Women and the Maobadi: Women, Ideology and Agency in Nepal's Maoist Movement
Judith Pettigrew and Sara Shneiderman*
Himal South Asian, January 2004

Judith Pettigrew teaches anthropology in the Lancashire School of Health and Postgraduate Medicine at the University of Central Lancashire, UK.

Sara Shneiderman is conducting PhD research in the Department of Anthropology at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA.

I. Introduction: Contrasting discourses of victimization and agency

One of the most reported aspects of the Maoist 'People's War' in Nepal has been its high levels of female participation, with up to 40% of all combatant and civilian political supporters allegedly being women (Sharma and Prasain 2004:151; Onesto 2003 [1999]:169). Striking photos of young, gun-toting guerrilla women are prominently displayed on the "official" Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) website, and distributed from New York to London to Peru in materials produced by the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM). These images are apparently intended to serve as evidence of the movement's egalitarianism and "empowering" effects for Nepali women.

However, some observers have recently begun to suggest that Maoist claims of high female participation have been exaggerated (M. Thapa 2003:51). In addition, the rapidly expanding conflict 'industry' based in Kathmandu seems intent on constructing a discourse of victimization which portrays helpless village women at the mercy of both the Maoists and the state. Providing support and rehabilitation for women affected by the conflict is clearly of utmost urgency, but we take issue with the portrayal of such women as lacking agency (see Pettigrew 2004 for an alternative view).

Such contrasting narratives of agency and victimization are nothing new, and have long been at the center of feminist debate. As elsewhere, the reality for Nepali women lies in the particularity of lived experience all along the continuum between these two extremes. To date, no thorough ethnography of rural women's experiences in the 'People's War' exists, and in this paper we make some tentative steps towards filling that gap. Several articles by Nepali journalists, human rights workers and activists advance gendered perspectives on the 'People's War' (Gautam 2001; SAP-Nepal 2001; Sharma

and Prasain 2004; M. Thapa 2003; Gautam, Banskota and Manchanda 2003 [2001]), providing important foundations for our own work. We are at the beginning of a detailed process of documentation and analysis of the gender aspects of the conflict, and this contribution is intended as a position paper to initiate debate, not a comprehensive or conclusive treatise. We welcome commentary from diverse perspectives that adds to the empirical and analytical framework we lay out here.

Several interlinked questions guide our analysis of these issues here: (1) What claims does the CPN (M) make about gender equality and social transformation on the ideological level? (2) How do class, ethnic, caste, and religious identities affect the validity of these claims as experienced by different women, both as members of the Maoist movement and as non-aligned civilians? (3) How do Nepali Maoist models for women's "empowerment" negotiate between overarching international Communist attitudes towards the "women question" and the existing particularities of gender discrimination in Nepali society? (4) Are the social transformations that the Maoists claim to be effecting in terms of gender relations (a) in fact radical breaks from the past, and (b) the intentional result of Maoist policies, or primarily unintended consequences of the conflict? In addressing these questions, we emphasize the potential for multiple and sometimes contradictory agencies, and acknowledge the intersecting lines of class, caste, ethnicity, religion, gender and history in shaping individual political consciousness.

II. Background: History of the 'People's War'
The 'People's War' was first officially declared in February 1996, when the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (hereafter denoted as CPN (M)) presented a 40-point list of demands to the Nepali government. The points deal largely with rectifying economic and social injustice, abolishing monarchy, and establishing a constituent assembly, and have been described by several non-partisan commentators in terms such as, "reasonable and not dissimilar in spirit to the election manifestos of mainstream parties" (Thapa with Sijapati 2003:53). The Maoists went underground when these demands were not addressed.

