Introduction

To create new times would require a combination of critical analysis, attritional activism, and embodied assertions that the future can be different—now.

(Bear 2016: 497)

Nepali women’s reasons for joining the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) or CPN-M in their 1996–2006 People’s War were many, but Bear’s words, quoted above, “embodied assertions that the future can be different—now,” gathers them, despite their idiosyncrasies, and loosely holds them together for consideration. What women were moving away from or were moving toward (Brunson 2011) in joining the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) differed depending on the ways multiple aspects of their lives combined to form a compulsion. Many ex-combatants I interviewed cited the equity promised by Maoist ideology, and how it contrasted with their own experiences of being dominated by those with higher social standing with respect to gender, caste, and wealth. Some women reported joining primarily due to their father’s or husband’s involvement with the movement, while others joined in order to leave less than ideal family situations—contexts of chronic crisis that had become ordinary (Das 2006; Vigh 2008). More acute reasons cited by women were acts allegedly committed by members of the Nepal Army: the experiences of verbal and sexual harassment, rape, and the murder of a young female friend.¹ Before I began interviewing PLA ex-combatants, a few individuals not affiliated with the Maoists² told me that I would only be fed regurgitated Maoist ideology. I was relieved to find that presumption to be incorrect, as women shared their diverse embodied assertions that the future could be different.

In the opening quote, the reference to “new times” not only takes into consideration what it means to create a new present/future, but also evokes the ways that time itself is experienced and implicated in such processes. Women’s stories of procreation and aging during a prolonged civil war and its aftermath in Nepal affirm that chronopolitics—the politics of time (Norum et al. 2016)—are embodied and gendered. Pregnancy, birth, and becoming a mother were critical parts of many women’s experiences as PLA members and ex-combatants (see Figure 8.1).
The temporalities and spaces that women combatants inhabited shifted dramatically across the ten-year span of the Maoist People’s War, while held in post-war cantonments (camps) for almost six years, and upon their discharge and reintegration into society. The decade of wartime when combatants were underground was an inopportune time to procreate; if women became pregnant, they typically continued their combat duties and had to leave their infants in the care of others. In contrast, after a peace agreement was signed in 2006, a “baby boom” occurred in the cantonments while ex-combatants waited to be verified by the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) and processed (see further discussion below), seeming to signal an end to a wartime suppression of fertility that is common during post-war periods. I began research with PLA ex-combatants at a critical point in 2012 as the post-conflict cantonments were being disbanded, and they were expected to imagine and enact a reintegration into society. The timescapes of these women’s reproductive years include forests and compulsory perpetual movement and hiding, juxtaposed with the cantonment and involuntary immobility and waiting. I argue that in the end, women who had fought to revolutionize Nepali society often ended up in all-too-familiar gender roles as wives and mothers post-conflict, while some found themselves excluded from motherhood altogether due to the amount of time that had passed while fighting for the cause and waiting for processing. Thus, the title of this chapter, “Reproduction through revolution,” is intended to evoke not only the experiences of procreation throughout the war and its aftermath, but the unexpected ways procreation drew ex-combatant women back into long-standing gender relations and norms rather than overturning them.

In the contemporary moment, as anthropologists and activists theorize that reproductive justice is racial justice (Ross and Solinger 2017; SisterSong n.d.; Julian et al. 2020) and that racism needs to be centered in studies of reproduction (Davis 2019; Valdez and Deomampo 2019; Rapp 2019; Bridges 2011), how do we extend these insights based in the United States to institutions that uphold a global racialized system of those intervening and those in need of intervention? Nepali women’s struggles to achieve a more equitable society, when they take the form of fighting in a revolution, disrupt Global North discourses that position Nepali women on the passive, receiving end of economic and health interventions. Through sharing women’s stories of...
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procreation during a prolonged civil war and its aftermath in Nepal, I argue the anthropology of reproduction is well positioned to put to rest persistent discourses that fail to recognize the creative potential of women not only through reproduction, but through violence and destruction. These stories of ex-combatant mothers disrupt global health and development narratives that continue to rely on portraying women in the Global South as in need of intervention into their reproductive lives.

