficence, ethics of care, reciprocity, moral responsibility, and transparency in research through the standpoint and positionality of the researcher. Finally, the poststructuralist narrative approach will be instrumental in presenting the diverse and varied experiences of women who participated in the rebel group during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. The aim of my approach is to draw attention to the voices of the female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple disadvantages and discriminations (class, caste, ethnicity, social status, and geography). As a whole, the intersectional theoretical approach adopted for this research informs my methodological approach, which also includes poststructuralist narrative analysis.

The first section begins with the justification for the selection of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006) for my study. The second section will offer a descriptive summary of my fieldwork in Nepal. Next,
the chapter will briefly summarise the intersectional theoretical approach and its correspondence with the feminist research methodology that I use for the analysis. The fourth section in the chapter will elaborate on the feminist research methodology and include a discussion of a range of issues considered essential to feminist research. Specifically, I will focus on the issues of positionality and standpoint, epistemological, political, and methodological implications of male researcher doing feminist research, beneficence, ethics of care, reciprocity, moral responsibility, transparency in research with regard to sensitive topics such as experiences of armed conflict. In the final section, I will explain the usefulness of the poststructuralist narrative approach for challenging the hegemonic construction of a singular narrative on the female ex-combatants’ experience before, during and after the war. In doing so, the poststructuralist narrative approach also amplifies the voices of female ex-combatants at the margin.
4.2. Making Case for the Case Study of the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal

Many things contributed towards the selection of the female ex-combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006) as my case study for the Ph.D. research. First, women’s participation as combatants in Maoist insurgency in Nepal was peculiar because Nepal is a highly patriarchal society where women were, and still are, restricted in the domestic sphere. Therefore, seeing them as combatants was a radical departure from existing social norms. This peculiarity was further compounded by the diverse backgrounds of the female combatants involved. Nepalese civil war represents a ‘puzzle’ in a sense that despite being a male-dominated society restricting the activity of women outside domiciliary, the armed conflict saw a high level of the female combatants fighting for the Maoist rebel against the state. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal also saw a peaceful conclusion after the rebel group renounced weapons to participate in mainstream democratic politics. The extraordinary participation of the female combatants in the rebel group is, therefore, a curious case to be explored in-depth and width. Moreover, the female combatants who participated in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal hail from diverse backgrounds in terms of caste, class, ethnicity, geography, and social status, making it the perfect case for exploring whether their experiences of war and post-war uniformly matched their expectations before joining the war. This case study is in sync with my proposed research question which looks at the varied experience of female combatants in the civil war and after the war, and to see whether these experiences compare to their varied expectations upon joining the group.

The Maoist insurgency in Nepal, which saw the participation of women from the diverse social backgrounds (Des Chene, 1997; Cameron, 1998; Gautam, et al., 2001; Manchand, 2004; Tamang, 2009), can be best understood through the lens of an intersectional theoretical approach, which problematises the singular universal narrative of war. Liberal feminists consider women to constitute a monolithic group who either suffer equally from war or become empowered or achieve gains from the war. However, the category of ‘women’ constitutes a heterogenous conglomeration of multiple identities from various strata and systems of power and oppression (Mohanty, 1988; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2000; Collins, 2009). This compels us to question whether the impact of civil war falls equally on all women situated in variegated hierarchies of power, oppression, and identities. Nepal is an important case to explore this question as a result of the caste and class hierarchy, ethnic-linguistic and religious diversity, topographical variation, and uneven pattern of development across the country. It would be interesting to see if these factors relate to their experiences both within and outside, and during and
after the war. The diversity and hierarchy of social relations will allow me to explore if the female ex-
combatants at the intersection of various oppression and discriminations experienced the Maoist
insurgency in Nepal in the same ways as their female leaders or other female ex-combatants from
privileged caste, class, socio-political status, educational status, and geographical locations.

In addition to being a unique case, my cultural and linguistic competency, and availability of research
materials on the female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal made a case study of the female
combatants in Maoist insurgency in Nepal an ideal case study for my thesis. My identity as a Nepali
citizen reduced many barriers in the conduct of fieldwork in Nepal. My cultural and linguistic competency
and familiarity, knowledge, and awareness of the history, tradition, culture, and values of Nepalese
society were other factors that helped me to choose this case. This was important since Nepal is a post-
war society and my research subjects were female ex-combatants.

Additionally, the availability of materials about the Nepalese civil war, and female combatants
associated with it was another factor for the case selection (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). The case of
the Nepalese civil war is useful for this research as it is easier for me to gain depth of knowledge about
the case, due to my prior knowledge and first-hand experience of civil war in Nepal and availability and
accessibility of information. Further, it is suggested that the single case study methodology is suitable
where the research question requires exploring a question about which there has been very little related
research, particularly when the subject is an experience or concept previously invisible or yet to be
comprehended deeply (Ackerly and True, 2010, p. 129). Moreover, my linguistic skill and cultural
background played a significant part as some materials and documents that I relied on to study female
combatants in the Nepalese civil war are in the Nepali language.

In summary, the case study of Nepalese civil war is in sync with the objective of my research and the
intersectional theoretical approach that I take for my Ph.D. thesis. My identity as a Nepali citizen,
cultural and linguistic competency and the availability of sources on the female combatants in the Maoist
insurgency in Nepal made the case study of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal a natural choice for my
Ph.D. thesis. In the following section, I will describe my fieldwork experience in Nepal.
4.3. Fieldwork and Interviewee Sample

I spent three months in Nepal interviewing thirty-nine people (twenty-seven female ex-combatants, eight Maoist leaders, three experts on female combatants in Maoist insurgency in Nepal, and one retired brigadier general from then Royal Nepalese Army) for my fieldwork. After attaining human research ethics approval for the fieldwork by Ethical Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sydney, I went to Nepal for my fieldwork between November 2017 and February 2018. One of my aims was to meet interviewees who had been marginalised in the post-war narratives and underrepresented in previous research and hear accounts from subjects who had not been interviewed. Therefore, I tried to travel as far and wide as possible away from urban centres. During this period, I travelled to ten districts of Nepal sprawling from the East part of Nepal to the Mid-West, and from mountains to the North to plains to the South,22 over ten days (out of the three months of my fieldwork in Nepal). Although I had to make numerous difficult and dangerous journeys,23 this undertaking allowed me to meet many female ex-combatants living in remote parts of Nepal. A palpable sense of anger and frustration was visible in some female ex-combatants that I interviewed against Maoist leaders for their neglect towards them after the war. Also, many of them indicated that our interview was the first time they had been asked about their experiences and encouraged to tell their stories since the end of the insurgency. In turn, these women felt ignored by both Maoist leaders as well as by researchers who have been studying the conflict since it ended.

While my interviewee sample may be considered small for a qualitative work, this sample fits my research purpose nicely. I had initially planned to use mixed methodology with cross-sectional quantitative analysis occupying main analysis supplemented by the qualitative study of female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. However, my fieldwork changed my epistemological, theoretical, and methodological assumptions and beliefs. It subsequently culminated in changing the research questions for my research. When I started interviewing the female ex-combatants, it became

22 These districts were Rolpa, Rukum, Banke, Dang, Arghakhanchi, Rupandehi, Chitwan, Sunsari, Lalitpur, and Kathmandu.
23 The roads leading to the hill and mountain districts of Nepal are often steep, narrow, and treacherous contributing to thousands of deaths on those roads. Actually, my coach collided with a lorry on 10th of December 2017 on the way to Arghakhanchi, one of the hill district in Western Nepal. I was lucky to escape without injury while a dozen of people suffered minor injuries. Moreover, I was even more lucky to escape a major accident which occurred on 29th November 2017 when a bus, which I would have boarded on had I reached bus station fifteen minutes ahead that day, plunged into a river killing six passengers and injuring twenty-three more. More information can be found in this link: https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/bus-plunges-trishuli-river-killing-6-passengers-injuring-15-others/
apparent that the experiences of female ex-combatants were so diverse and complicated that they simply could not be reduced into binary/ordinal/categorical variables. Moreover, the presence of different identities and systems of oppression (caste, class, social location, education, ethnicity, geographical location) further complicated the victim-agency divide and conditioned their everyday experiences of life before-during-after the war in myriad ways. It made their experiences of the war further complex and messier. To reduce their complex experiences into number would be misrepresentation and distortion. Rather, I took the intersectional theoretical framework combining ‘matrix of domination’ within black feminism (Collins, 2009) and decolonial thinking (Shilliam, 2015) along with a poststructural narrative approach informed by the feminist methodology. I reached out to the female ex-combatants literally at the margin, collect and capture their diverse experiences and complex stories, and present them in a way that reflects the realistic picture of the war and post-war experiences in all its messiness and complexity. I travelled to remote rural areas of ten districts of Nepal sprawling from the East part of Nepal to the Mid-West, and from mountains to the North to plains to the South,24 undertaking numerous difficult and dangerous journeys.25 Staying in field longer would have made it possible to have large sample. However, I did not have either time or funding to lengthen my fieldwork longer. While the sample is much smaller than I had hoped, still it allowed me to explore the complex stories of female ex-combatants deeply.

I asked thirty-one questions during my interviews with female ex-combatants which can be broadly categorised into three categories- questions about their experiences prior to the war, during the war, and after the war. The questions that I asked about their experience prior to the war were related to their family, education, and social status. I also asked about their experience as women soldiers in war pertaining to their roles, duties, and responsibilities, their relationship with their male counterparts, attitudes and behaviour of male combatants towards them, and attitudes and behaviour of their family

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and society towards them. I also asked questions regarding their perception of their contribution towards
the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Additionally, I asked questions about their experiences of reintegration
back to their family and community after the war. Finally, I asked them if they think their participation as
female combatants has had any impact on genders relation in the Nepalese society. The questionnaire
for female ex-combatants is attached in Appendix A.

My questions to the Maoist leaders (both male and female leaders) and the experts were fewer (only
seven) and broader due to time restraints. In some cases, I asked less than six questions because of
their busy schedule. However, whenever the opportunity was available, I asked them further probing
questions regarding the reason behind the recruitment of the women into fighting force despite socio-
cultural restrictions, the female combatants’ role during the insurgency, the policy of marriage between
combatants, and the female combatants’ unique contribution to the Maoist insurgency and to broader
society. The questionnaire for the Maoist leaders and experts is attached in Appendix B. In the following
section, I will discuss the intersectional approach in feminist research which guides my research.

4.4. Intersectionality as a Methodology in the Feminist Research

I use intersectionality concept both as a theory and methodology. While intersectionality as a theory is
well-known, lately it is also gaining popularity as a method (Davis, 2014). Intersectionality fits neatly into
critical space inspired by poststructuralist theory in conceptualizing dynamic, multiple, and shifting
identities and categories (Ibid). By accounting for the complexity and contextuality, intersectionality  is
best poised to embody situatedness of all knowledge as envisioned by Haraway (1988). Similarly, that
intersectionality can also be used to highlight the complexity of categories or the intersection of identity
among specific groups (McCall, 2005). Feminist intersectional scholars have offered various
methodological strategies to use intersectionality as a method in feminist research. Kathy Davis (2014)
emphasizes researcher’s situatedness, awareness of complicated nature of gender construction, and
paying attention to blind-spots and near-sightedness that come as an inevitable part of one’s social
location, theoretical perspective, and political orientations. To me, intersectionality promises to enhance
the researcher’s reflexivity by allowing to incorporate his/her own intersectional location and that of
his/her research subjects in the production of knowledge that is critical and comprehensive. Moreover,
intersectionality embodies normative commitment to voices from the marginalized group at the
intersection of multiple systems of oppressions and discriminations. Hence, intersectionality not only offers an overarching theoretical framework to guide my research, it also provides methodological tools and strategies to conduct my research.

Similarly, an intersectional approach in feminist research essentially aims at prioritising and validating voices of women at the margin or who is located at the intersection of oppressions and discriminations. Put simply, this means that the intersectionality in the feminist research focuses awareness on women, and their experiences shaped by the social forces and dynamics, which in a monocular vision, are overlooked, or at best sped through (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1020). Using intersectionality to guide my methods requires adopting a distinctive stance, striving to take seriously the multitude of experiences of the women and understand them within hierarchical relations and multiple systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). This is well exemplified by Crenshaw (1989, p. 149) when she draws attention to the intersections of sex and race to highlight the experiences of discrimination of the black women in the US, not as a means of universalising or generalising, but to centre and explore the multifaceted experiences of a particular group (black women in the US). She summarises elements of her core argument here:

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women’s experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as black women. (Crenshaw 1989, p. 149, cited in MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1028).

Such a stance of forsaking the claim for universality, portents the possibility for thinking inclusively about other oppressions based on caste, geography, and social status. This theoretical approach supports a methodology aimed at understanding the experiences of particular groups of women who exist within various intersections of penalty and privilege. For example, a high-caste Hindu woman in the context of Nepal may be constrained by the puritanical Hindu interpretation of her roles within a family and society, but she might be privileged by her higher social status and standing (Cameron, 1998, Chapter 1). Additionally, Mohanty (2003, p. 223) asserts that in making power and inequality visible, one should take into account the macro-politics of global economic and political systems and processes while thinking about the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle.
The intersectional approach cannot be understood through a metaphor of a car crash at an intersection (Crenshaw, 1989). Instead, intersectionality is about understanding various axes of inequality that not only intersect but mutually intertwine, co-construct, and constitute simultaneously (Weber, 2009 in Dill and Kohlman, 2012). This conception transcends static and/or siloed understandings of oppression and privilege, and pays attention to structural and individual forces in their continual and mutual constitution (Ken, 2008, p. 154). Furthermore, this “matrix of domination” approach insists that we can only get an accurate analysis of any one form of oppression when we examine how it interacts with other sources-including gender and race- and in various contexts (Ken, 2008, p. 154).

Since this research centres around the female ex-combatants who face disadvantages and marginalisation because of their caste, class, geography, educational status, and social status, the intersectional approach is best suited to highlight their stories and experiences. Such an approach does not consider these systems of oppression and identities as static, linear, and monocular. Rather their experiences are constitutive of the dynamic interaction of the various oppressions and identities. Analysing the rich experiences of these women with attention to the multi-facets of their identity complicates a singular or binary understanding of ‘women’s experiences of war’. In particular, this analysis disrupts binary victimhood or agency narratives. The next section will explain the intersectional approach through the principles and practicalities of the feminist methodology.
4.5. Feminist Methodology for the Research

Consistent with the intersectional feminist approach, this section outlines various methodological commitments central to the feminist methodologies, which also inform my research. These issues include attention to the status and position of women included in the research and working to include perspectives of women who might be considered in marginal positions. It also includes a focus on transparency in my methods and analysis, potential power dynamics, and ethical issues faced during the research and questions of positionality and standpoint. In the following section, I will outline my attempt at capturing not only diverse voices and experiences of the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal but also my efforts to highlight the voices and experiences of the female ex-combatants at the intersections with various systems of oppression. Following this, I include reflections on the positionality and power dynamics at work during the interviews in two parts. The first part will explore the power dynamics associated with me, as a male educated researcher from a well-reputed Western University, interviewing female ex-combatants living precarious lives under the scrutiny of orthodox society. My own position, privilege, and biases impact the questions I ask and the answers that I can elicit in response from the respondents. The next part will reflect the relationship in the reverse. In this part, I will elaborate on how the interaction with my research subjects and the research process questioned and transformed my position on the epistemology, methodology, and data collection process. Finally, I will also discuss at length the ethical issues of exploitation, beneficence, ethics of care, reciprocity, and moral responsibility.

Prioritising the Marginalised

While I worked to ensure that the interviews included interviewees from a range of regions, background, and classes, the focus was on the female ex-combatants at the intersection of various oppressions (class, caste, social status, ethnicity, and geography). As indicated earlier, I interviewed twenty-seven female ex-combatants. Out of them, only ten came from higher caste backgrounds, while thirteen came from the indigenous nationalities. Based on the National Legal Code (Muluki Ain adopted in 1854 AD) which instituted a hierarchical caste system in Nepal, Brahmin, Chhetri, and Newar are considered to be higher caste in Nepal (Hoefer, 1979; and Gurung, 2002). These caste groups have traditionally enjoyed exclusive access to power, resources, and special privilege in Nepal. Indigenous nationalities are placed below Brahmin, Chhetri, and Newar, and they are considered a ‘touchable’ caste group, but
there is a variation in their status as well. Even within the indigenous nationalities, there are two categories: Matwali alcohol drinkers (non-enslavable) and Matawali alcohol drinkers (enslavable). My interviewees belong to both categories. The remaining four female ex-combatants come from the Dalit family or the ‘untouchable’ caste. The Dalit caste is considered to be an impure group, and hence an untouchable caste according to the National Legal Code of Nepal 1854 AD. They are placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy (Ibid). Because of the centuries of exclusion and misrecognition as an equal member of society, the majority of this group still feels marginalised and excluded even after the change in the law prohibiting the discrimination and exclusion based on caste. Since I take the intersectional approach, their experiences of war remain the focus of my research.

In addition to identifying the caste of the women I interviewed, I also attempted to note their class status. I identified three loose categories of class- lower, middle, higher- and worked to locate women within these categories. Categorizing the female ex-combatants into class divisions was subjective since I did not ask them to identify their class or financial status. However, as I explain, I used multiple types of observation to make an assessment on this. Understanding women’s class is important as it is one of the major systems of oppression in Nepal where, as elsewhere in the world, higher class people enjoy privilege and power over lower class people. They enjoy greater access to the state institutions and resources which perpetuate their position. Although caste and class are closely intertwined, lower-caste Dalits, because of their long history of systematic exclusion from state institutions and resources, are most likely to be poorer. They have no part in the decision-making which determines their economic welfare and status. Moreover, due to untouchability and segregation, they are deprived of education—one of the important means of social mobility. Moreover, the lack of social networks, lack of adequate protection, and neglect from the state mean their economic mobility remains restricted and slow. Overall, the lack of resources, exclusion from the political decision-making process, and lack of recognition and mis/mal recognition rendered them economically poor and vulnerable. In terms of the economic status of those who might be considered ‘higher caste’ female ex-combatants, only three came from a middle-class background, and the majority belonged to the lower class background. Only one interviewee of indigenous nationality belonged to the middle class, the rest belonged to the lower class background, while all of the female ex-combatants from the Dalit caste hailed from lower-class families. This also presents an example of how caste and class intersect each other.
It is necessary to provide a typical example of how I would make an assessment of the class and economic status of the interviewee. Two of the interview questions asked the respondents about what they were doing at present and asked them to compare their status (socio-economic, political, and legal) before joining the war, and after the war. During the informal conversation before and after the interview, the interviewees also talked about their family background, home, raising kids, and struggles in their lives, which offer strong indications about their class. I also found the observation method to be a useful way to infer their economic status, as there is often a tendency to overestimate or underestimate one’s economic status.

The following example further illustrates the types of information I used to make assessments about class distinctions. I interviewed one of the female ex-combatants in Thabang, Rolpa in the Mid-Western Hill region of Nepal, which is known as the epicentre of Maoist insurgency in Nepal. I stayed at a home-stay for a couple of days which was just a few blocks away from her small mud-walled home. During the informal conversation over a cup of tea with her and my host family, she opened up about her life and her family. Listening to her life story and the story of her parents, it was not difficult to comprehend her economic status. Her family struggled to send her to school and joining the PLA not only provided her sense of purpose but also gave her an escape from the harsh realities of her life. These included the limitations of non-existent educational and economic opportunities, poor economic status, and police brutality at her village. Although I conducted the fieldwork during the winter season with frigid weather in the mountains, I saw her 12-year-old son wearing an old, soiled, and torn sweater which was not enough to protect him from the bitter cold. He was wearing a thong, with no socks, without wearing anything to cover his head in the freezing conditions. When I asked where her mother was, he replied that she had left home early in the morning before dawn to till a piece of land that they owned, and would be back late. He had to look after his sister who was six years old. Given these circumstances, it was not difficult for me to guess their economic status. My speculation on the interview subject’s economic status was further confirmed by the conversation with my homestay hostess.

Social status in Nepal is largely the function of caste, class, education, and geography i.e., the part of the country a person belongs to. For example, if a person is from a high caste, high-class position, and

26 The questions were: Question three: What are you doing now? & Question four: How do you compare your status (socio-economic, political, and legal) now with that of pre-Maoist insurgency period? [Is it listed in the Appendix?]
lives in Kathmandu (the capital of Nepal), he/she enjoys access to good education, better employment opportunities and enjoys higher social status. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to meet the female ex-combatants from the remote parts of the country and tried to incorporate the voices of female ex-combatants from lower castes and lower-classes. Most of the female ex-combatants I interviewed originally came from remote mountain/hills dispersed around the country. Only two female ex-combatants out of twenty-seven came from the Kathmandu valley where the capital of Nepal is located. Traveling long distances was essential as I tried to include female combatants from diverse caste, ethnicity, culture, and geographical backgrounds. I had to travel extensively, often very long distances on very dangerous roads. As mentioned, I spent ten full days out of seventy-five days of my fieldwork on travel. At times, the journeys were as long as thirty-six hours. Mountainous terrain, poor condition of roads, ongoing road-works, and endemic road-traffic meant that the travel time became unbearably long and arduous.

In order to include the voices of those who were not interviewed before, I avoided help from typical gatekeepers to identify potential new interviewees. First, I identified potential locations of residence, usually the surroundings of the seven UN cantonments which spread over Nepal for the People’s Liberation Army during the DD&R (Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration) for the former female combatants. Next, I asked residents, rather than gatekeepers- including community elites or former rebel leaders- of the local area to know if there were any ex-combatants from the Maoist insurgency. This led me to the female combatants in that area. Then, I used snowball sampling to reach more female ex-combatants willing to take part in the interviews. Only five out of twenty-seven of the female ex-combatants that I had interviewed indicated they had already been interviewed. A couple of them reluctantly agreed to be interviewed explaining that there is no use of participating in the interviews because they had already shared their stories, but they do not know if their stories have meaning anymore. One of them remarked, “The leaders have got their coveted position in the government. Why would they bother to listen to insignificant people like us?” In Nepali: “Netaharule Singhadarbarma kurchi payepachhi hamijasta sana manchheka kura ke sunthe ra?”

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27 This topic came up while I was trying to solicit a consent from a female ex-combatant in Rupandehi on 5th January 2018. Apparently, she was interviewed twice before by other researchers who had asked about her post-conflict experience. She felt her stories went in vain. She ultimately agreed for the interview once again after I explained to her that her story, whether this will reach to the Maoist leader or not, is very significant in itself and it needs to be told. After the interview, she also arranged her
However, I managed to interview twenty-two female ex-combatants who told me that they were being interviewed for the first time for research into their experience. Most of them were living in hill districts of Rolpa, Rukum, and remote areas of Arghakhanchi district, far from urban centres. It took me thirty-six hours from Kathmandu to get to the Thabang, Rolpa. Their remoteness, in part, explains why they were not interviewed before. However, nine out of twenty-two the female ex-combatants who were not interviewed before did not live far from the urban centres in the plains. Channels and networks established by gatekeepers in Nepal commonly access the same pool of the female ex-combatants for interviews. Had I approached the gatekeepers, I would not have been able to reach out to marginalised female combatants for interviews.

**Standpoint and Positionality**

Feminists strongly emphasise that research is not a value-neutral enterprise and a researcher should adopt a reflexive process of knowledge creation (Harding, 1987, p. 127). While I also take this position, I equally argue that the location and positionality of the researcher and the subject of research or the research process, mutually reinforce each other. In other words, as much as the background, personality, and presence of the researcher impact the epistemological and methodological direction of the research and the data gathering process, the research subject and research process also equally impact the researcher’s belief in the epistemological, methodological, and methodical components of the research. In the following section, I outline my reflections on feminist questions of power and my positionality as a researcher on the selection of the research subjects, mode and conduct of the interviews with my research subjects, the perception of the research subjects of me and its impact on what they chose to say, and importantly, what they chose not to say to my research questions. This is inseparably entangled with the explanation of how the unfolding of the research process tinkered and transformed my initial research questions and aims along the research journey. I consider this process to be essential to understanding my final thesis, and I will, therefore, briefly outline this iterative process in the following section.

Schooled in quantitative research skills, my initial research strategy involved finding answers from interviewees that are quantifiable, enabling me to run statistical analysis to tell a causal story about the
impact of women combatants on civil war duration. However, I realised from the onset that quantifying the experiences of the war of female ex-combatants, whose stories are so complex, would be impossible. I listened to stories of hope and despair, empowerment and disillusionment, excitement and despondence, relationship and alienation, ruthlessness and compassion, ideological seduction and practical ambivalence, robotic performance in the war, and emotional recollection of war. After hearing these stories, I realised that any effort to quantify or generalise these experiences would be a flagrant distortion and generalisation. Secondly, coding their contribution to the Maoist insurgency into numbers via intangible qualities such as honesty, loyalty, and their symbolic value became an impossible task. Ultimately, it forced me to redesign my research, modify my research questions, and change my methodology from quantitative-based mixed-methods to primarily qualitative research. I converted from a devout positivist into a researcher paying attention to the experiences and perspectives of people, particularly those at the margins, for the nuanced understanding of the multifarious reality of war.

In terms of the position and standpoint of the researcher, the latter signifies that our situated everyday experience should become a “point of entry” of the investigation (Smith, 2005, p. 10, emphasis in the original). This forced me to consider the ways in which my position as a male researcher studying at a Western university, and coming to interview the female ex-combatants in a still-orthodox society like Nepal, influenced the process of knowledge collection and production. My national identity, linguistic, and cultural background, made it for me to possible to mingle with interview subjects scattered across the country, and to gain their trust before conducting the interviews in a relatively short time. Other aspects of my identity, such as an upbringing in a lower-class peasant family where my sister could not go to school because of the dominant patriarchal gender norms, and my struggles to gain the education, for example, resonated with many interviewees who, therefore, felt comfortable talking to me.28

However, doing my Ph.D. from a Western University on a sensitive topic like female ex-combatants made some potential participants sceptical of my true intentions, and some of them refused to partake in the interview. One of the female ex-combatants refused to be interviewed on the ground that I was from a foreign university. She said that she would be happy to be interviewed had I been from any

28 For example, interview participants such as Jamuna Rana from Baglung had to drop out of school because her mother wanted her to help her with the domestic works. So many participants could not go to school because of the prevalent norm that being a girl, they do not have to get education. This had striking similarity with the story of my elder sister in my family who was deprived of education because my mother thought she ought to help her at home rather than going to school.
university in Nepal. She also said that she would not give interviews to people from non-governmental organisations/international non-governmental organisations (NGOs/INGOs). Nevertheless, we had an enlightening conversation for forty-five minutes. I told her that I was not from any NGO/INGO, explaining that although I was from a foreign university, the topic was my own choice and not a Western agenda. She told me that she was a member of a hard-liner splinter group from the main CPNM (Communist Party of Nepal Maoists) (Centre) and that she adhered to the Mohan Baidya Kiran faction. This faction is sceptical of foreign actors and critical of capitalism and neoliberal democracy. Similarly, the faction sees Western education as the vehicle for furthering Western political and economic agendas. Anything coming from Western countries is, hence, treated as a matter of suspicion. In this sense, my work with a Western university might have added to her resolve not to participate in the interview. I respected her opinion and putting our differences aside, we spoke extensively about the research project. When we discussed the female combatants, she expressed her disagreement on the definition of a combatant. Her disagreement centred on the fact that a combatant, like herself, who has put collective and ideological interests above their individual interests, should be distinct from the standard technical definition of a combatant by UN. She did not receive any salary or material benefit by joining the insurgency because the rebel provided no such material dividends. Rather, she insisted that she joined them because she was inspired by their ideologies. The definition of a combatant in war literature centres on the membership to the armed group and specific role played by the combatant but does not take into account the ideological inclination of the combatant.29 Despite lack of any material gain and financial security, many combatants like her were ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of revolution. They were unquestionably the vital force on the aegis transforming the country from a despotic monarchical rule, to republicanism through it became a federal republic and a secular country. Indeed, all the interviews that I conducted converged on this view. She insisted that not all rebel groups were the same, and all the combatants associated with these diverse rebel groups should also be identified distinctly. As a result, she declined to participate in a formal interview. Nevertheless, my conversation with her was thought-provoking and insightful. Her opinion confirmed my commitment to closely consider every story I heard, and avoid tendencies to generalise or look for an easy or singular narrative.

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29 Major international conventions that tried to define the combatant do not include ideological inclination of a combatant. For example, International Committee of Red Cross “Protocol Additional to the Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949 and Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8th June 1977” and UNICEF (1997) exclude ideological inclination of combatant in their definition of the combatant.
Her argument against the universalizing tendency of scholars in conflict and peace was valid, compelling us to move beyond convenient simple definitions and explore complexities. At the end of our conversation, she said that she would contact me if she changed her mind. I also gave her a PIS form with more information about the project, letting her know that, if she changed her mind, she could contact me anytime, and that we could arrange an interview over the phone. She, however, did not contact me. My identity as a male researcher might have been less consequential in this case, as my association with a Western university, a place that is deeply sceptical about ultra-leftist groups in Nepal for the purported propagation of neoliberal political agendas, could influence the interviewing of female research subjects within traditional society.

On the other hand, my position as a male researcher interviewing the female ex-combatants in an orthodox society prevented me from conducting one-to-one interviews on many other occasions. While one-to-one interviews could have been effective to talk to male combatants of the Maoist insurgency about their personal relationships, my efforts to include female ex-combatants from the diverse regions of the country would have been furthered with the help of a female research assistant, balancing the power structure in the interviews, and making the interview process more comfortable. But travelling wide and long distances meant that it was not possible to recruit a female research assistant and take her with me to conduct the interviews. Despite my numerous efforts, I was unable to find qualified female research assistants in some of the remote areas of Nepal for conducting interviews with the female ex-combatants. Because of the lack of female research assistants to conduct the interviews, I sometimes coordinated the interviews in a group, in order to balance the power-asymmetry. This process usually involved two or more female ex-combatants sitting together in a group, and I would interview them one by one. Sometimes, they would be accompanied by their family members, friends, and neighbours. In this way, they felt more secure, comfortable, and less intimidated before a stranger interviewing them. Conducting Interviews in a group also helped the participants construct a rich memory of the past, collectively. However, this method also involved issues of privacy while talking in a group, including sensitive issues like their marriage, and group cohesion in mixed-gender rebel groups. This was compounded by the fact that Nepal is a conservative society where male-female interaction is frowned upon, especially when it is outside the wedlock.

While group interviews might have prevented the female ex-combatants to delve into their private lives, it could have been further compounded by the interviewer effect on the female ex-combatants and
social desirability bias. Research shows that the presence of an investigator, in some cases, can influence the type of response respondents to give (Halperin and Heath, 2012, p. 248-249). The interviewer effect was prominently demonstrated in a study exploring whether the race of the interviewer influenced respondents’ responses on race relations. Black respondents were found to be more likely to say that they did not trust white people if they were interviewed by a black interviewer than when they were interviewed by a white interviewer (Schuman and Converse, 1971). During my interview with an expert on female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Dr. Bishnu Raj Upreti, it emerged that the women were used for sexual purposes during the Maoist insurgency. Some reports also suggest that sexual abuse was widely prevalent within rebel groups (Tamang and Sharma, 2016). Two former Maoist female leaders, Hisila Yami, and Aruna Rayamajhi also gave an example of an illicit heterosexual relationship between two senior leaders, but the issue of sexual abuse did not surface in the discussion. Moreover, none of the twenty-seven female ex-combatants mentioned the prevalence of unregulated relationship outside the gaze of the party and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). None of the women interviewees (thirty-four in total) spoke of any sexual harassment and abuse in rebel groups during the insurgency period.

While it may have been the case that, indeed, they did not experience sexual harassment and abuse, it is also likely that they would not have reported these experiences to me, even if these had occurred. This barrier is compounded by the social desirability bias, particularly so when conducting interviews in the group. The basic human tendency to present oneself in the best possible light can influence the data acquired during the interviews where participants self-report. Consequently, the participant’s response is significantly biased towards what interviewees think to be ‘correct’ or ‘socially acceptable’ (Maccoby and Maccoby, 1954). There is no counterfactual evidence to determine, in the context of interview in the group, that the respondents adjusted their narratives so as to make them in tune with the socially accepted ‘normal’ behaviour, interaction, and relationship in their involvement during the Maoist insurgency. However, dynamics surrounding interviews- having to conduct the interview in a group, presence of family members during the interview, and the presence of the male interviewer- offer ample possibility for selective information to be offered and social desirability bias to be activated. Next

30 Interview with Dr Bishnu Raj Upreti, Dated November 22, 2017.  
31 Interview with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi, date: December 21, 2017.
section will offer further critical self-reflection on epistemology and politics of my positionality as a male researcher doing feminist research.

**Critical Self-Reflection: A Male Researcher Doing Feminist Research**

There are epistemological (and political) and methodological issues at stake for a male researcher engaging in feminist research. This section will first highlight the epistemological debate of involving men in feminist politics followed by methodological significance of critical self-reflection of social location for a male researcher in feminist research. As a heterosexual cis male researcher who is a beneficiary of patriarchal oppression of women and other genders, my research on women needs a critical self-reflection. The role of men in feminist movement has elicited considerable discussion and debate in two dimensions. Some have argued for an inclusive approach—male feminism, which invites men to become feminists, will create most significant changes in their attitudes (Flood, 2017: 49). Others have argued that their roles should rather be as pro-feminist allies due to the continued privileges they receive as masculine actors in patriarchal system (Casey and Smith, 2010). Their privileges as men allows them to derive significant material, structural, and institutional benefits from oppressive gender order while simultaneously laying claim to be activists and advocates for gender justice. Some ‘good’ men’s claim to be feminists in contrast to other ‘bad’ men obscures ‘phallocentrism’ where the privileges that all men get from the gender hierarchy by recentring focus on contribution of ‘good men’ to feminist political objectives (Macleod, 2007). In fact, men enjoy disproportionate rewards by becoming feminists with having to do little to challenge the systems and cultures of oppression against women (Flood, 2017). Instead, adopting position of reflective male ally to the feminist cause, rather than an independent agent of change, would prevent the possible risk of men reassuming influential position, while allowing centrality of women’s autonomous organization in implementing feminist political objectives (Duriesmith, 2018: 59-62). As supporters of movement against oppression who are part of oppressor group, this position of reflective male allies allows men to play role in change of oppressive system, without trying to escape their culpability for structures of oppression or co-opting emancipator movements (Goldstein and David, 2010 cited in Duriesmith, 2018: 62).

While I position myself as a reflective male ally who is also aware of many privileges I enjoy as a male researcher studying women’s experience at an elite University in the West, I also share affinity with my
research subjects as a fellow Global South citizen besieged by poverty and destitution in the most part of my life.\textsuperscript{32} I was able to witness and even experience Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006) firsthand from its inception to its resolution. My study at school and university was disrupted frequently by ongoing conflict. I was even taken captive for a short period and tortured and threatened by security forces in 2004. Some of my friends in village joined Maoists and others joined state security forces. Ultimately, my experiences of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal inspired and shaped me to undertake my PhD research. Talking to female ex-combatants who often share similar background with me and amplifying their voices, as they are, through my research is one of the many ways that I can serve my duty as a fellow citizen of Global South and as a reflective male ally of feminist movement for dignity, equality, fairness, and justice. As a feminist research, one’s research should increase possibility for progressive social change.

Secondly, my PhD research adopted methodological commitments central to the feminist research methodology. These commitments focus on the critical reflection of the researcher’s position in knowledge production as it is socially located and the production is mediated by power relations (Smith, 1997; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 112; Flood, 2013: 65). The commitments include critical reflection of my own positionality and standpoint as well as position and status of my research subjects. It also includes a focus on transparency in my methods and analysis, potential power dynamics emanating from my own gender identity. Finally, there are ethical issues faced during the research and questions of positionality and standpoint such as exploitation, beneficence, ethics of care, reciprocity, and moral responsibility. I will these issues in detail in the following sections.

\textbf{Ethical Dilemmas}

Finally, exploitations and beneficence, ethics of care, reciprocity, and moral responsibility remain important questions to be addressed by feminist researchers. I found myself constantly reflecting on

\textsuperscript{32} I come from a lower class peasant family in Nepal and both of my parents are illiterate. While I managed to get higher education, it was not without extreme struggle where I had to support my family by working in farm and shepherding cattle except school hours. I frequently missed my classes because I did not have money to buy uniform, school shoes, and stationery for my school, high school, and campus studies. I was able to continue my study because I happened to be one of the brightest students in my school and I won multiple awards and scholarships. I feel privileged enough to continue my school where many girls and boys of my age could not. My own elder sister was forced to work at home relinquishing her dream of getting basic education. While this was partly because my family couldn’t afford to pay for her tuition fees, the patriarchal mindset prevalent in my family and in the larger society considered her less worthy of education and saw her as an expendable body in service of her parents, husband, and her children.
the following question: Could fieldwork that uses the stories and observation of the poor and less-privileged be exploitive? This is a question that was ever-present as I conducted fieldwork and witnessed the abject poverty that some of the female ex-combatants were in. It was impossible not to be overwhelmed by the sense of destitution and hopelessness surrounding the research subjects while interviewing them. It was also impossible for me to be a neutral and dispassionate observer. Many female ex-combatants felt that they have been neglected and betrayed by the same people who they helped to be in power with their blood and sweat during combat. I felt that I too had been utilizing, and possibly exploiting their stories for my individual purpose of gaining a Ph.D. degree that will open many opportunities for my career development. Over two decades ago, Diane Wolf (1996, p.19) suggested that the power asymmetry between the researcher and the research subjects, and the inherently exploitative nature of relationship between researcher and the research subjects, had led to a research crisis for feminist fieldworkers, as they must wade through ethical and moral dilemmas to be able to conduct fieldwork. This work often does not tangibly benefit the research subjects, but can be vital for the career advancement of the researcher. Daphne Patai despairs on whether there is any possibility to write about the oppressed without necessarily serving as oppressors (Patai, 1991, p. 139). Similarly, the position of power enjoyed by the researcher in relation to the research participants, in general, reflects the social reality of hierarchy where some groups can misuse their power to suit their interests without much consideration for the impact their action might bring upon those less-privileged (Lal, 1996, p. 193). These issues give way to many important questions such as: is it possible to conduct research with vulnerable groups without further exploiting them?; and how do we mitigate this dilemma?

Here, the question of beneficence to the research participants becomes crucial. The issues of fair treatment of research participants, and some kind of gain for the research participants, tangible or intangible, becomes prominent. There are stringent ethical human research procedures in place to ensure that the research participants are not put in difficulty, deceived, or harmed in the research process. Secondly, the idea of benefits to the researched remains an easy concept, it but has complex practical implications. Some feminist researchers point to the ability of research to ‘empower’ or ‘emancipate’ the research participants (Kelly, et al., 1994, p. 36-37). But it is unclear what this actually entails, or whether it is possible to know if the research will ultimately benefit researched communities. In many cases, this remains a lofty ambition to achieve. Moreover, it reduces the researcher into a powerful conscientious being having both the material, ideological, and moral powers to transform the
lives of research subjects. On the other hand, the research subjects are reduced to the weaker and ignorant lots that need to be empowered, emancipated, and have their ‘consciousness raised’ (Randall, 1991).