With their original strongholds in the mid-Western districts of Rolpa, Rukum and Jajarkot, the Maoists slowly began to establish "base areas" elsewhere in the country. Early on, repressive police responses antagonized local people and contributed to support for the Maoists (Thapa 2001). The Maoists also capitalized on a widespread sense of frustration with a corrupt and unreliable state, which despite promises of enfranchisement and economic development after the advent of democracy in 1990, had provided little in the way of concrete improvement. The conflict escalated after major police operations in 1998, with frequent skirmishes between Maoists and police throughout the country. It reached a new height in November 2001, when the guerrillas withdrew from a several-month long ceasefire and initiated a series of attacks across the country including ones targeted at Royal Nepal Army barracks in Dang in the mid-west and Salleri in the eastern district of Solu-Khumbu. This confrontation marked several departures: for the first time the Maoists had directly challenged the army (rather than just the police), and had demonstrated their now substantial strength outside of their known strongholds in the western part of the country.

In response, King Gyanendra—who had come to power after the June 2001 Royal Massacre in which his brother, former King Birendra, was killed—imposed a state of

emergency on November 26, 2001, which effectively suspended most civil rights and for the first time deployed the army to fight the Maoists. After a year of continued conflict and increasingly large numbers of deaths among Maoists, state forces and civilians, as well as a political crisis in the parliament, the king appropriated constitutional powers and put the democratic process on hold on October 4, 2002.

January 2003 saw a second ceasefire called between the parties, and a schedule for peace talks was established as high-ranking Maoist leaders came aboveground and became instant celebrities, most notably the ideologue Dr. Baburam Bhattarai. All of the negotiating parties faced the challenge of establishing political legitimacy: since there was no democratic government in place, the Maoists questioned the ability of "government" negotiators (handpicked by the King) to in fact implement any agreement reached. On their side, the government negotiators questioned the Maoist ability to maintain control over their cadres, particularly since low-level attacks continued to occur throughout the negotiation period.

Ultimately the talks broke down in late summer 2003 when both sides refused to budge from their opposing positions on the issue of a constituent assembly. On August 27, Prachanda, the Maoist commander, unilaterally declared the ceasefire over, and Maoist/security force confrontations resumed. Human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have extensively documented the human rights violations committed by both the Maoists and state forces (Amnesty 2002a; 2002b; 2003), and the conflict has cost over 8000 lives since 1996.

III. Global and local ethnographic contexts

General literature on women combatants is limited, since most published work on women and war focuses on women as civilian victims. The literature available highlights that there is a lack of recognition of women's active roles during armed conflict, which frequently leads to a double victimization during the reintegration phase following conflict (Moser and Clark 2001:9). For example, families and communities may castigate woman combatants for ignoring 'feminine' duties such as chastity and motherhood during the conflict, while on the other hand, leaders responsible for designing post-conflict demobilization and reintegration programmes do not recognize women's contribution during the guerrilla struggle and do not design gender-inclusive programs. Research elsewhere suggests that although women are transformed by their experiences of participating in armed insurgencies, they do not gain equality through this engagement (Peries 1998 as cited in Cockburn 2001:21). Furthermore, the presence of women does not make the character, culture and hierarchy of militant organizations more feminine (Cockburn 2001:29).

Karen Kampwirth (2002) provides one of the most in-depth discussions of these issues in her work on the political, structural, ideological and personal factors that motivated women to participate in guerrilla activities in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas (Mexico) and Cuba. Although the situation in Nepal must be considered on its own terms, we can gain useful analytical frameworks and comparative insight from such research conducted in other conflict zones. Based on interviews with 200 female ex-combatants, Kampwirth suggests that the factors which lead women to mobilize as guerrillas include *structural changes* such as land concentration which increased insecurity for rural poor, male migration and the abandonment of families, and female migration which break

traditional ties and make organizing more possible; *ideological and organization changes* such as the growth of religious and secular self-help groups and changes in guerrilla methods such as a shift to mass mobilization; *political factors* including severe repression in response to very moderate oppositional activities causing many women to join or support guerrilla groups as a means of self defence; *personal factors* such as age, since large numbers of young women joined the armed insurgencies as teenagers, following in their parents' activist footsteps. Kampwirth also notes that the motivations of younger women were somewhat different to those of older female householders, as younger women tended to be 'pulled' into organisations as a means of obtaining immediate opportunities, whereas older women tended to be 'pushed' by obligation or life circumstances. Large numbers of women joined via various student groups at university or secondary school. Young women who joined politically radical organisations had usually previously belonged to social networks and youth groups that then led to radicalisation. Ultimately, Kampwirth notes that some women join armed struggles for a combination of all or several of these factors.