Context

Previous scholarly and creative writing by and about Nepali PLA women is extensive and rich. Anthropologist Michael Hutt notes that women themselves had authored around six book-length memoirs by late 2010, including Tara Rai’s well-known *Diary of a Guerilla Girl* (*Chhāpāmār Yuvati ko Diary*), translated into English under the title *Guerilla Girl* (2017). The People’s War had inspired over 350 books of poetry, fiction, songs, essays, and memoirs (Hutt 2012). This is not surprising when one considers that the revolution began in 1996 and lasted until 2006, spanning a decade.

While for many urban civilians in Nepal, the People’s War became the backdrop to their ongoing attempts to continue life as usual (Brunson 2016), the situation for PLA combatants, Nepali army and security forces, student political activists, and even civilian rural villagers, was quite different. In Kathmandu, student politicians were actively engaged in campaigns of protest against the monarchy, creating persistent pressure for change via civil unrest in the streets (Snellinger 2018). The protests and performances captured people’s attention via the horrendous traffic jams they created in the capital city, along with frequent images of protestors with torches, bricks, and bloody injuries on the evening news. In the countryside, PLA combatants were busy fighting guerilla warfare, committing strategic acts of violence against representatives of the state and suffering counterattacks. Villagers found themselves caught between the two sides, the Maoists and the state, as Maoists became unable to maintain camps and shifted to a strategy of demanding housing and food from villagers (Pettigrew 2013). While in this research I focus on the women who joined the PLA, one of the major impacts of the war was the noticeable number of women in rural areas who were left at home to take on the extra household and agricultural work by husbands who left to join the PLA (Gautum et al. 2001).

Several scholars offer an important corrective to any uncritical assumptions that joining the Maoists in their People’s War was a panacea to existing gender inequities. Shneiderman, for example, shares a story of a well-respected, educated *janajāti* (Indigenous) woman being offended by the assumptions that visiting Maoists made about her, and the ways they discussed political and ideological matters only with her husband, and not her (Pettigrew and Shneiderman 2004). Khanal argues, based on her interviews with ten Maoist mothers, that women faced patriarchal norms both from the party and the larger society (see also Shah 2019 for the case of women revolutionaries in India). PLA women “try to negotiate the social expectations of motherhood in Nepali society and at the same time the propaganda and efforts of the Maoist party to control and regulate their motherhood” (Khanal 2009: 67). The most famous critic of gender equity within the Maoists is also the highest-ranking woman within the party—Hisila Yami, widely known by her *nom de guerre*, Comrade Parvati. She provides a scathing critique of marriage within the party, arguing that unmarried women who joined the movement were pressured by leadership to marry. She denounces marriage as robbing the movement of promising women leaders and perpetuating women’s marginalization and domestic slavery (Yami 2007). CPN-M leadership also regarded birth and motherhood as an obstruction to the revolution (Yami 2007; Khanal 2009). Indeed, from a practical standpoint,
pregnancy and birth did hamper women’s ability to engage in active warfare; several stories attest to the tremendous efforts that women made in order to avert pregnancy or to overcome its physical limitations (Bhattarai 2016).

Tracing a community scattered

Around 2012, after the cantonments were being disbanded, many couples originally from the districts adjacent to Kathmandu attempted to resettle in the area, particularly in the urban city of Kathmandu and nearby towns. Had I conducted the research a year earlier, I would have had an easy task: the women would have been living collectively in or just outside the cantonment in Chitwan. They would have welcomed a distraction to occupy their time, for, despite the educational and skill-building programs introduced in the camps, the overall milieu was one of endless waiting to be processed. However, since my research focused on the gendered challenges of women’s reintegration into mainstream society, I was interested in speaking to them as they attempted to rejoin “normal” daily life after leaving the cantonments. This meant that there was no ethnographic community; former PLA women were scattered all over the Kathmandu Valley and neighboring districts.

Initially, my Nepal-based research consultant, Manoj Shrestha, and I had to go through low-level male politicians and party members in order to invite one or two women to talk; for me, as an American woman, this was an uncomfortable situation in which to be. As an American, I imagined that I represented much that the former PLA disdained: Rampant capitalism, inequality, and overconsumption. Yet, after a quick conversation on the side of a dusty road, the politicians recommended a few women who I should meet. Not every step of fieldwork went as smoothly as that initial meeting. One high-ranking ex-combatant agreed to meet with us in a restaurant, her bodyguard waiting outside, and listen to the story of why I wanted to speak with PLA women. I tried to explain that as an anthropologist, I saw a remarkable situation unfolding, and I desired to ensure that the history that was in the making was recorded via the perspectives of women on the ground. She said she had many contacts in the district adjacent to Kathmandu to the north, but after a pleasant conversation and polite goodbyes, I never heard from her again. Not long after that, however, a low-level ex-combatant invited us to the flat where she was living with her younger brother. After speaking with us and treating us to tea, she initiated a chain of female contacts that came to form the bulk of this research. We were also able to meet with a Communist Party of Nepal representative of the Constituent Assembly, who I will call Kavita ji, and after a lunch meeting with her, she was willing to vouch for the value of my research. She introduced me to a few key female figures in the party, and she shared her own experience and expertise at length over the course of several meetings. The questions I was posing touched on several vital issues in her own life, and she was generous with her time and explanations.