While navigating the dilemma of beneficence and empowerment, one of the main focuses of my research was to cultivate the sense of ethics of care, reciprocity, and moral responsibility in the relationship, making the relationship more sustainable, lively, and organic. Despite being a strong believer in the peaceful movements and non-violent means to fight the injustice, oppression, and exploitation, I have respected the fact that women’s participation in the armed struggle laid the foundation that brought positive political changes, including enhanced justice, equality, and fairness.

There are several means by which I worked to cultivate sustainable and responsible research relationships. First, participation in the study was voluntary. Nevertheless, I provided the interviewees with gifts as a token of gratitude for their time. If they had to travel for the interview, or incurred any other expenses related to it, I compensated them. I made sure that the interviews did not interfere with women’s daily work-schedule and other household works. Finally, I offered help wherever possible, including, for example, in guidance for their studies. Aruna Rayamajhi, one of the interviewees in the elite category, was interested in the study of mass communication and journalism. Since I had a unit on journalism in my undergraduate study, I offered to guide her in the future should she solicit it. Some of the female ex-combatants asked me to make their plights known to their leaders. They explained that they had not seen their leaders since the end of the war and that nobody came to ask them how they were doing. I agreed and tried to make the plight of female ex-combatants known to their leaders. I mentioned the sense of alienation, frustration, and neglect felt by some of the female ex-combatants to their leaders such as Hisila Yami, and Pampha Bhusal during my meetings with them. Herein, my efforts align with the intersectional approach seeking to amplify and validate the experiences of those who face multiple disadvantages and system of oppression (Collins, 2009).

As a part of feminist methodology, I attempted to incorporate the voices and experiences of the female ex-combatants within various interlocking and intersecting systems of oppression. Similarly, the research process was made transparent by being reflexive on the positionality and power dynamics. It showed how my own position, privilege, and biases, influence the questions I ask and the answers I receive. On the other side, I also showed how the interaction with my research subjects and the research process shaped my position on the epistemology, methodology, data collection, and the
research question itself. Finally, I highlighted the important ethical issues of exploitation, beneficence, ethics of care, reciprocity, and moral responsibility in feminist research also inform this research.

The next section will explore why the poststructuralist narrative approach is well-positioned for the critical exploration of the multi-faceted experiences of alienation, frustration, and the neglect of female ex-combatants and how that deviates and differs from their leaders’ narratives and experiences. The poststructuralist narrative approach, hinged on the false universality, also helps me to explore complex and messy stories and experiences of female combatants which includes sense of purpose, joy, feeling of liberation to disorientation, despair, frustration, sense of betrayal and marginalisation. These range of experiences make any attempt to box their experiences within a singular and universal narrative futile. This deviation and difference, the fact that some female ex-combatants felt an overwhelming need to alert the leaders of their stories and experiences despite fighting in the same war, remains my critical point of inquiry through the use of the poststructuralist narrative approach.
4.6. Poststructural Narrative Approach

The intersectional theoretical approach emphasises the voices of a particular group that perceives itself to be disadvantaged and discriminated on the basis of multiple systems of oppression and identities. The approach treats these voices as a valid and valued source of knowledge and as a source that can contribute to further knowledge creation. For this, feminist methodologies advocate not only devising a way to reach out to those subaltern voices, but also being sensitive to power dynamics, positionality, and ethical issues, while hearing the voices of such groups. Along this epistemological and methodological track, poststructuralist narrative approaches helped me explore the complexities of the experiences of the female ex-combatants at the margin and at the intersection of multiple systems of oppressions who fail to fit into the coherent and dominant narrative.

Since this thesis centres around exploring the narratives female combatants in the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal through complex experiences and stories of the female ex-combatants, a poststructuralist narrative approach is the most appropriate methodology to capture these narratives and the complexities of women’s experiences. Rather than creating an overarching single narrative of the female ex-combatants, I sought to explore their experiences in their full complexity and contradictions. In contrast to initial narratology which emphasised reduction of complexity and heterogeneity, poststructuralist narrative theorists resist narrative unity and formal or thematic coherence. I subscribe to the poststructuralist narrative theorists for this research. Paying attention to the “process, becoming, play, difference, slippage, and dissemination,” poststructuralist narratology attempts to “sustain the contradictory aspects of narrative preserving their complexity and refusing the impulse to reduce the narrative to a stable meaning of coherent project” (Curie, 1998, p. 3). Similarly, it attempts to deconstruct the organisation of knowledge in binary oppositions where one constituent of the binary is considered superior to the other. In other words, if the politics of creating a singular narrative based on supposed singular narrative is not identified and studied, points for the resistance also remains distance (Wibben, 2010, p. 64).

The poststructuralist narrative approach is also useful in my research where I treat the female ex-combatants as a heterogeneous group, and emphasise their divergent experiences characterised by their belonging to different caste, class, social status, ethnicity, and geographical situatedness. Here, I find the poststructuralist narrative approach compelling because of its potential as exploring the
complexity where it may even disrupt the dominant voices and expose the futility of attempts to summarise or pull out any singular overarching narrative. Narratives have both conforming and disrupting elements to existing social, symbolic, economic, and political order, which can, in turn, propagate grand narratives that act as an imposition, and a form of violence with the insistence over a singular meaning/representation. This renders selecting and enabling some meanings/representations (i.e. meaningful, reasonable, and rational) while others are neglected, silenced, and marginalised (i.e. meaningless, preposterous, and irrational) (Wibben, 2010, p. 44). At the same time, narratives can also serve as counter-discourses disrupting the power and authority of the established discourses (Shapiro, 1988, p. 19 in Wibben, 2010, p. 44). The narrative approach moves on to explain how some narratives are deemed sensical while dismissing others forms, making the imagination of any alternatives impossible. Here, narrative theory aims to highlight the operations that produce particular meaning, and the implication this meaning has for the understanding of human existence (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 6). Furthermore, the poststructuralist narrative approach is also a deconstructive move of reversing binaries (Wibben, 2010, p. 45)- for example, it can show how the inaudibility of voices of the female ex-combatants at the margin furthers the voices of their leaders, often propelling the latter to positions of greater power and privilege by the insurgency. This is a universal singular narrative of women in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Moreover, by enabling the representation of the voices of the female ex-combatants- those who felt their voices were not listened to- ‘counter-discourses’ can be created to oppose the terms of power and authority circulated and recirculated in the discourse (Wibben, 2010, p. 43).

In practical terms, the post-structural narrative approach also allowed me to refrain from segmenting elements of the interviews into narrow themes or topics. In doing so, I was able to retain complex and sometimes contradictory experiences that individual women had during the war. Retaining this ‘messiness’ was analytically essential and in line with my theoretical approach, which aims to show the complexity of these women’s experience, rather than curating their experience through narrow topics, themes, or patterns.
1.1. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter showed that feminist research methodology complemented by poststructuralist narrative approach is best suited to conduct my Ph.D. The female ex-combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006) became the fundamental choice for my case study because of their participation despite the diversity shaped by political, economic, socio-cultural, ethnic, religious, and geographical forces. The case of Maoist insurgency in Nepal allowed me to explore whether the constitution of the diversity in the female ex-combatants also translates into the diverse experiences for them during and after the war. Additionally, my linguistic and cultural competency played part in the selection of the case of Nepal for my Ph.D. research. I took the intersectionality both as a theoretical guide and methodological strategy in prioritizing the voice of female combatants at the intersection multiple systems of oppression and identities. The poststructuralist narrative approach further creates tension between the hegemonic discourse of war and its resistance by the discordant individual stories of the female ex-combatants. Despite deploying multiple methods of research, the intersectional approach, in essence, is founded on raising the voices of the group at the disadvantage. This feminist research methodology, with its non-universal approach, is conducive to the conduct of the intersectional approach amplifying the voices at the margin. While there are epistemological (and political), and methodological issues for a male researcher engaging in feminist research, critical self-reflection of my positionality and situatedness can assuage potential pitfalls of cooptation and moral dilemmas. Furthermore, transparency, unpretentious subjectivity, and rigorous ethical approach to various difficulties of conducting fieldwork with vulnerable research subjects made feminist research methodology a clear choice for my Ph.D. research. The poststructuralist narrative approach is also useful for my research in resisting and questioning the hegemonic construction of the female ex-combatants’ success stories through analysing experiences of the female ex-combatants who feel excluded, discriminated, and neglected at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and identities. The following five chapters will analyse the data from the semi-structured interviews from my fieldwork in Nepal. The analyses will centre around the experiences and perspectives of the female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and multiple identities. I also analyse the experiences and narratives of their leaders, often from the higher class, higher caste, well educated, and high social status. This will allow me to explore the diverse experiences of the female ex-combatants within the same rebel group fighting the same insurgency with a singular objective.
5. **Background of Maoist Insurgency in Nepal and Women in the Insurgency**

5.1. **Chapter Introduction**

On the surface, the start of the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006) remains a puzzle. Democracy, economic growth, and an overall improvement in the quality of life, which are essential to sustain peace and prosperity (Hegre, 2014; Collier and Hoeffler, 1998), coincided with the onset of Maoist Insurgency in Nepal. After hijacking the democratic process in 1960, King Mahendra (Reign: 1955 to 1970) established a party-less Panchayat (council) system governing Nepal for the next thirty years. However, in 1990, a coalition of left and right-wing parties came together in the agitation against the Panchayat system, and for a multi-party democracy (Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 6-7). As a result, democracy was restored. In the subsequent years, the Nepalese economy enjoyed a decent rate of growth, boosted by economic liberalization in the country. Furthermore, economic growth was accompanied by some improvements in the Human Development Index (HDI).

The revival of democracy in Nepal's economic liberalization in the early 1990s seemed to follow the Fukuyama script, but not for long. Maoist insurgency gained momentum in Nepal at a time when Fukuyama (1992) had famously proclaimed the end of history, suggesting that the dominance of Western liberal democracy was the final form of governance and the endpoint of humanity's sociocultural evolution. In February 1996, after a brief engagement in the fledgling democracy in Nepal, Maoists started a class-based rebellion influenced by Marx, Lenin, and Mao. The end of the Cold War, withdrawal of Soviet power, and the third wave of democratization in Eastern Europe which were previously communist satellite states within the Soviet Union (Huntington 1996) seems to have influenced his bold conjecture.

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33 The average GDP growth of Nepal was 3% in the decade preceding revival of democracy (1976-77 to 1986-87). The GDP saw uptick in the period 1987-88 to 1994-95 with average GDP 4.1% (Sharma, 2006, p. 1242). Similarly, roads, schools, health facilities, universities, banks and other development infrastructure and service sectors grew in 1990s (Mahat, 2005).

34 HDI improved between 1996 and 2001 even in Maoist stronghold districts (UNDP, 2004; NESAC, 1998). Over the past forty years, Nepal has been among the top ten countries in the world in the rate of improvement in HDI (Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 9).

35 The predecessor of CPN-M (Communist Party of Nepal-Maoists) had managed to be the third largest party in the 1991 general election winning nine seats (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 218).
At the turn of the 21st century, while violent communist rebellions failed or stagnated elsewhere,\(^{36}\) the violent communist rebellion in Nepal bucked the trend despite the odds it faced. The adverse international political climate in the post 9/11 attacks, characterised by a ‘War on Terror,’ failed to stop the growth of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.\(^{37}\) In this context, the King deployed the Nepalese Army, with military assistance from the UK, US, and India, to root out the so-called ‘Terrorists’ (Paff-Czarnecka, 2005, p. 162; Muni, 2010, p. 10). Given the hostile international and domestic context, few would have predicted an outcome favourable to Nepalese Maoists. Although Maoist were unable to capture the state as they had initially aimed for, they still managed to achieve their primary objective of overthrowing the so-called feudal monarchy in Nepal, and establish a Republican Government in 2008, twelve years after the insurgency had begun (Nepal, et al., 2011, p. 889; Muni, 2010, p. 16). They did so by embracing the multi-party democratic values, forming an alliance with political parties shunned by the autocratic King Gyanendra\(^{38}\) to eliminate the monarchy. Moreover, they renounced bullets and resorted to ballots, becoming the largest party in the aftermath of the first Constitutional Assembly election (Lawoti, 2010, p. 3).

Many scholars point to the fact that the re-establishment of democracy in 1990 did not do much to alleviate poverty and inequality in Nepal, creating conditions for the armed rebellion (Lawoti and Pahari, 2010; Murshed and Gates, 2003; Thapa and Sijapati, 2003; Do and Iyer, 2010; and Mahat, 2005). Nepal’s democratic political agenda failed to address the central issues of poverty, equitable development and ethnic, caste and gender oppression. While the revival of democracy, economic growth, and improvement in life benefited some section of society, the dividend of democracy, economic growth, and improvement in HDI (Human Development Index) failed to reach a larger population. In other words, the dividend was not equitably shared between the wealthy and the poor, between urban and rural populations, or along ethnic and caste lines and across geographical regions.

However, as Basnett (2009) argues, the currency of ‘inequality’, or the ‘relative poverty,’ and ‘deprivation’ has been depleted, but it does not explain why the acute ‘inequality’ and ‘deprivation’ in

\(^{36}\) Such as Shining path Peru, FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia)) in Colombia, communist insurgency in Malaya, FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), El Salvador, FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front)) in Nicaragua, Naxalities in India, to name few.

\(^{37}\) Maoists were enlisted as a terrorist group by US, UK, European Union, and India (Muni, 2010, p. 13-14).

\(^{38}\) King Gyanendra became the King of Nepal in 2001 after King Birendra and his family were massacred. He assumed direct authority after suspending the constitution and banning political parties in February 2005.
the decades preceding 1996 did not result in the onset of armed rebellion in Nepal. Inequality is certainly a necessary condition, but it was not sufficient to bring about the rebellion. Moreover, he finds that at the sub-national level, not all the districts which were unequal and poorer experienced violence, whereas some districts considered to be very wealthy and equal suffered a high level of political violence during the civil war in Nepal (Basnett, 2009, p. 7).

In this milieu, the first section in the chapter explores the causes of Maoist insurgency in Nepal despite the political and economic conditions being conducive to peace and economic growth. It begins with the brief historical analysis on the political process of the formation of unitary, centralised, exclusionary, and exploitive nature of Nepal, highlighting the exclusionary political process accompanied by flawed economic policies and hegemonic cultural process that created the unequal society. Next, this section will explain how this inequality morphed into armed rebellion. Particularly, it discusses the level of poverty and inequality among other necessary conditions, in the years running up to the civil war. The second section in the chapter will begin with the exploration of the involvement of women in the political movements in Nepal, and its second part will analyze the enabling conditions that helped to bring about the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.
5.2. Historical Background

This section draws a historical pattern of accumulation of social, political, economic, and cultural power and privileges by a few social groups since the establishment of Nepal in the late 18th century. Over these years, Nepal experienced various political systems ranging from absolute monarchy, oligarchic Rana regime, democracy, party-less Panchayat system, and multi-party democracy before the Maoist insurgency in the mid-1990s. Differing political systems, however, uniformly perpetuated the power and privileges of a few social groups at the expense of most of the population.

Founding Period (1769-1846)

The inception of modern Nepal also marks the beginning of unequal power balance in the country, whereby control over land and political power was monopolised by elites, and centralised by the state. The birth of the modern state of Nepal occurred in 1768 AD after King Prithvi Narayan Shah (Reign: 25th September 1743 AD- 11 January 1775 AD) unified the three kingdoms in Kathmandu valley, and the various small principalities outside valley to the East and West (Muni, 1973, p. 1; Whelpton, 2005, p. 35; Hasrat, 1970, p. 148). King Prithvi Narayan Shah established the Shah dynastic rule. The territory of Nepal was further expanded under Pratap Singh Shah and under the regency of Bahadur Shah (Hasrat, 1970, p. 151-153). To the East, Nepal occupied a larger part of Sikkim up to Tista river along with some strips of land in plain and to the West, extending all the way up to Kumaon and Garhwal which are now part of the Indian state of Uttaranchal (Whelpton, 2005, p. 39). Kathmandu became the centre of unified Nepal, and the centre of power was effectively monopolised by a select few social groups of the upper Hindu Caste known as the bhardars39 which formed the royal court of the palace. Along with political and social prerogatives, they also monopolised Nepal’s economic resources (Shaha, 1990).

Although Nepal was a diverse country, the conceived uniform social-political framework (based on national caste hierarchy) and accompanying legal frameworks favored only the high caste social groups in power. The caste hierarchy was codified and legally enforced by ‘Muluki Ain’ (Civil Code) which blocked upward social mobility for lower caste people (Hoefer, 1979). For example, inter-caste marriage was restricted, and such marriages could reduce the status for the higher caste marrying a lower caste

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39 Courtiers. Usually from Thapa, Rana, and Pandey caste group which are high caste groups according to Hindu Caste Hierarchy.
person, and, furthermore, a lower caste person marrying a higher caste person could not upgrade his/her status. This system ensured that the power and privileges of the higher caste elites did not trickle down to the lower caste social group. Similarly, the land tenure system,\textsuperscript{40} Jagir and Birta system, were given to the nobility and civil and military employees hailing mainly from high-caste social groups (Basnett, 2009, p. 14).

**Rana Oligarchy (1846-1950)**

While the Rana regime changed the actors in Nepalese politics, the system of exploitation and domination by the elites, however, remained and was even exacerbated. In September 1846, Jung Bahadur Rana became prime minister after a bloody Kot massacre\textsuperscript{41} which established the ‘Rana Oligarchy’. The powers were concentrated in the hands of prime-minister (Ranas), and the king was reduced to titular head. After consolidating his rule domestically, he devised a friendly policy towards the British Government to bolster the oligarchic rule at home (Tyagi, 1974, p. 75-76). Agrarian feudalism deepened as nearly half of the cultivated land in the Terai, one of the most agriculturally productive areas in Nepal, went to three Rana families (Regmi, 1971). The ‘Rana Oligarchy’ was characterised by self-enrichment by the Rana family and their close associates. The national treasury was used as a personal wealth; furthermore, investment in health, education and people’s welfare was non-existent. The Rana regime was also not concerned with the modernization of the economy and providing public welfare. There were constraints on industrialization as the Rana regime effectively disconnected the country with the outside world, preventing the import of the machinery and technological know-how.

The only reliable source of income and subsistence for Nepali was agriculture. Moreover, decreasing agricultural growth because of primitive agricultural technology, and feudalization of agrarian relationship benefiting the elites, led to economic stagnation (Basnett, 2009, p. 15).

\textsuperscript{40} Historically, the land has been the most valuable resource in Nepal as well as broader South Asia (Agrawal, 1994). Having more land indicated (and still indicates) higher social status and security. The land tenure system offered land to person as a recognition of his/her service and contribution to the state.

\textsuperscript{41} Kot massacre refers to massacre that occurred on 19\textsuperscript{th} September 1846 at the palace arsenal (the Kot) when Jung Bahadur Rana and his brothers killed many influential courtiers including the Prime Minister of Nepal. This resulted in ascendency of Rana autocracy and diminished power of the monarchy in Nepal over next 103 years.
First Democratic Period (1950-1960)

February 1951 marked the end of the Rana regime and birth of democracy in Nepal after the first organised armed struggle in Nepal, with India’s active support (KC, 1976). Although the exiled Nepali leaders in India intended to overthrow the Rana regime through non-violent means, they ended up fielding ‘Jana Mukti Sena’ (People’s Liberation Army), an armed wing, to topple the Rana regime. Through a series of armed attacks, they were able to capture seven major cities in Eastern Nepal (Rose, 1971, p. 178-207). The Indian railway network reaching Nepal’s border was used to transport weapons and manpower for the war. Although the leadership was dominated by the high-caste leaders from usually elite backgrounds, the militants were composed of people from all backgrounds and castes (Dalits, Indigenous Group, High Caste Groups, and even women) (Tamang, 2009). Finally, a tripartite accord in Delhi between the King, Nepali Congress, and the Ranas, ended the Rana regime in Nepal and heralded the dawn of democracy for the first time. The flight of British from India also coincided with the end of ‘Rana Oligarchy’ in Nepal. The British were the major source of outside support for the Ranas, enabling the latter to quash any dissent activities by exiled leaders in India. On the other side, Nepali political leaders who fought against the Ranas had close relationships with the leaders that led the Indian Independence struggle (Rose, 1971, p. 178-207).

However, the numerous attempts at institutionalizing democracy during the brief democratic interlude (1950-1960) were marred by political instability. An agreement on writing a democratic constitution through constituent assembly failed to materialise. The democratically elected government, headed by prime minister B. P. Koirala in 1959, initiated many progressive development initiatives aimed at redressing structural inequalities and developmental maladies such as land reforms and rapid industrialization through planned development (Mahat, 2005). However, the King removed the coalition government in in December 1960, starting his direct rule through the party-less Panchayat System, and annulling all the reforms initiated by the democratic government.

Panchayat Era (1960-1990)

King Mahendra started his direct rule by claiming that the country was not ready for the multi-party democracy and that only the Party-less ‘Panchayat System’ was suited to the climate and soil of the country (Thapa, 2003, p. 18). The Nepali Congress attempted to launch another armed rebellion against the King, but a lack of support from India rendered the movement a failure. India had a war with China
in 1962 and did not want to antagonise Nepal- a buffer state between India and China. The Panchayat Era did attempt to modernise the economy, and prioritise ‘nation-state building’. During the Panchayat Era, the Nepalese economy grew by 3.9% annually on average (Mahat, 2005), and there was minor progress in health and education. However, this progress did not transform the rural economy and lifestyle by much, as the growth dividend was concentrated mainly in urban centers and the capital. Moreover, the pre-existing politico-social, economic, and cultural hierarchy and inequality became even more pronounced (Paff-Czarnecka, 1997).


The multi-party democracy was re-established in April 1990 after the ‘First People’s Movement’. In part, India had a small but influential role when it played the ‘geographic trump card’ by closing all but two bilateral trade routes amidst serious political tensions (Hoftun, 1993, p. 23; Chaturvedy and Malone, 2012, p. 295). Economic liberalization followed democratization, bringing economic growth and some improvements in health, education, and infrastructures (Mahat, 2005). Even after the return of democracy, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched the ‘People’s War’ with the aim of establishing Nepal as a republic. Eventually, the Maoist Insurgency ended after the ‘Second People’s Movement’ and the abdication of the throne by the king on 24th April 2006. The first constituent assembly voted to oust the monarchy in June 2008, and Nepal became a federal democratic republic.

The brief historical summary of Nepal shows that the grievances of poverty and inequality, the primary conditions for armed rebellion, existed for nearly 240 years prior to Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006). However, during that period Nepal only experienced armed rebellion twice- one overthrew the oligarchic Rana regime (1947-50) with the support from India, and another (1960-62) fizzled out without Indian support. Similarly, another localised violent Jhapa rebellion, inspired by Naxalites in India was quashed in its early stages in 1971. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal, however, began without Indian support. Maoist’s demands, the *casus belli* to launch the armed rebellion if not fulfilled, were overtly against India42. Therefore, a deeper analysis of the enabling conditions for Maoist insurgency in Nepal

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42 Eight demands out of total nine demands concerning nationality were explicitly targeted against so called overt Indian activities, investment, encroachment, and interference in Nepal. The demands ranged from the call for annulment of previous unequal treaties with India to banning of vulgar Hindi films, videos, and magazines. The demands were originally published in (Thapa,
is warranted. The next section will explain the other factors which mattered apart from the ubiquitous grievance model of civil war in the context of Nepal.

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2003, p. 391) and also available online from: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/nepal/document/papers/40points.htm [Last accessed on 10th October, 2017]
5.3. Unravelling the Blackbox of the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal

The grievance model of poverty and inequality holds greater currency in explaining the onset of Maoist insurgency in Nepal (See Acharya, 2010; Lawoti and Pahari, 2010; Murshed and Gates, 2003; Thapa and Sijapati, 2003; Do and Iyer, 2010; Mahat, 2005; Basnett, 2009). However, it is equally puzzling that armed conflict in Nepal did not occur when poverty and inequality were acute and the political system in the country oppressed people the most. Rather, they occurred when economic growth in Nepal was the highest in recorded history, and after the revival of democracy. Yet, as mentioned above, growth and democracy contributed little in reducing inequality and poverty in society (Lawoti and Pahari, 2010). This section first presents the nature and extent of poverty, sliding life-standards, and shrinking land ownership, together with various inequalities- economic, political, and socio-cultural- along the ethnic and spatial lines in Nepal. The second part of the section focuses on the various enabling conditions that ushered the country towards the armed conflict. It will reflect upon openness and erosion of monopolistic coercion by the state because of the re-establishment of democracy. This allowed Maoists to politicise the grievances and mobilise populace in preparation for the insurgency (Thapa, 2012, p. 47-54), and the modernization that came along with the democracy added to the consciousness of Nepali people (Lawoti, 2010, p. 11). Likewise, the unity and ideological refinement in Maoist leadership helped to maintain cohesion within the rebel group throughout the insurgency (Lawoti, 2010, p. 12-14). Most importantly, India’s approach, ranging from the negligence in the beginning to the support for the movement in the critical stage, played a vital role in the success of the insurgency (Muni, 2012). Additionally, the police brutality drove victims towards Maoists and multiplied the support and sympathy for Maoists (Thapa and Sijapati, 2003, p. 90).

Poverty and Inequality

Poverty and inequality in society- whether it is relative deprivation or perceived gap between expected and achieved well-being- can breed discontent, frustration, and even violent aggression (Gurr, 1968, p. 1104, 1970, p. 326). Despite the revival of democracy in 1990, Nepal saw the repetition of the same ills that befell its first democratic experiment in the 1950s. Specifically, the country saw a series of short-lived unstable governments43 failing to advance aspirations for prosperity through economic

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43 Instability was so rife that between 1991 and 2002, Nepal saw no less than 12 governments- a disarray that the Maoists justified as one of the key reason to resort to arm and their contempt for democratic process (Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 17).
development and good governance (Hutt, 1994 in Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 7). During the Panchayati era (the autocratic rule of the king, 1960-1990), the absolute monarchy was using the state for rentier purposes without initiating much development. Between the thirty years from the King's takeover in 1960 to the return of the democracy in 1990, Nepal's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) grew at an average of a meagre 1.5 percent per annum (Muni, 2010, p. 4). In 1990, at the time of arrival of democracy, Nepal was the poorest country in South Asia. This position stayed the same even after ten years of democratic governance, and despite the decent growth GDP rate as mentioned before. Land ownership is another indicator of security, status, and prestige in Nepal. Forty percent of medium and large landowners in the hills were classified as poor in 1996 because of the sudden deterioration in their income and living standards (Deraniyagala, 2005, p. 55-56). The marginal peasants that constituted a much larger part of the population were far worse off (Deraniyagala, 2005, p. 55). The poverty level in Nepal is reflected by the fact that around eighty percent of the population was employed in the agricultural sector in the 1990s. Considering the boom in population and finite land availability, the poverty rate further expanded. The absolute number of poor people also doubled between 1977 and 1996 (Mishra, 2004, p. 22).

Poverty and inequality were predicted to bring the armed conflict in Nepal even during the peaceful years predating the Maoist insurgency. Blaikie and Seddon (1977) were the first to predict the political crisis in Nepal due to structural contradictions stemming from the 'semi-colonial experience,' and forced stagnation in production and productivity in West-Central Nepal. Nearly two decades later, Maoist insurgency erupted with Western Nepal being the epicentre. Similarly, Baburam Bhattarai’s Ph.D. Thesis (1985/2003) emphasised that poverty, unemployment, and inequality caused by deteriorating conditions of the rural economy dependent on agriculture, was a ‘prima facie’ factor for the armed rebellion by the peasants (Bhattarai, 1985/2003, p. i).

Poverty and inequality in Nepal were further exacerbated by the deeply rooted corruption in each level of governance which accompanied the return of democracy in 1990. There was a momentous surge of

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45 Hills cover 65% of the total land area of Nepal.

46 Bhattarai’s PhD Thesis, ‘The Nature of Underdevelopment and Regional Structure of Nepal: A Marxist Analysis’, is considered to be ‘the political and economic manifesto’ for launching Maoist Insurgency. It was completed in 1985 at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. It was published in 2003.
expectations on development and good governance in people following the revival of the democracy, but the massive disappointment soon followed at the dismal performance of politicians and administrators (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2005, p. 164). State power was abused and each level of a state mired in corruption (Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 16-17). The image of political parties as, ‘tools of high caste, corrupt and nepotistic Kathmandu elite,’ became endemic in the general population (ICG, 2003: 4). Maoists mobilised and incorporated the disaffected section of society, mostly the marginalised groups, with rewards and recognition of their plight (Pettigrew, 2003).

Moreover, the economic growth in Nepal fuelled inequality, which the democratic system in Nepal was ineffective at mitigating. Such inequality was prevalent along with the class, caste, regional, and ethnic lines. Despite the decent economic growth, Nepal remained very poor, and the number of absolute poor increased in the 1990s, indicating that the growth only benefitted the few on top. With a Gini Index of 0.426, Nepal had become the most unequal country in Asia in the 1990s (Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 10; Wagle, 2007). As mentioned before, in many cases, the relationship between land-ownership and wealth is stronger in Nepal (Whelpton, 2005, p. 51). Karen Macours (2006) finds that the rise in inequality, measured by unequal ownership to land, has a significant correlation with Maoist recruitment. The promise of progressive land distribution by Maoists drew popular support among peasants or at least prevented the resistance against Maoists despite excessive violence and coercion. Land ownership patterns also contributed to poverty and inequality. Often the rich people in Nepal were the ones whose ancestors gained land revenue collection rights during the 18th and 20th century. Forty-four percent of households owning up to a half hectare of agricultural land only constitute fourteen percent of the privately-owned agricultural land. On the other hand, five percent of households who own more than three-hectare agricultural land cover twenty-seven percent of the total agricultural land (Lawoti, 2010, p. 9). Gautam, et al., (2001, p. 217) provide rich data from the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) to elaborate on the significance of land ownership for poverty. This data indicates that rich farmers (by Nepalese standards) make up ten percent of the population and own sixty-five percent of the agricultural land. By contrast, poor farmers that constituted sixty-five percent of the population, and only owned ten percent of the land and eight percent of farmers were landless.

Similarly, regional inequality also contributed to the onset of armed conflict in Nepal. International development activities were limited to the capital and other urban centres around the country, leaving rural and remote areas with less infrastructure and lesser opportunities. With less and fewer
opportunities available for the poorer people away from urban centres, Maoists exploited this sense of deprivation for the mass mobilization and recruitment in the run-up to the People’s War. Although the data for uneven development is unavailable for the 1990s, Nepal was placed among the ten worst countries for uneven development in 2007 (Fund for Peace, 2007). Moreover, the confluence of regional, cultural, linguistic and religious discrimination and deprivation, is concentrated in the most remote and underdeveloped areas where indigenous and ethnic groups are in majority (Manchanda, 2004, p. 240; Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 218). Unequal growth between the urban area and rural area has been attributed to the inequality between the urban area and rural (and remote) areas. The lack of opportunities and sense of deprivation allowed rural areas to become a breeding ground for the radical left-wing in the rural remote areas to fight a flawed political system and economic policies (Sharma, 2006). Deraniyagala (2005) pinpoints the lingering economic ‘deprivation’ in the mid-western and far-western regions as the reason these areas turned out to as a hotbed for the armed rebellion. Not surprisingly, the Maoists were able to consolidate their base areas in the mid-western and far-western region of the country where poverty and malnutrition were concentrated (Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 10-11). Furthermore, Mani, et al., (2011) find that more unequal villages and districts in Nepal suffered more violence and killings during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

Inequality among Social Groups

Corresponding to poverty and economic inequality, for many scholars, horizontal inequality (inequality along with the ethnic groups and social groups) remained one of the primary reasons for the armed conflict in Nepal. The horizontal inequality created a conducive environment for Maoists to garner support among the marginalised population. Frances Stewart (2000) finds that horizontal inequality has more explanatory power over the vertical inequality (inequality within an ethnic or social group) in explaining the start of Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Horizontal inequality, particularly spatial and caste inequality, explain the start of Maoist insurgency in Nepal (Murshed and Gates, 2003). Nepal has one of the highest levels of horizontal inequality in the world prevalent along with the ethnic, linguistic, religious, racial, gender, caste, and regional line (Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 10). The Caste Hill Hindu Elite Males (CHHEM) 47 concentrated the political, economic, social, and cultural power into its hands

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47 Nepal is among the most ethnically diverse and socially stratified countries in the world (Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 12). Nepal has four major religions (Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Kiranti), numerous caste groups divided in four categories (Brahman: educated priests in the top tier; Kshetriya: warrior class such as King and army; Baisya: businessmen and tradesmen; and Shudra:
In general, not only are the people from a lower caste, indigenous, Muslims and Dalits (untouchable caste group) poorer, the decrease in the poverty rate among them is also slower. The HDI (Human Development Index) of Brahmins, the highest-ranking caste group in the hierarchy, was 135 in 1996, compared to the national average of 100. Indigenous populations, Dalits (the lowest caste group), Madhesia (a marginalised ethnic group living in the plains) and Muslims (a minority religious group in Nepal) had an HDI score of ninety-two, seventy-four, ninety-six, and seventy-four respectively (NESAC, 1998 in Lawoti, 2010, p. 10). Similarly, poverty decreased by forty-six percent among Brahmins and Kshetriyas (higher caste groups), while the reduction was only six, ten and twenty-one percent respectively for the Muslims, hill indigenous nationalities, and Dalits (Tiwari, 2010).

Even after the democratic revival, the dominant CHHEM (Caste, Hill Hindu Elite Males) held positions of power and influence, further marginalizing lower caste, indigenous nationalities, Dalits, and Muslims. The democratic mobilization of 1990 had seen the mass participation of Nepal’s Dalits and indigenous nationalities, but democratic change failed to integrate them into the power structure (Gellner and Bhattachan, 1999 in Manchanda, 2004, p. 240). Since the return of democracy in Nepal, only Brahman and Kshetriya groups have dominated the mainstream civil society (Lawoti, 2010, p. 10). These groups were politically dominant as well, holding key positions in the twelve influential sectors in 1999: the executive, judiciary, constitutional councils, civil administration, parliament, political party leadership, local government heads, and leadership of industrial and commercial, academic, professional, cultural, science and technology, and civil society associations (Neupane, 2000 in Lawoti, 2010, p. 10).

Marginalised groups in Nepal also face structural and historic discrimination from the state. The declaration of a Hindu nation in the constitution of Nepal in 1950 meant favorable treatment of Hindus constituting 80% of the population according to the 2001 census (Thapa, 2010, p. 921). After the unification, Hindu rulers imposed caste system based on Hindu scriptures as the unifying framework to facilitate political control over the newly acquired territories ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse population. Almost a century after the unification in 1854, a legal and cultural code for the country, known as Muluki Ain (Country Code), was promulgated to homogenise the country into strict
Khas-Nepali was declared the national language and official language, making it difficult for other native language speakers to improve their socio-economic and political status without proficiency in the Nepali language (Jha, 2017, p. 45). The Panchayat system beginning in 1960 relied on the proliferation of the idea of Nepali nationalism for its survival. Nationalism heavily relied upon the role of the monarchy as the symbol of national unity and updated legal codes based on high caste Hindu norms (Burghart, 1994). Likewise, a Citizenship Commission formed in the 1990s refused citizenships to more than three million adult Nepalese, mostly Madhesi but also Dalit and indigenous nationalities (Upadhaya, 1995).

The Political Mobilisation of Grievances for the Insurgency

However, the literature on relative poverty and inequality as a cause of Nepal’s Maoist Insurgency (1996-2006) do not focus on how the grievances arising from poverty and inequality turn into the collective perception of the grievances. Further, they do not explain how this collective perception of grievance, in turn, enables collective action against poverty and inequality in the form of violent resistance. As mentioned in the beginning, forms of inequality and grievances, albeit in the varying degrees of magnitude and intensity, were omnipresent since the inception of Modern Nepal but were not enough to produce violent civil war. Therefore, extant causal explanations on the onset of Maoist insurgency in 1996 (and not in the earlier period), and how poverty and inequality translated into political violence are not adequate, and the transmission mechanism that transmits grievances into conflict needs more research. In other words, a suitable conceptual framework to explain the timing and process of civil war in Nepal (1996-2006) is necessary (Basnett, 2009). In this respect, Skocpol explains-

What is at issue is not so much the objective potential for revolts on the grounds of justifiable grievances. It is rather the degree to which grievances that are always at least implicitly present can be collectively perceived and acted upon… the really important question is what transforms

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46The Muluki Ain ranked the entire population in a caste hierarchy that regimented social life accordingly giving material, social and cultural legitimacy. According to code, the Hindu high-caste Bahun and Chettri (Brahman and Ksatriya) were ranked at the top. In the middle were Tibeto-Burman ‘tribes’ (now self-identifying as Janajatis or Adivasi janajati such as Gurungs, Rais, Sherpa, etc.) and untouchable castes (Dalits) were relegated at the bottom. The code also identified the ‘Hill’ (Pahadi) people as the ‘true Nepali’. The loyalty of the residents of the Southern plain region (Madhesi) bordering India, with language, customs and cultures similar to that of North India, was questioned upon (Jha, 2014).
the peasantry, if only at local levels, into a collective force capable of striking out against its oppressors. (Skocpol, 1979, p. 11).

In other words, the development of grievances should be followed by the politicization of grievances in a way the mass perceives the grievance collectively and identifies itself as a victim. Furthermore, the collective perception of grievances primarily morphs into collective action when the countervailing force is weakened and divided. Put otherwise, even if the grievance is collectively perceived, as long as the oppressor or the state is unified, powerful, and uses institution for the suppression, the armed movement against them can easily be quashed. The weakening of state characterised by the reduction of its coercive enforcement and oppressive power and the development of the dissident organisation is imperative to understand how violence actualised in the context of Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

The Maoists in Nepal effectively politicised the grievances so that most of the poor, oppressed and marginalised people collectively identified with the grievances that Maoists claimed to fight against. Moreover, Basnett (2009, p. 9) postulates that the monopoly of coercion before the 1990s by various political configurations in Nepal, and the lack of dissident organisation and unified voice of those oppressed in the pre-1990 period. In contrast, the weaker democracy, the development of the Maoist rebel organisation, and the ability of the Maoists to unify peasants and other oppressed and marginalised groups to band together against the state were key in explaining the onset of Maoist insurgency in the 1990s but not before (Lawoti, 2010).