These issues have just begun to be addressed in a Nepal-specific context. Beyond the proliferation of reports issued by human rights groups and NGOs, there has been relatively little in-depth research on the Maoist movement in general. Several publications have recently begun to take the Maoist movement seriously as an object of analysis (Hutt 2004; Karki and Seddon 2003; Thapa with Sijapati 2003). However, much of this work remains focused on large-scale party dynamics and historical issues, rather than addressing the experiences of people on the ground. During the early phases of the conflict, there was a tendency among Kathmandu-based commentators to cast rural Nepalis who participated in the Maoist movement as victims of a sort of false consciousness, whose lack of education and general 'backwardness' made them unable to understand Maoist ideology, and were therefore dismissed as less than full political agents. In contrast, we contend that the ideological dimensions of the movement must be considered from the perspectives of those who participate in it.

The limited existing literature on women in the war has provided some welcome exceptions to this pattern of analysis, with a few important articles focusing specifically on women's agency (M. Thapa 2003; Gautam et al. 2003 [2001]). However, these have tended to go to opposite extremes by respectively suggesting that women are fully empowered by participation in the Maoist movement, and that, "there is no less militant option by which they [rural women] might exercise their agency" (M. Thapa 2003:51). We suggest a more nuanced approach which acknowledges both women's multiple existing scripts for agency and the constraints within which they exercise it.

Our discussion here is based on both primary ethnographic material and published secondary sources in English. Due to time and space constraints, the present article does not incorporate Nepali language materials, but these constitute an important aspect of our ongoing research. We particularly welcome commentaries that refer to articles and reports currently unavailable in English. It has been difficult to conduct in-depth research on the conflict in rural Nepal, particularly since the state of emergency was declared in November 2001. Foreign visitors are closely monitored in Maoist-controlled areas, and the constant potential for violence between the Maoists and the state forces can make extended visits unsafe. Both authors conducted previous long-term research in rural Nepal before the insurgency escalated, and later returned to their original field sites to

collect data about the conflict. Our material spans several distinct locations in western, central and eastern Nepal (we have chosen not to name specific villages or districts), and was gathered from 1999 to 2003 on a series of short field visits under constrained conditions. We also recognize that Maoist policy and practice differs depending upon the stage of struggle at each place and time. For these reasons, the localized data upon which we base our analysis is in many cases suggestive rather than definitive.

IV. Maoist claims and critiques

Ever since Frederick Engels first articulated the link between gender roles and modes of production in his classic work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, the relationship between women's liberation and class revolution has been an important aspect of Marxist ideological debate. Female Communist leaders have taken pains to distance themselves from 'bourgeois feminists', arguing that the 'woman question' must be addressed within the overarching framework of class revolution rather than as a social end in itself. Operating within this historical context, Nepal's Maoists must negotiate between two hegemonic ideologies—Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought and conservative Hindu cultural norms—in defining an approach to the 'woman question' that is at once concordant with international ideological expectations and applicable to Nepal-specific social situations.

In the original list of 40 Maoist demands, point number 19 is the only one that refers specifically to women, and this focuses on a Nepal-specific issue: "Patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women should be stopped. Daughters should be allowed access to paternal property" (as cited in D. Thapa 2003:393). As suggested by the second sentence here, Nepali law historically prohibited women from inheriting property unless they were unmarried and over the age of 35. However, this tenet of the Civil Code was altered in 2001 after long battles by Kathmandu's mainstream feminist organizations (M. Thapa 2003:53-54), at least in theory granting equal property rights to women.

This leaves only the first sentence as a relevant plank in the Maoist platform. The reference to "patriarchal exploitation and discrimination" accurately sums up the fact that in the world's only officially Hindu state, dominant—and often state-supported—ideologies towards women are based upon conservative Hindu concepts of femininity (Bennett 1983). However, Nepal is also home to over 60 non-Hindu ethnic groups who speak Tibeto-Burman languages and together comprise a substantial proportion of the population. (The official 2001 government census figures show just over 20%, but most likely this is a gross underestimation; Harka Gurung, for example, puts the ethnic population at 36.4% [2003:5]). It is common knowledge that gender relations among these groups vary widely from the normative Hindu image, often with more (although not entirely) egalitarian kinship and economic structures. We will return to this point later.