This research involved traveling what seemed like long distances (due to traffic) on a motorcycle for each interview. We had mobile phone numbers, but no addresses—in part because there is no system of addresses for much of Nepal. Despite this, we eventually found each contact, covering much of the entire district of Kathmandu and part of Kavre. No taxi driver ever would have been able or willing to search out these scattered residences, nor could a foreigner find them on her own; I was entirely dependent upon my research consultant and his motorcycle. At the end of each day, leg muscles, back, and knee joints ached. In total, I spent more hours on a motorcycle in order to locate these women than I did interviewing them. Each woman’s story seemed more valuable as a result. For the interviews outside of Kathmandu, in Kavre, my long-time research assistant Meena Manandhar and I took the bus. We got off one stop too early. After a slow slog down a muddy road, with the kind of mud that tries to steal your shoe with
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...each step, we reached the small bazaar and met our contact, who graciously orchestrated our recording of stories.

In the beginning, I was somewhat apprehensive to meet these exceptional women. They had lived in hiding for many years, part of a guerilla army attempting a socialist revolution. They had adopted *noms de guerre* in order to protect their identities. Most had been involved in firefights. Yet, they were also ordinary. During one interview session, I was embarrassed by the generous hospitality of a new mother who cooked an elaborate meal for us while her infant daughter slept on the wooden cot next to us, underneath a little mesh tent that kept out mosquitos. I shared in the joy of another young woman reminiscing over the photographs of her wedding in the cantonment, and her optimism for making a better life—first through the Maoist People’s War and now through studying English and applying to universities in Australia. She missed her husband greatly; he was away, working in Qatar. And I laughed with an otherwise stern woman, formerly a high-ranking officer, who joked dryly about never learning to cook due to being enlisted in the People’s Liberation Army for so long. Now her husband has to do the cooking in her family, an unusual situation in the context of Nepal. She had taken a bullet in the head and another in the leg and had survived.

The variety of personalities I encountered in this research underscored that PLA women were hardly a homogeneous group, nor did they define what it means to be a woman or a mother in the same way. Yet, they shared the experience in post-conflict times of the pressure to conform to the traditional gender expectations that they had fought to reform. Most expressed dissatisfaction with the post-conflict state of affairs in their homes and in their nation.

In sum, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 23 PLA ex-combatant women who had become mothers either during the war or afterward while living in the cantonment. Each interview lasted around one to two hours, depending on how much *gaf saf* (chatting) occurred. Out of the 23 women, 11 were Brahmin, six were Chhetri, two were Dalit, two were Tamang, one was Newar, and one was Magar. In addition to these interviews, I met several times with the Constituent Assembly representative whose words appear generously in this chapter. Later in 2015, I was granted a face-to-face interview with the well-known Commander “Asmita” Leela Sharma, the founder of the Former PLA Women Foundation.

Wartime: Dealing with pregnancy while underground

During the ten years of wartime, while combatants were underground, women said that if they became pregnant, they typically continued their combat duties and had to leave their infants in the care of others. Khanal also describes how some women kept their babies with them in the field, noting the difficulties they faced in providing adequate nutrition for themselves and for their young children, as well as staying alive, during active warfare (Khanal 2009). The stories of pregnancy during wartime should be kept in the context of the country as a whole, however, because pregnancies were not a time of adequate rest and nutrition for many women in Nepal (Khanal 2009; Brunson 2020).