**Factors Facilitating the Political Mobilisation of Grievances**

In addition, rapid change in the Nepalese society brought by modernization, ideological resilience and strategic pragmatism within Maoist leadership, external factors, and the excessive repression of dissent by the state, are thought to have also played key role in the onset and growth of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (Lawoti and Pahari, 2010). The modernization after political and economic liberalization in Nepal since 1990 facilitated a general political consciousness in the people and germinated the sense of deprivation. The revival of democracy in Nepal in the 1990s brought many changes because of the spread of education, growth of communication networks and globalization, and mass media. While modernization changed societal conditions and introduced uncertainty and fluidity (Fujikura, 2003), it also brought self-awareness in society while facilitating the division in society (Joshi and Mason, 2007).
In the midst of rapid change and heightened expectations of the citizen, the state failed to match expectation with better service delivery.

Similarly, adequate preparation within Maoist leadership with greater emphasis on the strategic pragmatism, ideological discipline, and organisational efficiency had a durable impact on the growth of the rebellion. The highly educated Maoist leadership closely studied the leftist revolutions around the world and learned from the mistakes of the past revolutions to adopt strategic pragmatism (Muni, 2010, p. 10-12). Before declaring the Maoist insurgency in Nepal in 1996, Maoists leadership went through five years’ period of intense debate, discussion, indoctrination, and purging to adopt a correct ideological line suitable to the conditions of Nepal (Mishra, 2004, p. 10). Likewise, along with the military, the Maoist established both civilian organisations to further their cause in both peace-time and war. They built party organisation with an army (People’s Liberation Army), a united front (United Revolutionary People’s Council Nepal, and many sister organisations and fronts to assist the party and army (Lawoti, 2010, p. 12).

The explanation of Maoist insurgency in Nepal is incomplete without analyzing India’s role not only in the resolution but also its onset. India did not pay much attention in the earlier stage of the Maoist conflict, despite Maoists holding ‘Indian expansionism’ as being responsible for the underdevelopment, structural inequality, instability, and frequent interference in the sovereignty of Nepal (Thapa, 2003, p. 391; Bhattarai, 2003). This allowed Maoists to escape initial vulnerability. Moreover, contacts with Indian Naxalites (Left-wing extremist group in India) and eight-ten million strong Nepali diasporas in India helped Maoists in ensuring shelter and ‘safe havens’, procuring arms, training and mobilizing financial support in India (Muni, 2010, p. 13). Furthermore, ex-king Gyanendra’s attempt to secure military support from the US and the UK to defeat Maoists, his attempt to include China in SAARC as an observer, and autocratic moves in February 2005 alienated India. It prompted India to facilitate the alliance between Maoists and political parties in Nepal shunned by the King (Jha, 2014). India supported the alliance of seven parties and Maoists against the monarch who took the authoritarian role that ultimately abolished the monarchy in Nepal, and brought the insurgency to an end (Einsiedel, et al., 2012, p. 22-23).

Finally, the state repression and police brutality further precipitated the impending armed insurgency in 1996. In the two years running up to the launch of the armed rebellion, UPF (United People’s Front),
the predecessor of the Maoists, were using peaceful political, cultural and development activities for mass mobilization. The idea was to strengthen the potential for class struggle as they saw class struggle only means to eliminate poverty and cure developmental ills. However, the state employed savage repression in response (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 219). The police targeted the UPF supporters by filing false cases and putting them into jail, and the Maoists retaliated by targeting the politicians and the elite. The government launched a police operation named ‘Operation Romeo’ in November 1995, resulting in thousands of men fleeing to India or in the jungle to escape the police atrocities (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 219; Muni, 2010, p. 8). Hundreds of members of left-of-centre parties were arbitrarily arrested, put in detention, disappeared, raped, tortured, and executed (ICTJ, 2010, p. 21). Furthermore, another police operation in 1998 named Kilo Sera-2 exhibited further atrocities and brutality driving many people to the Maoist fold (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 228; Muni, 2010, p. 9). In turn, police brutality and violent repression were key to strengthening the Maoist movement.

In summary, the case of the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal proves that weak democracy might facilitate armed conflict rather than working towards resolving it. Similarly, exclusionary democracy combined with unequal development can be a breeding ground for violent left-wing movements based on class politics. Despite the reinstallation of democracy and some improvement in the indexes of economics and indicators of quality of life, a large section of Nepalese society felt left out. Maoists were able to exploit this contradiction and mobilise and recruit people from the community and class that felt neglected, excluded, and oppressed by the state. Finally, through adroit leadership, strategic planning, and efficient organisation, Maoists launched a successful communist insurgency in Nepal. Additionally, Indian involvement and brutal police repression tactics also contributed to the growth of the insurgency. The next section will explain the conditions that led to the participation of women in Maoist insurgency in Nepal.
5.4. Women in the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Pre-Conditions

Nepal is a predominantly Hindu country which is deeply patriarchal. Women are subject to religiously sanctified exclusion ranging from households to the state level across political, economic, and socio-cultural spheres. Traditionally, women and girls in Nepal have been confined to the domestic sphere and denied access to education and adequate healthcare, economic independence, and political participation (ICTJ, 2010, p. 19). Compared to men, women are discriminated in all social groups and have a lower status in the public sphere. This is reflected in the overall low development indicators (education, employment, political participation, access to finances and property among others) for women compared to men in Nepal (Acharya, 2003, p. 42).

Women in Major Political Movements in Nepal

Historically, women's participation in political movements in Nepal has been low. Although modern history of Nepal began in 1769 after its unification (Rose, 1971, p. 24), the history of Nepalese women's movement for equal rights and representation, and women's collective engagement for political goal has not been long. Women in Nepal started raising their voice for the right to vote and the right to contest elections since 1945, five years before the introduction of democracy in Nepal. Women's activism started in 1948 with the establishment of the Nepal Women's Association to raise political and social awareness among women and to pressure the government to grant voting rights for women. Although they were granted the right to vote and had the right to stand for elections in 1951, their representation in legislative bodies remained between nil to negligible numbers at best (Khakurel, et al., 2011). Despite having political rights granted with the introduction of democracy in 1950, the level of women's participation remained minimal in political movements for democratic rights in Nepal. The Nepalese society, which is also characterised by patriarchal gender-relations, the status quo prevailed in the next four and a half decades regarding the status of women. Also, their presence in the judiciary and executive bodies remained dismal until the past few years (Falch, 2010, p. 21). The king's subversion of the democratic system to an autocratic regime suspended all political parties and civil society organisations and their activities between 1960 and 1990 (South Asia Partnership, 2009, p. 51). Also, women's participation in the movements for democracy in Nepal between 1950 and 1990 was less prominent (ICTJ, 2010: 20).
The change in the political system in 1990 from autocracy to democracy was not accompanied by the significant change in the political, legal, socio-economic and cultural status of women in the country. The patriarchal structure and norms more or less stayed unchanged in Nepal in this period. Democracy was revived in 1990, after nearly four decades-long relapses into Panchayat system. There were some positive steps taken towards gender equality at this time. Before the civil war, Nepal became a signatory to CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of the All Forms of Discriminations Against Women) in 1991. The government adopted ‘gender mainstreaming’ as a primary strategy for directing resources to women. On the institutional initiative, the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare and Women’s Commission were created (Tamang, 2009); however, tangible results did not follow. In the subsequent democratic elections, women failed to make it to the legislative body in significant numbers. In the periodic elections in 1991, 1994 and 1999, women represented only three, three, and six percent of the total elected seats respectively (Khakurel, et al., 2011). Similarly, the Local Self Governance Act of 1999 included twenty percent reservation for women in the local bodies (Tamang, 2009, p. 66-67); however, the election of local bodies stalled because of insurgency that began in 1996. Likewise, the representation of women in the judiciary, executive bodies and other apparatuses of government did not improve (Manchanda, 2004). Furthermore, not much was done towards eliminating legal discrimination against women. For example, citizenship is still granted through the male line, and women did not have rights to ancestral property until very recently (Richardson, et al., 2016; Tamang, 2009, p. 66; Manchanda, 2004, p. 244-245; Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 222). A review of discriminatory laws against the women by the Forum for Women and Legal Development (FWLD) in 2009 revealed over hundred discriminatory clauses and rules in fifty-four different pieces of legislation, including the constitution (Tamang, 2009, p. 66). Regarding health, a woman’s life span was shorter than a man’s by two and a half years in 2001 (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 221). More than 15 percent of girls are married by the age of 15 and had their first child by 19., and Nepal has the highest rate of maternal death rate in South Asia after Afghanistan in early 2000. With regard to education, only 21.3 percent of women were literate compared to 54.3 percent of literate men in 2001, and the percentage of literate women is even lower in remote areas (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 222).
Diversity a Barrier for unified Women’s Movement?

As indicated in the first half of the chapter, Nepalese society is also characterised by a diverse mix of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups. This has had a substantial influence in terms of the possibility of the unified feminist movement for the women’s right and the elimination of discriminations against the women. The level of autonomy of women varies according to the ethnic community, caste group, and geographical locations (urban/rural). The heterogeneity of Nepali society is also reflected in the gender structure. Nepal has been characterised by having multiple gender norms, something clearly connected with the ethnic and caste divisions in the country. For example, women from Tibeto-Burman communities in the remote hill districts have escaped puritanical Hindu acculturation, and are relatively more autonomous than the upper-caste Brahmin Chetri women, along with fewer religious-cultural restrictions (Cameron, 1998, p. Chapter 1; Manchanda, 2004, p. 245). Tibeto-Burman women and Janajati women traditionally enjoy greater rights with equal or more access and control of resources, relatively higher social mobility and freedom within the private sphere (ICTJ, 2010, p. 19). Thus, Seira Tamang (2002, p. 162) points out,

> It is clear that not all women in Nepal have been sequestered in the realm of the domestic, nor has wage-labour, business and other realms of “the public” been uniformly imagined only as masculine; neither has the sexuality of women been consistently and narrowly regimented.

Nevertheless, lower caste, Dalit (the untouchable castes), and Janajati women remain marginalised within the marginalised community. Some of the changes in law towards eliminating discrimination of women eluded underprivileged Dalits, indigenous nationalities, and women from remote hinterlands that constituted that contained the majority of the population. Small minorities of women that are able to improve their socio-political and economic standing hail disproportionately from the high caste Hindu social group (Brahmin, Kshetri, and Newari). High caste women have more avenues of empowerment such as education and employment and access to healthcare and resources than the lower caste and Dalit women (Upreti and Kolas, 2016).

49 Mainly Magars from Mid-Western hill districts, Gurungs from Western hill districts, Rais from Eastern hill districts, Sherpas and Thankali from Mountainous region constituted this community.

50 Seira Tamang (2009, p.69) brings up issue of failure to including voices from the women outside high-caste elite group and homogenization of women’s experiences in Nepal. She also highlights the failure of major political parties in Nepal to include women outside dominant caste and social group.
The heterogeneity of women’s experiences in Nepalese society also meant that a unified feminist movement through non-violent political activism failed to take off even after the arrival of democracy. The complex nature of Nepalese society marked with hierarchical distinctions and social divisions and prevalence of other social bases of subordination besides gender is considered to have worked against the possibility of a unified feminist movement in Nepal (Des Chene, 1997, p. 294). Even when political debates on social inclusion intensified in the country during the post-conflict state restructuring and peacebuilding process, women from different caste and ethnic nationalities were often prioritizing their own identity and specific oppression unique to their identity (Tamang, 2009, p. 63). Similarly, Nepali women’s movement has been and continues to remain, dominated and led by high-caste Hindu women and some Newar women who enjoy privileges in terms of access to power, authority, and benefits (Ibid). Discrimination in cultural practices and women’s autonomy varies across ethnicity, caste and social groups; however, in general, multiple discriminatory legislation, socio-economic and cultural practices persisted against women.

**Women in the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal**

Maoists were the first political party\(^{51}\) to come up with a radical social agenda that pledged to end all forms of discriminations against women. They were quick to recognise the discrimination and deprivation of women in Nepal. The nineteenth point of the forty-point memorandum\(^{52}\) had taken on board the women’s question, demanding the end of patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women and property right for the daughters (Thapa, 2003, p. 391; Manchanda, 2004, p. 247). With mainstream political parties being ambivalent regarding women’s question, Maoists gained significant support among women (ICTJ, 2010: 24). The decade long Maoist insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006) brought radical change in gender-relations, bringing women out of domesticity into the political whirlpool.

Additionally, Maoists adroitly tapped into the pool of women within the marginalised ethnic community who had relatively less religious-cultural restrictions. This is reflected in the greater participation of

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\(^{51}\) Maoists were a peaceful political party that competed in general election in 1991 before resorting to armed rebellion to achieve their aim. They considered that radical change in Nepali society is only possible through an armed rebellion (Karki and Seddon, 2003).

\(^{52}\) Before launching the Maoist Insurgency, Maoists submitted 40 points memorandum to the government of Nepal with an ultimatum (Thapa, 2003, p. 391). Failure of government to meet the demands by Maoists resulted in the start of the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal.
female combatants from this ethnic community. Nearly seventy percent of the women in the Peoples War were from the Tibeto-Burman and non-Aryan communities. Similarly, women combatants made one-third of the fighting force in the Maoist stronghold districts which had a dense Tibeto-Burman population (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 224, 237). Since women in Tibeto-Burman community were still a part of an underprivileged social group, and women’s overall status is lower compared to men within this group, women’s vulnerability and exploitation within this community is even greater. Despite the autonomy, women in those communities were the ones who suffered most (Manchanda, 2004, p. 245).

Maoist leadership was overwhelmed by the unexpected response of the women to join the insurgency from the very beginning (Onesto, 2000 in Manchanda, 2004). Many of the wives of top leaders joined the insurgency along with their husbands. Maoist Insurgency in Nepal was characterised by the higher level of women’s activism on both the political and war front. Indeed, in the Maoist propaganda, women commanders were projected as formidable fighters, more committed, disciplined, reliable and militant (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 239). Along with remarkable participation as a female combatant, women were prominently active in the Maoists’ sister organisations such as ANWA (R) [All Nepalese Women’s Association (Revolutionary)]. In the local level, women participated in the parallel government structure set by Maoists such as ‘local people’s government’, Maoists ‘justice system,’ and on the cultural front. In those structures, women contributed to organisation building, leading social struggles against cultural ills and superstitions, acting as informants, conducting publicity campaigns and so on (ICTJ, 2010, p. 26).

The actual numbers of female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal are contested. While breaking down the women’s participation into numbers, Hisila Yami, one of the primary Maoist woman leaders, explained that it was made mandatory to have two women in every unit of 9 to 11 members in the fighting ranks (Manchanda, 2004, p. 241). According to her, every third guerrilla was a woman in Maoist stronghold area, whereas, in the new districts where Maoist influence was yet to be established, one in ten combatants was a woman (Manchanda, 2004, p. 241). Maoists claimed that the proportion of women combatants was as high as 40 or 50% of the total (Manchanda 2004). However, after the verification process of the Maoist combatants by UNMIN (United Nation’s Mission in Nepal), the proportion dropped to about 20% (Out of 19,602 total combatants, 3,846 were women) (Arino, 2008, p. 8). Yet, the interview with Lila Sharma, head of the former Brigade Vice-Commander in the PLA (People’s Liberation Army), revealed that the numbers are much smaller than the actual number which
she estimates to be around 10,000 (Thapa and Ramsbotham, 2017, p. 53). Many female combatants, including Sharma, opted out of UN verification process to assume political roles, while others left after being wounded, disabled, and disqualified (Thapa and Ramsbotham, 2017, p. 53). Still, in the Maoist stronghold areas of Rolpa, Rukum and Jajarkot, at the lowest level of the fighting ranks, in the people’s militia women constituted forty to fifty percent of the cadres, thirty-five percent at the squad level, twenty to thirty percent at the platoon level, and a total of nine women at the highest level were reported (Gautam, et al., 2001).

In the later years, the question of women seems to have given some space in the formulation of strategy and policy for the Maoists. In 2001, Prachanda Path53 created a women’s department in the Central Committee in the recognition of the contribution of women in the insurgency. The gender question was also included in the programmatic framework prepared by the leadership (Gautam, et al., 2001). At the ground level of the Maoist stronghold areas, many of the mass actions were reportedly taken to dispense justice to the women. Such actions included banning liquor, punishing husbands who beat and misbehave with their wives, punishing rapists, wresting back the usurped land of single women, acting against dowry, and outlawing polygamy (ICTJ, 2010, p. 27-44). Similarly, ‘People’s Courts’, parallel judiciary system created by Maoists, were lauded as efficient in dealing with women’s issues and protecting women’s right in a prompt manner (Manchanda, 2004, p. 248). Additionally, Maoist party’s mass women’s organisation ANWA (R) (All Nepalese Women’s Association (Revolutionary) had launched nationwide grassroots campaign against alcohol, domestic violence against women, gambling, polygamy, and ending evil practices, such as banning women from entering ritually pure places during their periods and secluding them in a cowshed (Thapa, 2003 in Manchanda, 2004, p. 248; Lohani-Chase, 2014, p. 30).

53Doctrine of Communist rebellion named after the Supreme Commander of Maoist Insurgency, Puspa Kamal Dahal alias ‘Prachanda’. This doctrine focused on the Communist doctrine suitable to the condition of Nepalese society [CITATION NEEDED].
Women’s Question after the End of the Insurgency

The question of women’s emancipation was considered secondary to the freedom of all communities and classes from the feudal monarchy. In other words, Maoist emphasised that women’s liberation would only be possible after class liberation (Manchanda 2004, p. 247). The feudal monarchy was considered to be the class enemy of proletariats and was purported to have been the root cause of all forms of exploitations and ills – including gender inequality- in the society (Ibid). Furthermore, one of the meaningful indices of whether gender and women’s emancipation was central to the Maoist insurgency involves looking at the leadership capacity and profile of women during the insurgency, and their capacity to shape and articulate the policy and agenda of the insurgency. Importantly, it is also necessary to identify Maoist positions in the key issues of women’s question and its impact on women. The gap between the rhetoric of emancipatory agenda for women and their action was glaring on many occasions. during the two rounds of peace talks in 2001 and 2003 when Maoist fielded an all-male team for the peace-negotiation. When asked about the contradiction, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, the ideological brain of the Maoist movement, explained, ‘you do not have to be a woman to represent women’ (Manchanda, 2004, p. 252). Furthermore, the Politbureau of the Maoist party did not have any woman members (Ibid). Secondly, Maoists held a conservative position on sexuality and reproductive rights. Many women were incarcerated in the Maoist operated jails for the extra-marital affairs. Manchanda (2004, p. 251) further goes on to say that the so-called Cultural Revolution hailed by Maoist supremo Prachanda was more a reproducing of traditional gender relations.

Nevertheless, the Constitutional Assembly election in 2008, the main political agenda of Maoists (Muni, 2010, p. 4), did increase the percentage of women in the legislative assembly. The uptick was based upon the Interim Constitution that ensured women’s representation in all bodies of the state which was another major demand of Maoists (Manchanda, 2004). It stipulated that women should represent a minimum of one-third of the total number of candidates to the Constitutional Assembly (Article 63(5)).54 The new electoral law passed by the Interim Parliament in June 2007 also included this provision. Similarly, the provision for the mixed electoral system, the combination of first-past-the-post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR), in the Interim Constitution gave a marginalised group like women the

opportunity for greater representation (Falch, 2007, p. 21-22). As a result, altogether nearly 3,500 women stood as candidates in the election comprising 35% of all candidates. There were more women voters in the election than men (UNIFEM, 2009, p. 11 in Falch, 2010, p. 22-23). Women gained only 30 (12.5%) out of the 240 seats under the first-past-the-post and 161 (48%) out of the 335 elected under the proportional representations system. Additionally, the three major political parties nominated six women to comply with the quota stipulated in the Interim Constitution. In the new government formed after the election, four out of twenty-four ministerial positions (16.67%) were filled by women (Jagaran Nepal, 2008, p. 6).

Still, beyond numbers, the substantive representation of women to pass many women-friendly policies and their implementation did not match the expectation. The law regarding citizenship had been gender-discriminatory for a long time in Nepal. For example, the child is unconditionally entitled to citizenship by descent on the basis of his/her father being a Nepali citizen. However, the child is not eligible for citizenship by descent on the basis of his/her mother being a Nepali citizen. Similarly, a woman married to Nepali man can easily get Nepali citizenship, but a foreign man is not entitled to the same rights if his wife is a Nepali citizen (Kanel, 2014). Increased representation of women in the legislative assembly was not enough to put an end to this discrimination. Also, the attempts to grant constitutional status to the Women’s Commission also did not materialise (Khakurel, et al., 2011). A report by South Asian Partnership points to the same direction, “Because of the quantitative reservation and proportional participation, the number of women representation in the political structure has sequentially increased. However, corresponding qualitative improvements in women’s participation are yet to happen” (South Asian Partnership, 2009, p. 51)

Although the proportion of women in the legislative body reached the ‘critical mass’ number needed to bring substantive policy changes, various factors worked against the expected policy changes for greater gender equality (Kanel, 2014). Lack of critical actors (actors that have capacity to influence politics and policies), lack of critical acts (drafting bills, public debates, and lobbying), primacy of party ideology over women’s issues, lack of unified position of women representatives on the issues pertaining to women, prevalence of, masculine culture and norms, and lack of political experience,

55 The term ‘critical mass’ is derived from nuclear physics which refers to the quantity needed to trigger the chain of reactions (Dahlerup, 1988). In political context, the analogy implies the certain threshold that is required to bring about change. For example, if women’s participation reaches 30 percent in an organisation, the qualitative shift will take place (Kanter, 1977).
policy knowledge and institutional position for women, are considered to be the stumbling blocks to achieve gender equality in Nepal (Kanel, 2014). Similarly, even when the existence of Inter-Party Women’s Alliance gathered to discuss the issues salient to women, women representatives found it hard to raise it to the Constituent Assembly. Despite all major political parties having women’s wings, their voice is not taken seriously (Falch, 2010, p. 23-24). Furthermore, women’s opportunities within political parties were determined by their loyalty and kinship to political leaders rather than based upon merit and capability (SAP, 2009, p. 54).

Despite all the hurdles, remarkable progress over the past few years on the question of women’s right has taken place. A lot has improved in the last two decades since the start of Maoist insurgency in Nepal, and particularly after the end of the Maoist insurgency. Many discriminatory laws against the women have also been changed such as regulations providing protection for victims and sanctions for perpetrators of human trafficking (Human Trafficking Control and Regulation Acts, 2007/08), and a law punishing perpetrators of domestic violence (Domestic Violence [Offense and Punishment] Act, 2009) (Falch, 2010, p. 27). The year 2016 became a historic year for Nepal (and for the world) when women became heads of the legislative, judiciary and executive body for the very first time. Apart from gains in political participation and representation, Maoist insurgency also had a significant impact on intersectional inclusion and gender equality and institutionalizing sexual and gender minority rights in Nepal (Baniya, et al., 2017, p. 4).

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56Bidhya Devi Bhandari became the second president of Nepal in October 2015. OnsariGharti Magar, a Maoist ex-commandar, became the speaker of house also in October 2015. Finally, SushilaKarki became the Chief Justice of Supreme Court in Nepal between April 2016 and April 2017.
5.5. Chapter Conclusion

Maoist insurgency and its success in Nepal defied many odds. Nevertheless, careful study reveals conventional predictors of armed conflict to be the root causes of the insurgency in the Nepalese context too. Political exclusion and poverty combined with unequal development and horizontal inequality proved fertile ground for the insurgency. At the same time, effective mobilization of grievances by Maoists with efficient organisation laid the foundation for the conflict to start, and it was further expedited by police brutality. Direct and indirect role of India also played a vital part in the sustenance and conclusion of the insurgency. In this regard, the participation of women in Maoist insurgency including as combatants were one of the defining features of Maoist insurgency in Nepal. The lack of women’s vigorous political activism after the introduction of democracy in 1950 and the return of the democracy in 1990 seems to be in marked contrast to their participation in the Maoist insurgency. Maoists not only brought up women’s question in the Nepalese society as a whole but also targeted the women within the marginalised community who had more autonomy in private realm but actually fewer opportunities in the public realm. It resulted in the extraordinary participation of women in Maoist insurgency in political wings and local government structures to fighting units. Some scholars have questioned whether such a transformation of the gender roles of women in Nepalese society is the ‘intended consequence’ of Maoist insurgency (Pettigrew, 2012; Manchanda, 2004). Particularly, women’s ability to influence decision-making and their limitations regarding gender roles and status show that qualitative improvement on gender equality is a long way to achieve (Baniya, et al., 2017, p. 4).

Nevertheless, the greater participation of women during the civil war has also continued in the post-war politics period, and most scholars attribute such transformation one of the major legacy of Maoist Insurgency in Nepal (Manchanda, 2004; Baniya, et al., 2017, p. 4). Moreover, it cannot be denied that the Maoist shook the traditional gender order based on patriarchal ideals in a swift and unexpected manner in the patriarchal society like Nepal. The gains made in terms of achievement of gender equality, albeit far from perfect, seem irreversible. Gagan Thapa, a youth leader of the Nepali Congress Party, succinctly expressed it while commenting on how the Maoists had pressured the political parties in Nepal to respond to women’s issues—“The Maoists are making us travel in ten years a path we would have travelled in fifty [years]” (Pettigrew, 2012, p. 103).

The next three chapters will explore whether such rapid transformation has transformed the lives of all the women who played the central part in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal as combatants. How do female
ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression make sense of insurgency in Nepal? The following chapters will explore the expectations, ambitions, experiences, perspectives, and post-war life-trajectories of these women.
6. Pre-War Experiences and Expectations

6.1. Chapter Introduction

This chapter draws from interviews with the Maoist leaders and experts to analyse the pre-war experiences of Nepali women. They largely characterise the experiences shaped by patriarchal domination. Patriarchy in Nepalese society suppressing and oppressing Nepali women before the war is the most frequented theme featuring in the interviews with the Maoist leaders and experts. While the concept of patriarchy is an essential concept in feminist theory, its definition has been problematic as various strands of feminism define patriarchy differently. Black feminists such as bell hooks argue that the fight against patriarchy should not be limited simply to access to men’s world by disrupting the monotony of domestic life for some women, from certain races or class. Instead, it is about listening to the voices of women of all backgrounds, and the recognition of women's experiences as equally important and valid (hooks, 2000). In contrast, radical feminists see patriarchy as, ‘universal, trans-historical phenomenon; where women everywhere oppressed by men more or less in same ways’ (Acker, 1989, p. 235). While Marxist feminists link such oppression to a particular mode of production (Ibid), others see it as a particular system of domination by men- the patrilocal extended household in which the senior male holds the authority (Kandiyoti, 1988). Whereas Walby (1990, p. 20-21) goes further to frame it within a system of social relation composed of six structural spaces: mode of production, paid work, state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions. Most conceptions of patriarchy converge on the domination and oppression of women by men, but they have different explanations in determining where, when, and how such domination occurs. The Maoists largely defined patriarchy as a male-dominated system that fails to see a woman in their individual essence of being human rather, valued instead in the light of their ‘reproductive function,’ within a system ‘underestimates their capabilities’ (Yami, 2007, p. 61). They saw patriarchy closely intertwined with the class exploitation where women are seen as ‘free slaves’ (Yami, 2007, p. 103). Maoists predicated the end of patriarchal domination at the end of class exploitation (Bhattarai, 2007), and to this end, they also encouraged women to take up arms by emphasizing ‘Martial Feminism’ (Gayer, 2013, p. 337) to fight against the patriarchal institutions under the patronage of the feudal monarchy.

Patriarchy remained a primary push factor for Nepali women towards the Maoist insurgency that promised liberation from patriarchy towards gender-equal society. At times, the patriarchal beliefs were
instrumentalised to enable women to perform intelligence and support tasks for the success of the insurgency. Women needed a collective platform to fight against various discriminations in the patriarchal system. By providing them with such an organisational platform and equal opportunities, the Maoists substantiated their claim that the liberation of women from patriarchal structures towards a more gender-equal society was one of their primary goals. Women were encouraged to perform various ‘masculine’ duties and tasks even though they might be considered abnormal as per traditional gender roles, or, roles considered ‘normal’ and historically acceptable within their communities. For example, they were encouraged to dress like men and avoid wearing jewellery associated with femininity.

Furthermore, the institution of marriage as a significant tool of patriarchal control in Nepalese society was challenged. However, the Maoists did not always pulverise patriarchal norms and practices. Interestingly, some of the norms, values, beliefs, and practices of patriarchy were preserved and even promoted when it suited their scheme. For example, while sheltering in villages during military campaigns, the female combatants were at the forefront of public relations by helping people in the village with daily chores such as cooking and cleaning, which are considered to be traditional feminine roles.

Overall, patriarchy holds a pivotal position in the narrative, connecting the female combatants to the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

The first section in the chapter explains how the Maoists used patriarchal domination as a tool to mobilise women in the insurgency, legitimise its fight against the state, and used it as an instrument to benefit the insurgency. The second part of the chapter uses the intersectional theoretical tool to analyse women’s question in relation to patriarchy in the Maoist insurgency. It will explain the Maoist leaders’ attempt to frame the patriarchal exploitation within the intersectional theoretical framework in three ways- construction of the singular identity of Nepali women as victims, lack of critical tools to explore diversity and complexity of Nepali women’s experiences, and designing of the program based on flawed premises of uniformity and homogeneity.

57 For example, my interviews also reveal that the idea of women being less likely to be politically motivated and violent than men was utilised throughout the insurgency by deploying women for intelligence gathering and logistic operations. These accounts highlight the belief that women were less likely to raise suspicion than their male counterparts in these activities.

58 Interview with Ganga Karki Puja (Date: 12/12/2017)

59 Interviews with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date: 21/12/2017)
6.2 Patriarchy: The Fight against the State Embodying the Old System

For many women in Nepal, the state represented abstract patriarchy, and its apparatuses such as army, police, and local bodies became its visible manifestations. While Maoists gave them hope of equality and offered a platform for the collective struggle against the patriarchal oppression, they too used patriarchal masculine standards to judge their contribution in the war. As described in the section that provided a brief history of women’s involvement in the political movements in Nepal, women were systematically discriminated, marginalised, and oppressed in sectors ranging from education to economics, and at different levels — from an individual level to the family and the state (Acharya, 2006). For many women, the police represented the brutality of domination, evident when they were beaten, raped, and their husbands killed in operations against Maoists. Although women comprised eight percent (1013) of the total killings during the Maoist insurgency, government troops committed eighty-one percent of these killings. Moreover, rape followed by the killing of women by government troops was considered to be more widespread phenomena than those reported by media and human right advocacy groups (Thapa, 2016, p. 104). Public good provisions such as health and schools from the state were almost non-existent for many women, particularly in rural areas. Access to healthcare for mothers was and still remains poor (Bhadra and Shah, 2007). Boys were preferred over girls for education and many girls could not go to school (Thapa, 2016, p. 100). Instead of protecting and helping women to flourish, the patriarchal Nepali state actively oppressed and discriminated against them.

In fact, women’s everyday life was so miserable and dangerous under patriarchal oppression that, for some, fighting in the war was just another type of war they had to fight. Women had nothing to lose in the insurgency other than the chains of patriarchy (Yami, 2007, p. 54). Common experiences of insecurity for women under the patriarchal state included: the risk of being harmed during their mensuration, as they were not allowed to stay at home and made to stay at a cowshed or in a cave; the risk of falling off the cliff while fetching water or falling off a tree while collecting fodder for the cattle to feed; or dying while giving birth to a baby because it takes days to get to hospital in many parts of

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60 Police operations such as ‘Operation Romeo’ in 1995 and ‘Kilo-Sera-2’ 1998 got the notoriety for dealing with Maoists and their sympathisers including women in atrocious and inhuman manner (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 219, 228; Muni, 2010, p. 8-9; ICTJ, 2010, p. 21)

61 Interview with Subina Shrestha (Date 20/12/2017)

62 This system is known as Chaupadi system in Nepal. According to the traditional belief, girls are considered impure during this period and they have to stay away from home, often in caves and cowsheds (See Tamang, 2016)
the country (Bhadra and Shah, 2007). By joining the Maoist insurgency, women defied the restrictions imposed by the patriarchal society that barred women from taking up many roles outside the domestic sphere. For example, women were barred from general service in the army,\(^{63}\) ploughing land, or building houses.\(^{64}\) For many, Maoists offered the opportunity to fight against these forms of discrimination, oppression, and taboos, and the resistance to patriarchal society gave them freedom, equality, and a sense of empowerment. Former PLA Brigade Vice-Commander Lila Sharma opined,

> After becoming rebels, we broke all the shackles and taboos of the societies such as women must not climb trees, women shouldn’t carry guns, women should not leave home alone, girls should not debate too much, girls should be obedient, and so on. Therefore, carrying a gun was not odd to us.\(^{65}\)

Women felt the need for a country-wide organisation to channel their collective energy in the form of political power that could dismantle a patriarchal system. In the context of Nepal, where a much lesser proportion of women are educated\(^ {66}\) and empowered\(^ {67}\) compared to men, there was a dire need for an organisation that accepted them regardless of their education and skills. Moreover, they were looking on to an organised force that treated them equally, unlike other organisations based on patriarchal ethos and hierarchy. Furthermore, women needed an organisation that could hold the power to change the socio-cultural, economic, and political status quo (Thapa, 2016, p. 100). In the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Maoist political organisation, they found an equal division of labour shifting traditional gender roles and relationships (KC, et al., 2017, p. 184). Hisila Yami explains why women, therefore, chose the PLA to assert their collective political will- “They (women) needed more

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\(^{64}\) During interviews with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017), Hisila Yami (Date 21/12/2017), Lila Sharma (Date 20/12/2017), this issue featured prominently.

\(^{65}\) Interview with Lila Sharma (Date 20/12/2017)

\(^{66}\) According to the Ministry of Education and Sports (2006), the literacy rate (for six years and above) for women was 25 and 42.5 percentage in 1991 and 2001 compared to 34 and 54.5 percentage for men respectively (Bhadra and Shah, 2007, p. 32). Similarly, female/male ratio for the higher education enrollment was just 24/100 (1991) and 26/100 (2001) (Bhadra and Shah, 2007, p. 8).

\(^{67}\) Empowerment is measured in multiple ways. Comparing number of women in decision-making as an indicator, women constituted only 6 % of MPs in the parliament and 17% of Managers in 1990 (Bhadra and Shah, 2007, p. 3)
organisation, army, and power. A woman is nothing on her own... They needed organisation. The most organised sector is the army, isn't it?\footnote{Interview with Hisila Yami (Date 21/12/2017)}

Despite the Maoists welcoming women with open arms in its squads, militias, and party organisation, they used patriarchal masculine standards to assess their worth in the fighting force. Interviews illustrate that women combatants had to prove their capabilities much more than their male counterparts, despite their equal status and position in the PLA (Rai, 2017, p. 203; Thapa, 2016, p. 99; Adhikari, 2016, p. 118). In fact, Maoists were keen to include women once the fighting started, and women showed that they were capable of fighting. It took five years from the start of the war for the party to seriously consider the contribution of women in the institutionalization of continuous revolution and their role in preventing counter-revolution (Comrade Parvati, 2003 in Thapa, 2016, p. 98-99). A male, whether strong or weaker, was naturally believed to be a soldier, whereas women had to be more committed and motivated to prove that they could be a soldier. Hisila Yami recollected,

\begin{quote}
In the beginning, there were no women in police, armed-police, and army. There were no women in intelligence. Once we had them, they (state) also started recruiting women. In some ways, women pulverised the arrogance in men that women cannot fight. Women started shining in such a way that men had to request them not to fight. If they fought recklessly, we would have lost our best fighters.\footnote{Interview with Hisila Yami (Date 21/12/2017)}
\end{quote}

Maoist leaders were equivocal to point out that women were equal in their capability to fight against the patriarchy. Yet, the quest for equal recognition as soldiers put the pressure on women to be extra motivated during the insurgency to be on par with male combatants.
6.3. Revolt against the Patriarchal Institution of Marriage

For Maoist leaders, the rebellion against the institution of marriage was another way that they could fight the state with its co-constituted patriarchal structure. In a conservative society like Nepal, women are not supposed to walk, talk, or stay together with men before marriage. In many cases, a girl has to marry the man of the same caste, religion, and culture chosen by her family. After marrying at an early age, she is expected to spend the rest of her life devoted to her husband, in-laws, and children (Onesto, 1999). By contrast, once women joined the Maoist party, they were generally treated equally to men. Also, within the Maoist party, dowry was banned. They had freedom and equality - they could walk together, talk to men, and even lead men (KC, et al., 2017, p. 184). They could marry a husband of their choice irrespective of caste, ethnicity, religion, and culture once the party sanctioned their match.70 Such a marriage tradition was called a ‘progressive’ marriage because it broke away from the prevalent norms, rules, and cultural traditions in the society, and it did not necessitate sanctification from society and religion. Maoists helped Nepali women wrestle the decision-making power about their marriage and life against their parents and guardians (Leve, 2007, p. 144-45). One female leader explained,

The party gave priority to love marriage. When a couple is bound by love, their relationship becomes sustainable. This was the understanding of our party. We did not validate caste-system. We used to give priority to inter-caste marriage. To eliminate social evils, we prioritised inter-caste marriage and love marriage.71

On the whole, along with not abiding by the norms, tradition, and values associated with marriage, the Maoists substituted it with their rules and practices of marriage. It gave them a ‘progressive’ and ‘revolutionary’ façade. Moreover, the Maoists took control of the institution of marriage thereby controlling the lives of the combatants.

70 Marriage within party was extensively discussed during and after interview with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 20/12/2017). The marriage age for a female was twenty whereas it was twenty-two for a male.
71 Interview with Saraswati Pokharel (Date: 22/01/2018)
6.4. The exploitation of Patriarchy for the ‘Revolution’

By including female combatants in the insurgency, Maoist not only resisted patriarchy but also exploited it for their benefit. Women were also given responsibility in the intelligence in Maoist insurgency according to their capability (Adhikari, 2016, p. 118). The perceived inability of women to fight, and their default disposition as caring, nurturing, and peaceful beings, allowed women to carry out critical intelligence tasks during the insurgency more freely than men (Dalton and Asal, 2011). In addition, women combatants adapted very well in the community where they were deployed to carry out certain intelligence tasks. While men also carried out successful intelligence and reconnaissance work, women had an edge over men. Pampha Bhusal commented,

They (women) would easily adapt themselves to the different environment by becoming a vegetable vendor, milk vendor, by disguising as a business-woman, and by selling meat, vegetable, fruits. Thus, they were very successful in preparing intelligence report…. The state did not believe that women could do this. When they would collect firewood, grass, fodder, they seemed more natural.  