Official Maoist pronouncements on gender relations have focused on overturning gendered hierarchies as part of their larger program for radical social transformation. Li Onesto, a journalist for the Revolutionary Worker who made several trips with the People's Army in western Nepal from 1998 to 2000, appears particularly interested in women's issues, and presents an entirely positive view of the empowering changes the 'People's War' has brought to women's lives. She writes that, "When the armed struggle started in 1996, it was like the opening of a prison gate—with thousands of women

rushing forward to claim an equal place in the war" (Onesto 2003 [1999]:169). In a rather sentimental turn, she writes that this "is something that can bring tears to your eyes" (ibid).

In 2000, Onesto interviewed the CPN(M) commander-in-chief Prachanda about changes that the 'People's War' had wrought in the Maoist "base areas" four years after the "initiation". Prachanda emphasizes the transformation of gender and family relations:

> The people were not only fighting with the police or reactionary, feudal agents, but they were also breaking the feudal chains of exploitation and oppression and a whole cultural revolution was going on among the people. Questions of marriage, questions of love, questions of family, questions of relations between people. All of these things were being turned upside down and changed in the rural areas. (Onesto 2003 [2000]:195)

Onesto then presses Prachanda to speak explicitly about women's participation in the movement. He appears reluctant, but finally makes the following statement:

> ... our party has tried to develop the leadership of women comrades. There have been problems in doing this, but now we are, step-by-step, working to solve this problem. Masses of women have come forward as revolutionary fighters. And we had a plan right from the beginning that the women and the men comrades should be in the same squad, the same platoon and that all things should be done in this way. We have worked to make new relations between men and women—new relations, new society, new things." (Onesto 2003 [2000]:195).

Notably, Prachanda acknowledges the difficulties in developing women as leaders within the party. He otherwise claims that the 'People's War' has been responsible for a radical shift in gender relations in society at large. However, as these are his most prominent published statements on gender issues, it is surprising that he does not offer more in-depth information or examples of Maoist successes. In fact, it seems that international Maoists such as Onesto bear greater responsibility for creating the image of an egalitarian 'People's War' in Nepal than the Nepali leadership themselves.

Comrade Parvati, the pseudonym for a writer who identifies herself as a Central Committee Member and Head of the Women's Department of CPN (Maoist), speaks openly about the "problems" in developing women's leadership to which Prachanda alludes. Although male cadres' military careers continue developing beyond the age of 40, female cadres' careers rarely develop after the age of 25. When the People's Liberation Army expanded to the brigade-level, women started asking questions about their participation in leadership positions. Female cadres experience difficulty asserting themselves, and male cadres have difficulty relinquishing "… the privileged position bestowed on them by the patriarchal structure" (Parvati 2003a). Frequently the male leadership relegates women's issues to women rather than taking them up as central issues, neglects to implement programs developed by the women's mass front, are unnecessarily overprotective of female cadres, and resort to traditional division of labor by monopolizing "… mental work and relegating women to everyday drudgery work" (Parvati 2003a). Married women who show promise are discouraged from taking up positions that would take them away from their husbands. Women active in the Maoist movement frequently experience marginalization when they have children and "… many bright aspiring communist women are at risk of being lost in oblivion, even after getting married to the comrades of their choice" (Parvati 2003a).

Despite these problems, Parvati also emphasizes the Party's successes regarding women. By 2002, there were several women in the Central Committee of the Party, dozens at the regional level and even larger numbers at the district, area and cell levels. The People's Liberation Army boasts many women section commanders, and vice commanders as well as female-only squads and platoons and local level female cadres. Parvati also highlights the importance of the All Nepalese Women's Association (Revolutionary) [ANWA(R)] in mobilizing women at the community level, as well as serving as an example of effective mass organization at the vanguard of the entire movement (2003a). (See Shakya [2003] for a critique of the ANWA(R)'s position.) With the adoption of a new form of Nepali Maoism in February 2002 named "Prachanda Path", the question of developing women leaders gained prominence and a separate department to develop women's potential was created.