Kavita ji, the PLA ex-combatant and Constituent Assembly representative introduced above, described what it was like to be pregnant and give birth during the People’s War. She explained that while underground, pregnant PLA soldiers were not able to receive prenatal check-ups. Only if someone became very ill or “serious” would they be sent “outside” to a clinic. She continued her description of wartime, saying:

A few were born in Kathmandu, and a few others used to be sent outside (to a neighboring district). Otherwise they usually gave birth in villages. I also gave birth to my
daughter in a village. Up until nine months, walking and walking. The baby was small. And once toward the very end my stomach hurt badly and the doctor checked me. The doctor said, “Your baby is small, you have to rest, have to drink buffalo milk.” But where could one find buffalo milk at that time? How could I stay in one place? And later I gave birth myself in a village. I stayed in one place for five days after the baby was born, five days in another place; I continued in that way. I didn’t stay in one place.

She described the embodied experience of guerilla warfare and hiding in rural parts of Nepal. Groups of combatants were constantly on the move, often only staying in one area for a few nights at a time, out of fear of being discovered and overpowered by the Nepal Army. Describing female combatants’ experiences while at war, she continued:

They had to carry their belongings and walk. They had to carry one gun and a pack. Even at two [to] three months pregnant, they fought. They probably didn’t admit they were pregnant because of embarrassment. For so many people, it was discovered only after dying that they were pregnant; even though they were told not to go, they fought. One couldn’t stay in one place to eat and rest, one had to keep walking. They walked until they gave birth, and after they gave birth, they had to walk the next day or the next. That’s how they had to walk during that time. And so many women … usually commanders were men, and one should tell one’s commander one’s problems, but in many situations, one feels that one can’t speak about one’s personal problems.

A few ex-combatants described being taken in by a village family near the time of birth and being allowed to give birth and rest for a short while in their homes. A few others reported being allowed to travel to a hospital when the circumstances permitted, but they feared they might be discovered while at the hospital. And while pregnancy and birth were challenging under such conditions, leaving their young children with relatives or villagers was as well. Kavita ji continued,

[As PLA mothers,] we have to be “strong.” At that time, we used to have to leave our children and go, no? No one could keep her child with her. The longer one is together with one’s child, the greater the love will become. Mother and child should meet, but maybe for some reason they meet only after staying [far apart] for two years. But one who is stationed nearby, the child will meet maybe every two–three days. That’s a different story. At that time, the word “mother” wasn’t spoken. When meeting one’s child, “Mother” wasn’t said. So that others did not find out that it was her child and kill them, we were taught to use “sister,” “auntie.” Now, so many of my friends’ children call them auntie or sister. Later, after peacetime began, they were taught to say “āmā” or “mummy,” and they say that. So many did not recognize or find out [it was their mother]. Now, also, they don’t [care about their parents] that much … In my situation, I left her at 16 months, and at the time of leaving her, the members of my husband’s house were a little scared. They were afraid they would be killed for keeping her, and also my husband’s family was high-caste, and so for one month I left her at a local house instead. One woman said she would raise her for me—her children were older—saying, “I’d enjoy a small baby.” She was also from our political party. She said, “How can such a soldier take a baby? If you meet the police or army, they will kill both mother and daughter. If they meet only you … then one will survive.” After she said that, I left my daughter when she was 16 months.
She kept and raised her for one month. And then my grandmother asked, “Where did you leave your daughter?” After saying, “at a local house,” my grandmother said, “You act like you have no one! Bring her here, I will raise her. If they kill me, so be it.” And I brought and left her there. My grandmother raised her for around ten months. For seven years, she was raised at [my] husband’s home. After that, for two years my husband’s aunt raised her, my elder sister for one year, my husband’s brother’s wife for one year, and now she is in a [school] hostel.

Kavita ji went on to describe how when she visits her daughter in the hostel, she limits her expression of love toward her daughter in order to diminish her daughter’s desire to live with her mother.

If something is needed, I give money or do this and that. I act like I don’t love her that much. She sees how much other mothers who come there love [their children], and one day she questioned me, “Did my mommy not give birth to me or something? Did she take me from someone else? Are you not my mommy?”

Her daughter had never lived with her for any extended period of time. Even post-conflict, as she worked for the party as a representative in the Constituent Assembly, she was too busy to raise her daughter alone. Her daughter continued to live in the boarding dormitory at her school. She concluded her story about her daughter, and her enactment of motherhood, in this way:

Our situation is like this: our party doesn’t pay us money, I am educating my daughter with the help of the allowance provided by the party for my husband’s death, and sometimes when she wants to eat or buy something, there isn’t money, and we have to make do with a little less, she says, “My father died because of politicians, and they won’t pay for my education? Why did this happen?” Sometimes she says, “I will kill them one by one.”