As combatants, women raised less suspicion to security forces- in untraditional roles such as business-woman, and goods vendors, or in common roles such as collecting fire-wood and fodder for cattle. This is striking, as even when women combatants were disguised in unconventional roles, they managed to complete their tasks undetected. The chances of being caught were lesser when they carried out similar tasks while disguised in their domestic roles such as shepherding cattle, collecting fire-woods, etc. Since female combatants had more access and they could carry out such tasks undeterred, interviewees (the Maoist leaders) noted that their intelligence reports were more accurate.  

Similarly, the conservative norms and values attached with patriarchy on many occasions enabled women to shield Maoist leaders from getting caught by the security forces. In traditional Nepalese society, a married woman is not allowed to talk to a stranger, and a woman residing with another man outside the wedlock is unthinkable In rural areas, a lot of villages were devoid of male members because of the threat from both the security forces and Maoists (Manchanda, 2004). On many occasions, women

72 Interview with Maoist leader Pampha Bhusal (Date:17/01/2018)
73 Interview with Maoist Journalist Aruna Rayamajhi (Date:21/12/2017)
saved Maoist leaders from getting caught by pretending a Maoist leader was their husband. It was inconceivable for anyone including security forces to think that a woman in a traditional Nepali society could stay with a stranger. The agenda for women’s liberation and equality also drew their sympathy towards Maoist insurgency, for which they risked their lives and honour to protect Maoist leaders.

**Patriarchy within the ‘revolution’**

Instead of challenging the division of labour in patriarchy, their work was doubled, having to prove themselves as soldiers and simultaneously continuing the traditional feminine roles. Along with having to prove themselves as soldiers, they had to perform double duties by simultaneously continuing with traditional feminine roles. Despite Maoists claiming to dismantle patriarchal system oppressive to women, they too persisted with the patriarchal division of labour when it suited them. The Maoists took advantage of the unique skills of female combatants- a combination of traditional and soldiering skills. A lengthy discussion in a group involving two female leaders indicates such kind of dual expectation from female combatants,

As the sister (Hisila Yami) said, women played a double role- one in the battle and another in the civil dress. Men could be only one army- an army in the combat dress; women were army in civilian attire- from cooking food for the army, protecting men and the army, to building the public relationship. On the other side, they took arms to fight in the battle. Therefore, they played the role of a dual-soldier. Looking that way, isn’t it? (Hisila: Yes.) **Aruna:** From hiding Maoists to working as the sentry for the Maoists- to watch out whether police are coming for a raid or not. Women were the first to wake up early in the morning. Men used to sleep longer- Therefore, women have played a double role.

The dual-duty for women combatants, need to fight and also do support-work simultaneously, did not end with the end of the war in Nepal. Some of the leaders reflected that they are supposed to perform a form of double duty in pursuing their professional career outside the home, and in their primary

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74 Interview with Maoist Journalist Aruna Rayamajhi (Date: 21/12/2017) and Lila Sharma (Date: 20/12/2017)

75 The patriarchal division of labour involves assignment of certain roles for men (productive/skilled/well-paid) and certain roles for women (unproductive or less productive/unskilled or less-skilled/unpaid or less-paid) in a manner that perpetuates the existing power relationship between men and women in the society. Walby (1990, p. 20-21) calls it patriarchal mode of production and patriarchal relations in paid work. I want to call it patriarchal division of labour.

76 Interview with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)
caregiver roles inside the home. It was well reflected in my conversation with a Maoist female leader Saraswati Pokhrel, now deputy speaker of the house in the provincial government in province one. It was expected for a female leader to play a dual-role- support role as well as the professional role. However, for a male, the support role from him is considered an extra asset, but not essential. In the post-war period, reflecting on her struggle in her pursuit of a political career, and her responsibility as a primary caregiver inside the home, Saraswati explained,

We (women) face obstacles in every step...We need to have a will-power to overcome them. We need to convince everyone. I don’t feel difficulty. I’m also a daughter-in-law in this family. I have a very old father-in-law and mother-in-law. I have kids as well... They think that they should support me and do not obstruct my political career.... I do not have much time looking after them. Yet, they are happy to support me.77

Although all the interviewees emphasised that roles assigned to women combatants were similar to men combatants, women rank and file combatants were expected to perform dual-duty, which in some cases, still continues after the end of the war.

In summary, Maoists equated patriarchy with the status quo state to make the state a legitimate target of violent attacks. This helped them to garner support from women who contributed by becoming combatants in significant numbers. However, they utilised patriarchal norms wherever it suited the rebel group, despite this often resulting in an extra-burden on female combatants. In both ways, patriarchy featured dominantly in their narrative of revolt against the old state. However, essentialization of all Nepali women’s experiences as equally oppressed under the patriarchal system requires careful consideration. This is because there is wide diversity in women’s everyday experiences in Nepal conditioned by various systems of oppression and discriminations such as caste, class, social status, ethnicity, education, and geographical location. Next sub-section will use the intersectional feminist framework to further explore attempts of the Maoists to essentialise experiences of all Nepali women as a victim under patriarchy needing rescue.

77 Interview with Maoist leader Saraswati Pokharel (Date: 22/01/2018)
6.5. Intersectional Theoretical Framework & Patriarchy

Based on experiences of a particular group of women during the Maoist insurgency, the matrix of domination within black feminism (Collins, 2009) and decolonial thinking (Shilliam, 2015) can reframe the construction of oppressed/discriminated/less-conscientious Nepali women under a patriarchal system requiring rescue and development. Similarly, these theories help us understand the lack of critical inquiry regarding such hegemonic constructions. Finally, the model of rescuing oppressed Nepali women used by Maoists also foists solutions in the form of movements and struggles but lacks sustained engagement with the subjects (Nepali women at the margin) whom they claimed to be rescuing. Maoist focus on the need for women’s empowerment and liberation from patriarchy was based on an essentialised notion of women’s status as victims who need to be rescued and liberated by Maoist programs of liberation. However, such a constitution of a universal category of women in need of rescue/development/empowerment in Nepal elides the diversity of women’s experience, accompanied by the varying levels of autonomy and, the freedom they felt as combatants. The universal category does not take into account the regional, cultural, ethnic, and religious difference in women’s experience. Similarly, it erases the historicity and effaces the material differences among various groups within Nepal. Seira Tamang (2009) argues that this started with various developmental agencies after the WID (Women in Development) approaches starting in the mid-1970s that promoted the essentialised image of Nepali women as closely aligned with that of Panchayat nation-building enterprise aiming to create a Nepali national identity, ignoring the diversity and complexity of their status and predicaments. This tendency has facilitated the image of Nepali women as constrained by a highly patriarchal caste-ridden Hindu cultural ethos when significant portion of Tibeto-Burman women in Western Hills, the region where Maoists drew a lot of its female combatants, are seen to be less circumscribed by the puritanical Hinduism and purity/pollution concepts (Goswami, 2015; Karki and Seddon, 2003, p. 83-110: Cameron, 1998, Chapter 1). Moreover, development agencies constituted the homogenous category of agency-less ‘Nepali women’ on the basis of shared discrimination, oppression, and backwardness ready to be

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78 Nepal is a diverse country constituted of multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-caste, and multi-religious group spread across Nepal. Nepal has over sixty non-Hindu ethnic groups and more than 100 linguistic groups (Tamang, 2009, p. 64) The status of women is not uniform across these various social-groups (Karki and Seddon, 2003, p. 83 & 101; Cameron, 1998, p. Chapter 1). Women in some groups, particularly various indigenous groups such as Gurung, Limbu, Thakali, etc. enjoy considerable autonomy and have escaped puritanical Hindu restriction for women in marriage, economic activities, and so on.

79 The panchayati system declared Nepali language as the official language, proclaimed Nepal as a Hindu kingdom, and promoted Nepali identity based on Khas-Aryan identity, the identity that most of the rulers and elites hailed from.
uplifted and developed. The Panchayati government was satisfied to propel widely advertised project of infrastructure development- development of roads, hospitals, and industries simultaneously with the development of the less-developed backward women into developed/educated women (Tamang, 2009). Pursuing such a project, development agencies hoped to elevate Nepali women equivalent to their counterparts in the West, with similar interests, needs, desires, ambitions, psyche, and attitudes. The Maoist movement also tended to base ideological and descriptive definitions of patriarchy upon the high-caste Khas (Nepali) speaking Hindu women’s experiences and presented it to be the manifesto for the liberation of all Nepali women. The conception of liberation for women was predominantly premised on the overthrow of a Hindu monarch who also was considered to be the protector of the feudal-patriarchal system. Maoist leaders promised female combatants that once the Hindu monarchy is overthrown, the patriarchal Hindu religion that often excludes and discriminates women would go away (Yami, 2007). Similarly, the feudal system would crumble giving women liberation in a ‘true’ sense. However, this discourse excluded many indigenous and Janajati female combatants who did not follow the Hindu religion strictly and enjoyed significant autonomy in the family (Cameron, 1998, Chapter 1; Goswami, 2015; Karki and Seddon, 2003, p. 83 & 102). Most importantly, the needs and interests of already autonomous women facing other class, linguistic, ethnic, and geographical discriminations, were not considered seriously. To give an example, when I asked about education, some of the female combatants from indigenous backgrounds responded that they now can read, write, and speak the Nepali language because they were taught to do so during the insurgency. These combatants came from various ethno-linguistic backgrounds and many of them could not speak/write/read in the Nepali language. It is ironic that Maoist claimed to fight for the autonomy of these ethnic communities while teaching them the hegemonic Nepali language.

Similarly, the Maoists prioritised class struggle while other vectors of oppression in the case of women such as caste, social status, education, and geographical location were of secondary concern. While women participation in setting the gender agenda was not clear, the inclusive involvement of women from various intersections of oppression became a further distant possibility. Supreme leader of Maoist insurgents Puspa Kamal Dahal, known by name de Guerre ‘Prachanda’, confessed- “I must say that before the launch (of the War) we were not serious on ‘the woman question’, our women comrades
were not at the forefront of the movement...There was not much effort to develop women comrades.”

Furthermore, the insurgency ignored or barely took into account the specific needs, status, and vulnerabilities of women, particularly those belonging to a lower-caste, lower-class, and from the marginalised social groups where patriarchy was not the primary problem. For example, inter-caste or inter-ethnicity marriage helped Maoists led by middle-class upper-caste males to muster their image as the party with progressive credentials, but it also pushed many lower-class/lower-caste women to the risk of being abandoned by their husbands, husband’s family, and the society. Nepal is a patrilineal society where a girl lives with her husband and her husband’s family after the marriage. Since she belonged to the lower caste she was rejected, abused, and abandoned by her husband’s family, while the experience was different for higher caste female combatants marrying lower-caste male combatants. She was readily accepted by her husband’s family because of the prestige and privilege that comes after her higher caste status. These factors added untold miseries upon female ex-combatants who married higher caste male combatants only to be rejected by the husband or her husband’s family after the war.

The Maoist insurgency, despite claiming to be progressive by taking the agenda of gender equality in their manifesto, also relied on the ‘rescue rhetoric’ that aimed at freeing women from the grip of patriarchal discrimination. The subjects of rescue, victims of patriarchal domination, were thought to be incapable to lead their movement for gender equality, needing middle-class educated males to represent their voices and lead the movement. This rescue mission was to be led by male leaders who dominated the agenda-setting at the inception of the Maoist insurgency (Karki and Seddon, 2003, p. 109). There were only two women among a hundred central committee members. One central committee member, Hisila Yami, hailed from upper-middle-class Newar (also upper-caste) family (Gayer, 2013, p. 339). Her father was a cabinet minister and her husband was a second-ranked Maoist leader after supreme leader Prachanda during the Maoist insurgency. The other central committee member, Pampha Bhusal, also hailed from upper-middle-class Brahmin (upper-caste) family. Both of them were well-educated but even the privileged female leaders within Maoist like Hisila Yami felt that

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80 Prachanda in interview with Revolutionary Worker reporter Li Onesto in 1999, three years after the start of the insurgency (Pages 109-110). Full interview in Karki and Seddon (2003, p. Chapter 3)
81 Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi, dated 21/12/2017
male leaders within Maoist were reluctant to relinquish their power and privileges (Yami, 2007). First, fewer women were given the opportunity to lead than what the Maoist gender agenda would suggest (Karki and Seddon, 2003, p. 109). This indicates the gap between the rhetoric of gender equality and the reality of representation within the Maoist party. Secondly, women who leaders within the Maoist party occupied a similar position after the war. There was little mobility of women from the marginalised community to leadership positions. Aruna Rayamajhi observes,

[I]t appeared that the leadership of women was rejected somehow. Still, women were not weak in battle, whether you understood it or not, a gun does not differentiate between male and female. Despite the equal role in people’s war, there was no woman at the top level after the peace-process. Still, now, women do not have a significant role within the party. Despite not visible during the conflict period, this marginalisation of women is visible now. From battle to the ballot, very few women got tickets. Those women who were the leaders at the start of the people’s (Wives of higher caste male leaders usually from higher caste), they are only women leaders in Maoist party now. During the war whoever female combatants became leaders and commanders, where are they now? Are they in Nepalese army integration now? No, they are not.

This leaves an untraversable political gap for the majority of female ex-combatants from the marginalised social group with no or little education, resources, and privileges to raise the issues salient to them. Their voices were always marginalised and silenced. Only female leaders with privilege and status (often from an upper-middle-class, higher-caste, good education, high social status, and based in urban centres) managed to gain much from the insurgency.

In order to realistically reflect the disadvantage and discrimination faced by female ex-combatants at the margin, the theoretical concept of ‘matrix of domination’ in black feminism is useful. The concept of a matrix of domination encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organised through diverse local realities (Collins, 2009, p. 246-247). The essentialization of Nepali women’s experience under patriarchy also reveals the fallacy of assuming that it affects all Nepali women in the same way and undermines the other vectors of oppressions: caste, class, social status, ethnicity, education, and

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82 Approval of party as election candidate or appointment of leaders during the conflict era.
83 Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi, date 21/12/2017
geographical location. Although black feminism focuses on the intersection of race, class, and gender in United States context, it can be used as a model that captures other systems of oppression, discriminations, and identifiers whose mutual construction impacts lives of women in different context and locations. By using intersectional paradigms to explain matrix of domination in Nepali context and constitution of individual Nepali woman’s individual and collective agency within it, black feminism is instrumental here to understand and reconceptualise the social relations of domination and resistance.

The lack of intersectional paradigm in framing and conducting research on the Maoist insurgency in Nepal also has given way to the lack of academic scrutiny on the divergence between Maoist female leaders who mostly hailed from privileged background (higher caste/higher class/city area/educated family/powerful political family), and marginalised groups (lower caste/lower-class/remote rural area/uneducated family) on the analytical level. Seira Tamang (2009) was the first scholar to investigate women’s involvement in Maoist insurgency in Nepal through intersectional lenses, arguing that the diverse identities, experiences, positions, and voices of Nepalese women involved in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal were expended in the construction of an ‘oppressed and exploited Nepali woman’ modelled more on the Brahmin/Kshetri/Newar women, from the Hindu religion than the women from ethnic/caste communities such as Tibeto-Burman women from diverse religious backgrounds. The key draw for Nepali women in Maoist insurgency was freedom from patriarchal oppression and greater autonomy. Despite suffering no less structural patriarchal discrimination, Tibeto-Burman women were less subjected to puritanical Hinduism that restricts women’s roles outside domestic circumference compared to Brahmin/Kshetri/Newar women. Recently, KC, et al., 2018 attempt to use intersectionality approach to take into account experiences of female combatants from diverse caste, class, and ethnic backgrounds. While they have indicated the proper direction for research on this topic, more contribution is needed.

Finally, the modality of the revolution was formulated, led, and advanced predominantly by the upper-middle-class, high-caste males (Karki and Seddon, 2003: 109). Although vocally claiming the liberation and upliftment of women oppressed and exploited by the patriarchal system, there were few women in leadership positions. One of the most cited incidents succinctly explains the resistance in the Maoist leadership to put women in a leadership position to influence the policy and practice of the party. When asked about no women in Maoist delegation for the peace talks with the government during the civil war, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, second-ranked Maoist leader leading the Maoist delegation, replied
reporters that they do not need a woman to represent agendas for women's equality (Tamang, 2009). This implies the age-old patriarchal thinking that men do know women’s problem, needs, and complexities. Men are so capable/conscious/sensible enough to represent women’s voice. A father/brother/husband can represent the voice of daughter/sister/wife. Secondly, it devalues women’s voices/experiences/propositions so that it is not necessary to give women a space to spell out their voices, experiences, and proposals for peace. This tendency can be seen within the continuum of patriarchy as an answer to the very problems rooted in it. Maoist party was not impermeable to it. Moreover, whenever opportunities for women existed, it was taken up by women from a relatively privileged background.84

Such ostensive presumption of one group knowing the reality, suffering, demoralisation, humiliation of the particular oppressed group better than the oppressed group itself parallels the epistemic superiority of colonial masters over subaltern subjects (Shilliam, 2015). Similar to Gramscian logic where an oppressed group such as peasantry is considered epistemically inferior for the intellectual expression of their lived experiences, experiences of being dominated and exploited (Gramsci quoted in Shilliam, 2015, p. 7). This constitutes the double marginalisation of the marginalised people in a sense they are marginalised by the oppressive system but such marginalisation is further exploited by the group proclaiming to represent their voice but not letting them speak. In this context, letting subaltern, marginalised, and oppressed people speak for themselves provides the real possibility for the retrieval of thought and action that address the epistemic injustice in ways otherwise to elite gaze and hegemonic constructions.

Once the insurgency was over, and after the Maoist leaders came to the power by winning the election in 2008, the political presupposition was that every female combatant was empowered and every Nepali woman in the country was empowered and equal to men because a couple of female leaders within Maoists had come to power.85 This presupposition was hinged on the premise that the feudal system propped up by the monarchical rule was the source of patriarchal oppression and exploitation of women. Maoist leaders argued that once monarchy is overthrown, feudalism will crumble and only then women will be liberated and equal. This turned out to be true for the handful cases of women and female ex-combatants who got elected, occupied government offices, and became cabinet ministers. Also, many

84 Interview with Deepak Thapa, date 21/11/2017
85 Interview with Deepak Thapa, date 21/11/2017
women along with former female combatants acquired seats in the parliament through the 33 percent reservation system. Maoists were the leading force in proposing and implementing these significant changes in favour of Nepali women (Tamang, 2009). However, although the war had ended, the systemic conflicts continued in the majority of female ex-combatants’ lives. Most of the women who were elected, occupied government offices, and became cabinet ministers hailed from the elite backgrounds—either higher caste/higher class/city area/educated family/powerful political family. Many female combatants, often from the lower-caste/lower-class/remote rural area/uneducated family/marginalised group felt left out from so-called radical changes in the society. Many female combatants belonging to higher castes but from lower economic statuses, or living in rural areas, also felt the ostracisation and difficulty in reintegrating with society (Goswamy, 2015). All of the female combatants that I interviewed except one were resettled in a new place away, from their homes and community because of this ostracisation which conforms to earlier research by Subedi (2014, p. 241) and Bhandari (2015, p. 67). The Maoist insurgency failed to envision liberation of women despite a successful armed struggle which they do not hesitate to call a revolution.

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86 Interview with Deepak Thapa (date 21/11/2017) and Aruna Rayamajhi (date 21/12/2017)
6.6 Chapter Conclusion

In summary, the Maoists claimed their insurgency was to establish an egalitarian society that also included gender equality. They saw patriarchy under the feudal monarchical system to be the cause of exploitation and discrimination of all women in Nepal. They projected the state as the visual manifestation of patriarchy and made it a legitimate target to change the status quo and bring change. This helped them to mobilise women in the promise of ending all forms of exploitation and oppression against women. Women responded and contributed greatly in the insurgency even by taking masculine roles like soldiering in significant numbers. Yet, the female combatants at the intersection of multiple systems of oppressions become voiceless in the struggle for supposedly their own liberation. The design of the women’s struggle for equality within Maoist insurgency represented the experiences and perspectives of men and at best experiences and perspectives of women from the privileged class, caste, social status, educational status, and urban centres. Inter-caste marriage was seen as a stimulus for social change without considering possible repercussions to women combatants from the lower-caste, lower-class, and low social status. Moreover, Maoists utilised patriarchal norms wherever it suited the rebel group, often resulting in burden, suffering, and pain on female combatants from the marginalised social group.

The application of intersectional theory along with decolonial thinking by Shilliam (2015) is useful to reveal three key aspects of the involvement of female combatants in the Maoist insurgency of Nepal. The construction of ‘average oppressed Nepali woman’ at the expense of diversity; lack of an intersectional framework that results in perpetuating the voices of elites in the ostensive presumption of representing the real voices of marginalised female combatants; and finally the reductive design of movements, revolt, and struggle as a solution to patriarchal oppression and discriminations against Nepali woman are three important facets that characterise involvement of female combatants in Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Although patriarchy constitutes a major source of oppression and exploitation of women in Nepal, it affects women from different social groupings in different ways. Moreover, inadequate attention to equally repressive other systems of oppression and exploitations such as class, caste, social status, and geographical location results in leaving out the majority of female ex-combatants at the margin from realizing positive change in their lives in spite of numerous political upheavals. Only taking the intersectional approach and talking to female ex-combatants at the margin and at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, the complete and realistic picture of motivation
and expectations of female ex-combatants in joining the war, their experiences of war and post-war period can emerge. The next chapter will extend the intersectional theoretical framework to the experiences of female ex-combatants during Maoist insurgency in Nepal.
7. **Experiences During the War**

7.1. **Chapter Introduction**

One of the significant findings of analysing the interviews of female ex-combatants with their leaders and experts on the topic was their unanimous emphasis on the greater contribution of women combatants in the sustenance and the success of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Notwithstanding the constraints and contradictions of agency acquired through violence, the Maoist insurgency in Nepal also offered female combatants the ability to realise their potential within the insurgency, as agents transforming the socio-political landscape of Nepal. While their agency is contested in different ways, interviews with the female ex-combatants revealed that they made unique and significant contributions to the Maoist insurgency and simultaneously disrupted the myth that women cannot be good soldiers. The women combatants showed themselves to be a great asset to the Maoists in their struggle against the better-resourced state forces in Nepal. Counter to the gendered conceptualizations of war as a realm where only men fight and sacrifice their bodies for women and children, women fighters proved equally capable of fighting the war and sacrificing their bodies in what they perceived to be in the needs of society and the nation. Besides, the interviews with female ex-combatants indicate that they were honest, loyal, and disciplined, making imperative for the Maoist leaders and commanders to utilise their skills and capabilities in the insurgency. However, the loyalty of female combatants also turned out to be due to the lack of options, not necessarily part of their nature. Nevertheless, female combatants played a vital role not only in fighting but also in other vital functions such as intelligence operations.

On the other hand, the Maoist leaders and experts on the topic also converged on the greater role played by female combatants. In fact, there were striking similarities in the way they described the capabilities of female combatants and their qualities as combatants in the context of their insurgency in Nepal. Further, they stressed that female combatants compensated for the lack of physical strength compared to the male combatants through more commitment, honesty, and discipline. Moreover, they stressed that female combatants were biologically conditioned to endure in protracted conflict. Maoist leaders especially explained how female combatants contributed to the prolongation and success of the Maoist insurgency by enhancing legitimacy, spreading Maoist political agendas, improving public relations, and providing vital support work.
However, the contribution of female combatants towards the Maoist insurgency remains incomplete if we do not take into account how they managed to fit themselves into the male-dominated combat group, performing conduct of war which is predominantly a masculine domain. The interviews with female ex-combatants on combat cohesion disrupts the dominant myth that combat becomes inefficient when women are included in the fighting unit along with the male combatants. Nevertheless, this mixed-gender combat cohesion is not without costs, and the costs are higher for female combatants, mainly in their ostracisation by society during and after the war.

Given the themes that emerged after the analysis of interviews related to the female ex-combatants’ experience during the Maoist insurgency- from capability and qualities of female combatants to their contribution to the insurgency and cohesion in the group- taking female ex-combatants’ voices to the front and centre of the analysis helps in understanding the insurgency in its full spectrum. Talking to female ex-combatants, particularly those under the ‘matrix of domination’ offers a unique perspective to the conflict. As discussed later in the chapter, many facets of their experiences of war- their understanding of agency, their experiences of path-dependency, and lack of options after joining the war manifested in the boundedness with the rebel group, and cohesion in rebel group, and subsequent delusion of the Maoist insurgency- could only be understood in the context of their being at the intersection of multiple systems of oppressions which shape their expectations from the insurgency and experiences that follow. Furthermore, these expectations, experiences, and ideas that emanate with the interaction between their expectations and experiences need individual focus. The intersectional theoretical framework offers the analytical toolbox to weave together the layers of complexity embedded in such context-informed experiences of war and help us understand it in its entirety.
7.2. Agency Question

Many traditional conceptions of the agency are unable to accommodate the sense of empowerment and agency experienced by female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Interviews with the female ex-combatants challenge the tendency in certain feminist IR analyses to associate empowerment with only nonviolent action, and to divide empowerment into its political and economic dimensions, predominantly focusing on the latter (Kunz, 2017, p. 737). The focus on the deliberation, judgment, and well-informed choice by feminist theorists (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963) becomes insufficient in the context of Nepal when female combatants joined the Maoist group. Many of the women were below the age of sixteen when they joined the Maoist party or became affiliated with it, confirming some of the other studies on female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (Shakya, 2003, p. 394). Some of the female ex-combatants revealed that they were at secondary school and left school to join the Maoist insurgency. Similarly, many of them explained that they did not exactly know what the insurgency was really about. Many female combatants did not know the gender policies of the Maoists. Moreover, some of these women could not read and write (Adhikari, 2006, p. 67 & 73), but they made a conscious decision to join the insurgency because they saw their empowerment not within the four walls of the house, but through active engagement in politics and a political movement. Many of them did not exhibit rational, objective, meditated and goal-oriented judgements on their career in joining the insurgency, as emphasised by rational choice theory. Although some women were not fully informed about the Maoist’s policies and goals, they still made conscious and calculated decisions about joining the insurgency. One female ex-combatant explained that although they lacked an informed judgement, in the sense, that they did not put much faith on the policy of the Maoists, it did not mean that they did not carefully consider the situation they were in as the insurgency started.

More than the party policy, we joined the movement against inequality for equal rights. Therefore, we were ready to do anything against the old state system that limited women in the kitchen and four-walls of the house. When we started understanding the people’s war positively, we joined the Maoist party thinking that it was good for us and will do something for us. Rather than waiting for the party policy, we thought that we have to contribute more than men to secure our rights. Therefore, women got involved in the people’s war. 87

87 Interview with Tika Oli (Date 13/12/ 2018)
The characterization of the female combatants as vulnerable beings unconsciously drawn into the political projects of men is not accurate in this case. Many female combatants had an inductive understanding that the Maoists stood for an egalitarian vision of a society where women are considered equal to men. Female combatants had experienced the praxis of the Maoist policies - including action against the oppression of women. They had seen abusive husbands being corrected, domestic violence against women being outlawed, sales of alcohol being banned, gambling being outlawed, gender-discriminatory laws and norms being annulled and violated, oppressive and exploitative landowners being punished, corrupted government officials being chased away, and violent police forces being attacked (Adhikari, 2006, p. 69-75). They did not necessarily use the concepts of empowerment and agency to describe their aspirations; however, they described their commitment to escaping everyday experiences of powerlessness, helplessness, neglect, being beaten and abused, and scraping for mere existence in their lives. Women expressed a common understanding of freedom/agency/empowerment as stepping outside domesticity (Adhikari, 2006, p. 74). Although there were risks to this choice, they argued that at least the freedom was possible through this avenue and they could at least die in their own terms while potentially freeing fellow sisters from the manacles of patriarchal discrimination and oppression. In short, women made calculated, albeit sometimes with limited information, decisions to participate in an egalitarian movement that might shift women’s social conditions more generally, rather than dying because of the lack of nutrition, healthcare, or from abuse of their husbands. These are the sorts of complicated motivations shaping women’s decisions to join rebel groups. Binary understandings of victim/agent cannot account for the very real and complex factors that both constrained these women but also motivated them to act politically.

The Maoist insurgency invited these women with open arms providing a collective platform for fighting their individual grievances. Meaningful martyrdom in the name of the revolution seemed an act of freedom and dignity for some female ex-combatants in contrast to the existence in the society that rendered them sub-human. For many, martyrdom allowed them to have some meaning in glorious death (Gayer, 2013, p. 334) rather than dying meaninglessly in a war they had limited control over. They wanted to be agents of change and transformation in society. They went beyond thinking for their own rights to fight and considered the broader collective right of society. In this context, the concept of individual agency cannot capture the women’s motivation to alter, redefine, reproduce the social structure. A former female ex-combatant explains,
I think we did good by becoming female combatants because had we not been there, attitudes like women cannot do anything, they are housewives, and they are only birth-machines producing babies, would not have changed. There is still this kind of thinking- some old people still think this way. However, I think, we women proved that we can fight, and we can do anything.88

Moreover, some female ex-combatants emphasised that their decision and actions were guided by a sense of duty for gender equality in society, rather than individual desire. They saw themselves as essential agents in widespread efforts to improve their status in society. By letting men fight for their liberation, they risked lending their destiny into the hands of men. They felt even though the playing field was not necessarily level for them, they were ready to do their part- fighting equally for their equal rights and for political change in the society. Another female ex-combatant explained, “[Had women not fought war] It would have been a male-dominated country. Women would not have gotten equal rights. For equal rights, we also need to fight equally.”89

The individual agency, rational choice, and empowerment that emphasises individual fulfilment does not sufficiently characterise participation of women willing to take on combat roles and die so that their fellow women and their sisters and daughters can live a dignified life. The longing for collective voice and transformation rather than individual fulfilment is an essential part of black feminism. Black feminism with its focus collective sense of need for change (hooks, 2000, p. 11), and women speaking and acting for themselves (rather than letting men being their spokesperson and liberator) from a position of subordination (Collins, 2009, p. viii-x) can be useful here to understand the experience of war by female combatants during Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

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88 Interview with Birshu Gharti (Date 28/12/ 2017)
89 Interview with Hiramoti Pun (Date 02/01/ 2018)
7.3. Myths Debunked: Women cannot be Good Soldiers

While the willingness of women in Nepal to contribute to the Maoist insurgency as combatants complicates the question of their agency, it also simultaneously disrupts the dominant perception of the ideal soldier being male-only. The conception of the war as a masculine enterprise with men sacrificing their bodies on behalf of the women and children became inadequate to explain the extraordinary contribution of the women combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Despite the initial scepticism on the capability of the female combatants, they managed to change such perception as incorrect and biased. The female ex-combatants that I interviewed characterised themselves to be honest, loyal, and as committed to the cause of insurgency as men. Moreover, in addition to their contributions on the frontline, they were had other vital roles in intelligence and logistics. Importantly, the interviews defied the common distinction between combat and ‘support’ roles. The ideal of a combatant as someone on the ‘frontlines’ carrying arms did not always readily apply to the condition of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, and this possibly extends to many civil wars around the world. The distinction between combat and support was blurred. In fact, the interviews suggest that some of the more risky war duties did not involve armed combat. For example, some of the female combatants were tasked with roles they described as highly insecure, such as scouting and intelligence gathering. These roles were risky because rebels could be arrested, tortured, and killed. Moreover, in most cases, they had to operate alone, unlike in the combat where they have fellow comrades to fight along with them against the enemy.90

Although the female combatants challenged social norms and were often treated with more respect within rebel groups than they would be in their communities, sexism and discrimination persisted in the insurgency, especially at the beginning of the war. For example, some male soldiers, sharing the prevalent perception in the broader Nepalese society, questioned the utility of women outside their homes and family. Some of the female ex-combatants interviewed acknowledged that they were led to internalise the inferiority of their existence, even in a conflict challenging the state and its dominating apparatuses. As a result, women had to fight two wars simultaneously- first, the internal war against discrimination and distrust from some sections of the rebel group and second, the external war with the enemy. One female ex-combatant recalls, “Men had an illusion that women could not contribute

90 Interview with Saraswati Pokharel (Date 22/01/2018)
anything other than the service in the kitchen. Women also had such an illusion. Now everyone understands that women can also fight, women can do anything."91

While vestiges of societal prejudices and biases towards women regarding their ability to fight and lead combat operations persisted, women ex-combatants explained that such biases started to fade away once the female combatants began fulfilling roles and duties assigned to them successfully. A female ex-company commander during the insurgency recalled,

Little bit sense of superiority was there in men. In my experience, women had to carry a similar load as men combatants. However, women would have different problems such as periods. In such cases, men had to help them. Women would feel low self-esteem after that. Men would feel that without their help women could not move forward. That’s my understanding based on my experiences. But, there was not any problem of anger, discord or grudge in the group.92

Likewise, the leadership and commanders were hesitant in the beginning to lend leadership and command to a female combatant during the combat operations. This contradicted Maoists’ proclamation of the equal division of labour and equality between men and women in the group since they encouraged the inclusion of more women in the fighting force. However, once the female combatants started proving their capability in the war, more and more female combatants were given higher responsibilities. Another female ex-combatant observed,

There was equal treatment to both the male and female members. Yet, in many cases, the leadership would hesitate to give women combatants the authority to command thinking that they may not be able to take responsibility. As I said before, the whole country is patriarchal. With this tendency, they would be extra careful about the missions and campaigns when women are given the command to ensure that it is successful. That’s it. Nothing else.93

Moreover, the barriers for women in leadership roles in the rebel group were a frequent topic of discussion. There were some concerns regarding the ability of women to fight and lead the battle. However, this was not considered to be a significant issue as the female combatants persisted in voicing their concerns regarding their representation in the People’s Liberation Army. Slowly and steadily, the

91 Interview with Junmaya Thapa (Date 02/01/ 2018)
92 Interview with Ganga Karki Puja (Date 12/12/2017)
93 Interview with Ruby Shrestha (Date 27/11/2017)
leadership began giving leadership opportunities to the female combatants. One former female combatant explained,

There were few incidences [of distrust of the capability of female combatant] but we would discuss upon that. After the discussion, we would resolve that. It was a group after all. These things can happen in the group, but it was not a big issue.94

Female combatants were not content with the support role that they were given initially. They always wanted to contribute to the revolution by being at the forefront of the battlefield. They wanted to prove their worth and clear the scepticisms even if that meant dying while fighting. One female ex-combatant explained,

At that time, I would argue if I did not get a chance to participate in the battle. I have to go to battle, I have to fight, and I have to die. This was the thinking at that time.95

While these interviews do not conclude that all women aspire to be, and can actually become good soldiers, it debunks the myth that soldiering roles are exclusively a masculine preserve and privilege. Yet, in doing so they also had to endure constant pressure to show extra commitment and performance to prove their worth as a combatant. The next sub-section further explains that the female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal not only overcame the scepticism of their male counterparts and their leaders regarding their capabilities, they also demonstrated qualities fitting an ideal soldier on many occasions as someone who is self-less, brave, and does not hesitate to sacrifice his body for the collective cause. Moreover, they were gradually able to win trust in gaining leadership positions over the course of the war.

94 Interview with Ubjani Roka (Date 04/01/2018)
95 Interview with Deumaya Budha (Date 04/01/2018)
Honesty, Discipline, and Commitment

The extraordinary level of honesty, commitment, and discipline in the female combatants challenged the dominant belief that male combatants are always superior to female combatants in each aspect of the war in the context of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. The female combatants actively engaged in all combat and guerrilla units in the militancy operations. They held responsibilities equal to their male counterparts (Upreti, et al., 2018, p. 42). The female combatants repaid the responsiveness of the leadership to the aspirations of female combatants with their relentless revolutionary zeal and extraordinary bravery. There were honest, loyal, and deeply committed to the cause of the insurgency (Gayer, 2013, p. 341). In some instances, some interviewees claimed the female combatants to be more capable than the male combatants at the battlefield. A former female combatant recalled,

I don't want to criticise our male counterparts here, however, men were clever and they used to think of themselves only while facing the enemy. Women combatants wanted to be at the forefront of the battle. Women always fought bravely. The party duly appreciated their contribution. Because of their bravery, women were able to reach a high level such as brigade commander, brigade commissar, and division commissar.96

Even in the most testing times, most of the interviewees emphasised that the female combatants kept their loyalty to the party intact. Reflecting on their past combat experience, many female combatants recalled that the women combatants were least likely to surrender and reveal details about the rebel group on being detained (Gayer, 2013, p. 341). The female combatants prioritised the party and revolution above anything, even themselves. A former female company commander explained,

We did not surrender before the enemies. Men might have surrendered. They let their weapons get taken away from them by the security forces, but the women combatants never did that. Many friends got caught and put into jail. You might have come across some of them. Whatever would happen to us, despite extensive torture and many years of detention, we did not divulge secrets to them. Many times, I had also been encircled by the enemy. I was able to escape….Because of our participation, the people’s war benefitted a lot.97

96 Interview with Tika Oli (Date 13/12/ 2018)
97 Interview with Shashi Gurung (Date 05/01/ 2018)
Moreover, the interviewees explained that they and other female combatants they knew did not lose hope even when their male counterparts became hopeless. The female combatants displayed greater resilience even when their side had to suffer a ferocious offensive from the enemy. Another former female combatant testified,

Under continuous firing, some battalion commanders would try to withdraw. Even when the men would withdraw, the women would keep marching forward in the battle. Therefore, many battles were successful because of the role played by women.98

Stories such as these showcase the incredible instances of valour by the female ex-combatants. These anecdotes came frequently in the interviews with both the Maoist leaders and the female ex-combatants. The explanation behind such extraordinary courage and performance could be a combination of multiple factors. While honesty, discipline, deep commitment towards the insurgency in female combatants might explain some aspects, the next sub-section attempts to consider if this could also be the result of lack of alternative choices for the female combatants. Again, this approach complicates the binaries of empowered/duped by exposing the complicated array of factors motivating women to serve with rebel units.

Loyalty as a Lack of Options?

Interviews with female combatants revealed that female combatants were more likely to die for the cause than betray the revolution. However, it also arose from the interviews with the female ex-combatants that the female combatants lacked tangible options outside the rebel group, even if they decided to leave the group during the insurgency. The interviews with Maoist leaders emphasised that the female combatants were honest and loyal to the Maoist party. However, the binary framing of the actors as either the good/righteous/perfect or the bad/degraded/flawed ones does not help understand the complex decision-making process of the combatants in the civil war. It is not enough to say that women stayed in the rebel group and fought hard because they were loyal. Interviewees demonstrated that loyalty in the context of civil war is complicated. One major complication was that the female combatants had few options outside the insurgency; therefore, the chances of them leaving or deserting the rebel group were very low. This could be perceived as an instance of fierce loyalty, or self-

98 Interview with Ruby Shrestha (Date 27/11/ 2017)
preservation and practicality. Furthermore, the inherent perception of the female combatants as being abnormal in Nepalese society dissuaded them from leaving as they were aware that their re-integration into society would be difficult.