One example of women's ambiguous position within the party leadership is the story of Kausila Tamu (Gurung). In mid-2001 the Maoists set up people's governments in 21 districts, and while no woman was appointed to chair a district government, four women were appointed as vice-chairs, including Kausila Tamu in Lamjung district. Tamu had previously been a commander in a guerrilla squad, as well as a sub-regional committee member of the party. She had denounced and divorced her husband who had reneged against the movement after being captured (Comrade Parvati 2003a). Following the death of the district chairman, she was promoted to this most senior position, but was killed while laying an ambush against the security forces in May 2002. She is best known as the author of a letter which became public in 2002, in which she told her family that because she was close to Baburam Bhattarai she had become a target from those outside his faction and was under suspicion. Following her death, comments published in the Kathmandu Post quote a colleague of hers as saying that she was "…fearless and a good organiser in the region [and] would not have been killed had the leadership been cautious". What is surprising is the lack of attention paid to Kausila Tamu's career both when she was alive and following her death. A hill janajati woman, she was one of a very small group of women elected to the leadership of the original people's governments, yet her story has primarily been cited for the light it sheds on rivalry between factions headed by the male leaders rather than for its own value as the story of one the few female leaders from hill janajati backgrounds. In contrast, the death of Rit Bahadur Khadka, who held the structurally equivalent position in Dolakha district, attracted enormous attention and ongoing eulogising from the party. While it may be possible to explain the different degrees of attention paid to these two individuals as solely due to their factional affiliations, it remains curious that one of the few janajati women to reach a position of senior leadership has received such scant attention.

Along these lines, there is still a conspicuous absence of any women at the top. Members of Kathmandu-based feminist organizations of various political affiliations were particularly unimpressed with the lack of any women on the Maoist negotiating team that came aboveground following the ceasefire of January 2003. In an article addressed to the male Maoist leadership, women's health and reproductive rights activist Dr. Aruna Uprety draws attention to women's disillusion with the divergence between Maoist ideology and practice by accusing the Maoists of "…behaving no differently than our 'men-stream' political parties. We never expected our male-dominated government to

7

involve women in the peace process, but we thought you were going to be different" (Uprety 2003).

V. Empowering the universal Nepali woman

Uprety's complaint highlights one of the central problematics in Maoist attitudes towards women: in many ways, the underlying vision of "Nepali women" upon which Maoist claims of transformation are premised may be remarkably similar to existing dominant discourses. In a recent article, Seira Tamang (2002) clearly shows how the stereotypical image of a "universal Hindu Nepali woman", oppressed and in need of empowerment, is the fictional product of a development discourse created by and for high-caste Hindus in Kathmandu. As Tamang explains, "The patriarchically oppressed, uniformly disadvantaged and Hindu, 'Nepali woman' as a category did not pre-exist the development project. She had to be constructed by ignoring the heterogeneous forms of community, social relations, and gendered realities of the various peoples inhabiting Nepal" (2002:163). Ironically, these discourses of empowerment emanating from the development establishment may have had unintended results: by emphasizing rural women's critical thinking skills, 'empowerment' programs may have paved the way for them to engage with Maoist ideology as fully conscious political subjects (Leve 2002). In this regard, the Maoist movement is situated on a continuum of social change projects that have historically operated in Nepal—despite their critique of both the Nepali state and foreign-funded development agendas, the Maoists themselves have arisen out of the same crucible, and in many ways have uncritically appropriated the terminology and symbolic vocabulary of the entities they claim to work against. The language of 'women's empowerment' is one such example, and in its deployment seems to indicate an implicit acceptance of the notion of a universally disempowered Nepali woman.This essentialized image stands in stark contrast to the reality of multiple scripts for agency that have long been available to Nepal's ethnically and religiously diverse women. Nepal's non-Hindu and largely Tibeto-Burman language-speaking ethnic groups, who have come to be known collectively as *janajati*, or 'people's nationalities', often structure gender and other social relations very differently to those suggested by the normative Hindu image. There is also considerable diversity among the practices of Nepal's Hindu groups, which this stereotype does not acknowledge. Although the representation of hill *janajati* communities as entirely egalitarian is equally extreme and untrue—as Mary Des Chene has pointed out, there are "many quiet forms of constraints on the 'freedom'" (1998:42) of *janajati* women as well—in many cases, they do have access to different forms of economic and cultural power than their caste-Hindu counterparts. In addition, the gendered division of labor in hill *janajati* communities has traditionally been more fluid, with men often performing domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning, and women engaging in heavy labor such as carrying loads for cash wages.