Throughout this text, I have included moments of boldness and loss, but also intimacy and joy, in an attempt to represent women’s stories in their fullness and complexity. These are the words of a child who feels abandoned by the cause, by the very leaders for whom her parents made enormous sacrifices. I believe it is important to keep her daughter’s words in context, without attempting to downplay the disappointment and rage that they express.

**After the war: A “baby boom” in the cantonments and (gendered) reintegration**

After a peace agreement to end the People’s War in Nepal was signed at the end of 2006, the PLA were assigned to reside in 28 cantonments. These included seven main cantonments (corresponding to division headquarters) that were distributed across the length of Nepal, from Kailali in the west to Jhapa in the east, and 21 smaller satellite cantonments. Thousands of minors were released (and disqualified from joining the Nepal security forces), but over 19,000 ex-combatants were confined in cantonments, under UNMIN supervision, to be registered and wait for “processing” that would determine whether they were eligible to join the national security forces, in particular the Nepal Army, or retire. With the exception of one high-ranking individual, who had stayed in the Sindhuli cantonment, the women interviewed in this research had been held in the Chitwan cantonment, located to the west of Kathmandu.
Initially in the cantonments, couples were forbidden to procreate, but the official processes through which individuals were determined to be eligible or not to join the Nepal Army stalled for years. Due to disputes, an agreement was not reached on integration criteria until November of 2011. A “baby boom” occurred in the cantonments while ex-combatants waited nearly six years to be processed. As a result, the party (CPN-M) developed a system to place mothers and newborns in nearby flats outside the camps and provide them with an allowance. What women soon discovered, however, as processing was carried out, was that having a child effectively pushed them out of a future career in the military. They could not serve in the Nepal Army and be primary caretakers of a young child at the same time. However, leaving one’s children with other family members was no longer acceptable during peacetime as it was during the war. Tamang (2016) analyzed how the mainstream media in Nepal, mostly dominated by high-caste men, portrayed women as choosing retirement for the sake of their children and to enable their husbands to join the Nepal Army. She critiqued the ways dominant patriarchal notions of motherhood shaped the script and photography of Nepali journalists reporting on women ex-combatants’ retirement and reintegration into mainstream family values and roles. My interviews with women ex-combatants provide the much-needed corrective of women talking on their own terms about being forced to retire because of motherhood.

As an outsider, it was incomprehensible to me how PLA ex-combatants could join the Nepal Army post-conflict, but this is reported to have been the plan of the PLA leadership long before the peace agreement between the two was signed. Journalist Kiyoko Ogura describes watching a play in 2003 in which the Maoists promoted the idea that PLA combatants eventually would merge with the national army, to work together for the good of the country (Ogura 2010); and several women described to me how that was exactly what they had wanted to do. Serving in the Nepal Army afforded a decent, steady income, which was hard to come by, especially for women. A 26-year-old Brahmin woman, the mother of a one-year-old son, explained. We sat on low stools in her one-room cold store (a tiny convenience store) just outside the gates of a local private school, which provided her a stream of students who bought small snacks or juice boxes after school. She said that she had made a big contribution to the party by supporting the war for six or seven years. She had spent a long time learning how to fight, patrol, and contribute to life in the barracks. That was what she was trained to do, and she didn’t know how to do other civilian things. She had wanted to join the Nepal Army, but she was disqualified by being the mother of a young child. So, for the time being, she ran the shop, and it worked well for her because she could watch her son in the store and sell items at the same time. She added that she really wanted to work outside of the home. She had studied for and passed the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam while detained in the cantonment. At the time we spoke, she had been separated from her Tamang husband for 16 or 17 months. When asked about hope for the future, she replied, “In one to two years, who knows what will be?” Despite all the uncertainties of that period, personally and for the nation, she ended by saying that she had hope for Nepal.