The female combatants’ social constraints compelled them to commit to the rebel group. Most of the female combatants lacked documents to travel both within and outside the country because many of them defied their families to join the insurgency. Without the support of their parents, they could not obtain citizenship. To find accommodation in the city, people needed some identification (such as a citizenship card) due to an emergency ruling from the government (Billingsley, 2018). The Army could come in and search for any accommodation without any prior notice and the lack of having identification could land the female combatants in trouble. Most of the rebel women did not have such identification. Unlike men, they could not escape the war to gain employment overseas because there was a restriction on their overseas employment in some parts of worlds such as Gulf countries in the Middle-East (Adhikari, 2006). A former female company commander explained,

There was no guarantee of his/her security even after forsaking war. Therefore, they did not want to desert during the conflict. This is one thing. Next thing, it was not possible to stay in Nepal even after leaving the war. For a male combatant, it was possible to go to India after leaving the group, but it was not possible for a female combatant to seek employment in India after leaving the group…. It was not possible for them to go for overseas employment. Therefore, many people thought that the war was the only alternative for them and they stayed in the group.99

Similarly, discrimination in education against girls (Adhikari, 2006) meant that the female combatants were less qualified to take up the scarce employment opportunities to sustain themselves in a new place. Most of the female combatants who joined the rebel group were deprived of formal education. Many of them left school to join the rebel group. Their settlement in new places and cities was also difficult because of the lack of education and training to get jobs. One female ex-combatant explains the situation for the female combatants during the war-

99 Interview with Ganga Karki ‘Puja’ (Date 12/12/ 2017)
I feel that at that time the women would face more difficulties than men. Men were more educated and clever than women. They could go overseas. Those men who wanted to leave and had citizenship, went to India. It was easier for them. However, women needed to stay in their village if they got married and left the party. In the village, people know that she had been with Maoists. The Army could have killed them. It was better to stay in the rebel group. They had to be in the group despite hardships and difficulties.\textsuperscript{100}

Finally, the women who had joined the rebel group were considered to be not normal which made their reintegration back into the community after joining the war very difficult. Moreover, after deserting the rebel group, coming back to the community was risky because the security forces could identify them as Maoists. It echoes with what Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) coined ‘Mother, Monster, and Whore’ narrative. The perception of the female combatants as a monster with an abnormality, a mother to avenge the death in her family, or a whore to spend time with men in the rebel group remained prevalent. Many female combatants did not want to reveal their identity because of the stigmas attached to her for being a combatant, even after the end of the insurgency in Nepal (Upreti and Shivakoty, 2018, p. 83). One former female combatant tells her experience,

\begin{quote}
After the demobilization [after the peace-process], I naturally felt bad. In terms of coming back to society, I felt difficulty in the beginning. Still feeling difficulty now. It was like being possessed by the evil spirits as believed in the society\textsuperscript{101}
\end{quote}

Loyalty was complicated and possibly shaped by the lack of mobility options and societal constraints. Exploring the experiences of war by the female combatants at the intersection of various systems of subordination can bring the nuances and complexities in their narratives which also shape their choices and opportunities. Intersectional frameworks embedded in black feminism helps to bring these voices, complicate the dominant narratives, and provide a holistic picture of the war. Attributes of abnormality ascribed to women engaged in the violence by the society might have constrained the female combatants from leaving but it also enabled them to play a vital role in the area of intelligence gathering and logistic. Furthermore, the following sub-section demonstrates how Maoists used gender stereotypes to their advantage by employing the female combatants in the intelligence-related tasks.

\textsuperscript{100} Interview with Nandakali Darlami Bohora (Date 05/01/ 2018)

\textsuperscript{101} Interview with Ubjani Roka (Date 03/01/ 2018)
7.4. Role in Intelligence

During the insurgency, every battle age male adult was considered to be a Maoist suspect, whereas this was not the case for the women. Interviews indicate that female combatants performed particularly well in the intelligence work for the rebel groups. While interviews with the leaders and commanders also highlighted the utility of the female combatants in intelligence operations during the insurgency, interviews with the female combatants illustrate the processes at work which made them so successful. Since the army and police consisted of the male members, employing the women could be effective because they could use their sexuality to extract the information. Similarly, the women were not particularly seen to be a security threat by the security forces, which enabled them to do intelligence work undetected. Moreover, women could mingle in society easily so that they could complete their tasks smoothly.

While love and marriage within rebel group were allowed and even encouraged, the Maoist party also encouraged its cadres and female combatants in intelligence to use ‘libidinal tactics’ with the enemy in order to glean intelligence and weapon. In short, women were encouraged to exploit their sexuality in order to get information and intelligence. The perceived honesty and loyalty of female combatants made them trustworthy for such operations and they were used frequently. One female ex-combatant who was also involved in such intelligence tasks elaborated,

Our party used women most. Because it was easier for them. For example, in one incident where I was involved….. I pretended to be the sister of a real saving collector and went to army….I trapped a soldier into love. I went to the army canteen to eat. I scanned the arsenal area, officer’s quarter, and so on. I did a reconnaissance of the barrack there….We had to do anything…For men, it is difficult because there were only men in the police and army. Even if there were women, they are not given infantry responsibility.

Similarly, the very stereotypical view of women in society as naturally peaceful, caring and compassionate beings that could do no harm to others enabled female combatants to have greater access to carry out their intelligence tasks effectively. This also corresponds to a body of literature that

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102 Laurent Gayer (2013) uses ‘libidinal politics’ to describe use of love, marriage, and sex to gain control over its combatants within the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. I use ‘libidinal tactics’ to refer to the use of sexual appeal of female combatants to the tactical advantage during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal

103 Interview with Kamala Sharma (Date 22/01/ 2018)
highlights that women can have greater access to the target due to the prevalent gender stereotypes that do not see them as a threat (Davis, 2017, p. 2; Jaber, 2003, p. 6; Friedman, 2008, p. 43). They could do vital intelligence work undetected. The Maoists exploited this advantage during the insurgency. A female company commander during Maoist insurgency exemplified this through an anecdote involving her,

In some cases, women were given more priorities in activities such as intelligence gathering. It was easier for women because this society thinks that only men are considered to be thieves. Even today women are not considered as suspects. They are easily left without suspicion. During the emergency rule in the Maoist insurgency, it was the case. I used to travel frequently to many places [name of places hidden] as a part of the operation. Our male colleagues used to be searched in the army check-points, however, I was not. The Maoist party would prioritise women at this (intelligence operations). ¹⁰⁴

Finally, the women combatants could quickly adjust to a new situation, making them very effective in doing intelligence work in new environments. As explained above, the tendency of society to not consider women as a threat made it easier for them to win the trust and make friends in a new place and environment. In Nepal, the Maoists mostly controlled and operated in rural areas. Maoists had to take shelter in villages during/before/after the military campaign. People within these communities had a special sympathy for women combatants. A former battalion commander quoted, “In INT (Intelligence), women could adjust and mingle in any situation. They could easily mix in the village. People sympathised them.”¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, their ability to win the goodwill of the people by helping them in their daily domestic chores helped female combatants easily mingle with the new environment. The women spies could easily integrate into a new household by helping families with daily household chores. As the household chores are mostly confined within the privacy of homes, a woman acting as a spy could elude suspicion. Also, it facilitated greater interaction with the family, particularly women and children, allowing them to win trust which is vital for intelligence work. Another former female battalion commander explained,

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Ganga Karki ‘Puja’ (Date 12/12/ 2017)
¹⁰⁵ Interview with Man Kumari Mahat ‘Shanti’ (Date 02/01/ 2018)
For example, women could get food easily. They were pragmatic. They helped families with household chores—washing utensils, cooking food, washing clothes, cleaning the house, and so on. Naturally, the women were good at adjusting in a new society...But it seemed awkward for men spies/soldiers doing such duties. Later, they got used to it. Still, in many societies, men are not supposed to do such tasks.106

The female combatants’ experience of war is complicated and fails to fit into pre-existing victim/agent binary. Dominant theories questioned their agency and their motivations were invalidated because they did not follow rationality for the individual gain. Moreover, their collective thinking and self-sacrifice for the sake of collective gains could only be understood through black feminism. While there was considerable scepticism at the beginning regarding the women’s appropriateness as combatants and their ability to lead, they were able to shred various scepticisms regarding their inability to contribute to the insurgency as a good combatant and even as a commander. They proved their worth by being honest, loyal and committed to the cause of the insurgency. However, such loyalty in many cases can be attributed to the lack of options and opportunities, and higher costs leaving the group. Nevertheless, the combination of loyalty with the prevalence of many gender stereotypes in society allowed them to play instrumental roles in intelligence. Female ex-combatants’ experience of being judged through the masculine standards in the rebel group and sense of pride and achievement in being able to exceed the expectations during the war could only be understood in the context of their lived experiences. Their lived experiences are shaped largely by their being at the intersection of umpteen systems of oppressions/discriminations/alienations such as class, caste, social status, ethnicity, educational status, and geographical location. The intersectional theoretical framework with its relentless focus on voices marginalised at the intersection of various systems of oppression/discrimination/alienation is the most effective tool to map out the messiness of war. The next section will further extend the perspectives of the Maoist leaders and the experts on the contribution of female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

106 Interview with Man Kumari Mahat ‘Shanti’ (Date 02/01/ 2018)
7.5. Unique Qualities of Female Combatants Contributing to the Maoist Insurgency

The interviews with Maoist leaders and experts concurred that the unique qualities of the female combatants were suitable to the condition of guerrilla warfare during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, and they contributed to the sustenance and the success of the insurgency. Experts on the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Maoist commanders and leaders, and a former commander of the Nepalese army that fought the Maoists also highlighted that the women combatants were honest, trustworthy, loyal, deeply determined, and strictly disciplined. The female combatants were seen as equally capable in fighting— if not more capable— and endured longer in an adverse environment. For a rebel group, aiming to supplant the existing government, these qualities were very important. In the context of Nepal, such qualities of the female combatants helped Maoists to endure longer for a decade. The Maoist perseverance in the insurgency eventually pressurised the government and extract political concessions towards the end of the insurgency that concluded with the peaceful political settlement.

Honesty, Loyalty, Trustworthiness, and Discipline

In the interviews, almost all the leaders and commanders that led and commanded female combatants, and the commander that commanded the army against the Maoist female combatants during the Maoist insurgency were unequivocal in the characterization of female combatants as honest, loyal, trustworthy, and having the ability to conceal and defend confidential information. The characterization of female combatants’ attachment to the cause of insurgency ranged from a positive, ‘Iron-fortress of revolution’ preventing counter-revolution and carrying on the revolution (Yami, 2007, p. 3), to a pejoratively attributed ‘yes man’107 trope that still benefitted the insurgency because of the tendency on the part of female combatants to follow leader and party ideology unreservedly.

The women combatants followed the orders without inhibition, fear, and selfishness (Rai, 2017, p. 203). Moreover, they were considered to be less-corruptible. Once they took up arms, they would rather die than fleeing the battlefield. Former Maoist female commander Lila Sharma notes,

> Although men had a mentality that they were stronger, muscular, and tougher, they left their arms and fled away when the fire was opened in war. I have so many male friends in the battalion and brigades who are still out of contact and are in India and elsewhere after fleeing

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107 Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date: 22/12/2017)
the war. However, women never threw their arms away against the direction of the party in the
history of people’s war in Nepal. Secondly, after being captured, many men surrendered, and
many men divulged secret information regarding shelter, the identity of the Maoist cadres and
leaders after the extreme torture by police and army. However, women did not have such a
record. Women did not surrender even after being tortured in the barracks.  

The women combatants’ ability to follow orders and guard information at any cost could have been the
reason women combatants were given greater responsibility in intelligence during the insurgency.
Former Maoist female leader Pampha Bhusal, who served as a cabinet minister at various ministries
after the war, also linked their confidentiality and loyalty to their success with regard to intelligence
work. Similarly, Aruna Rayamajhi, a journalist and former Maoist leader, emphasised, “They (women)
were ready to die but they would not reveal any information. I worked in a central office of one of the
top leaders. They would guard the confidentiality at any cost.”

Yet, the women combatants’ willingness to die for the cause of the insurgency was seen by some as a
sign of weakness in making rational judgements. Former Maoist leader Aruna Rayamajhi also argued
that the unquestioned obeisance and acquiescence on the part of female combatants could also reflect
the lack of education among women combatants from the lower echelons of the PLA. Despite being
engaged in the Maoist insurgency since the beginning, she was still puzzled by the willingness to
sacrifice their own lives in return for nothing. Nevertheless, it served the Maoist party needing soldiers
who were unhesitant to embrace the death for the cause of ‘revolution’ whenever necessary. Aruna
further reflects,

In rural areas education also matters a lot. Apparently, the party needed ‘yes men’ in war who
are ready to do whatever told them to do. They needed people ready to work as ‘yes men’ than
people preferring to discuss and debate. It was necessary. They would not get anything. They
would not get a salary, but they were ready to die. This meant they were ‘yes men’. What would
they get by preparing to herd like cattle in one order of a leader? There was nothing to gain.

108 Interview with Lila Sharma (Date 20/12/2017)
109 Interview with Pampha Bhusal (Date: 17/01/2018)
110 Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date: 21/12/2017)
111 Those who are ready to follow orders without questioning and much reasoning.
Still, there was competition to catch a bullet and die. There was competition to be in the assault group,\textsuperscript{112} perhaps you understand this terminology.\textsuperscript{113}

This statement does not imply that women combatants did not defect, or that only men combatants switched their alliance during the war. However, among women, the desertion of troops was uncommon (Marks, 2017). Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, the chief ideologue of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and former prime minister of Nepal, commented that the “[u]nique quality among women is that once they got involved, they involve [sic] for the long-term. Very few women betrayed or deceived the party.”\textsuperscript{114}

Joining the war for a woman in Nepal as a combatant was not an easy decision. It required leaving a family behind and being prepared to face family and societal exclusion for not following gender norms (Upreti and Shivakoti, 2018). This made their return to society less likely if they changed their mind, and hence, they were likely to stay longer in the group. On the other hand, since the female combatants followed their leadership and obeyed their orders steadfastly, they rarely deserted the party and often followed the party policy strictly. Similarly, given the prevalence of gender norms that projected them as peaceful, a-political, and not ‘ideal’ soldiers, joining the insurgency as a woman required extra courage and commitment. For women, making the transition to combatant status required a level of commitment and determination that was sturdy enough to dismantle societal barriers, both physical and mental (Marks, 2017). Their engagement as combatants in the insurgency was merely another type of war, extending from the one they had been fighting every day,\textsuperscript{115} as their struggles in traditional society was not a straightforward choice. At the same time, not all the women who joined the Maoists as combatants had equally harsh hardscrabble lives. A former Nepalese army brigadier who fought against Maoist insurgency hailed the higher commitment of female combatants,

\begin{quote}
Women combatants are, okay from the strength perspective, perhaps a little bit weak. But from the motivational purpose, they are not behind the male soldiers or different. And another point, in Nepal’s context, the women combatants fought hand to hand with the male soldiers. And they were tougher and more committed to their cause. At the battlefield, we saw it. That’s why I would not say the ‘women’ soldiers. If we say that from a physical perspective that may be
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{112} The group at the forefront of the battle.
\textsuperscript{113} Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date: 21/12/2017)
\textsuperscript{114} Interview with Dr Baburam Bhattachary (Date: 16/01/2018)
\textsuperscript{115} Interview with Subina Shrestha (Date: 20/12/2017)
okay. However, on the determination and commitment level, and on their loyalty, we should not doubt their capability\textsuperscript{116}

This observation from a former brigadier commander in the Nepalese army points to two things. First, in terms of soldiering roles, women are associated with weakness by default. Secondly, female combatants demonstrated an extraordinary level of commitment, determination, and toughness to make up for their physical disadvantage, often with little regard to their body in, what they called, fighting for the bigger cause. Thomas A. Marks (2017), in his study of the female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, found that some of the female combatants fought combat operations even in advanced stages of pregnancy. Former Maoist female commander Lila Sharma gives further testament to it. She recalls,

\begin{quote}
In the second Khara war,\textsuperscript{117} a three months’ pregnant company commander, Prativa, fought in the war despite my repeated request not to do so. She was under my command… [and] Comrade Ekata, left her two months’ old baby at home to fight the war in Jajarkot-5 Katiya. \textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

In a similar vein, for most of the female combatants, the motivation and higher commitment gravitated towards the collective cause than personal career and material gain. corresponds well with the findings of Alexis Henshaw (2017) who does not find any correlation between selective incentives and the likelihood of women joining the rebel organisation as the combatants. During the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, female combatants were more found to be pliable, and it was easier for the leaders to manage them. While there was frequent competition between the men combatants for leadership positions, women rarely raised an issue related to promotion, strictly following the party decision. Aruna Raymajhi observes,

\begin{quote}
If you look at the inter-rivalry within the party, women were not involved….There was competition among the men in leadership. The women combatants were conciliatory. They did
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{116} Interview with Dr Umesh Bhattarai (Date: 26/11/2017)  
\textsuperscript{117} A place located in Rukum district Nepal. Maoists suffered heaviest casualties in whole of people’s war in their attempt to capture it.  
\textsuperscript{118} Interview with Lila Sharma (Date 20/12/2017)
not show much interest in the competition. They were ready to stay behind if it contributed to the party. This was the plus point for the party.\textsuperscript{119}

Interviews with the Maoist leaders and the experts on the female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal confirm the earlier analysis that the commitment towards collective goal- the goal of freeing oppressed Nepali women through armed struggle - was the priority for the women combatants, an aim for which they were ready to sacrifice themselves. This sacrificial attitude for collective liberation can find resonance in black feminist thought where individual empowerment is less valued than the collective struggle and attainment (Collins, 2009)

**Women Combatants as Capable Fighters**

Finally, another recurrent subject of discussion which arose during the interaction with both Maoist leaders and the female combatants was the capability of women combatants to fight alongside the men combatants equally. They agreed that the female combatants were as capable as male combatants, if not more effective. Moreover, they could endure longer in the insurgency. However, this perception was rare at the start of the insurgency. Even the Maoist leadership was not convinced that women could equally contribute to war. Onsari Gharti, the former Maoist commander who served as the speaker of the house after the war, remarks:

> In the beginning, we also faced difficulties. The leadership only gave supporting roles to the women in war-front doubting their capability. They thought that the inclusion of women might weaken the war-front. This was natural. We were just members in the beginning. I was a mere member in the beginning. Once we started fighting, we got increasing responsibilities. We successfully fulfilled those responsibilities. We became commanders as well, and we also led the war-fronts. I have not heard any war-front becoming weaker after the inclusion of the women combatants. Many women combatants got martyred and those who survived led the front. Therefore, women are also equally capable in the army was proved.\textsuperscript{120}

It is probable that the aforementioned traits, honesty, loyalty, motivation, commitment, determination, and discipline, played a role in women combatants earning the trust of their leaders and commanders

\textsuperscript{119} Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)

\textsuperscript{120} Interview with Onsari Gharti (Date: 22/12/2017)
in a short time. Former Maoist leader Pampha Bhusal explains that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was the one place where the action and energy mattered more than the erudition and shrewdness. Hard work and honesty was rewarded. She explains,

Slowly, PLA was such a sector where only the capability mattered most... In the fight for life and death, the bullet would not differentiate between men and women. It was equal for everyone and open for the competition. Whoever could endure and improve, they could move up the ladder. Lately, women reached the level of brigade commander.¹²¹

Furthermore, Maoist leaders also emphasised ‘scientific rhetoric’ to justify the capability of women to fight the protracted war. They highlighted that the female combatants may have been physically weaker but they were biologically superior (Gayer, 2013; Yami, 2007, p. 64). The Maoist leaders explained that the women combatants are biologically superior to the men combatants because they had greater endurance and perseverance. Women had natural self-cleansing system of the menstrual period and the biological protection offered by womb protects women from many epidemic diseases to save expectant fertilised eggs (Yami, 2007, p. 64). So as a corollary, this natural system of immunization helps women to live longer than men in normal circumstance and endure hardships longer. Moreover, former Maoist female commander Lila Sharma asserts,

My conviction is that women are biologically stronger. While observing battle against five hundred army-men days in and day out, I think the women are not weaker biologically. Women can endure a lot... The men can show great strength in a short period but the women can sustain power for longer. Therefore, they are successful. Sages in the ancient period used to say that women are the earth. I think this was true. Women can withstand our weight, our dirt, and so many things. Earth can endure a heavy load of so many things.¹²²

The women combatants might have been weaker physically, but they persevered and persisted until the achievement of the goal of the insurgency. Like earth, they did not yield in the face of challenges and adversity but maintained their loyalty and confidentiality whenever warranted. They took the burden

¹²¹ Interview with Pampha Bhusal (Date: 17/01/2018)
¹²² Interview with Lila Sharma (Date 20/12/2017)
of transforming society with sheer determination and discipline. In doing so, they helped the Maoist insurgency in Nepal to sustain and succeed.

The interviews with female ex-combatants and Maoist leaders and experts in the fieldwork confirmed that the female combatants proved their capabilities as combatants. They also embodied essential qualities in helping Maoists to resist the government and achieve their political objectives. The female combatants compensated lack of physical strength with dedication, discipline, determination, and a higher level of motivation, showing an equal level of courage, tenacity, and perseverance in the fighting, and put collective interest over personal gain and promotion. In short, the female combatants were the key protagonists of Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Maoist leaders further explained how these qualities of female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal helped them to fight the protracted war in various ways. However, they instrumentalised these aspects in gaining legitimacy and support for the agendas of change during the insurgency. The next section will elaborate on how the inclusion of women in the insurgency helped Maoist insurgency by enhancing legitimacy, spreading the Maoist political agendas, improving public relation, and providing vital support work.
7.6. Female Combatants: Legitimising and Sustaining the Insurgency

Without sound material resources (Pun, 2008), anti-Indian rhetoric and distance from ideological kin China, and influential Western powers in Nepal turning against them (Muni, 2010), the Maoists desperately needed legitimacy among the populace for whom they purported to fight for. They not only needed to show that they represented the larger section of the society but also had to substantiate their claim that dissatisfaction of people against the state was so intense and widespread that violence seemed a justified response. Moreover, it was necessary for them to propagate their legitimacy- of their broader representation and valid political agenda- to the larger audiences at home and at the international level. Female combatants in the Maoist insurgency symbolised the women’s endorsement for the insurgency. On the other hand, in a traditional society like Nepal, the sudden catapult of women from private spheres to public spheres defied the traditional image of women in Nepal. Pictures of gun-totting women in military attire caught the attention of national and international media. This had the intended effects of sensationalising the Maoist insurgency and publicizing the Maoists’ agendas for change.

Representation of Majority in Nepalese Society

In claiming to fight for the liberation of the oppressed class in society, Maoists, by default, had to incorporate the largest oppressed group in the society- the women. They could not ignore women represented more than half of the population intersecting diverse caste, ethnicity, region, and religion. In their *jus ad Bellum* for launching the insurgency, point nineteen in the forty-point demand to the government stated that patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women must be eliminated (Thapa and Sijapati, 2007). In terming it ‘The People’s War,’ meaning total participation of the population in the society, the Maoist leadership simply could not ignore women. Former Maoist deputy commander and former Minister of Energy and Supply, Janardan Sharma ‘Prabhakar’ explains,

> People’s war means the revolution of people. The bigger part of society is women. Without their participation, this was not possible. With their participation, and because they fought in PLA, a

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123 The term used by the Maoists for the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal. This is derived from Mao’s ‘The People’s War’ or ‘The Protracted People’s War’, in China. Nepalese Maoists followed Mao. Hence, the term ‘The People’s War’ is used in the context of Nepal.
larger part of society participated in people’s war. Therefore, it was not possible [without the participation of women].¹²⁴

**Legitimacy of the Maoist Agendas**

Women’s enthusiastic entry into violent politics, particularly among the rural and subaltern women, marshalled the unmistakable symbol of revolt against the unjust and oppressive state. Moreover, the oppression and atrocity from the state were so egregious that it was glaringly apparent to rural women considered to be ‘consciousness-less’ and ‘a-political beings’ in Nepal (Tamang, 2009). While this biased assumption might fittingly reflect Cynthia Enloe’s (1993) assertion that the women’s lives are considered to be ‘private’ and ‘trivial’ whereas men’s lives are inherently thought to be ‘serious’ and ‘political’, the participation of female combatants in Nepal showed the hyper politicisation of the state violence against its own people. Likewise, in a heterogeneous society like Nepal, the united support of women towards Maoist movement, despite the division of women into a different caste, ethnicity, culture, and linguistic allegiances (Des Chene, 1997, p. 294) illustrated the broader appeal of the Maoist insurgency among women.

Notwithstanding the differences, Nepalese women’s historic sense of common injustice, oppression, and marginalisation as second-class citizens within the state fitted the Maoist’s progressive rhetoric towards the emancipation of oppressed groups. Despite the clear understanding that the Maoists needed more than one gender or one social group participating in the protracted insurgency,¹²⁵ the heterogeneity of the women’s experience in Nepal meant the task was difficult for the Maoists. Naturally, given the Maoist agendas of women’s empowerment and liberation, the absence of women would have been unacceptable.¹²⁶ The enthusiastic participation of women from a broader and wider spectrum of Nepalese society showed the women’s approval of the Maoist agenda of gender equality. Deepak Thapa, an expert on the female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, commented,

> As communists, the emancipation of women is one of the primary goals of all the Maoists rebellions everywhere. So, it was not something they chose to do. That was part and parcel of

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¹²⁴ Interview with former Maoist Deputy Commander and former home minister and minister for energy and supply (Date: 03/02/2018)

¹²⁵ Interview with Subina Shrestha (Date: 20/12/2017)

¹²⁶ Interview with Onsari Gharti (Date: 22/12/2017)
being a revolutionary force. The Maoists started propagating this message of the women’s empowerment and emancipation. And empowering them also to fight alongside man in this struggle they launched.127

Apart from proclaiming to legitimately represent women by the virtue of women’s liberation agendas, the prevalence of women combatants in Maoist insurgency, hitherto insignificant in the historical context of Nepal (ICTJ, 2010, p. 20; Falch, 2010; Khakurel, et al., 2011), showed the elevated discontent towards the state among people in general, and the investment of substantial trust in the Maoist agendas for change. Former Maoist deputy commander and former minister of energy and supply, Janardan Sharma ’Prabhakar’ considers the spontaneous participation of the women in the Maoist insurgency demonstrated the prevalence of atrocious oppression and discrimination in the Nepalese society, particularly towards them. For him, the Maoist insurgency offered an outlet to the frustration and anger of women and people in general.128

Similarly, Maoists portrayed female combatants as the victims with justified vengeance towards the state. Rather than highlighting the acts of violence, the focus was overtly oriented towards the structural violence impacting the lives of women. Deepak Thapa, an expert on the female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, explained,

Having women in the ranks of the fighters allowed the Maoists to project an image that the dissatisfaction within status quo is so deep that you have the women also taking part in this armed struggle…..They had that symbolic value, added that symbolic value for the Maoists.129

While the unprecedented participation of the women as female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal might have boosted the Maoists’ claim for the large support base in the country, it also served another important function. The sanitised representations of the female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in media put the Maoists in a positive light despite their extremely violent tactics. Once trained to kill, the female combatants not only went into the jungle, but also participated in battles and killed their enemies in the same manner as the male combatants (Tamang, 2017). My interview with

127 Interview with Deepak Thapa, Director of Social Science Baha, Nepal and expert on the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal. Date: 21/11/2017.
128 Interview with Janardan Sharma (Date: 03/03/2018)
129 Interview with Deepak Thapa (Date: 21/11/2017)
the leaders, experts, and the female ex-combatants also revealed that the female combatants fought with male combatants on equal footing often with more tenacity and determination. In some cases, female combatants also committed especially violent acts against so-called local 'tyrants' (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 232). However, the media portrayals of their acts were more in the light of vengeance and bravery rather than the depravity linked to killing someone extrajudicially (Tamang, 2017, p. 230). Furthermore, Maoists were successful in their propaganda to portray People’s Liberation Army being inclusive and representative, as a true people’s army in stark contrast to the Royal Nepalese Army, a tutelage of feudal patriarchy and misogyny (Yami, 2007, p 56, 58, 59). Therefore, the presence of female combatants in the Maoist insurgency created a deceptive facade to project the image of Maoist insurgency in a less culpable manner.

Having women in the group along with men also indicated the popularity of the Maoists. Many women who did not participate or could not participate directly in the insurgency as a combatant or the political cadres, still sympathised with the rebel group because they felt that the Maoist represented them as they women as their direct representatives in the rebel group. They felt that if it was not for them, their daughter’s future would be secure. Women felt that even if they had to face domestic violence and oppression (Adhikari, 2006, p. 72), their daughters would be liberated and emancipated.

On the other hand, the women participating directly into the insurgency had a contagion effect with regard to their politicisation. They increased the interest in the insurgency within their families presenting the Maoists as gentler and benign faces in villages (Yami, 2007, p. 21). In the context of Nepal where the representation of women in the parliament and within mainstream political parties have been tokenistic at best (Tamang, 2009), the Nepalese women felt that they had a good representation and a louder voice in the rebel group as women’s participation was claimed to range between one third to the half of the total numbers (Yami, 2007, p. 6; Marks, 2017; Bhattarai, 2016, p. 129). For the Maoist insurgency to take the form of a movement, the participation of women at every level of the insurgency was indispensable. Subina Shrestha, the journalist who followed the lives of female combatants during and after the insurgency, asserts,

130 Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)
131 Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)
Their whole motto was to kind of change their existence socio-cultural imbalances and I mean, their line was the emancipation of minorities including the women and therefore not having the women included would not have worked. It was imperative for the Maoists to have not only the women but other minorities to be the part of the movement so that it has longevity. Because it is going to be like an intellectual awakening not necessarily leading to a movement.\footnote{132 Interview with Subina Shrestha (Date 20/12/2017)}

The significant appeal and sympathy of the women for the Maoists led to active support towards Maoists in various forms. It substantiated the Maoists’ claim for the legitimacy within the Nepalese society. By incorporating women, one of the most oppressed social group, the Maoists further consolidated their repeated claim that they were fighting for the oppressed class. As the next sub-section elaborates, such appeal and legitimacy within Nepal also spilled into rigorous propaganda work regarding their radical agenda for socio-economic, and political change, inside and outside the country.

**Publicity of Maoist Insurgency and Maoist Propagandas**

Finally, the women combatants in the Maoist insurgency attracted widespread media attention and publicity nationally and internationally serving the propagandist purpose for the Maoists. Coverage of the female combatants, invariably in military fatigues holding guns, became an enduring image of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (Tamang, 2017, p. 226). Female combatants became the face of the PLA (People’s Liberation Army),\footnote{133 Interview with former Maoist commander and speaker of house Onsari Gharti (Date: 22/12/2017)} as Maoists claimed that they shifted the image of Nepali woman as of ‘tired malnourished woman carrying children at one end and rearing cattle at the other end, to that of ‘dignified fighting women with a gun’ (Yami, 2007, p.11). While the extent to which this was true is debatable, it provoked the radical transformation of some Nepalese rural women, from carrying out habitual household chores to slinging SLR (Self-Loading Rifle) and carrying military-backpacks, eliciting sustained intellectual and academic inquiry inside and outside the country (Marks, 2017; KC, Hilhorst, and Haar, 2017; Leve, 2007; Manchanda, 2004; Baniya, et al., 2017). This attraction also aroused curiosity in the Maoist insurgency and their agendas of change, and the female combatants became the original point of this curiosity. Hisila Yami argues that the female combatants helped the Maoists
internationalise a ‘people’s war’ wherein pictures of female combatants with a gun became foci.\textsuperscript{134} Similarly, Bishnu Raj Upreti, an expert on female combatants in Nepal’s Maoist insurgency, posits,

> So, the female members into the insurgency in both in the political level as well as in the combatant level gave Maoist greater message to deliver to the community that community should support them. That gave the big space for them to attract the attention of the international community. And, it helped them to popularise insurgency all over the world saying that 40\% of the combatants are female.\textsuperscript{135}

The female combatants in the Maoist insurgency not only signalled popular support for the Maoist in Nepal, but also helped the rebel group to internationalise Maoists’ agendas of change. This was vital in claiming the relevance of their struggle against the status quo represented by the state.

**Public Relation**

Maoists considered good public relations as an essential requirement for sustaining the conflict. By incorporating the female combatants in the group, Maoists were not only able to interact with the women in the community better but, it also helped them garner sympathy from the general public. During the insurgency, it was mandatory to have at least a woman member in every outreach initiatives at the community level (Rai, 2017, p. 200). A lot of men in the remote rural areas left their homes to take refuge from the police operations.\textsuperscript{136} Many of them went to big cities, or to India, or undertook employment further overseas to escape the police brutality. However, despite the apparent danger, the patriarchal social-structure in Nepal inhibited the mobility of women (Adhikari, 2006, p. 70). Maoists had also remained hidden during this period, depending on the larger public for food, shelter, and other provisions. Women were mostly left at home in the villages to look after children and the elderly. In a conservative society like Nepal, trying to take shelter at home with only women and children at night would have been near impossible for a male rebel group, unless they resorted to the use of force. As

\textsuperscript{134} Interview with Hisila Yami (Date: 21/12/2017)
\textsuperscript{135} Interview with Dr Bishnu Raj Upreti. Date: 22/11/2017
\textsuperscript{136} Police operations such as ‘Operation Romeo’ in 1995 and ‘Kilo-Sera-2’ 1998 got the notoriety for dealing with Maoists and their sympathisers including women in atrocious and inhuman manner (Gautam, et al., 2001, p. 219, 228; Muni, 2010, p. 8-9; ICTJ, 2010, p. 21)
this act would have drawn public backlash, the women combatants were vital for negotiating in such situations. Deepak Thapa observes,

I guess there is a tendency to feel much safer with the female combatants around despite the fact that they are trained to kill as violently as the males. But, you know like, when they went into villages to take shelter… for matters like those, it helped to have women around because people could get a sense of security that they could relate to. Because in most of the villages, there were no men living there….to have female combatants also in this group of people who have come and asked for shelter and food certainly would have made difference in the relationship with the rebels.¹³⁷

It represents the underlying assumption that a woman, despite carrying a gun, is firmly founded upon the essentialist characteristics of being peaceful and non-violent. Nevertheless, the traditional perception of women as caring and compassionate in the Nepalese society made the rebel group more approachable to society. Similarly, Hisila Yami claims that the female combatants in PLA acted as a self-cleansing force that checked overtly militaristic tendencies (Yami, 2007, p. 56). People thought that the Maoists were common people like themselves lacking the violence of rebels. Yami argues further that without the women, the Maoists would have been detached from the public to whom they heavily relied upon to advance the insurgency. She postulated, “Without them (women combatants), it would have been a roving guerrilla cut-off from the people. It would have been incomplete... And, it would not have sustained longer.”¹³⁸

Inclusion of the female combatants in the Maoist side worked in two important ways towards improving the public relation of the Maoists. First, it enabled them to interact and alleviate fear among women who remained in the village after the male members deserted them because of the war. Similarly, having the women in the group gave it a humane face, as a family unit or a part of the community. The next sub-section will highlight the non-combat support role played by the women in the Maoist insurgency.

¹³⁷ Interview with Deepak Thapa (Date 21/11/2017)
¹³⁸ Interview with Hisila Yami (Date 21/12/2017)
Non-combat role and Support Role

While some women contributed to the Maoist insurgency as combatants, many more women equally contributed under the disguise as civilians without armaments. The Maoists claimed that the women combatants constituted around forty percent of the total combatants before the UN verification and forty-five percent of the total combatants in the party organisation.\textsuperscript{139} The UN verification confirmed the female combatants in the PLA to be at twenty percent (3,846 out of 19,602) (Bhattarai, 2016, p. 129; Arino, 2008, p. 8). This proportion was much higher for the women in support roles, although they were equally prone to the danger of getting detained, tortured, raped, and killed. Women were often used to carry heavy loads of arms, food, and war materials during the war (Adhikari, 2006, p. 71, 84) where they could have been easily killed. Nevertheless, they carried out a variety of vital tasks during the insurgency. Onsari Gharti explains,

> While in the battle, people had to support us carrying our logistics. They had to carry captured weapons. They had to supply weapons during the war when they run out. People supported us through food, shelter, and so many things. Most of them were women. This was the foundation of PLA.\textsuperscript{140}

However, it was not only during the large war-operations that women supported the insurgency through non-combatant roles. They were also essential for the functioning of the rebel organisation outside the war zone. Women participated as whole-timers, political, medical, cultural, administrative workers, and dedicated sympathisers who lived and travelled with the rebel group for years (Bhattarai, 2016, p. 129). Aruna Rayamajhi adds,

> They played the role of a dual-soldier. Was it any less challenging to call a stranger a husband to protect him from the army? From hiding Maoists to working as a sentry for the Maoists- to watch out whether police are coming for the raid or not.\textsuperscript{141}

This also confirms the assertion of Sarah Parkinson (2013) who stresses the quotidian networks of women that are vital for the functioning of the rebel organisation. In the context of Nepal, women

\textsuperscript{139} Interview with Pampha Bhusal (Date: 17/01/2018)

\textsuperscript{140} Interview with Onsari Gharti (Date: 22/17/2017)

\textsuperscript{141} Interview with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)
supported the rebel group by feeding them, housing them, and, most importantly, not informing the government about their activities and whereabouts. This is interesting given the fact that even women who did not leave their homes to join the People’s Army, or became party activists or members of local militia, risked violent reprisal and even death from military forces to support rebel group at the height of the conflict (Leve, 2007, p. 131).