Such diversity raises important questions about the Maoist claim to have transformed social relations, as well as the commonly cited reasons for women's attraction to the Maoist movement. In a widely-circulated article that affirms the Maoist discourse of empowerment for women, Gautam et al. claim that the majority of Maoist women are from *janajati* backgrounds (2003 [2001]:94). On the one hand, they suggest, *janajati* women "are culturally less oppressed than Hindu upper-caste Aryan women" and suffer from "fewer religio-cultural restrictions" (ibid:101). Yet on the other hand, they are

predisposed to join the Maoist movement because, "the tribal socialisation of women from the oppressed ethnic groups, especially their experience of communal sharing in women work groups [sic], makes them particularly responsive to collective action" (ibid:113). Indeed, if, as Gautam et al. suggest, *janajati* women are already relatively empowered, then why should they be attracted to a rhetoric of transformation based on a reified notion of an oppressed "universal Nepali Hindu woman"? Conversely, if *janajati* women are the main female protagonists in the 'People's War', why should Gautam et al. later be so concerned about what it means for "Hindu women" (ibid:114) to take up arms? If it is indeed Hindu women who are taking up arms, why all the interpretive emphasis on *janajati* women?

The supposition that *janajati* women comprise the majority of Maoist women remains unsubstantiated. In addition, the suggestion that they are more inclined to take up the Maoist cause because they have greater freedoms is contradictory, and also reminiscent of the traditional attitudes of internal colonialism emanating from the Hindu elite at the center towards the non-Hindu groups in the periphery. Such explanations for women's participation seem to accept without question existing stereotypes of non-Hindu groups as egalitarian, 'martial races', who are essentially predisposed to taking up arms. They also do not adequately explore the motivations of the many caste-Hindu women participating in the movement.

In a similar vein, the anti-alcohol campaign of the ANWA(R) has been one of the most publicized aspects of women's participation in Maoist-associated action. However, there has been little attempt to understand in-depth how the anti-alcohol movement has different implications for various cultural groups. In fact, it may well be the case that such strident alcohol bans alienate rather than attract, and even infringe upon the existing freedoms of women from hill *janajati* groups for whom alcohol consumption and exchange hold important symbolic power in cultural and religious life. The structure and achievements of the ANWA(R) as a mass organization deserve further ethnographic attention, but from a perspective aware of the diverse meanings the organization's campaigns may hold for women from different backgrounds.

Comrade Parvati takes a slightly more nuanced approach by suggesting that the effects of the Maoist movement have been different for women from each group, depending upon their existing relative freedoms (2003b: 179). She writes that the revolution has assisted Hindu women "… to break the feudal patriarchal restrictive life imposed by the puritanical Hindu religion, by unleashing their repressed energy". On the other hand it has "… given meaningful lives to Tibeto-Burman and other women who are already relatively free and have greater decision-making rights, by giving them challenging work to do" (ibid). She suggests that the people's war has had a particularly important impact on those from the most exploited dalit communities by "…unleashing their hatred against the state" (ibid). These statements seem at odds with Maoist claims of social transformation premised upon the assumption that rural women are universally oppressed and in need of empowerment—if they already possess such agency, why must they become Maoists to find meaning? Despite these disjunctures, however, the Maoist platform is clearly compelling to many rural women, both Hindu and otherwise. The following two brief ethnographic montages demonstrate some of the contradictions that are evident in practice, which we return to analyze in the conclusion.