Sushmita also had wanted to join the Nepal Army, but she had been disqualified because she had joined the PLA at 14 years old, as a minor. We recorded her story in her one-room clothing shop in a small town in Kavre, with her husband dutifully distracting her one-and-a-half-year-old daughter so that she would not be interrupted. Her husband was still living in the cantonment and hoped to integrate into the Nepal Army, but had taken some days off to come to visit her and his daughter. Sushmita was Chhetri, and her husband was Gurung. She joined the PLA because she “liked everything” about the Maoists recruiters she met, their speech and behavior. She married her husband when she was 20 years old and became pregnant while in the cantonment. For six months of her pregnancy, she did her regular duties in the cantonment, and then she took rest and was given 4,000 Nepali rupees (roughly $55 at that time). Since it
was peacetime, she went to Dhulikhel Hospital to give birth. At the time of the interview, she was mostly in charge of childcare, housework, and the small shop, since her husband was still in the cantonment hoping to join the army. Despite the seeming necessity of that arrangement, the way her husband deferred to her and to the fact that it was her interview—deftly distracting the child with no spoken instruction to do so—left an impression on me. The subtle details of this interaction provide some insight into the complexity of how structural constraints based on gender (the husband was joining the Nepal Army, while she was unable to) translate into a mix of personal constraints based on gender. She was educated, confident, articulate, and gave no verbal or non-verbal cues of deference to her husband as being superior (such as I am accustomed to observing). She was responsible for the majority of the childcare due to the situation, but stated that he cared for their daughter when he was home. In this relationship, there were indications that their personal beliefs about gender equality might have caused their situation to play out much differently if the limiting structural forces had not been in place.

In the end, after all the political parties had come to an agreement on the conditions of integration in November 2011, and ex-combatants were processed according to those conditions, fewer than 1,500 PLA ex-combatants were integrated into the Nepal Army. The rest took voluntary retirement, with cash packages ranging from 500,000 to 800,000 Nepali rupees. Only 105 women were able to join the Nepal Army (Thapa 2016).

The majority of women I interviewed expressed that men and women shared duties such as cooking, washing dishes, washing clothes, and other chores that were typically gendered activities in Nepal. During wartime and in the cantonments, PLA members took turns performing different duties, regardless of whether it was viewed as women’s work by the larger society. But when I pressed women on their statements that married partners did equal work, asking them about specific duties related to childcare, I observed a pattern. After they became mothers, and perhaps more so after leaving the cantonment, women were burdened with quite an unequal share of the so-called “same” amount of household and caregiving labor. One 25-year-old woman summed it up cleverly, saying, “Husband’s and wife’s responsibilities are the same. But a mother’s work will always be greater.”

Concluding reflections

In her edited book, *Women, War and Peace in South Asia*, Manchanda begins from the premise that there is a need “to understand the role of women beyond victimhood, women’s variegated negotiations with conflict and their capacity to emerge as agents of social transformation” (Manchanda 2001: 10). With this chapter, I add to this “chronicle of women’s experiences of organised political violence” (Manchanda 2001: 9), but I also extend her point to critique Global North narratives of the neediness, lack of agency, and powerlessness of women in the Global South. Moreover, I assert that the anthropology of reproduction, while continuing to celebrate birthing people’s creative power via procreation and parenthood, must reckon with the ways that protest and political violence are integral to motherhood and parenthood rather than antithetical. If feminist concerns about embodied inequalities dragged reproduction to the center of social theory in the 1990s (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Rapp 2001), then a new generation of scholars will show how in an age of environmental/health/racial crisis there is no theory—indeed, no social—without reproduction and struggle. In a time of crisis, procreation and parenthood become an embodied assertion of the belief that the future can be otherwise, even as oppressive structures prove firm.

Through this research, I have documented the stories of personal and political struggle of women who became mothers during a prolonged civil war and its aftermath in Nepal, while
they were active members of the Maoist guerilla army, the People’s Liberation Army of Nepal. Ordinary life does not stop during extended periods of war; combatants fall in (and out of) love, have children, and begin to grow old. Women who married and became pregnant during the extended period of fighting faced challenges during pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period. They often had to leave their infants to be raised by others, sometimes posing as an auntie to their own child. And women who gave birth during the post-war years in cantonments faced difficulties in reconciling their reasons for fighting with their new roles of mother and wife. Alternatively, other women missed an opportunity to reproduce because the extended period of the war and processing spanned most of their reproductive lives.