In short, the inclusion of the female combatants portrayed Maoists as the true representative of the Nepalese society that wanted change in the status quo through its progressive political agendas. Endorsement of these agendas by the broader section of population, including women, meant that their political ends were considered genuine, also justifying the violent means to an extent. Moreover, the female combatants brought much needed positive publicity for the Maoists in the national/international stage despite their violent tactics. However, the positive effects that Maoists were able to achieve with the inclusion of the female combatants would not have been possible without good bonding between male and female combatants and cadres within the rebel group. Interviews with the female ex-combatants reveal the mechanisms that held cohesion between male and female combatants together during the insurgency.
7.7. Cohesion in Combat

Interviews with the female ex-combatants further revealed their relationship with male combatants and its impact on the operational capacity during the insurgency. Findings from the interviews undermine the myth of the band of brothers. Megan Mackenzie describes this myth as the overarching story that presumes male-only groups as naturally best able to band together to accomplish difficult military missions efficiently. The ‘band of brothers’ myth presents men as exceptional, essential, and elite in military missions. Mackenzie explains,

The myth casts the nonsexual, brotherly love, male-bonding, and feelings of trust, pride, honour, and loyalty between men as mysterious, indescribable and exceptional. Second, male bonding is treated as both primal and an essential element of an orderly, civilised, society. Third, all-male units are seen as elite as a result of their social bonds and physical superiority [emphasis in the original] (Mackenzie, 2015, p. 3)

Interviews with the female ex-combatants and their leaders and commanders revealed that the male and female fighters not only had social cohesion, which is defined as the degree to which different members in a group like/prefer each other and interact accordingly, but also demonstrated very good task cohesion, or the cohesion needed to work together in a group to achieve common objectives. While the female combatants inspired the male combatants to fight, men respected and treated female combatants as equal. Many of the combatants also got married within the group. It was also common for the combatants to develop platonic self-described ‘brother-sister’ relationships. Moreover, the interviews showed that everyone in the rebel group was indoctrinated and bounded by the ‘class love,’ with a common mission to establish an egalitarian society inspired by communist ideology. According to the female ex-combatants, it was ‘class love,’\textsuperscript{142} not brotherly love, that bonded rebels during the insurgency and kept the wheels of the insurgency running. The women combatants in the mixed-combat group were described as enhancing unity, cohesion, focus, and motivation, thereby making the group stronger and better. As I explain later in the thesis, despite these accounts of women’s core contributions, and respect within the rebel movement, such equality, and respect among men and women within the rebel group remained transient and failed to translate into a lasting gender-equality after the war.

\textsuperscript{142} Interview with Bimala Ghimire (Date: 11/12/2017). This term was common in interviews with both female ex-combatants and their leaders who used it to characterise the bond between male and female combatants during the insurgency.
Band of Brothers and Sisters

In the context of the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal, the band of brothers and sisters replaced the band of brothers myth. Interviews with the female ex-combatants, which was also confirmed by their leaders and commanders, showed that the inclusion of female combatants had a positive impact on the combat operations in terms of group cohesion and task cohesion, making military operations efficient. Participants emphasised that as the conflict progressed, cohesion and coordination improved between the male and female combatants. The latter demonstrated operational capability and high professionalism, despite indications of some disadvantages in terms of physical capability and traditional conceptions of combat as a masculine domain. A female ex-combatant described the strong camaraderie and bonds between the male and female combatants as-

They used to call us sisters and we used to call them brothers. We lived together like a family.

We did not find that attitude [hostile attitudes towards women combatants] in the cantonment.143

Similarly, the male and female combatants were described as communicating well in combat units and continually inspiring each other. While there was omnipresent hesitation among the female combatants initially, that they could fight the war in equal footing as male combatants, with support and encouragement from the male combatants and each other, the female combatants slowly gained confidence in combat. In turn, the male combatants were inspired and motivated by the female combatants for the bravery and perseverance. A former female ex-combatant mentioned,

While fighting together, the men and women had each other for support. Women also gained self-confidence that they could also fight. Men were also able to succeed without loss. Therefore, it helped both. Making it easier and comfortable for both.144

Such cohesion and coordination are significant given the historically lower participation of women in various elements of Nepalese society and their formal exclusion from the national military (Yami, 2007). The unequal relationship in the Nepalese society did not impact in-group cohesion in the rebel units. None of the female combatants that I interviewed did described any problem in mixed-gender combat units. They managed to forge a strong bond with their male counterparts as the conflict progressed, along with a sense of mutual respect and equality in the group that they had not known previously in

143 Interview with Parvati Pariwar Regmi (Date 05/01/2018)
144 Interview with Nandakali Darlami Bohora (Date 05/01/2018)
their roles pre-war in the society. This attracted many women towards the Maoist rebel groups. These women had been oppressed by patriarchy, depressed by a lack of freedom and opportunities, and exasperated by everyday domestic violence against them. Highlighting the equality in the rebel group another former female combatant stressed,

I did not feel discrimination and ill-behaviour in the group. There was equal behaviour. Many joined because of inequality in the villages in the quest for equality. I did not find such (inequality) in the organisation.\textsuperscript{145}

The cohesion, coordination, bonding, and comradery within mixed-group combat units was ubiquitous during the Maoist insurgency and was not an aberration. Even the uncertainty of war and the absence of established groups and stable locations did not seem to weaken the cohesion and bonds within mixed-combat groups in the Maoist insurgency. Maoists did not have permanent military bases during the war, and their armed wing, the People’s Liberation Army, was constantly on the move. Often, they had to travel very long distances to attack designated state security installations. The combatants would mix with new brigade/battalion/companies and change brigade/battalion/companies frequently whenever necessary. Even after being in different groups with different people from different backgrounds, many female combatants emphasised that the ethos and principles that governed the relationship between male and female fighters within PLA remained unchanged. One female ex-combatant pointed, “We got along really well. We didn’t know when our fates would be sealed. Therefore, we used to share even the tiniest piece of food. We had such a feeling.”\textsuperscript{146} Such bonding among the combatants in the mixed-gender group was not particular to any single battalion or company. It was a prevalent attitude in the whole People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Another female ex-combatant added,

I did not experience the hatred and disrespect. We kept changing groups. We were in the company. We never did any leg-pulling... The relationship between male and female combatants was very good. We would respect our seniors and also behave with respect to our

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{145} Interview with Bimala Roka (Date 03/01/2018)
\textsuperscript{146} Interview with Jamuna Rana (Date 05/01/ 2018)
\end{flushright}
juniors. During the time of separation, everyone used to get emotional. I think we had a very good relationship.\textsuperscript{147}

The band of brother myth that represents male bonding as unique in wars, and necessary for accomplishing military missions, was debunked by interviews that consistently outline the prevalence of cohesion, coordination, bonding, amity, and camaraderie between the male and female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Interviews indicate that despite initial doubts on the capability of the women combatants as mentioned in detail in the previous section, the men combatants did not oppose women as combatants in the fighting group. Rather they found women combatants contributing to the cohesion through encouragement and inspiration. Moreover, the prevalence of cohesion, coordination, bonding, amity, and camaraderie between the male and female combatants was widespread during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

**Temporary Equality and Respect**

Several women seemed to describe three separate phases of the war, which corresponded to differences in how they were treated. Before the war, they were rendered unfit for soldiering duties and confined to domesticity (Yami, 2007). By contrast, during the war, many female combatants spoke of the experience of equality and respect. Inspired by the communist ideology of egalitarian society, the gender distinction between the male and female combatants seemed to become irrelevant - or at least less prevalent - during the insurgency. Instead, the commitment towards the radical transformation of Nepalese society in the mould of communism became the single focus. Similarly, the Maoists weaved together the ethnocultural diversity, and variegated caste and social groups to form a uniform proletariat class to fight against the feudal monarchy. This sense of equality helped the Maoists to sustain the insurgency longer. Notwithstanding the differences, including male and female, East and West, higher caste and lower caste, people came together to fight against the perceived common enemy - the discriminatory and repressive state led by the feudal monarchy. However, once the common class enemy, the feudal monarchy, was dismantled, there were efforts to reproduce the pre-war gender hierarchy. Post-war, women were forced back into domesticity and faced familiar forms of sexism that they experienced pre-war (Kunz, 2017). A former female combatant explains,

\textsuperscript{147} Interview with Ashmita Nagarkoti (Date 10/01/2018)
All the brothers and sisters within the party with communist ideology were equal (during the war). After the peace process, some of them (male combatants) became greedy. But before that, we used to be patient, humble, tolerant, and well-mannered. All of us were equal. We never experienced this (difficulty with male combatants)...Because of this, we could sustain ourselves...During the war, we promised to live and die together. We used to get emotional because of such affections... We did not discriminate based on gender. It did not happen in our group to our members.148

Some female combatants were nostalgic when they shared their experience during the war. They felt they were highly valued and treated equally and fairly during the war, and they could even excel above men. However, women describe that this momentum ended with the war’s conclusion. The gender equality gains of the insurgency for women were slowly eroding away, dismaying the female ex-combatants. For example, a former female combatant despairs,

There was no feeling such as male and female at that time...... Now I feel that had people’s war been extended for three-four years more, women’s status would have been even higher. It was very difficult, but we fought and proved that we were not a single step behind in fulfilling our duties. Men also could not look down upon us. Now, it is difficult to find in this situation. In the past (during insurgency), it was possible for us to go beyond and above men. Personally, I have not felt any difficulty now. However, as a whole, looking at the situation faced by women now—women suffering in domestic violence and women being oppressed by mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, and husbands, it feels that women would have been liberated further had the war lingered further. Sometimes, I become nostalgic about the people’s war. Our voice was stronger then.149

Furthermore, after the war, many of the female ex-combatants felt excluded and left behind by the leaders as their situation and needs were not carefully considered. As indicated earlier, compared to their male counterparts, most of the women combatants during the insurgency had less education or their education was disrupted by war. Many of them joined the insurgency because their parents did not send them to schools. Although the ban on recruitment of women soldiers in army was lifted in the

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148 Interview with Bimala Ghimire (Date 11/12/2018)
149 Interview with Tika Oli (Date 13/12/2018)
later phase of the war, women combatants’ lack of formal educational qualification disqualified many of
the female combatants from integrating into the national army once the conflict was over. Men were
more educated and had wider networks to seek help and support. Because of the lack of gender-
sensitive peace-building programs, there were few resources to support the female ex-combatants in
their political, social, and economic empowerment post-war (Kunz, 2017; Upreti, et al., 2018). Female
combatants felt that they missed out on whatever meagre opportunities were available after the war.
These opportunities, including integration into the Nepalese army, were mostly taken up by the male
combatants. The honesty and dedication that earned them respect during the war were not treated as
an essential and useful trait post-conflict. A female ex-combatant expresses her displeasure,

Now, in terms of expanding the organisation, rather than capability, clever and deft people are
prioritised. Honest and dedicated cadres are in the backseat. During the war era, honest people
were highly regarded. The women were honest. They would trust women. If there was a bad
attitude towards women, this many women would not have joined. The women were highly
encouraged and motivated to join…they were highly respected. Party did not shy away to give
responsibilities to women.¹⁵⁰

The brief sense of equality and respect that the female combatants earned during the Maoist insurgency
diminished as soon as the war ended. Pre-war gender inequality seemed to re-emerge almost instantly,
and their expectations of an egalitarian society where they had equal worth as men was shattered.
Instead of considering the history of discrimination and disadvantage for women and designing gender-
sensitive programs to manage their expectations in the post-war period, female ex-combatants felt
abandoned. However, not every person I interviewed had such a pessimistic assessment of post-war
Nepalese society. Indeed, the people who were sanguine about future prospects based on the current
situation were primarily the Maoist leaders, hailing from a higher caste, middle class, educated, and in
some cases urban backgrounds. The intersectional theoretical framework that I take for this thesis is
vital in this situation. Drawing attention to the female ex-combatants under various axes of oppression
such as class, caste, social status, education, and geographical location offers a better vantage point
to understand the divergence. At the same time, it positions me to locate the voices from the margin
and identify the alternate ways of knowing about the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, untainted by the

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Man Kumari Mahat (Date 02/01/2018)
hegemonic narratives. The intersectional theoretical framework that combines ‘matrix of domination’ by Collins (2009) and decolonial thinking by Shilliam (2015) is the most effective theoretical lens for this purpose.
7.8. Chapter Conclusion

Interviewing and analysing two groups of participants, the female ex-combatants and their leaders and the experts, offers a unique vantage point to reflect on the complexities of war. While both sets of interviews converge on some of the key aspects of war, there are many other topics where there are gaps and lack of congruity. Such divergence tells a lot of things but one important aspect this highlights is the importance of talking to women ex-combatants at the margin. The women ex-combatants and their leaders and the experts on the topic uniformly agreed on the importance of female combatants during the insurgency. Their unique qualities such as honesty, commitment, loyalty, and discipline shattered that only men could fit the traditional conception of ideal soldiers. However, as Interviews with the Maoist leaders and the experts on the Maoist insurgency in Nepal elaborate, qualities of female combatants were instrumental in the resistance and the success of the insurgency. The participation of women in the conflict played a vital role in legitimising the insurgency, improving the public relation, and providing essential non-combat support. On the other hand, talking to the female ex-combatants also helped to understand the group dynamics better that bonded male and female combatants together in myriad ways and enabled them to play a vital role in the insurgency. Both the female and male combatants together formed a band of brothers and sisters that was unified and cohesive during the insurgency period. This boosted the morale of male and female combatants and helped them sustain and advance the insurgency. The exclusionary nature of a society that had discriminated against the women seemed to be temporarily suspended during the war, with a commitment to the egalitarian values and practices of Maoists. Many female combatants had joined the rebel group precisely for the dignity, equality, and respect they found in the rebel group. The meritocratic and non-discriminatory nature of the rebel group meant that both male and female combatants supported, encouraged, and inspired each other. However, once the conflict was over and the rebel group dissolved, the female ex-combatants did not find the same kind of support, encouragement, and respect as they had in the war. Moreover, such unity and cohesion also became the point of despair in the post-war period when the cohesion and unity gave way to the conflict and competition that favoured men. Lack of a gender-sensitive DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration) program did little to prevent the relapse of women into domesticity and marginal social roles (Goswamy, 2015; Kunz, 2017).

Talking to the women ex-combatants at the margins, and often at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and discriminations, enabled me to capture the complexity of war where stories of linear
agency/non-agency, empowerment/victimhood become dissolved and become ambiguous. This is important because the women were not simply empowered or duped by war as agents/victims. They had diverse experiences of war, at different phases of the war. Therefore, it is necessary to try to look at the bigger picture without confining the analysis to one group of women engaged in war, or to one point in the time period. The intersectional framework inspired by the black feminism is essential at the task of bringing out the voices from the margin and construct this complicated picture of war with their mosaic experiences of agency and vulnerabilities, hopes and despairs, bravery and boundedness, cohesion and disconnection. Given such a diverse experience over various points of time during and after the war, the intersectional framework used for this research is instrumental to bring out all the nuances and complexities of the conflict in the light of the lived experiences of the female ex-combatants at the margin. The next section focuses on the discourse of heterosexual marriage during the Maoist insurgency. Again, the intersectional framework helps to explore and complicate the Maoist insurgency in Nepal with diverging perspectives on the institution of marriage between the female ex-combatants and their leaders.
8. **Scientific and Progressive Rhetoric of Marriage**

8.1. **Chapter Introduction**

'Scientific and progressive' marriage was a topic that frequently came up during the interviews with both the female ex-combatants and their leaders and experts. Unlike the unanimity about women combatants' contribution to the Maoist insurgency through their unique qualities, they differed on the understanding and interpretation of 'scientific and progressive' marriage during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. The lower-ranking female ex-combatants interpreted marriage in the rebel group during the insurgency within the continuum of traditional marriages in society, including moral codes and discipline, although being transgressive in some ways. The female ex-combatants specifically used the term 'scientific' to capture their understanding of marriage as a natural and necessary process. However, they were equally critical of marriages during the insurgency as it had a disproportionately adverse impact on their lives in terms of ostracisation and exclusion from their family and society. In contrast, Maoist leaders used 'scientific and progressive marriage' to strengthen their credential as the most progressive political force in Nepal in emancipating Nepali women. The Maoist leaders emphasised the progressive, modern, and unique nature of their decision to allow marriage and reproduction within the rebel group. Similarly, they used marriage to control and manipulate the lives of combatants for the benefit of the insurgency. The first section will present an analysis of the understanding and interpretation of marriage in the interviews with female ex-combatants, followed by understanding and interpretation of marriage in the interviews from the Maoist leaders.
8.2. The Scientific and Progressive Discourse on the Marriage

The scientific discourse on marriage during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal needs to be seen within the broader pattern of attempts by Maoist leaders to characterise the insurgency based on ‘scientific postulations’ bound for progress and success. The party, which launched communist guerrilla war after rescinding multi-party democracy, frequently used scientific rhetoric to distinguish themselves from other communist parties and non-communist parties in Nepal, and also from other leftist guerrilla movements around the world. Marxists often hinge their theory to be a scientific theory in its coherence with Imre Lakatos’s methodology of the scientific research program (Burawoy, 1990). Imre Lakatos argued that the scientific value of knowledge cannot always be proven by the pieces of evidence of the senses or the power of intellect (1976). Even when theory is unable to predict certain events, this theory can still be scientific and progressive if subsequent theoretical developments are consistent with the core and explain away the anomalies and make renewed predictions (Lakatos, 1976). Burawoy (1990) asserts that Marxism is a scientific theory, despite arguments against it, as it confirms the scientific research program of Lakatos when observed from a historical perspective. Starting with Marx and Engels, to German Marxism, to Russian Marxism, and to finally Western Marxism, Marxism subscribes to a model of the progressive research program. The anomaly of Soviet Marxism can be explained as due to the failure of the reciprocal interaction between Marxism’s heuristic and historical challenges (Ibid).

Maoists in Nepal claimed to be the most progressive or ‘scientific organisation’151 in Nepali Society by borrowing Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology and applying it to the Nepalese context. By making ‘objective’ assessment of the geopolitical and socio-economic reality of Nepal and ‘subjective’ commitment to the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology, Maoist claimed that the insurgency in Nepal was necessary and bound to be successful (Karki and Seddon, 2003, p. 80; Thapa and Sijapati; 2003, p. 46). It started at the time when leftist movements were failing around the world and the socialist block crumbled, leading Francis Fukuyama to declare victory for Western liberal democracy over communism (1989). Moreover, chronic fragmentation and division among communist parties in Nepal and existence

151 Maoists used this term consistently to characterise themselves as the distinct political force. It was to such an extent that All Nepal Independent Student Union- Revolutionary (ANNISU-R), the Maoist affiliated student organisation, also began using this term in post-war period to make them distinct (in the sense of discipline, consistency, and effectiveness) from other student organisations (see Snellinger, 2010)
of much larger communist party in the form of CPN-UML (Communist Party of Nepal- Unified Marxist Leninist) propelled Maoists to come up with radical and progressive agendas (Lawoti, 2010). Maoists accused the existing communist parties to be gradual reformist and revisionist unable to take a ‘revolutionary leap’ (Karki and Seddon, 2003, p. 85-86). Impatient with gradual Darwinian evolution of the communist movement in Nepal, they wanted a rupture with its continuity. In fact, they accused other communist parties as not being progressive enough as they lacked ‘scientific dialectical materialism’ (Karki and Seddon, 2003, p. 97). The premier former Maoist female leader Hisila Yami provided an example in the context of women’s liberation in the society,

This should be looked at this way. In the past, in the communist party, particularly, in Mashal,\(^\text{152}\) used to give loud slogans before the people’s war... At that time, a supporting husband who is whole-timer political cadres or leaders was considered to be a revolutionary act for a woman...We broke away from this tradition. Before the start of the people’s war, I still remember, the party summoned all the wives of leaders to say that women should also join people’s war along with their husbands equally. Only playing the supporting role is not enough. We proposed this as a mental preparation before the start of people’s war. Therefore, we were ready to break all the traditions including the conceptions in the Communist party that we discussed earlier. Let alone society, we also broke the mindset prevalent in the communist parties of that time.\(^\text{153}\)

The insertion of scientific rhetoric into communist lexicon was another way to reassure Nepalese people that they were unique, objective, progressive, and destined to be successful even when other communist movements were failing in their promises both inside and outside Nepal. Maoists frequently exploited the science/progress and tradition/backwardness dichotomy to convince its combatants, cadres, sympathisers, and other masses in the society that the ideology and policies they espoused, and praxis of their ideology and policy, will lead towards a better system, even if they sound radical in a Nepalese context. This rhetoric of scientific rationale was the driving force behind women combatant’s inclusion into protracted combat as well. Maoists claimed that women combatants’ ability to endure pain and suffering turned out to be effective in war (Yami, 2007). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Lila

\(^{152}\) One of many communist parties in Nepal

\(^{153}\) Interview with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date: 21/12/2017)
Sharma, the highest female ranking female commander during the Maoist insurgency, also used biological evidence to position women as capable of fighting a protracted war.154 ‘Scientific marriage’ was similarly used to set them apart from other similar insurgent groups (Gayer, 2013, p. 348). This approach to marriage was distinct as female combatants participated in the rationale that apart from fixed ages, there were no restrictions on marriage. Furthermore, they were allowed to have babies during the war. Hisila Yami quotes,

The age for marriage was fixed at 20 (women) and 22 (men) during the insurgency. Naxalites in India have to vow not to have babies while in the group. Still today, they don’t have babies. In LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam), they have a policy not to have babies. We did not put a restriction on this matter. 155

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154 Interview with Lila Sharma (Date: 20/12/2017)
155 Interview with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date: 21/12/2017)
8.3. Female Combatants’ Scientific Rhetoric on the Marriage

Scientific rhetoric on marriage, in general, refers to the use of science as a term to justify marriage during the Maoist insurgency. During the insurgency, science, modernity, and progress were used interchangeably (Snellinger, 2010). Rather than discussing the semantics and accuracy of these individual terms, I look at Maoist use of these terms to define their ideology and action wherein marriage featured prominently. Modernity is understood to encompass a post-industrialisation society marked through not only industrial advancement and economic transformation but also the democratization of society, especially the destruction of hierarchy and privileges based on inheritance and declaration of equal rights of citizenship (Bendix, 1967, p. 292-293). Similarly, Nisbet (1965) explains modernity, exhibit the same burning sense of society’s sudden, convulsive turn from a path it had followed for millennia. All manifest the same profound intuition of the disappearance of historic values-and, with them, age-old securities, as well as age-old tyrannies and inequalities (p. 20)

Similarly, for the Maoist leaders, science/progression/modernity meant letting go of centuries-old feudal structures, religious-cultural norms and values, and economic practices that perpetuated the power of feudal elites (Karki and Seddon, 2013, p. Chapter 3). It is in this milieu, that ideological interpretation of contrast between modernity/science/progress and tradition began. Accordingly, old societal norms, values, cultural codes and practices of marriage also became the target of bifurcation between science/modernity/progress against the tradition. Subsequently, Maoists began constructing their own sets of rules and regulation to replace and govern the existing institution of marriage (Gayer, 2013).

Rather than seeing marriage within backwardness/tradition vs progression/science binaries, female combatants, however, justified marriage as a natural process based upon the biological need of human beings in the society. For them, it meant continuity rather than a radical departure from the cultural values and practices in society. Maoist leaders, however, attempted to present themselves as the most progressive force in society by constructing marriage within a scientific discourse as a departure from backward cultural norms, practices, and rituals. But the resultant structure of control, surveillance, and examination did not differ from the society from which they wanted to be distinct. Moreover, marriage also represented a tool to create an in-group and out-group dynamic within the rebel group, creating a community of revolutionaries and containing them within the revolutionary circle. Finally, despite reliance of leaders on scientific rhetoric of marriage and ideas of a progressive society, female ex-
combatants were the main victims as it did not save them from strong societal repercussions in the aftermath of the conflict.

The Scientific Rhetoric on Marriage

Female ex-combatants during the interviews used the term ‘scientific marriage’ to capture the way they perceived marriage, which often occurred between combatants during the insurgency. It was perceived as a natural and biological reality of human existence. Almost all of the female ex-combatants that I interviewed married within the rebel group during the insurgency. A significant proportion of them had an inter-caste marriage (Gayer, 2013; Adhikari, 2006). These women felt that marriage should not be held hostage to caste and social status requirements and that mutual relations between male and female combatant were a primary requirement for marriage. One former female battalion commander explained, “Marriage is a scientific reality. We cannot ignore this. When a couple like each other, they would propose (before the party) and would get married.”

Once the first pre-condition (liking each other) was met, in the scientific conception of marriage by Maoists, ideological and intellectual closeness was required. As the combatants were already ideologically indoctrinated in the group (Eck, 2010) this aspect was not difficult to achieve. Contrary to the prevalent negative perception in society, female ex-combatants considered marriage in the rebel group to be disciplined emphasising the deeper ideological and intellectual symmetry over superficial physical attractions. Hence, the marriages forged during the insurgency within the rebel group were considered to be made of superior bonds to those forged outside war. Another former female combatant explains,

There was a vast difference between the ways of falling in love and marrying someone in the society now and in the rebel group then. There was love but it was progressive….The relationship was of ideology and intellect. It was not like we see in society.

This understanding of social practices such as marriage and framing it within scientific rhetoric by female ex-combatants during the insurgency also highlights the underlying power structure within the Maoist party. Maoist leaders could withstand and justify their marriage outside the traditional scheme

156 Interview with Man Kumari Mahat ’Shanti’ (Date 02/01/ 2018)
157 Interview with Shashi Gurung (Date 05/01/ 2018) and Bimala Ghimire (Date 11/12/2017)
of marriage. Presenting inter-caste marriage as a part of the progressive and revolutionary credential, intergroup rebel marriage was considered to be modern and a sublime bond (Ahearn, 2001, p. xii). Hence, rebels could have inter-caste marriage, and enter in wed-lock autonomously without having to contemplate extensively on the possible ramifications from both their family and society.

Despite the outward support of inter-caste marriage, most of the premier leaders belonged to higher caste group Brahmin and Kshetriya and married within their caste. Even when some of married outside their caste, their relative position of power in society could negate the criticism or even opposition for their non-conformity with the tradition and culture in the society (Gayer, 2013, p. 352). However, that was not always the case for rank and file combatants. Female combatants and male combatants in these positions lacked this privileged position. Rank and file rebels used this scientific rhetoric of marriage to justify their inter-group marriages as they began returning back to the community in the post-conflict period. For them, marriage was more in sync with the norms and mores of society with a value over purity, chastity, restraint, and discipline associated with ideologically committed and intellectual depth. For them, the requirement of ideological and intellectual bonding meant that marriage was not only about the physical attraction but beyond it.

Although the rebel group’s approach to marriage defied the traditional logic of marriage, the overall structure of power and control through the institution of marriage remained the same. Female combatants were trained and indoctrinated into the standards of normality-hierarchical observation (Maoist party or commanders needed to know whether combatants had affairs or intention of marriage), normalizing judgement (emphasis on the ideological commitment and inter-caste marriage being hallmark of progressive credential), and examination (punishment for any libidinal withdrawal from the norms for being less revolutionary (Gayer, 2013)). In the rebel group, the combatants needed approval from the commander before marriage. One of the female combatants that I interviewed explained that the ideology and revolution were supreme to anything else, “Party would give approval. During marriage we used to vow that our ideological commitment would be in the centre, the relationship was peripheral.”

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158 Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date: 22/12/2017). She did inter-caste marriage and is in successful marital life. However, she acknowledged that inter-caste marriage has created problems in the lives of many female combatants who often hail from lower caste, lower class, and less-privileged family.

159 Interview with Saraswati Pokharel (Date 22/01/2018)
Through the reconstruction of the institution of marriage and associated codes and rules around it, Maoists replicated societal norms, values, practices, and institutions to maintain power. This power was largely derived through control of combatants under the new institutional setting that derived its legitimacy through binary opposition to existing traditional institutions and associated norms and practices. This had far-reaching implications for the female ex-combatants. In the case of marriage, for example, they were torn between adaptation into a radical new progressive conception of marriage and simultaneously need to adhering to cultural norms, practices, and rituals. Female combatants were left with a double bind: they felt the freedom to marry who they liked, although limited within the ideological and intellectual circle; and yet, they were beholden to social policing after the war. This precariousness of their situation was not shared by their leaders. As the next sub-section explains, they experienced backlash, exclusion, and additional burdens on their lives.

**Ostracisation of Female Combatants**

The scientific and progressive rhetoric used to frame inter-rebel marriage did not prevent female combatants from subsequent social ostracisation for leaving their home to associate with rebel groups in the jungle. In the rebel group, they had to live together with male combatants. However, such communion before marriage was considered to be a moral deviation by the orthodox society (Gayer, 2013, p. 352). Living along with male combatants away from home was considered to be immoral, characterless, and sexually deviant. One female ex-combatant explained,

> It was difficult to go back to the family and society because people might say that your daughter went with this man and that man, slept with this man and that man. Society ostracises girls….I experienced that…My father and mother did not say anything but society would think that way. They don’t know the reality there. They just think that they have been degraded and spoiled….If I get married outside the party, my husband would point out that I had joined Maoists. And I feel bad (If my husband would say this to me).  

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Such observations about female ex-combatants were made by some scholars in other cases as well which are equally relevant to the case of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. For example, Megan Mackenzie (2012) observes,

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160 Interview with Jamuna Rana (Date 05/01/ 2018)
Taking someone as a wife’ typically refers to having sex in Sierra Leone. It is not always clear whether this sex is forced or not; however, it is important to note that “bush wife,” “wife,” and “sex slave” are often used interchangeably by women and are even used this way within organisation documents and reports (p. 125, emphasis on the original).

Whether female combatants or women associated with the rebel group took the decision to get married with their male counterparts and whether sex consented or not, there is a tendency to muddle the distinction and see female combatants and women who got married during the war with stigma. Be it Sierra Leone or Nepal, the image of women ex-combatants are often tainted.

Similarly, by becoming combatants women were considered to be unfit for domestic life and settlement in the society post-war. They were considered to be rebels not conforming to the cultural norms and values of femininity such as docility, obedience, and subservience in the context of Nepal. They were considered to be wild and unruly. Another female combatant expressed,

> At home, they are considered to be incapable of mingling back to the household. They had been away. Now, they cannot do household chores. They have become anarchic. They do not obey others… Such things are thought about them.\(^{161}\)

However, female combatants spoke of a different reality in the rebel group than the prevalent societal perception. Female combatants thought themselves to be even more disciplined and committed to a noble cause rather than being misguided and exploited in the group. There were equality and respect in the group. Despite this perceived realm of discipline and commitment, female combatants seemed to be aware of the disparate social norms they also might be held against. Nepalese society did not easily accept inter-caste marriage and widow marriage. Post-war, women who entered such marriages were similarly blamed for breaking social norms and values (Upreti, et al., 2018, p. 41). Another female combatant explained,

> They would say that we lived together with male combatants. They would not know our strict rules and regulation within the party. We used to walk both male and female in equal numbers….Society would say- look they are able to live male and female together. They are having fun…. However, we did not think in that way. We were not culturally and morally

\(^{161}\) Interview with Bimala Ghimire (Date 11/12/ 2017)
deviated. We were motivated to do something. But they (the society) did not know about it. Maybe, had we been in their place, we would have talked the same thing.\textsuperscript{162}

Female soldiers did not seem to have been surprised by the response they got from society. Perhaps, they remained aware of the competing sets of expectations and norms placed on them during and after the war. This precarious situation may be termed ‘double jeopardy’ (King, 1988, p. 46), as used within black feminism to describe the double subjugation of black woman by sex and race. It is similar to ‘double consciousness’ where one has to constantly be aware of the gaze of others at the same time following one’s own way of life (Du Bois, 2006, p. 9). By replacing ‘consciousness’ with ‘jeopardy’, I highlight the vulnerability and precariousness of women combatants’ existence, particularly those who are also at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and disadvantage. Women combatants in the context of Maoist insurgency also faced similar dual-pressure. They needed to fit into the revolutionary fervour of the Maoist insurgency, and not to be seen as ‘reactionary’, a term reserved for those who are unwilling to adapt to the change. At the same time, they risked a societal backlash by abandoning traditional values and practices. Despite trying to bridge both worlds (ultra-progressive Maoists and orthodox society), female combatants became the object of moral policing by post-war society. They were labelled as deviant, immoral, and abnormal by society. They were realistic in their anticipation of such response from society because of their ‘double consciousness’ (Du Bois, 2006, p. 9). However, as the next section illustrates, male combatants did not face similar social scrutiny on their character and activities.

**Male Combatants not Scrutinised**

Women combatants seemed to be the main victims of moral surveillance and ostracisation post-war. Like female combatants, male combatants also lived along with female combatants and married without the consent from their family and society. However, community members questioned only the character and judgement of female ex-combatants, while their counterparts could get married outside the rebel group if they wanted during the insurgency, and on return to the community after the insurgency. For a woman combatant, marrying outside the rebel group involved the risk of social failure because of her history as a member of the rebel group. One female combatant explained,

\textsuperscript{162} Interview with Kamala BK (Date 05/01/2018)
Men could get married outside the party but for women, the thinking was that they should not marry outside the party. Maybe they could get married if they had asked. People don’t understand. In the future, they might say she is from the combatant group. Family and society might view them differently. Therefore, it was for our own good that we were told not to marry a man outside the party.\textsuperscript{163}

Moreover, Maoist commanders actively dissuaded female combatants from marriage outside the rebel group. Another female combatant narrated how she was treated badly by her husband who did not belong to the rebel group because of her history as a combatant,

My commander had told me that I should not get married to an outsider without consulting them first... Now, I feel that they had said such a thing for my own welfare. My husband started to hate me because I was from a rebel group....After the trouble, I went back to the cantonment.\textsuperscript{164}

Furthermore, marrying outside the rebel group was very difficult for women because of political and ideological differences. First, women’s natural roles and responsibilities are thought to lie within four walls of a home in Nepalese society. Being ideologically motivated and politically active, therefore, would have been difficult for former female combatants if their partners were not on their side politically and ideologically. Secondly, the larger society was not ready for the radical changes in gender relations that the Maoist party supported.\textsuperscript{165} One former female combatant opined,

Because whatever change we may bring, some people in the village do not change. Therefore, leaving the group and marrying in a village was impossible for a woman...It would have been different politically and ideologically. Hence, they thought that marrying within-group would be better and they got married within the rebel group.\textsuperscript{166}

Additionally, the Maoist attacked culturally accepted markers of feminine traits such as wearing jewellery and sarees and suruwals.\textsuperscript{167} These were deemed to be patriarchal and hindering the liberation of women. For them, equality also meant uniformity not only in the political ideology but also in everyday practices such as dressing and appearance in the rebel group. On the other hand, men did not have to

\textsuperscript{163} Interview with Srijana Nepali (Date 02/01/ 2018)
\textsuperscript{164} Interview with Srijana Nepali (Date 02/01/ 2018)
\textsuperscript{165} Maoist rebels were political party before starting the insurgency
\textsuperscript{166} Interview with Shanta BK (Date 11/12/ 2017)
\textsuperscript{167} Very common traditional wears for women in the Indian subcontinents.
change because they were already seen to have been liberated in society. However, once the insurgency was over, female combatants had to return to society only to discover that the society had not changed as such, making it difficult for women combatants reintegrating in society. One former female company commander explained,

> When I was involved in armed conflict, I took off my ear-rings and nose-piercings and gave it to my mother. Men used to wear shirts and pants at that time and I also used to wear shirts and pants. However, now in society, I have to wear saree, blouse, and jewellery as deemed necessary by society. Men can wear a shirt and pant. This kind of discrimination makes it a bit difficult for women to get settled in society more than men.\textsuperscript{168}

The women combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal had to adapt to masculine culture to be accepted as ideal combatants. In contrast, men did not have to change much. They could marry outside the rebel group if they wanted, but the same option was not available to female combatants. This became an effective way to create an in-group/out-group dynamic with female combatants as the centripetal force. Only women suffered if they married outside the group because of the stigma of being in the rebel group while men were not as much scrutinised of their characters as female combatants. Even after fighting the same war in similar capacities as men, women combatants were subject to societal moral inspection in ways men were not. As mentioned in the previous section, women combatants had to subject themselves to not only a ‘double consciousness’ (Du Bois, 2006, p. 9; King, 1988, p. 44) but to ‘multiple consciousness’- consciousness as the preserver of culture and tradition, as a protector of revolutionary fervour, and as an ideal soldier in masculine domain while simultaneously forming the humane face of the armed group. Furthermore, as the next sub-section highlights, the burden of child-rearing during and post-conflict fell disproportionately on women, despite Maoists claims to be creating a revolutionary environment defined by gender equality.

\textsuperscript{168} Interview with Ganga Karki ‘Puja’ (Date 12/12/ 2017)
Regressive Burden Sharing in Reproduction

My interviews with female ex-combatants who had children during the insurgency show that the progressive (and scientific) rhetoric of marriage within the rebel group did not lead to equitable burden-sharing after child-birth. There was no coherence between the Maoist agenda of gender equality and equitable share of child-rearing burden between male and female combatants. Although reproduction rights were not curtailed during the insurgency, the rebel group lacked a fair and coherent plan to manage and reintegrate the female combatants into the group once they had children. After the birth of a child within a rebel group, child-rearing responsibility squarely fell upon female combatants, reflecting the persistence of long-standing traditions within Nepalese society which the Maoists claimed to be dismantling. A former female company commander elaborated,

> Once they would have a baby, they were compelled to back down. I will introduce you to other ones. There is Sita [name changed]. She was at war. Once she got a baby, she had to back down. She had to look after the baby anyhow until the baby was one. From that perspective, they felt that they could not fulfil the duties of the party.¹⁶⁹

Moreover, the lack of support for female combatants post-childbirth contributed to the stalling of female combatant’s career aspirations as well (Gayer, 2013, p. 342). This was one of the key explanations for the lack of upward mobility for many female combatants in the PLA. Even when female combatants joined the insurgency much earlier than their spouses, they could not climb up the ranks. Another former female combatant explained her story,

> Although he [her husband] joined the party much later than me, he became a battalion vice commander. He was in the militia, after that he worked in YCL (Young Communist League,) before joining the PLA. Because of the children, I could not progress further. I stayed in the party organisation.¹⁷⁰

While marriage and relationships were encouraged, reproduction was reluctantly allowed during the insurgency (Gayer, 2013, p. 342) as this would risk losing combatants and create unnecessary burden. However, the Maoist party failed to translate its progressive and scientific approach into equitable post-

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Ganga Karki ‘Puja’ (Date 12/12/ 2017)
¹⁷⁰ Interview with Kamini Pun Magar (Date 02/01/ 2018)
birth child-rearing. The lack of equitable child responsibilities during the insurgency disproportionately affected the career prospects of female-combatants. This puts another layer of discrimination on women combatants, some of whom were already at the intersection of multiple discriminations such as caste, class, education, social status, and geography. The next section further inquires into the envisioning of marriage by Maoist leaders, adding another level of complexity to the understanding of multiple mechanisms during the war.
8.4. Maoist Leaders’ Rhetoric on Marriage: Libidinal Politics

Interviews with the Maoist leaders gave a different perspective on the marriage and its value during the insurgency. Analysis of interviews with Maoist leaders reveals that marriage was a vital part of attainment and containment of combatants, a source of authority and legitimacy, and a means of not only physical control, but also emotional and psychological control and exploitation of the combatants. Laurent Gayer calls it the ‘libidinal politics’ of Maoist insurgency delicately regulating ‘love-marriage-sex’ triangle mixed with the politics of martyrdom that proved to be a driving force behind the Maoist insurgency (Gayer, 2013). Unlike some other rebel groups such as LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) Sri Lanka, Democratic Union Party (Syria), and Naxalite Maoist Insurgency in India, Maoist insurgency in Nepal allowed its cadres and combatants to get married from the very start of the conflict. Falling in love was not considered a sin, as long as it did not breach certain rules such as an extra-marital affair. Maoists banned traditional rituals and practices prevalent in marriages which were often costly, burdensome, and discriminatory. For example, the dowry system, caste-apartheid in marriage, costly rituals, and widowhood were banned and marriage was simplified and made accessible. At the same time, the Maoists also allowed continuity of traditional governing ethos pertaining to love-marriage-sex to suppress implications of vulgarity, obscenity, and promiscuity. Moreover, Maoists attempted to influence reproduction in subtle ways as pregnancies were considered to be a hindrance, but they were not banned. The seemingly liberal attitude of Maoists towards love, marriage and remarriage, and sex, however, belied the elaborate pattern of control and management of feelings, emotions, sentiments of its combatants and cadres to elicit loyalty towards the Maoist movement. The ‘libidinal politics’ in people’s war in Nepal was essential for the attainment of combatants and cadres, containment of combatants and cadres, sustainment of revolutionary zeal, advertisement of its revolutionary credentials.