VI. Division of labor

Among a group of 450 Maoist combatants encountered by Pettigrew during their two day stay at her field site, approximately 25-30% were women between 16 and 25 years old. Of the seven-member section with whom she talked in depth, two were women. While a man led, one of the senior members was a 19-year-old *dalit* woman who gave orders to her junior colleagues. Both the *dalit* woman and her younger female colleague, a 16-year-old *chetri*, were responsible for cleaning their own guns, maintaining their equipment, washing their clothes and participating in sentry duty. They did not help in preparing food nor in repairing uniforms, both jobs which were carried out by men.

After the food was cooked, the four members of the section not involved in sentry duty received a plate of meat to share. Pettigrew watched as the multi-ethnic group consisting of *bahun*, *chetri*, *dalit*, and *magar* men and women forewent the usual caste and gender conventions and hungrily ate together from the same plate.

The 16-year-old *chetri* woman spent much of the morning cleaning her gun. Shortly after beginning, the cork she inserted to clean the barrel became stuck. She tried several physically demanding methods to dislodge it by herself, which involved using her body in ways which would have been unacceptable for a woman within most other social contexts. After several attempts she realized that she needed someone with greater physical strength to help. Only then did she request assistance from her male colleagues. They did not seem to consider her exertions as anything out of the ordinary and paid no attention to them.

While these images match with the Maoist portrayal of politically engaged and liberated women, participating equally with men in combat-related activities, this is a partial picture. An ex-Maoist woman interviewed by Pettigrew, the widow of a senior local-level cadre, complained bitterly of the gap between ideology and practice: while she spent every day doing propaganda work aimed at educating village women about Maoist ideals of gender equality, she did not enjoy equal relationships with her male colleagues. She complained in particular that she returned home at night to an unchanging situation in which her husband and other male relatives active in the Maoist movement expected her to take full responsibility for domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, running the house and looking after the animals. She concluded that she, "… wished to join a women's party as that is the only place where I can fight for women's rights." Ironically, weeks after this interview she was killed by the security forces as a "Maoist woman".

Some of the social shifts occurring among non-aligned civilian women are not prescribed by Maoist ideology, but rather created by the circumstances of war. In many areas of mid- and far-western Nepal, so many men have left to join the Maoists or flee the situation, that women are left to provide for their families alone, and therefore take on roles which they would not have considered doing in 'normal' life. In many areas, women have been reported as ploughing fields, running forestry groups, and administering schools and other institutions. Gautam et al. (2003 [2001]:104) interpret such changes as "an assertion of capability" by village women, but the overwhelming emphasis on women taking over men's jobs begs the question of why non-aligned village men are not also taking over women's jobs if there are indeed such a high number of female combatants.

Furthermore, it appears that some of these perceived changes are logical extensions of pre-existing practice and not new departures. This may be particularly so in

janajati communities, where men have long been engaged in outside activities. Although the immediate cause may now be the 'People's War' rather than Gurkha/Gorkha recruitment, the salt-grain trade, or labor migration, this is not the first time that village women have had to make do alone and take on stereotypically 'male' gendered roles. Pettigrew's research on division of labour among the Gurung ethnic group before the conflict highlights notable flexibility. While given a list of tasks agreed to be gender specific by both women and men, she subsequently witnessed women performing every "male reserved task" except ploughing, house construction, and the slaughter of medium to large animals. At the time of her research, she concluded that given the right circumstances women would also plough. The insurgency has now provided those circumstances, but by accident, rather than design. Rather than successes of the Maoist movement, then, these shifts in practice might be seen as instances of the "unexpected dynamics and spaces of ambivalence" that Andrew Kipnis identifies as central to the formation of putatively Maoist states (2003:286).

VII. Marriage and family
Along with M. Thapa (2003) and other reporters, we have observed that most female Maoist cadre in rural areas are very young, usually under the age of 20. This suggests that the majority of Maoist women are unmarried *at the time that they join the movement*. According to Comrade Parvati, however, they soon face internal party pressure "to get married covertly or overtly as unmarried women draw lots of suspicion from men as well as women for their unmarried status. This results in marriages against their wishes or before they are ready to get married" (2003a:). By focusing their recruitment efforts on unmarried women, the party may control marriage choices to a large extent, and also manipulate marriage alliances for political purposes. The leadership may view marriage as a means of controlling female cadres and making it more difficult for them to leave the party, whereas women with existing marital ties and children are seen as more likely to have conflicting allegiances. The disparate treatment of women depending on their marital status suggests that not all women are equal in Maoist eyes, and we must look closely at age and marital status, in addition to ethnicity and religion, as important factors in shaping women's experiences of the conflict.