Nepali ex-combatants’ narratives of becoming mothers were diverse; however, a few related themes emerged. First, with respect to women’s motivation to join the PLA, the personal is political: Many women were motivated to join the PLA because of some personal experience of violence and a desire to create a more equitable life. Leve has argued (2007) that the two attempts to explain rural women’s support of the Maoists in the terms of development—the “failed development” hypothesis and, alternatively, the success of rural development programs in “empowering” women (see Manchanda 1999)—are both somewhat misguided in the way they overlook the significance of personal experience and relationships. She argues that in her work with women in rural western Nepal, women did not define themselves as autonomous individuals, but rather through their relationships and commitments. In a different context, at the edge of the Kathmandu Valley, I arrived at a similar conclusion regarding the failure of the individualistic concept of “autonomy” to account for semi-urban Nepali women’s projects of reproduction and their navigation of conflicting discourses on how they ought to form their families (Brunson 2016). Among the women ex-combatants with whom I spoke, personal experiences of gendered suffering, once interpreted as injustice, often motivated women to join. They supported the Maoist movement in order to improve their relations, their treatment, and their futures through rejecting the status quo.

Second, while these diverse examples of PLA ex-combatants clearly dispel global health or development discourses of Nepali women as passive recipients in need of intervention, at the same time they underscore how trenchant societal structures of heteropatriarchy, marriage, and, most significantly in this case, motherhood, can be. For, although when joining the PLA the ex-combatants had actively rejected many gender norms such as arranged marriage, the inability to inherit land, and the normalization of gender violence, once they became mothers, they found themselves limited in new—but historically longstanding—ways. While men readily took up what had been traditionally deemed as women’s work, such as fetching firewood, cooking, and washing dishes, caring for a young child resisted this integration of gendered work espoused by the Maoists. Care work for a young child persisted as a separate category, a duty reserved for women.

In their involvement in political violence, women’s experiences of conflict are contextual and shifting (Manchanda 2001). Women who fought to revolutionize Nepali society often ended up reproducing the ordinary as they enacted all-too-familiar gender roles as wives and mothers post-conflict. Procreation re-embedded former PLA women into the old systems of gendered social expectations (and proscriptions on behavior), but without the support system afforded by traditional kinship networks or living under the management of the PLA. Post-conflict, reintegration examples included women left as widows in a society that stigmatized them and secular PLA marriages (janawādi bibāhā) that dissolved once under the scrutiny of a larger, dominant society that discouraged inter-caste marriages or without the typical social reinforcement of a man’s obligation to his wife. Finally, becoming a mother meant being unfit for integration into Nepal Army, tying women to motherhood rather than a social role that transcended or existed
outside of their role as a mother in powerful ways. Of course, there are exceptions, including Kavita ji, the member of the Constituent Assembly whose daughter lived at the school hostel, featured above. But these exceptions appear to come with a cost. Notably, the one woman who had a decidedly optimistic outlook on the future was a woman who had no children. She concluded her interview, saying, “I’m very satisfied [with what I’ve contributed during the war]. The next generation following us will not have to bear this.”

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Notes

1 Journalist Li Onesto documented instances of the police using rape, torture, humiliation, and murder against PLA women and sympathizers in her 2005 book Dispatches from the People’s War in Nepal, and several such cases gained national attention.
2 “Maoist” is the translation of Māowādi, the commonly used overarching term in Nepali for PLA combatants and CPN-M party members. The usage of this word in this chapter conforms to the common usage of it in Nepali society, the media, and other scholarly writing.
3 The 2008 documentary The Sari Soldiers, directed by Julie Bridgham, contrasts the actions of six Nepali women on multiple sides of the conflict, highlighting women’s varying strategies to seek justice.
4 When I asked the Constituent Assembly representative why I had a disproportionately high number of Brahmin-Chhetri women in my convenience sample of PLA ex-combatant mothers, she replied that she would guess that it was because Brahmin-Chhetri women are more well-connected and can rely on their networks to rent a room and make a living near Kathmandu, while Magar and other Janajāti women would be more likely to have to return to their villages after being released from the cantonments. The degree to which this is accurate is difficult to determine, but a selectivity issue does exist in that I only interviewed women within Kathmandu and Kavre districts, and not beyond.
5 However, journalist Kiyoko Ogura (2010) and others, including women I interviewed, noted the drawn-out series of disagreements on the terms of this integration that lasted for years, along with concerns that PLA ex-combatants had been indoctrinated with political ideology that would interfere with their allegiance to the national security forces.
7 The failed development hypothesis, as summarized by Leve, posits that “popular discontent with the government is the result of uneven, incomplete, or poorly executed development efforts and recommends more and better aid as the route to peace” (Leve 2007: 127).

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