Intriguingly, all the higher-ranked leaders who had already married were urged to bring their spouses with them to the insurgency rather than only supporting from home. This helped them sustain marriage because they no longer needed to be separated and could remain together in a relationship.

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171 I’m borrowing this term from Gayer (2013) where she explains how Maoists regulated and managed the love-marriage-sex triangle during the insurgency to the benefit of the revolution.

172 Interview with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017) and Interview with Lila Sharma (Date 20/12/2017)

173 Interview with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)
despite the war, and leaving their wives at home could have jeopardised their security if security forces tracked them down. Therefore, Dr. Umesh Bhattarai, a former brigadier general from the Nepalese army, notes that marriage helped the rebels for unity and strength. The second-ranked Maoist leader, Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, who was also with his wife Hisila Yami throughout the insurgency, argues that it helped Maoists to retain men- “Women also meant relationship. In some exceptions, because of women, men left. However, in most cases, because of women, men stayed in the group, and the whole family remained devoted to the party.”

For the younger generation, joining the insurgency was also seen as an escape from the puritanical restrictions of the family and society. It motivated many them to start a new life by joining Maoist insurgency. As discussed above, they simplified the process of who they could marry and how to marry as long as they followed Maoist governing ethos. As Maoists had banned the caste system and dowry system making marriage within the prospect of anyone if they desired (KC, et al., 2017, p. 180), they did not have to follow a caste system which limited their choice. Moreover, they did not have to give or take dowry and spend money on an extravagant wedding ceremony. This aspect of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal confirms the finding of Hudson and Matfess (2017) who claimed that the higher cost of finding brides and marriage in the society drives many young eligible single men towards rebel groups who make marriage affordable for them. Aruna Rayamajhi argues that many joined Maoists and stayed in the group because of the attraction towards the opposite sex.

I think human beings get attracted to the opposite sex. That was necessary for war. If you take it positively, I think that if a combatant, be it male or female, if they are married and went home, they might not return. If they were permitted to get married there and if they could express their love in the rebel group, it becomes sustainable somehow.

Progressive marriage was undertaken response to the cost of marriage and archaic practices and rituals surrounding marriage in Nepalese society such as child marriage, dowry system, and the caste system. Maoists took marriage under their sanction by bringing it outside the control of family and society. They

174 Interview with Lila Sharma (Date 20/12/2017)
175 Interview with Dr Umesh Bhattarai (Date 26/11/2017)
176 Interview with Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)
177 Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)
made marriage simple and accessible to the willing couple under certain conditions and made it stable (Adhikari, 2006, p. 75). But they had many more unmarried male and female living, marching, and fighting together— a source of concern for the moral police in the traditional society. While they promoted love and sex as a natural and biological need, they also had to act against the sexual anarchism (Yami, 2007, p. 29). For example, pre-marital and extra-marital sex, polygamy, remarriage before the divorce or loss of the partner were duly punished.\textsuperscript{178} Such punishments ranged from demotion and political re-education to eviction.\textsuperscript{179} This extended the governing ethos regarding love-marriage-sex prevalent in the broader Nepalese society. At the same time, it also saved them from ignominy, notoriety, and unwanted deviation arising from extra-marital affairs in leaders.\textsuperscript{180} In an attempt to defame Maoists, many reports that originated from security forces fighting Maoists claimed that they had discovered large quantities of condoms in the pockets of dead Maoists (Gayer, 2013, p. 358). The government army tried to project the image of female combatants on the Maoist side as mere objects of sexual gratification for the male combatants (Yami, 2007, p. 59; Tamang, 2017, p. 233). In such a situation, the formulation of strict codes and ethos that somehow shielded them from the accusation of promiscuity and vulgarity in Nepalese society.

Similarly, private affairs such as marriage were politicised to bolster the commitment and loyalty of newly-wed members towards the Maoist Party. Maoist party was depicted as above marriage, as fidelity to the party was framed as more important than fidelity towards marriage. The success of marriages was dependent upon a person’s dedication to the party and revolution. It was not uncommon to divorce a husband or wife if he/she was found to be disloyal to the party. For example, Kamala Dong, a female ex-combatant, divorced her husband after he was found to have gone against the Maoist party policies (Dong, 2064 v.s., p. 112 cited in Rai, 2017, p. 197). Similarly, the Maoist party became the approver and guarantor of the marital bond, supplanting traditional institutions such as family and society as leaders and commanders took the role of parents and guardians of the combatants. In essence, the institution of control over marriage continued. Such continuity was essential for the creation of a sustainable emotional and psychological basis for the continuity of war.

\textsuperscript{178} Interview with Hisila Yami in Gayer (2013, p. 351-52)
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid
\textsuperscript{180} In fact, Maoist party decided to make it compulsory for Maoist leaders to have their wives join them after extra-marital affair between two top leaders, Ram Bahadur Thapa ‘Bada’ and Pampha Bhusal. Before, it was encouraged but not enforced.
Even the narratives and perceptions around pregnancy and reproduction were carefully constructed so as not to be seen interfering but subtly influencing the decision-making of married couples. During my interview with the high ranking Maoist leaders and female ex-combatants, they unequivocally emphasised that there was no restriction for the pregnancy and child-birth, unlike in other rebel groups, such as the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency banning pregnancies and child-birth. However, the combatants were tacitly advised not to have children early and such admonitions were particularly reserved for the women. They were told that pregnancies could hinder their career development. Pregnancies were considered to be a disciplinary action that prevents them from advancing their careers (Gayer, 2013, p. 342).

Lila Sharma, the highest-ranked female commander (Brigade Commander) for the PLA (People’s Liberation Army), argues,

We need to take eight months’ leave during pregnancy. We have to be with the baby for a month to fulfil baby’s right. During that time, time progresses fast. Men’s responsibility is finished after sexual intercourse. Because of it, women lag in society. Men can stay in the game longer and hold grip. Therefore, we put this proposal to the Maoist chairman. We decided not to marry. Even if we marry, we will not give birth to the child soon. Those women who followed this managed to play a greater role. Practically, women have to take leave for a certain period. During that period, things speed up. It is really difficult to do catch up for women. … They have to wait for some time. Once they secure their future, they can marry and plan accordingly. I got married only after the peace-process in 2063 BS (2007 AD). I only have on the child and I’m engaged on my job…. If they (married female combatants) failed to do family planning, they missed leadership chances.181

The derision of a woman into a child-bearing machine in a patriarchal system arose repeatedly in the interviews with female leaders. They argued that many female combatants decided to join Maoist insurgency defying their pre-ordained fate to marry and have children. Therefore, the combatants, particularly those who had leadership ambitions, had been self-censoring thoughts of having

181 Interview with Lila Sharma (Date: 20/12/2017)
children. In many cases, this saved the Maoist party from unnecessary logistics of child-care and the combatant’s potential digression from revolutionary zeal.

Comparably, martyrdom was considered a crucial credential for ones’ recognition as a revolutionary even when one tragically loses the partner in war. The loss of a partner at the battlefield or during encounters with the government forces was used to engender a sense of vengeance and anger in widow/widower, directed against the government forces (Comrade Parvati, 1999; Yami, 2007, p. 24). This sense of anger and vengeance was also transferred to the martyr’s family so that they could also turn the mourning into power, and pain into anger, not towards the Maoist themselves, but towards the state and its security apparatus. Despite ostracisation and general unacceptance of the widows in most parts of Nepalese society, Maoists actively encouraged the remarriage of widow or widower after the loss of their partner (Adhikari, 2006, p. 76-77; Rai, 2017, p. 208). As mentioned in their memoirs, Samama D. C. and Sharda Pun, both female ex-combatants, remarried after losing their husbands during Maoist insurgency (D. C., 2064 v.s. and Pun, 2064 v.s. cited in Rai, 2017, p. 208-209). Although Sharda Pun lost two husbands in the Maoist insurgency but that did not deter her dedication to the Party.

Revolution is in need of sacrifices for liberation. This necessity has been fulfilled by both of my spouses. In the departure of both of my husbands, thoughts and ideology continue to multiply. From here on, the entire party revolution and the family of people’s war martyrs will become my source of inspiration. (Pun, 2064 v.s., p. 174 cited in Rai, 2017, p. 209)

While this reduced the mourning period of the widow/widower and retained the bereaved combatant, it also presented Maoists as a progressive party. Combatants’ feelings and emotions about love and loss within the private spheres were carefully accumulated, processed, formatted, mobilised, and sometimes controlled for the purpose of the collective action in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Here, the personal became completely subsumed within the carefully crafted political narrative.

Footnotes:

182 Interviews with Lila Sharma (Date 20/12/2017), and Hisila Yami and Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)
184 While most social groups in Nepal traditionally ostracised widow, particularly, so in Hindu community, for some social group such as indigenous population- Tamang, Gurung, and Rais- remarriage for a widow is not a big issue.
Marriage acted as a vital centripetal force through machinations of control and manipulation during the war. In purporting to free its combatants and cadres from the supposedly outdated norms and practices of relationship and marriage, they created own elaborate system of marriage. They retained some of the traditional norms and practices when they worked to sustain the marriage and retain combatants during the war. Moreover, similar to family and society in the broader Nepalese context, marriage became a public affair, as duty and loyalty to the party was important than duty and loyalty to the partner. Norms around reproduction and pregnancies were constructed so as to link them to regression. Furthermore, post-loss mourning and emotions were subject to de facto revolutionary ideals that prohibited the mourning and recess of revolutionary fervour. Nevertheless, the utility of marriage for the revolution was over as soon as the war ended. It worth noting here that although Maoists paid special attention to the sustenance of marriage during the insurgency, they, however, turned a blind eye at the disintegration of the marriage after the Maoist insurgency was over.\footnote{Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi (Date 21/12/2017)} Nevertheless, the ‘libidinal politics’ played a vital role in attaining and containing the combatants during the insurgency.
8.5. Chapter Conclusion

The elaborate ‘progressive and scientific’ rhetoric on the marital relationship during the Maoist insurgency had more of a role in emphasising the unique and distinctive nature of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal than the nebulous connection with the exact semantics of ‘science’. It was one of the major ways Maoists sought to distinguish themselves from other communists and non-communist forces within Nepal, and also other communist insurgencies outside Nepal which stagnated or perished away; i.e. Naxalist insurgency in India and Shining Path in Peru (Gayer, 2013, p. 348). It is not as important to consider whether their interpretation and application of ‘science’ in relation to prolonged fighting capacity of women and marriage was more of a biological reality and necessity and less of social reality, or whether this necessity was coherent with actual semantics of ‘science’. Rather, the process of organising ideas in the minds of people (cognition) is as important as the discourse (syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, argumentative, and narrative) and the social structure that facilitates production/reproduction of power, power abuse, and domination (Van Dijk, 2014). In other words, the mental structure of an individual processes the discourse structure within the context of the social structure to make inferences about the social situation. The mental structure consists of long-term memory and epistemic appropriateness - a combination of what an individual knows, and what part of that knowledge is deemed appropriate by the social context and situation. This subjective model of perceiving social situations is useful in understanding how Maoists constructed various discourses during Maoist insurgency in Nepal, and how the subjects of the discourse i.e. female combatants, comprehended these discourses.

The way female combatants and their leaders made inferences about the narratives of scientific rhetoric, particularly based upon their life experiences and perception (long-term memory), significantly portrays the existing power relations in the society. The divergence between the female ex-combatants and their leader was more salient in terms of their understanding and interpretation of marriage. The Maoist leadership was keen to use marriage as an example to show its progressive credentials in the Nepalese society. In the interviews, the Maoist leaders focused on the uniqueness of Maoist insurgency in Nepal in such a way that it not only changed the political landscape of the country but also radically altered the social and cultural fabric of the society. They encouraged inter-caste marriage, banned child marriage, and dowry system, and emphasised upon the consent of the couple instead of familial and societal control on marriage.
However, during the interviews, the female ex-combatants explained that their marriage was more in line with the existing socio-cultural norms and strict moral codes rather than a deviation from them. They highlighted that the marriage in the People’s Liberation Army was more disciplined, rational, goal-oriented, less-vulgar, and less-deviant. They were still strictly bound by the socio-cultural sense of purity, fidelity, and loyalty. Next, the female combatants saw marriage as a natural biological reality within the scientific discourse with a very important function within the social life. Marriage was based on ideology and intellect rather than the result of unbridled passion and emotion. Although it might seem exactly what leadership wanted them to be in order to tie them within the rebel group and insurgency, a closer look reveals it to be still heavily influenced by their prior societal values and norms. In the society marriage is a family or even a public affair- something done not only with an individual’s wish but also to align with the necessity of the family and society. Here, the party supplanted the family and society, leaders became parents, and female combatants were trapped between cultural puritanism and mores of conservative society on the one side and radical disregard for caste and gender hierarchies on the other. Yet, within this contradictory space female ex-combatants reformed the discourses by resisting radicalness on the one hand and submission to the oppressive tradition on the other.

The analysis of two different sets of interviews- female ex-combatants and their leaders- reveal differing perspectives, if not always contrasting, on the scientific discourse on marriage during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. This seemed like a pragmatic approach in the face of an orthodox society that puts the burden of morality and decency squarely on women, while also retaining revolutionary tropes within the rebel group. Despite this, interviews made it apparent that only the female combatants, and not female leaders nor the men, suffered the backlash of going against societal norms and practices pertaining to marriage and relationship. Their stance on marriage did not involve the progressive division of labour at the reproduction either. The rebel group, particularly leaders became the primary beneficiary of the scientific/progressive marriage, instead of serving female ex-combatants who thought they had married scientifically and progressively. Allowing marriage and relationships between men and women, within the parameters set by the Maoists, not only attracted men and women from a conservative society in the group, but it also helped Maoists to retain them longer, allowing the leaders to control and manipulate combatants to gain power. Speaking to the female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and vulnerabilities provides a different perspective on the
much claimed ‘progressive’ nature of the insurgency. Herein, the ‘matrix of domination’ by Collins (2009) is useful to capture the Maoist insurgency in its full complexity and wholeness.

In line with Shilliam’s decolonial thinking (2015), the discrepancy in the use of scientific rhetoric by the leaders and female ex-combatants also highlights the agency of female combatants in the form of intellectual resilience during and after the war by resisting the hegemonic colonisation of conscience and thinking within the rebel group itself. This is remarkable given systematic ideological indoctrination and strict disciplining during the insurgency (Eck, 2010). Moreover, the experiences of ‘double jeopardy’ (King, 1988, p. 44), ‘double consciousness’ (Du Bois, 2006, p. 9), and ‘multiple consciousnesses’ reframes the conceptions of marriage within scientific rhetoric to reveal underlying structures of power and vulnerabilities. The intersectional theoretical framework designed for this research captures the discrepancy in these meanings, underscoring how power and vulnerability are intricately associated with the meaning and interpretation. Prioritising the voices women ex-combatants at the margin with their diverse and alternative perspectives enables the resistance against the hegemonic discourse.
9. **Post-War Experiences**

9.1. **Chapter Introduction**

Forms of colonisation can be manifested in less visible ways, away from the traditional conception of colonisation in terms of expansion and the control of the territoriability. As indicated in the theoretical chapter, I extrapolate from Robbie Shilliam’s (2015) decolonial conceptual framework to introduce a new concept of ‘internal colonisation’ which focuses on the colonisation of thinking and episteme, and hegemony of particular discourse within the boundaries of a state. Colonisation can be deliberate blindness towards voices, interests, needs, and experiences of the people in the margin living within the state to propagate the voices, interests, needs, and experiences of one dominant group as universal. In this sense, colonisation need not travel international spatial borders, it also occurs internally within the borders of the state. In the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, diverse experiences and needs of the Nepali women were not taken into consideration seriously both in the setting of the agendas for the women’s liberation, and in the implementation of the agendas purporting to liberate them. Moreover, the focus on bringing women into the Maoist insurgency lacked consideration about the possible backlash that vulnerable women at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression were likely to face. Moreover, in the post-war period, the hegemonic discourse on the success of insurgency in liberating women overshadows alternative perspectives on the consequences of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, especially on the lives of the female ex-combatants. Yet, talking to the female ex-combatants at the margin shows divergent views during and after the insurgency indicating the resistance of the female ex-combatants to the hegemonic narratives. Finally, the section stresses the essence of decolonial thinking: the disentanglement of hegemonic narratives and invigoration of voices of the marginalised or the colonised, as I include. This encourages me to see the power relationship between the coloniser and colonised not through the vantage point of the oppressor but through the eyes of the oppressed/colonised/subaltern.186 Similarly, this decolonial thinking is in sync with the ‘matrix of domination’ of black feminist (Collins, 2009)

186 Like Shilliam (2015), María Lugones (2010) engages deeply with this which she terms ‘colonial difference’.
9.2. Internal Colonisation and Hegemony

During the Maoist insurgency, in the name of women’s liberation, Maoists broke the barriers hindering the women’s movement outside the domestic sphere to participate in the Maoist insurgency. Maoists encouraged women to transgress traditional gender norms and undertake masculine roles defying the socio-cultural restrictions on a woman. One female ex-combatant explained,

We broke rules according to the party policy. The society did not accept us. Women were supposed to marry and look after children and in-laws at husband’s home. For women to enter Maoist party which was underground and to be among men at night was considered to be dangerous and they were thought to be characterless…. Naturally, we disobeyed our parents to be at the party. When the party did not obey the state and when we whole-timers felt that we are bringing new society over the horizon, we also did not follow our parents who were brought up in a conservative orthodox society. We became rebels before our parents. After becoming rebels, we broke all the shackles and taboos of the societies such as women must not climb trees, women shouldn’t carry guns, women should not leave home alone, girls should not debate too much, girls should be obedient, and so on. Therefore, carrying a gun was not odd to us.187

Such radical acts of revolt in the society established the position of Maoist leaders as a revolutionary and progressive force in Nepal, however, they equally put many vulnerable female combatants, particularly from the marginalised community (in terms of class, caste, ethnicity, and geography), at the peril of isolation, ostracisation, and rejection. By transgressing taboos and taking on masculine roles against the norm, they alienated themselves from their communities (Goswami, 2015). Amidst the insurgency, radical revolutionary agendas were not reconciled with the reality of rural Nepali society, in order to alleviate the backlash against women combatants in their families and communities. It was assumed that once women combatants break taboos, they would steadily progress. Maoists did not think it necessary to hold a serious discussion about the schism between the female combatants and their family, community, and the tradition they left behind. In fact, research shows that women combatants who left their family and communities to join Maoists encountered problems with reintegrating (Adhikari, 2014, p. 103). Most of the family and communities where female combatants came from were located in remote areas that often remained resistant to radical changes that Maoists

187 Interview with Lila Sharma, date 20/12/2017
were advocating regarding gender relations. There were not enough infrastructures and resources in place to employ female combatants who did not want to resume their traditional roles in society. Despite this, most of the female ex-combatants in high-ranking positions were able to continue their political and social activism outside homes. Better family status, education, available resources, and connection meant that they could take risk of adopting radical societal norms and political with fewer repercussions in their lives. Although such experiences were unpleasant for the female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, concepts of modernity/progress/and science were exploited to persuade them. The ubiquitous use of the term ‘science’ as part of an explanation of the relevance of Maoist insurgency among leaders and subordinates alike speaks volumes about the permeation of elite ideologies and narratives into their followers. Some of the female combatants that I spoke to did not go to school, and those who got a chance to go to school left it to be part of the insurgency. Yet, leaders and subordinates, and educated and uneducated female combatants alike used ‘science’ profusely to explain the insurgency in many. For example, they used this term in reference to ideology, organisation, the fighting capability of women in a protracted war, and marriage in the organisation. Nevertheless, the permeation of the term ‘science’ within a group traveling from leaders to their subordinates despite the gap in education is striking. Most importantly, how these terms representing certain discourse behind the movement are received, reproduced, and refracted by subordinates in their mundane aspects of everyday life such as love, marriage, and casual conversation reveals various facets of the process, internal colonisation. Another prime example of internal colonisation is the prevalence of single narrative flowing from Maoist leaders devoid of alternative explanations for the success of Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Some of the female combatants spoke of their frustration for the neglect of their opinions/concerns/lived experiences.

188 Majority of female ex-combatants that I interviewed came from Western and Mid-Western hill districts of Nepal which are usually away from road network and lack decent access to education, health, communication, and other development infrastructures.

189 Interview with Deepak Thapa, 21/11/2017

190 Through the interviews I had with female combatants, science was understood as something representing sharp contrast to useless old cultural and traditional values and practices often associated with discrimination and oppression. The benevolent face of science was promoted as something magical that always leads to progress and there was not much discussion about the potential suffering, degradation, and inequality.
by their leaders. One female ex-combatant who also sustained injury from war-time vented her frustration,

We were also convinced by the party (Maoists) while we were in school (to join them)...Those who supported them from very early years are in the same position as they were before the war....Other people in the village listen to us but our leaders do not listen to us....Even our party leaders did not trust us....It was like my own parents put me in the handcuffs....We protected them putting our own lives in risk thinking that they will do something for the nation and protect us...Now we are fighting for our existence.191

The female combatants, and their male counterparts, during the insurgency were asked/coerced to forsake formal education to the indoctrination of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology (Adhikari, 2006). This effectively prevented them from knowing the world through a different lens beyond Marxist-Leninist-Maoist worldview. Even after the ‘successful and historic’ conclusion of the war and their leaders being in power, female ex-combatants emphasised that their situation has not improved. Despite being in power, female ex-combatants felt that their leaders refused to hear their voices and acknowledge their predicament. They felt betrayed and deceived by those who they sacrificed their lives to. Moreover, female combatants were pressured not to voice their pain and suffering so as not to taint the image of Maoist insurgency. One female ex-combatant elaborated,

So many got injured and martyred... I also got injured. I have also shrapnel in my body. I broke my leg. ... I did not apply for the compensation even though I broke my leg. For me these are nothing. My friends have far greater pain than me. They are broken into pieces. Before them, my troubles are nothing. Therefore, there were so many women combatants...They got injured. They have endured so much pain. Now they feel that this is it. They cannot raise issues thinking that this will bring the party to the disrepute. We do not know what might happen. In this situation, they have to hide their pains.192

Even after the end of the insurgency, the Maoists considered any view that would deviate from the success story of the insurgency for women’s equality and liberation as undesirable. Many female ex-combatants self-censored their voice so as not to challenge the dominant narrative of Maoist insurgency’s success. Their everyday pain, ailment, and struggles became invisible and suppressed.

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191 Interview with Kamala Sharma (Date: 22/01/2018)
192 Interview with Bimala Ghimire (Date: 11/12/2017)
This internal colonisation can also be compared with what Du Bois terms ‘double-consciousness’ (Du Bois, 2006, p. 9). This is an uncomfortable situation where an individual always looks at one’s self through the eyes of others. One has to live with ‘twoness’- first, there is the painful reality of the internal self; second, this painful reality of self has to be glossed over to the disciplining gaze of the other- only to submit the individual story to the narrative of the hegemonic construction. Female ex-combatants, whether it was during the insurgency or after the insurgency, had to adjust their consciousness and stories so as to tune in to the dominant discourses of the Maoist insurgency.
9.3. Resisting the Internal Colonisation: Divergent View on the Post-War Achievements

The intersectional approach with its attendant focus on the voices of female ex-combatants at the junction of multiple systems oppressions, allows me to explore the divergent understanding and explanation of Maoist insurgency in Nepal. This section offers a discursive analysis of the interviews with Maoist leaders and female ex-combatants to identify the points of divergence on the post-war achievements of Maoist insurgency further. The difference between the two sets of interviews persisted despite the strict hierarchy and requirement of stringent and unconditional adherence to the ideological doctrines flowing from the leadership during the insurgency (Eck, 2010). While some socialization theory might help explain the divergence to some extent, they also confirm the extraordinary intellectual resistance and agency of female ex-combatants against the prevalent hegemonic discourses on these topics. Finally, this also reiterates the decolonial thinking by Shilliam (2015) on the unique intellectual independence and resilience of female ex-combatants at the margin against the hegemonic characterization of war at the centre.

The comparison between the two sets of interviews- one set of interviews with elites (predominantly the Maoist leaders) and the other with subordinate female ex-combatants- gives us a space to argue that in spite of their position of multiple subordinations, disadvantage, and vulnerability, female ex-combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal were resisting the hegemonic discourse of liberation transformation of their lives emanating from their leaders. Analysis of the interviews showed that female ex-combatants differed with elites in the tone, content, and framing of the important topics post-war empowerment. Both sets of interviews equivocally highlight the importance of the female ex-combatants as the key agents of change; their capability to undertake adverse roles such as soldiering; their contribution to the Maoist insurgency and to the broader society in Nepal; and empowering impact of war on women in Nepalese society. However, a significant gap was observable in the content, presentation, characterisation, and interpretation of post-war achievements of female combatants and relationship during the insurgency. In the interviews, female ex-combatants were critical of the transformation in the society that did not bring substantial changes in their lives. They were critical and cautionary of the gains from the Maoist insurgency such as empowerment. While female leaders in the Maoist held similar position and views and sympathised with the female ex-combatants, leaders, in general, attempted to paint a more positive picture of the insurgency. They focused on the transformation of the social and political terrain of the Nepalese society. Yet, they failed to anticipate
and fathom the cultural backlash that squarely fell upon female combatants particularly from the underprivileged and marginalised communities.

Similarly, most of the elites, particularly the leaders, presented positive, romanticised and celebratory discourse of the insurgency. They highlighted on the achievements of the insurgency, agency of the people that insurgency allowed, and the radical transformation that insurgency brought to society. The focus was mostly on the establishment of republicanism in the country, end of feudalism, and rights for the marginalised and exploited people. Likewise, they highlighted the fact that a lot of marginalised group including women were able to express their collective agency by participating in the insurgency. Their participation was, as highlighted, crucial to the transformation of the society that brought many positive changes in regards to the rights of women such as access to the parental property, reservation in the parliament and at the local levels, and end of many discriminatory laws against women.

However, even some Maoist female leaders and experts on female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal were critical of the way most of the female ex-combatants from the lower-caste, lower-class, lower social status, and from remote areas have been marginalised in the post-conflict scenario. While highlighting the political awareness of female combatants, they also acknowledged that the needs of women ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple dominations and discriminations have not been taken into account in the post-conflict society. Furthermore, they felt that women were used by Maoist leadership to gain power but not much has been done to address their needs after the end of the war. Most of the combatants returned to the society reluctantly as housewives after the war. Some female leaders in the Maoist felt that the women combatants were used and disposed of as per the convenience of those in power.

Similarly, while the Maoist leaders were proclaiming the insurgency to be a resounding success, which was also the dominant narrative of the Maoist insurgency particularly for the liberation of women, many female ex-combatants from Maoist insurgency in the interview spoke about the frustration and depression, and how they felt abandoned. The insurgency may have been a success for women in general who benefited from the sacrifices of female combatants, but this was not the case for the female

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193 Interviews with Maoist female leaders Hisila Yami, Aruna Khadka, Pampha Bhusal and Lila Sharma. Similarly, my interview with Deepak Thapa, the director of Social Science Baha, and Bishnu Raj Upreti, the director of Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR) highlighted this. Analysis of interviews of female ex-combatants is presented in earlier chapter.

194 Ibid
ex-combatants who I spoke to. Lack of space for an alternative way of framing the insurgency illustrates the colonisation of narratives and fails to recognise the dissenting voices. The bar graphs below show how female ex-combatants and their leaders compare female ex-combatants’ status after the war with other women in the society when asked about their status post-war. While they perceive the status of other women to be better now than before the war; in contrast, the majority of female ex-combatants perceived their status as same or unchanged. This gives the impression that the war the female combatants fought in the subordinate position was different from the war their leaders fought.

![Diagram 9.1](image_url)

Most of the female ex-combatants that I interviewed felt that they have been defeated, even though the rebel group successfully negotiated a peace deal with the government and many Maoist leaders came to power after the war. They fought the war so that they could come out of domesticity, become independent and take equal places in society. Fighting in the war gave them false hope that they were leaving their homes for a better future. However, after the war, most of them returned to the same old routine they felt they had left to join the insurgency. In the post-war peacebuilding process in Nepal, peace was conceptualised as a return to things ‘the way they used to be’ and this also includes, in the case of female combatants, social structures that prop the (gendered) status quo (Goswami, 2015). Interviewees pointed out that they lost the prime period of their lives fighting for an egalitarian society which would respect them as equal beings vis-à-vis men. However, even after the sacrifice of their youthful years with their sweat and blood, gender discrimination still persisted after war. Some female
combatants were nostalgic while others regretted their wasted youthful years for meagre monetary compensation. This also corresponds with the findings from recent researches on female ex-combatants in Maoist insurgency in Nepal wherein female ex-combatants have expressed their dissatisfaction with their status in the post-war society (Upreti and Shivakoti, 2018; KC, et al., 2017; KC and Van Der Haar, 2018).

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195 Interview with Kamala Sharma, date 22/01/2018. Another disenchanted former female combatant who refused to be interviewed but was happy to share frustration and anger with the way leaders abandoned them once war was over.
9.4. Chapter Conclusion

In brief, the colonisation of conscience within the borders of the state resembles external territorial colonisation in the sense that both ignore, invalidate and belittle the alternative experiences, stories, and perspectives. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal, despite its strong gender equality rhetoric laced within fancy loaded terms like science/progress/modernity, failed to take into consideration of the voices, needs, interests, and experiences of women at the margin, often living precariously at the intersection of the multifarious oppressive systems. The female combatants were pressured to transgress the old traditional values and practices in the name of progress, science, and modernity. They were deprived of the formal education and ideologically indoctrinated instead while their critical outlook on the achievements of the Maoist insurgency was discredited and discouraged. In the post-war period, systematic attempts at the universalisation of the success of the Maoist insurgency by its leaders, intolerant approach to the difference, and lack of alternative explanation of the women’s equality and liberation after the Maoist insurgency conform to the internal colonisation tendencies and the hegemonic construction of the dominant narrative. Still, the possibility of resistance against the hegemony and colonisation can only be highlighted if the focus is directed towards the perspectives of the marginalised group. The hegemonic narrative, constructed upon elites in the society, fails to recognise the voices from the periphery and amounts to further reification. All these discussions show that embedding subordinated, marginalised and neglected perspectives is not only a question of ethics and justice but also a mark of academic integrity and balance. Here, the poststructuralist narrative approach nudges me to listen to the female ex-combatants at the margin and try to amplify their voices in order to resist and challenge the hegemonic/singular narratives of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal from the elites at the centre. Furthermore, the intersectional framework helps me to listen to the alternative voices emanating from the margin.

In the spirit of decolonial thinking, talking to the female ex-combatants, specifically those living in the remote and neglected areas including poverty-ridden families and communities, lower-caste, uneducated backgrounds, and other marginalised communities, means recognition of the value of their experience/intellect/wisdom not only in academic institutions but at home/village/community/ or in the ghettos of urban centres. It is important to hear, highlight, and recognise voices of the female ex-combatants stuck in the intersection of multiple layers of oppression and discrimination that are often blanketed and suffocated by the hegemonic constructions of their ideological/intellectual leaders.
(colonisers)within a single geopolitical boundary. In this way, as Robbie Shilliam (2015, p. 7) puts it nicely, when he states that we can reach seabed of the decolonial project also in the living knowledge traditions of the colonised. Serious dialogue in this respect offers the possibility for the retrieval of authentic thought and action unadulterated by colonial narrative, gaze, reason, and science. It also helps to address the root causes of injustices both local and global when the most oppressed are given a voice that would otherwise be drowned in the cacophony of the dominant colonial chorus. This epistemic justice and knowledge validity of women at the ‘matrix of domination’ is also equally emphasised by black feminists like Patricia Hill Collins (2009).
10. **Further Intersectional Lens: Cases of Two Female Combatants Before, During, and After the War**

10.1. **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter follows the stories of the two female ex-combatants in the same rank before, during, and after the Maoist insurgency in Nepal to further illustrate the complexity of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. The intersectional framework inspired by Collins’s (2009) ‘matrix of domination’ is suitable to capture the messiness of the war not only when seen through the Maoist leaders’ experiences and perspectives and through that of female ex-combatants’ perspectives, but it can even go further by capturing the intricacies between the stories of the female ex-combatants within the same rank and file during the war. It is important to mention that not all the leaders hailed from elite backgrounds while not all the rank and file female combatants came from marginalised communities. Moreover, winnowing the stories even at the margin also takes Shilliam’s (2015) decolonial thinking a step further. The picture of the war gets further messier, but also fuller when using an intersectional theoretical framework to examine the stories of rank and file female combatants from different backgrounds. Existing theoretical frameworks such as rational choice and radical feminism are unable to represent the complex stories, blurring agency and victimhood. Furthermore, these theories tend to take a short view and do not incorporate the full ranges of experiences before, during, and after the war. Using the ‘matrix of domination’ conceptual framework by Collins (2009) within the intersectional framework, I examine the experiences and stories of two female ex-combatants in the second section who hail from a different class, caste, social status, education level, and geographical location. This section will explore their lives before, during, and after the war to look at how despite being in the same rank during the insurgency, their lives took opposite trajectories after the insurgency.

This equally embeds the decolonial thinking by Shilliam (2015) that resists and disrupts sanitised and singular war narratives in hegemonic representations. It chases away the pretensions of the universality and singularity of certain experiences from the dominant and monolithic group. It is useful to return to my theoretical frameworks at some length here, because the stories of these two women, as well as the methodological choice to focus on their stories, reinforces and builds on these theories. As indicated, existing approaches to studying female combatants can be limited in their narrow approach to understanding choice, victimization, and agency. The participation of women in Maoist insurgency as combatants did not end the injustices and discriminations against them despite the peaceful
resolution of conflict notwithstanding Maoist’s unprecedented electoral success in the first constitutional assembly election post-war (Billingsley, 2018). Most of the Maoist female ex-combatants were not satisfied with their status where they are not able to fully reintegrate back to their society. Moreover, many of them are ostracised, isolated, and face new discriminations (KC, and Van Der Haar, 2018). However, it should not overshadow the fact that they were politically and socially more aware than average Nepali women. The female ex-combatants that I interviewed spoke with confidence, taking pride for their part in the socio-political change that swept geopolitics of Nepal. Many of them are now activists in the community and are able to raise their voice against violence and oppression against the women in their community. By disregarding their voices, we fail to regard the conflict in its totality.

It is easy to overlook the complex experiences of female ex-combatants in the rebel group since they do not conform to existing dominant theoretical frameworks such as feminist theories or the rational choice theory. It becomes important to examine, recognise, and capture the complexity of ideas originating from the everyday life experiences of women in the crossroads of manifold identities and oppressions. Often, these aspects resist fitting into a pre-existing theoretical worldview, but that constitutes an opportunity for new knowledge creation. In this context, speaking to female ex-combatants situated within the matrix of multiple dominations and following their complex experiences establishes the alternative ways of knowing about the conflict. Similarly, true to decolonial thinking (Shilliam, 2015) it also helps to resist and challenge the hegemonic narratives of insurgency from the elites at the centre by raising voices of the female ex-combatants at the margin. Moreover, the divergent stories of the two female ex-combatants despite many similarities illustrates how the intersectional framework is useful to study war in its totality beyond the singularity and universality assumptions. In this milieu, the next section will present the stories of two female ex-combatants before, during, and after the conflict to show how their experiences and stories are shaped and defined by the ‘matrix of domination’ in intricate ways.

196 Interview with Bimala Ghimire, dated 11/12/2017.
10.2. Two Stories: Intersectionality and Liberation of Women

While conflict may reveal a certain commonality in women's experience, I argue that it affects women differently, depending upon the various systems of identity and oppression such as caste, class, social status, and geographical location. This section draws from the third approach on intersectionality as described in the introduction, in order to understand two divergent life trajectories of female ex-combatants, Birshu Gharti and Ruby Shrestha after the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, in spite of their similar subordinate position in the rebel group during the war. The third approach of intersectionality defines each system of oppression interwoven in an intersection with the other in dynamic and complex ways (Collins 1993, 1998, Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992, Crenshaw 1994, McCall 2001, Anthias 2002a, 2005). The two female ex-combatants represent two distinct sets of identities and social locations despite vast common experiences during the war. Birshu Gharti belongs to a lower class, marginalised ethnic group. Along with the lower social status, she did not have formal education, and came from a remote underdeveloped part of the country. On the other hand, Ruby belongs to a middle class, high caste, and higher social status; she is also educated and comes from the Kathmandu valley where Nepal's capital city is located. During the insurgency, Maoists effaced these various systems of hierarchies and identities into a single proletarian class identity based on strict egalitarian communist ideology. However, after the war, their lives were conditioned by the saliency of the older identities and systems of oppression. After the war, Ruby has now become a successful journalist in a government-owned radio broadcasting organisation, despite losing a husband in the war and becoming a mother. Brishu Gharti is still living a hard scrapple life in the remote unforgiving mountains, along with her children while her husband, an ex-combatant, is in a Gulf country earning a living for the family. Equal status and opportunities during the war opportunities irrespective of the caste, class, ethnicity, language, and geography dissipated soon after the war. The two stories of the female ex-combatants during Maoist Insurgency in Nepal, Birshu Gharti and Ruby Shrestha, help illustrate this further through an intersectional analysis that takes seriously the multiple aspects of their identities such as caste, class, social status, education, and geography. The Intersectional lens here pays attention to the dynamic interaction of identities in the intersections resulting in the processes of continuities and discontinuities, collision and unison, neutralization and intensification, and cancellation and amplification result in the positions and identities being made/unmade, and claimed/rejected (West and Fenstermarker, 1995, p. 9). Similarly, social processes, practices, and outcomes that impact the
existing social categories, social structures and individuals residing inside the social structures and groupings also offer vital clue why few female ex-combatants managed to turn around their lives while majority could not.

**Story of Birshu Gharti**

Despite coming from a lower class, living in a remote isolated area, and belonging to the marginalised ethno-linguistic background, some women like Birshu Gharti could become politically active in Maoist insurgency as key actors. The Maoist insurgency did not originate in Kathmandu or in other city centres, beginning instead of the remote areas of Western hill regions of Rolpa and Rukum, away from the control of its ruling class. The egalitarian principles of the insurgency primarily based on class struggle, lower class, lower caste indigenous and Janajati, made people feel empathised, respected and listened to. Additionally, Maoists pledged that their movement also aimed to eradicate any sorts of gender discrimination and oppression, along with the class system. Since some Indigenous and Janajati women were more autonomous than the upper caste women in Nepal, women from these communities constituted a significant proportion of female combatants in People’s Liberation Army (PLA) (Goswami, 2015). Tibeto-Burman women enjoy considerable autonomy compared to Brahmin, Kshetri, and Newar woman under the puritanical Hindu religion (Tamang, 2009), and a majority of these communities are based in Western and Mid-Western hill and mountain areas of Nepal. Other factors were also important in this regard. For instance, because of its rough terrain, the state did not pay much attention to its development, and because of this remoteness, it was difficult for the state and its security forces to monitor or prevent them from siding with the Maoists. On the other hand, the geographical location also made it easier for Maoists to conduct recruitment campaigns in this area. Premier Maoist female leaders during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Hisila Yami, also confirmed during our interview that they formed the significant portion of female combatants in People’s Liberation Army (PLA) during the insurgency.  

Birshu Gharti was one of the twenty-two villagers who joined Maoists from their villages which were located at the centre of Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Rolpa. Growing anti-state sentiments in her village because of excessive repression and atrocities by state forces prompted mass-recruitment into the rebel group (Thapa and Sijapati, 2003, p. 90). Like many other families in her village, her family also did not stop her from joining Maoists. Rather, she was encouraged to join them. Gharti was in the sixth

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197 Interview with Hisila Yami dated 21/12/2017
grade when she joined the Maoists, becoming part of the PLA directly, whereas some of her friends joined cultural groups, students groups, and political organisation of Maoists before coming into PLA (People’s Liberation Army).\textsuperscript{198}

After joining PLA in 2001, she recounts that she participated in numerous fierce battles with the assault group.\textsuperscript{199} She got married within the PLA during the insurgency. However, before the peace-process started in 2006, she became pregnant. Post-pregnancy, the PLA arranged her return to her village, but she had nobody to look after her children. Combatants usually left their children with their families, returning to the fighting force after a period of rest. But for Gharti, her family and her husband’s family were not in a position to take care of her children. Further still, she was not much updated about the peace process that followed after the ceasefire in 2006 between the Nepalese government and Maoists. She did not go through the DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration) process. She did not have the chance to reintegrate into the Nepalese Army, nor she did receive a voluntary retirement package. Located in remote areas of Nepal, she also missed the paltry assistance packages she was entitled to as a former Maoist combatant. After her return to the village, her husband also left the PLA. He is now overseas for employment while she is looking after her two kids and also doing subsistence farming to scrape a living. She feels neglected and abandoned by the group for whose cause she and her husband were prepared to sacrifice their lives.

I was in Sindhupalchowk district in Basu Smrity Fourth Brigade. After the baby, the party advised me to stay in this area (her village where she is based now). Once I came here, I was out of contact with the party. Even responsible party cadres and leadership here did not care about me…t and the situation is the same (as before the war)….Once I got a baby, the peace-process started. [My husband and me] were both in the PLA, [and he] is overseas now. We had nothing at home…..Those who went through the DDR process got 500,000- 600,000 NRS

\textsuperscript{198} Interview with Birshu Gharti, Thabang, Rolpa dated 28/12/2017. Among many battles she fought, she vividly remembers Maoist attack on district headquarter of Sandhikharka, Arghakhanchi on September 8, 2002 (located 186 miles West of capital Kathmandu), Maoist attack in district headquarter of Jumla, Khalanga on 14\textsuperscript{th} November 2002 (located 550 km North-West from capital Kathmandu), and Maoist attack in Beni, the district headquarter of Myagdi on 20\textsuperscript{th} March 2004 (located at 280 km to the West of capital Kathmandu).

\textsuperscript{199} The assault group led the combat formation against the enemy.
(Nepalese Rupees) cash. Our six years’ contribution went in waste….We did not get any
information (on DDR)\textsuperscript{200}

\textbf{Story of Ruby Shrestha}

Ruby Shrestha, another former female combatant, also belonged to a family sympathising with the Maoist ideology. Like Birshu Gharti, she also got married within the Maoist party and had a daughter. With growing repression from the state, she was compelled to go underground and her direct participation disrupted her education.\textsuperscript{201} After her husband, brother, and brother-in-law were detained by the Army and were not heard of thereafter. Their bodies are yet to be found, even after twelve-year since the war’s end, just like thousands of others who disappeared during Maoist insurgency in Nepal (ICTJ, 2010).

Despite being direct victims of war and their involvement in the insurgency as female combatants for the same rebel organisation, there were many significant differences between Rubi Shrestha and Birshu Gharti in terms of caste, socio-economic status of the family, and geographical location which determined the availability of information, opportunities, and networking. Ruby was born in a middle-class decently educated Shrestha\textsuperscript{202} family. Although she may not have directly benefited from her caste,\textsuperscript{203} in many cases caste of a person determines how the person is judged and accepted in Nepali society, especially for a woman (Cameron, 1998). Despite being a girl, she was continuously encouraged and inspired by her mother and brothers towards undertaking higher education. She, therefore, managed to complete her SLC (School Leaving Certificate) education, before being pursued by the army for her alleged connection with Maoists. On completing the SLC, she went underground with the Maoist party. But after the war was over, her family encouraged her to pursue her further studies, and she went on to complete an undergraduate degree in journalism and mass communication. After working with many media houses in the capital, she was offered a position with Radio Nepal, a

\textsuperscript{200} Birshu Gharti, interview 28 December, 2017.

\textsuperscript{201} Whole-timer member in Maoist insurgency meant the members who have devoted to the insurgency with full commitment. This often meant leaving home and family and going to areas designated by the rebel group.

\textsuperscript{202} Shrestha is a higher order caste in Newar community.

\textsuperscript{203} During the interview dated 27/11/2017, she said that she was not very aware of the caste-system when she was young; because of communist inclination in her family, caste did not find prominence in the family.
state-run radio broadcasting organisation in Nepal. Ruby acknowledges the support and access she was lucky to have to be in this position,

I found society was also hostile to them (female combatants, particularly those who were widowed or who were abandoned by their husbands). Not everyone had similar access and close relationship with the family. My family and my brothers encouraged me to study. They said that life would not move forward by sobbing and weeping. I always had hope that I will find Rajan (her husband disappeared by security forces during the insurgency) in some barracks after the peace process but it did not turn out to be the reality. My brothers helped me to come out of this situation. Not every sister had such brothers and family.204

Ruby also had proper access to education and was able to look for jobs as she was located in the capital. Living in the Lalitpur district of Kathmandu valley, one of the most prosperous and developed districts of Nepal, provided numerous opportunities in her sector (journalism and mass communication) as all the major media houses are located in the valley. Likewise, she was able to continue her political activism and spread her network in the capital. At the time of the interview, she was enlisted as a possible member of parliament through proportional representation depending on whether her party could secure the required votes in the 2017 national legislative election.

Education was also an essential requirement for female Maoist ex-combatants to integrate into the Nepali Army, particularly in the higher ranks. Unfortunately, many female ex-combatants were deemed ineligible because of lack of formal educational qualification. For instance, Birshu abandoned her education after the sixth grade because Maoists disparaged the education system, calling it a bourgeoisie education system unfit for proletariats (Adhikari, 2006, p. 73-74). However, many female combatants like Birshu were barred from realizing their ambition of joining the Nepalese Army because of the lack of required formal educational qualification. Aruna argues,

Strangely, very young people got involved in the war. Age group started from 15-16 years to 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 years. I myself got involved at the age of 12-13 years. If they get one-sided indoctrination, what they will turn out to be? And, they did not get a chance to get an education. On top of this, they were women. They needed an educational qualification for the integration

204 Interview with Ruby Shrestha, date: 27/11/2017
into the Nepalese army. They did not have formal education certificate. Those men who had a little bit of education, they got integrated into the top level of the Nepalese army despite being junior to some of the female commanders. However, many women exited from the barracks weeping. They wanted to be in integrated into the Nepalese Army. Many things prevented them. Many of them did not have citizenship. Very strange! Many of them did not have a certificate. Also, they had babies. They had to forsake their dreams. There are such reasons. And, slowly this happened- I understood in this way- you need steel, sand, boulders to make a building. After the house is built, it is time for finishing touches. Whatever is left over after construction of the building is just a waste to be dumped. Observing this, Maoist made the women like the waste left after the construction of the building.\textsuperscript{205}

Many female combatants left school to join Maoists under the influence of their claim that the ‘bourgeoisie education’, the education provided by the state, was useless and obsolete. Instead, they started their own programme of indoctrination (Eck, 2010). However, after the war, female ex-combatants needed formal educational qualifications and certificates to qualify for the integration in the Nepalese. With a lack of formal educational qualification, they could not compete or find jobs in a scarce job market. Their leaders forgot them once they got power and they felt used and abused by their leaders.

At the same time in spite of Rubi’s family status, good education, high caste, and her location in the Kathmandu valley, she was not immune to state repression either, resulting in immense losses in her life. Because of the heavy presence of security forces around her locality, she and her family were unable to avoid monitoring from the state. Her family was harassed and tortured every day. While she narrowly escaped capture, her husband, brother, and her brother-in-law were not so lucky. Ultimately, she had to work as a full-timer in a remote mountain village. She decided to her keep her daughter with her but it was not feasible to feed her well in a place where food was scarce. She left her daughter with her mother and returned to join the PLA. She did multiple tasks during the insurgency from being in a cultural group, volunteer, radio journalist, to working in the Bethan Smriti Brigade of the PLA.

\textsuperscript{205} Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi dated 21/12/2018
Despite the hardships and struggle as a single mother and the pain of losing her closest family members, Ruby considers herself to be in a better position compared to the sub-human condition that most of the girls of her age she had met in the remote rural areas of Nepal. She observed,

So I used to ponder on how could women’s trafficking be possible? How even a very old man could marry a teenager? I had doubt. But when I went there (remote impoverished villages) and saw the situation, I understood how destitution, lack of education and awareness there prevented them to think properly about their future. They will think that if I marry this guy (even if he is an old man), I will get to eat good food and wear decent dresses…. If anyone gave them some good food to eat, they would submit their body. They don’t have awareness. This is the problem.\(^\text{206}\)

Ruby joined the Maoists after being influenced by their emancipatory ideology and agendas rather than to have her basic necessities met and to live a dignified life. She could have chosen other paths in her career if she wanted. Unlike her, many of her friends joined the PLA because only through it were their basic needs met, also acquiring dignity, respect, and equality. Ruby explains,

Maoists were more organised. They had at least food, shelter, and clothes. They had weapons. Not all Maoists were honest but they generally behaved well with people… Probably the way they focused on gender equality and women’s rights, I think Maoists were the centre of attraction of many women. In battle, women dressed like men carried weapons like men and walked along with men. They were equal in every way- at work, consumption of food, and leadership opportunities. Women would give speeches. Seeing them giving a speech in villages, even those who couldn’t communicate well before, boosted the morale of everyone.\(^\text{207}\)

Moreover, many of her friends from such poor communities who married during the insurgency, had children, and lost a husband like her, but they also had more challenges. Many of them undertook a ‘progressive marriage’ by shunning religious rituals without consent from family, relatives, and society. Instead, their marriages were conducted by shaking hands, exchanging books/weapons, putting vermillion on the forehead, and even by hugging. Their relations were not given a marriage certificate,

\(^\text{206}\) Interview with Ruby Shrestha dated 27/11/2017
\(^\text{207}\) Interview with Ruby Shrestha dated 27/11/2017
as during the insurgency, such marriages were sustained by ‘enforced class-love’. However, female combatants who married this way faced many difficult challenges post-war. She elaborates,

For those whose husband got killed, they did not have any pieces of evidence to show. Therefore, no marriage-certificate, no birth-certificate for a child. Even if they successfully filed a case for the inheritance, what could they get in the barren slopes of hills and mountains in remote places? What could they do after taking such land in the inheritance of the husband? They do not have an educational qualification. They couldn't go to school and college. They do not have industries there. There are no transportation facilities. There is no development. There are many challenges.\textsuperscript{208}

Ruby also faced stigma and rejection when she returned back to her society. She explains that her mother-in-law was very hostile to her. Society ostracised her because she was alive and her husband was dead. It was as if it was her fault that her husband was dead. As a single mother, she felt vulnerable because people wanted to exploit her. She was educated and held a respectable job but her in-laws were worried that she might successfully claim an inheritance from her dead husband’s share of the property. Yet, she is aware, that her struggles in reintegrating back to the society to live respectful and dignified life paled in comparison to many other female combatants who had done inter-caste marriage during the insurgency in the rebel group. Ruby explains why,

During the insurgency, those women who got married, would not know about their husband’s family. Even after knowing the husband’s family, her husband’s family refused to accept them. In the case of inter-caste marriage, no one is accepted- neither mother, nor the child, nor the husband. If a male is not accepted in his family, he absconds. My friend was a Tamang girl (Indigenous group considered to located lower in the Hindu caste hierarchy) and her husband was from a Brahmin family. Therefore, her husband got married to a Brahmin girl later, ditching her.\textsuperscript{209}

Interestingly, not all female combatants who partook in inter-caste marriages were rejected by their husband’s family. If a female combatant belonging to higher-caste married her lower-caste counterpart,
she was more readily accepted by her husband’s family than if she was from a lower-caste family than her husband. Marrying a bride from a higher caste family is considered to be a pride for bridegroom family in caste-segregated Nepalese society. This puts lower-caste female combatants who married male combatants from the higher-caste background at the risk of rejection by her husband’s family, leaving them in a vulnerable position.

Similar Experiences During the War But Different Stories After the War

Both Ruby and Birshu experienced varying levels of emotional investment in different subject positions at different temporal and spatial moments, as well as continuities and discontinuities in their sense of identification/disidentification. At specific times, and in specific spatial contexts, they refused particular identity positions, and these particular positions have become more salient, stabilised, and institutionalised. Ruby did not need to become a combatant in Maoist insurgency in order to be confident, to be equal to men, or to realise her dreams. She was studying well and was treated equally with her brothers in the family. She got constant encouragement from her family to take up further academic and career opportunities. She joined the Maoists inspired by their ideology and agendas, but she was also inspired by her brothers and her husband to join them. Yet, her experiences in the mountainous region along with her one-year-old daughter caused a constant clash between her revolutionary spirit and her responsibility as a caring single mother. Simultaneously, the hard ascetic life in the mountains as a revolutionary also collided with her moderately comfortable life in the Kathmandu valley. However, in the post-war context, her pre-war identity re-emerged; her access to education and proximity to the potential employers ensured that her post-war life was relatively successful. Contrarily, Birshu was not from an educated family or an urban locality. She did not have educational and employment opportunities for realising her potential. Birshu felt equal, strong, and confident during the war as she felt a sense of purpose and direction. But such transformation during the war did not extend into post-war life. Like Ruby, she also experienced a clash between her identity as a fierce PLA fighter and her responsibility as a mother. However, Birshu had to leave the PLA to look after her children. Her disadvantages resurfaced and her life-routine became even more burdened with children.

210 Interview with Aruna Rayamajhi and Hisila Yami, date 21/12/2017
Both stories capture the fluidity and complexity of the subject positions they adopted before, during, and after the war. They demonstrate, first, how a female combatant had come to see herself differently in different spaces (e.g. at her home and society before the war, in the PLA during the war, and in return to the society post-war); second, the ways that specific spaces (pre-war society, the PLA during the war, post-war society) are produced and stabilised by the dominant groups (elites, rulers, rebel leaders) who occupy them. The dominant group develops hegemonic cultures (docility and domesticity before the war; class-war and militancy during the war; and conformity with pre-existing social order after the war) through which power operates to systematically define ways of being and to mark out those who are in place or out of place. During the war, Maoists shut down schools, coerced and cajoled students to join the insurgency, and disrupted education calling the education system part of corrupt bourgeoisie culture. Martial skills were highly valued in Maoist insurgency. In the post-war period, so called ‘bourgeoisie education’ was highly valued but combat skill was not useful any longer. Those with formal education were highly valued and managed to secure stable positions in society.
10.3. **Chapter Conclusion**

The intersectional theoretical framework inspired by Collins’s ‘matrix of domination’ (2009) embedded within the black feminist conceptual framework is effective in the honest and unfiltered exploration of the messy and complex experiences of war, especially experiences of the female ex-combatants from diverse backgrounds and social status. Speaking to the female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple matrices of domination enabled me to explore the Maoist insurgency in Nepal with extraordinary breadth and depth with all-encompassing complexities. This equally embeds the decolonial thinking by Shilliam (2015) that resists and disrupts sanitised war narratives often in hegemonic representation. Similarly, it chases away the pretensions of universality and singularity of certain experiences from the dominant and monolithic group. Exploration of stories of Ruby Shrestha and Birshu Gharti with the intersectional theoretical framework imbibes these principles and tries to portray the honest picture of war when seen from the farthest peripheral space, but with the analytical awareness of the centre.

Ruby and Birshu share many commonalities yet locate themselves at the opposite ends of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. Their daily lives were disrupted in many ways because of the war that invaded their lives and priorities. Both of them got married within the rebel group during the war and had children in the midst of the war, and the burden of child-rearing fell squarely onto them. Unlike Ruby, Birshu did not lose her husband or any other close family members during the insurgency. Nor did she have to take her daughter with her while simultaneously working as a full-timer in the party. In contrast, the density of security installations in the Kathmandu valley meant Ruby and her family had no hiding place. She had to endure the harsh life in unforgiving remote mountainous unknown to her before, and that too with her one-year-old daughter. However, after the war, Ruby returned back to the Kathmandu valley, where her family lived. She has now climbed up the social ladder and has become a successful journalist in Radio Nepal, the state-owned radio broadcasting organisation. While it does not overshadow her personal agency- her competence, undying sense of purpose, and extraordinary perseverance- the disadvantages of being a female ex-combatant in a post-war context were also undone by the structural privileges disposed to her by simply being born into a family, which was very different from Birshu’s condition in many ways. Ruby’s privilege was associated with her being near the capital of the state providing more opportunities, coming from an educated middle-class family, caste, and a good support network around her. On the other hand, Birshu was from a poor and uneducated family, disadvantaged in terms of caste and social status, and she was also from the remote
impoverished mountainous part of Nepal that has been constantly neglected by the state. With no education, vocational training, support network, and lack of any jobs in her place, she held no real possibility to improve her living standard beyond a hardscrabble existence. Experiences of both Ruby Shrestha and Birshu Gharti demonstrate the dynamic and complex nature of intersectionality with changing and stabilising, and contrasting and converging nature of variable identities; different temporal and spatial positions; as well as continuities and discontinuities in their sense of identification/disidentification. In other words, the intersectional lens defies reductive conformity and demonstrate the intricate ways caste, class, social status, and locations shape female combatants’ diverse and complex experiences before, during, and after the war.
11. Conclusion

My research journey for this thesis was as complicated as the war itself. It was underpinned by the feminist assertion that research is not a ‘value-neutral’ process (Harding, 1987, 1995) and that a researcher has to make their standpoint and the positionality a ‘point of entry’ (Smith, 2005, p. 10). The journey for my Ph.D. research began much earlier than when I started writing a research proposal for my Ph.D. In fact, doing research on female combatants in civil war germinated in my mind in the fateful days of April 2005 when my district headquarter in Western Nepal was attacked by the Maoists. This was the first time that I was able to closely observe gun trotting, young, but fearless and calm Maoists female combatants slowly marching along the road before and after the attack. This observation formed the foundation for my interest on the topic. The next year, ten years after their insurgency had started, Maoists would enter the peace process ending with a peaceful political settlement. The DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration) process that ended in 2013 (Ansorg and Strasheim, 2019) showed that female combatants constituted 20 percent of the total fighting force in the Maoists (Arino, 2008, p. 8) However, Maoist leaders dispute this, claiming that the numbers were as high as 40-50 percent (Manchanda, 2004, p. 241; Thapa and Ramsbotham, 2017, p. 53; Gautam, et al., 2001).

I was intrigued by the fact that little was known about these women. There could be many reasons behind such a gap. My district (Kapilvastu) was not affected by the conflict until in the final years of the insurgency. Similarly, there was a lack of available information on female combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, leading me to speculate whether the gendered notion of war made women invisible except as victims. This left a niggling question on my mind, making me ask the same question Cynthia Enloe had (2014, p. 1)- Where are the women? This question was in some part addressed by recent research that offered large-N cross-sectional data to show that women do participate in civil war as combatants regularly (Henshaw, 2016a, 2017; Wood and Thomas, 2017; Haer and Bohmelt, 2018). My interest in the kind of impact the female combatants have on civil war developed after reading a corpus of research on female ex-combatants that portrayed female combatants as the ‘key protagonists’ of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal (Thapa and Sijapati, 2003; Manchand, 2004; Adhikari, 2006; Yami, 2007; Thapa, 2016; Rai, 2017). This further encouraged me to explore the quantitative impact of female combatants on the civil war duration and outcome. Since I had the data, my quantitative training also made me confident towards finding answers to these questions. My next task was to explore the causal
mechanisms through my fieldwork in Nepal linking female combatants with the civil war duration and outcome. In fact, my Higher Degree by Research (HDR) student profile (checked on 23rd July 2019) still has my initial abstract wherein I proposed to explore the impact of female combatants on civil war duration and post-war peacebuilding process using mixed methodology (large-N quantitative research and case study of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal) at the start of my candidacy.211

However, my second encounter with the female ex-combatants during my fieldwork in 2017-18 changed my epistemological, theoretical, and methodological assumptions and beliefs. It subsequently culminated in changing the research questions for my research. When I started interviewing the female ex-combatants, it became apparent that the experiences of female ex-combatants were so diverse and complicated that they simply could not be boxed into binary/ordinal/categorical variables. Their experiences blurred, challenged, and overlapped the notion of victimhood and agency in complex ways. Moreover, the presence of different identities and systems of oppression (caste, class, social location, education, ethnicity, geographical location) further complicated the victim-agency divide and conditioned their everyday experiences of life before-during-after the war in myriad ways. It made their experiences of the war further complex and messier. These stories and experiences that I had heard at the margin offered unique perspectives. I was unaware of the diversity of accounts, and I was unsure about capturing these complexities and messiness in an unfiltered manner in my research.

For example, in an attempt to simplify the experiences by highlighting one aspect, I had to make many other connected aspects of the experience invisible. One part of the questionnaire asks the female ex-combatants about how they characterised their present status. One female ex-combatant gave a long complex answer.212 Almost all the female ex-combatants gave a long answer to this question, reflecting on their past experiences and current situation. This female combatant had lost her husband, who had also been a combatant in the war. She had a ten-year-old son and she had opened a small grocery shop. However, her contentment with her life, as she explained, came from the fact that she was able to look after her son and send him school even being a single mother. However, she could not complete her studies because of the war, lamenting that had she not abandoned it, her studies could have opened up many opportunities. She could have achieved more had she was able to continue her education. But this woman had to join the Maoists because of the continuous harassment and torture from the


212 Interview with Shashi Gurung, date: 05/01/2018
security forces. Her contentment with life, therefore, was also associated with a comparison with her current situation, and with her peer female ex-combatants whose situation were much worse. Some of them sustained different physical injuries from the war which she was lucky to avoid. Many of them were divorced because their husbands’ family did not accept the intercaste and inter-ethnic marriage during the insurgency or their husband had left them. Her satisfaction also came with the way she considered herself financially independent and politically aware compared to her society where she thinks women are still dependent on their husbands and lack political awareness and independent thinking. Although the war robbed her of many things (education, her family, her husband), it also made her hardened, strong, independent, and politically aware.

This is only one example of the many complex interviews. I was unsure of how to make sense of this and other similar responses that I had collected. Would I be considered ‘objective’ and methodologically ‘rigorous’ had I reduced her complex story into the numerical categories of 'two,’ (one for being not happy, two for being content despite of some losses, and three for coming from war unscathed and contentment in the post-war) by saying that despite some losses she has managed to move on with her life and actually managed to be relatively successful than others? Would it have encompassed her experience faithfully? I felt that it would have been condescending to attempt measuring/quantifying her success (or failure) in numbers. The interviews also obliged me to question the notion that war experiences can be fitted into neat, orderly, and manageable reductive categories. If I somehow managed to do that, it would not truly reflect their experiences. I also realised that these experiences can not be boxed into binary/ordinal/categorical numerical values without partial representation, reduction, and even distortion. In short, I realised that my initial plan to categorise the answer into quantifiable categories would not work.

However, I developed my interest towards capturing all these diverse and complex experiences in pre-during-post war continuum. My research question changed as I wanted to explore and ask- What are the varied experience of female combatants during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal and after, and how do these experiences compare to their varied expectations upon joining the group? To answer this question, I realised that I needed a different epistemological foundation, a theoretical framework that reaches the margin and the bottom, and a research design that is not reductive in capturing the diverse experiences and complicated stories. Finally, I was convinced that the intersectional theoretical framework combining ‘matrix of domination’ within black feminism (Collins, 2009) and decolonial
thinking (Shilliam, 2015) along with a poststructural narrative approach informed by the feminist methodology was suitable to answer my research question. It urged me to reach out to the female ex-combatants at the margin, collect and capture their diverse experiences and complex stories, and present them in a way that reflects the realistic picture of the war and post-war experiences in all its messiness and complexity. To reach this conclusion, I had many difficult conversations, and that this choice did not come easily. My supervisor encouraged me to take this approach from the onset, and although I resisted it for long, I eventually incorporated this approach in an independent manner.

Each main chapter in my thesis presents the complex picture of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal through the stories and experiences of female ex-combatants at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression which in turn problematise many dominant singular narratives of the Maoist insurgency. Chapter six showed that characterisation of patriarchal domination as the sole lived experience of women in pre-war Nepal is problematic. Moreover, the instrumentalisation of the patriarchy by the Maoist leaders in many ways reflects on themselves than the women at the bottom of the socio-political hierarchies in Nepal. Chapter seven disrupted the dominant myths surrounding women's capability as a soldier and mixed-gender group cohesion in combat. This is highlighted by the convergence between the female ex-combatants, and their leaders and experts, on their greater contribution to the Maoist insurgency in Nepal through their capability and adaptability in the combat units. Yet, simultaneously, it also perpetuated female combatants' myth of obscured agency in the war when taking the long-view of the war. Similarly, chapter eight demonstrated that the attempt to bridge the seemingly contradictory traditional and scientific and progressive understanding of marriage by the female ex-combatants during the Maoist insurgency further underlined their conflicting and obscure space. Their conflicting space illustrated the battle ‘within’ in the midst of the battle against the enemy- having to experience the ‘double consciousness’ (Du Bois, 2006, p. 9) and ‘double jeopardies’ (King, 1988, p. 44). Chapter nine blurred the war and the post-war delineation by highlighting that the battle with the enemy might have ended but the ‘peace’ in the post-war is no less traumatic for the female ex-combatants at the margin. The ‘double consciousness’ and ‘multiple jeopardies’ continues to shape their lives in various forms but this does not amount to the victimisation of the female ex-combatants. Instead, despite all the attempts of the Maoist leaders in power to silence their deviating voices, it uniquely positions female ex-combatants to find ways to confront the dominant narratives about the insurgency with their own alternative perspectives. Finally, chapter ten extended the complexity and messiness of the war to the spaces
where the structural power-play and systematic contradictions are at its most obscure state. The stories of the two female ex-combatants in the same rank and file, but from the different social background show how the systems of oppression interact, clash, fluctuate but find ways to reinvent even in the so-called peaceful post-war period. In doing so, this chapter presented the pre-during-post war periods in the continuum rather in separate/detached temporal domains.

Throughout these five main chapters, my intersectional theoretical framework and feminist methodological approach equipped and prepared me to question the singular and uniform narrative of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. It encouraged and positioned me to hear the silence, to inquire the absence, to observe the war bottom-up, to map out war from the margin, and to reflect/observe the war in small stories against the dominant narratives. This approach helped me to explore the war close-up all in its complexity. Recording and presenting this complexity, in all honesty, might look disorganised, chaotic, and disorderly. However, this is vital to resist the colonising tendencies of those in power and position of domination (within and across the borders) and to foster alternative ways of knowing and resistance and emergence of new knowledge are always marked by disorganisation, chaos, and disorder.

Findings from the five main chapters can be synthesised within three broader conclusions. First, female ex-combatants’ experience of war is complex and varied, and such complexity becomes even more nuance and textured when looked through the intersectional theoretical framework. The intersectional approach that I used in my thesis enabled me to see how female ex-combatants experienced, understood, and perceived the war and its aftermath heterogeneously often shaped and moulded by their rank, caste, class, social location, educational status, and geographical location in intricate ways. Particularly, the double-consciousness and double-jeopardy of female ex-combatants trying to bridge tradition with science and progress in chapter eight are best explained by their rank, social location, and caste-class hierarchy. Furthermore, the stories of two female ex-combatants from the same rank but different social backgrounds and identities in chapter ten highlighted how the systems of oppression and identities- caste, class, social location, geographical location, and educational status- interact, clash, converge, fluctuate, transform, and re-invent themselves over the war cycle to influence their lives in intricately.
The second overarching conclusion from my research understands that the standard, the pre-during-post compartmentalisation of the war does not correspond to the real experiences of female ex-combatants in the Maoist insurgency in Nepal when observing the experiences of female ex-combatants and listening to their voices. My research is unique in a sense it uses the intersectional theoretical framework that further extends the complexity and messiness of the war, adding to the conversation of the armed conflict in earlier research (Megan, 2012; Parashar, 2009, 2014; Baaz and Stern, 2013; Sylvester, 2013) that problematise the singular unidimensional narrative of the armed conflict and present its messiness and complexity while exploring lives of women in the armed conflict. Particularly, this conclusion reinforces the earlier deduction drawn by Megan Mackenzie (2012) in problematising the war-postwar distinction through experiences of female ex-combatants in Sierra Leonian civil war. In my thesis, chapter nine explored the post-war experiences of female ex-combatants by highlighting this conclusion. While the dominant narrative propagated by the leaders characterised the post-war period as transformative in terms of social and political changes, talking to female ex-combatants, however, blurs the boundary between the war and post-war delineation. In fact, it was surprising to hear some female ex-combatants characterising war experiences better than the postwar and many of them were nostalgic to it. On the one hand, this may disrupt the notion that the is dangerous, destructive, and chaotic for everyone involved in it. On the other hand, however, the preference and nostalgia for the wartime gender roles also show the gap between the pre-war aspirations and expectations of liberation, empowerment, and gender equality, and postwar reality- gender-hierarchy, re-marginalisation, and limited opportunities for female ex-combatants. The sense of alienation/exclusion/marginalisation of female ex-combatants, particularly those at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression illustrates their post-war battle within.

Finally, in order to make sense of the complexity and messiness of war, we need to start our comprehension by looking at the lives and experiences of women marginalised by the war and at the bottom of social hierarchies. Only talking to female ex-combatants at the margin and at the intersection of multiple oppressions allows realistic mapping of these complexities. This will generate a less partial and distorted account of not only their lives and experiences but also about the men’s lives and social order and relations. Akin to standpoint theorist Sandra Harding (1992, p. 443), I showed that female ex-combatants’ multiple stories and complicated experiences have not been paid attention to as a source of objectivity-maximizing questions- the answers to which are not necessarily to be found in those
experiences or lives but elsewhere in the beliefs and activities of people at the top and center. The knowledge generated by evading the voices of female ex-combatants at the margin, and by not incorporating their experiences, is limiting. Simultaneously, such evasion also limits the critical scrutiny of the experiences of the dominant group perpetuating their dominance. While I concur with Dorothy Smith who argues that women's experience is the 'grounds' of feminist knowledge (Smith, 1990), I would go a step further to insert experiences of women at the margin (female ex-combatants at the bottom of many social hierarchies) offers important 'grounds' of feminist knowledge.

The intersectional theoretical framework developed for this research can also be replicated in studying the motivation of women joining the violent armed conflicts. Current studies have made a vital contribution by highlighting why women might join rebel groups (Henshaw, 2016b; Wood and Thomas, 2017; Bond and Thomas, 2015). The intersectional theoretical framework can offer a more nuanced and textured analysis of their motives and aspirations. Similarly, this theoretical framework can also be extended to study female suicide bombers. Existing research works on the subject (Zedalis, 2004; Bloom, 2005, 2007; Jacques and Taylor, 2008) reveal once concealed aspects of the war. However, they mostly take a short-term and narrow view of female suicide bombers' involvement in the suicide bombing focusing on their immediate motivation such as revenge, spiritual and financial reasons, ideology. Still, making intersection as the first point of inquiry has the potential to offer a longer, deeper, and systematic perspective on female suicide bombers in the armed conflict.

My main contribution through this thesis involves showing that like researchers, policymakers should also take the intersectionality seriously. Intersectional theoretical framework informed by feminist methodology not only helps to make sense of complex experiences and stories of the female ex-combatants, but it also leads policymakers to ask broader questions on designing and implementing policies. Beyond the armed conflict and theoretical framework, an intersectional approach has many practical implications in building positive and sustainable peace. Oversimplifying and generalising experiences might be decidedly policy-friendly, and policymakers often look for simple and singular policy prescription based on the experiences of the dominant group without encompassing the complexity. The tendency to overlook the multiple systems of oppressions crossing over at an intersection results in those vulnerable becoming more vulnerable. The intersectional approach is relevant in improving social justice in society by identifying the people at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. Intersectionality is even more pertinent to the context of the war as post-conflict
reintegration programs for the female ex-combatants should be designed to reflect the matrix of domination they face, which includes not only gender but also caste, class, ethnicity, and host of other identities and systems of oppression. The political transformation that followed the insurgency in Nepal eluded the female ex-combatants at the margin and at the intersection of multiple oppressions.

Another example from my fieldwork further highlights the policy suggestion of my thesis in the preceding paragraph. I also got a chance to speak very briefly with Maoists female ex-combatants who had joined a splinter Maoist group which is resorting violence after disenchanted from the Maoist leadership (Bhattarai, 2019). My fieldwork in Nepal coincided with the 2017 legislative elections in Nepal which the splinter Maoist group, Communist Party of Nepal (CPN), violently opposed (Bhandari and Schultz, 2017). Because of this, the CPN was pursued by the government intelligentsia. The female ex-combatants I had chance to interact briefly did not want to be interviewed or contacted over the phone for the detailed interview because of the security situation. The government was monitoring their activities closely so as to prevent any disruption in the election. The women I was speaking to belonged to a lower class indigenous group from Jajarkot, a remote mountainous district in Mid-Western Nepal. My brief interaction revealed that they felt they were cheated by their ‘selfish’ leaders who joined mainstream politics only to gain power for themselves betraying the ‘revolution’. They felt betrayed, alienated, and ostracised. They mentioned that the oppression against women has not gone away. Over the past few months, this group has engaged in a spate of violence resulting in the killing of half a dozen of its cadres and innocent citizens (Adhikari, 2019; Bhattarai, 2019; SBS Nepali, 2019). Some of its cadres got killed in what the government claims in cross-fire (Rai, 2019). As a result, this group was banned by the government lately (Bhattarai, 2019). This violence is much smaller in proportion than the conflict that is supposed to have terminated in 2006. However, it was a similar complacency that enabled the Maoist Insurgency (1996-2006) to grow and claim the lives of thousands of people. If the causes that led to the conflict are not addressed carefully, the chances for the causes to trigger the resumption of violence are always present. Lack of intersectional approach masks the various structural systems of oppression. Taking intersectionality seriously enables to visualise and conceptualise these oppressions and take actions accordingly. This will not only prevent the violence from resuming but also builds a firm foundation for positive and sustainable peace.
12. Appendixes

Appendix A

Questionnaire for the Female Ex-Combatants and Experts

1. What is your age?
2. How many years of school have you had?
3. What are you doing now?
4. How do you compare your status (socio-economic, political, and legal) now with that of pre-Maoist insurgency period?
5. Has the reintegration back to society been smooth? Why? Why not?
6. Initially, did you and other female combatants with you join the rebel group as a combatant? Why? Why not?
7. Did the number of female combatants change over the course of the war?
8. What was your age when you joined the rebel group?
9. Did the rebel group (Maoist insurgents) have a strategy to recruit female combatants? Why? Why not?
10. How long did you serve as a combatant?
11. Was it possible for you or other female combatants in your group to quit or leave the rebel group? Why? Why not?
12. Was it possible for a male combatant to quit or leave the rebel group? Why? Why not?
13. Was it possible for you or the other female combatants to return to your family and society after quitting the rebel group during the civil war? Why? Why not?
14. Was it possible for you or the other female combatants to go or settle elsewhere after quitting rebel group during the civil war? Why? Why not?
15. Did you or any of your friend marry husband from the rebel organization? Why? Why not?
16. Did married couples or the couple in a relationship stay in group after marriage or relationship? Please explain.
17. Did you think you were a capable combatant compared to other rebel members? Please explain why?
18. What was your role during the insurgency? Was it similar to male combatants?
20. Did you and other female combatants get along well with male combatants? Please explain.
21. Did you and other female combatants perform more or different duties than male combatants? Could you explain?
22. Were you and other female combatants employed in spreading propaganda through the cultural program or other means? Please explain why or why not?
23. Were you and other female combatants employed in smuggling weapons? Please explain why or why not?
24. Were you and other female combatants employed in intelligence gathering and passing intelligence report? Please explain why or why not?

25. Were you and other female combatants employed in any surprise attacks? Please explain why?

26. How were you received by your family and society about your role in the rebel group initially?

27. Did attitude of the rebel group members, family and society about your role change over time?

28. Do you think your participation as a combatant made the rebel group stronger? Why? Why not?

29. Could the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006) have been successful without the participation of female combatants?

30. Do you think it is easier for female or male combatant to reintegrate back to family and society after the war? Explain.

31. Have women benefitted from the participation of female combatants in Maoist-insurgency? Explain.
Appendix B

Questionnaire for Maoist Leaders

1. Was the decision to recruit female combatants taken before the start of the conflict?
2. Why did the Maoists take the decision to recruit the female combatant despite socio-cultural restrictions?
3. What could the female combatants provide for the insurgency that was different or extra from the male combatants?
4. Could you explain about the kind of roles female combatants played in the organization? In which roles they were efficient?
5. Was there any policy of marriage between male and female combatants? Why? Why not?
6. Do you think women’s participation as a combatant made the rebel group more capable to resist the government or to achieve their objectives? Why? Why not?
7. Could the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal (1996-2006) have come this far without the participation of female combatants?
13. **Bibliography**