In Shneiderman's research area, which has a predominantly non-Hindu ethnic population, the Maoists have actively recruited at secondary schools since 1999, targeting both male and female students between the ages of 14-18. They also recruited married men in their 20s and 30s by paying repeated visits to their houses and exerting pressure on them to leave their families and join the Maoists, and/or to work as non-combatant political supporters within the village. However, married women—including those within the 18-30 range who could make able-bodied fighters—were never targeted for recruitment. A 25-year old *janajati* married mother of two sons, who had completed her secondary education and was well-respected as a capable community member by both men and women, told Shneiderman that she was in fact offended by the visiting Maoists' treatment of her as an uneducated, traditional woman: "They only want to talk to my husband. They never discuss their ideological positions directly with me, even though I understand what they are saying and want to learn more. They order me around in a way my own husband and in-laws would never dare do". She confirmed that several of her peers felt similarly disillusioned that the Maoists' promises of gender equality were not

only belied by their attitudes towards married women, but even provided negative role models for local men.

On a practical level, conservative attitudes towards married women may be reinforced by the logistical demands of the current phase of the 'People's War'. Prior to the November 2001 emergency the Maoists maintained independent camps in forested areas and made only occasional visits to villages, but after the declaration of emergency, they were unable to sustain the camps and began to subsist almost entirely on food and lodging provided by village households. In this situation, Maoist cadres are dependent on established householders to support them, and recruiting married women in addition to men would weaken their own network of providers. The cadres' reliance on householders reinscribes traditional divisions of labor, often making the boundaries between domestic and public space much sharper than in "normal" life. Both authors interviewed village women who complained of being unable to carry on routine work outside the house while Maoists were staying with them, another way in which women's' existing practice may be further circumscribed by the war.

All of this suggests strongly that despite the rhetoric of social change at the top, in practice at the grassroots, many Maoist cadres maintain traditional notions about marriage. While some women experienced these biases negatively as the imposition of a gender-based discrimination that they had otherwise rarely felt, like the young woman quoted above, other women and their families have learned to manipulate this inconsistency between Maoist ideology and practice for their own protection. Pettigrew interviewed a number of unmarried householder women who falsely told the Maoists that they were in fact married in order to secure gentler treatment in their homes by suggesting that they were under the protection of men capable of taking revenge. We have also documented a return to child marriages—a past practice largely abandoned due to state-sanctioned "development" campaigns against it—to protect younger girls from recruitment. This unintended consequence of the war provides an ironic counterpoint to the wide claims of empowerment through the equally unintended appropriation of "male" jobs by women.

There is less information available about Maoist attitudes towards birth and childcare. The sparse existing material suggests that children remain largely the responsibility of women, and in fact often count against women in terms of their status within party hierarchies. Writing in 1998, Onesto observes that:

> ...the women still have primary responsibility for taking care of the children. But this is starting to change slowly. I have met many women comrades with small children, and other people are always taking turns caring for the children—in the 'revolutionary community', everyone is considered an 'auntie' and 'uncle' to the kid. There is not yet organised collective childcare" (2003 [2000]:173)

This statement ignores the fact that so-called "collective childcare" has always been a fact of Nepali village life, complete with the frequent use of kinship terms such as "uncle" and "auntie" to refer to any adult who does not already have another specific kinship designation. In Pettigrew's research area, collective childcare was institutionalised with the opening of a day care centre in 1999 through a local project unaffiliated with the Maoists.

It seems that not much had changed several years later, when Comrade Parvati describes the situation for party members who are also mothers as follows:

12

With the birth of every child she sinks deeper into domestic slavery. In fact many women who have been active in 'People's War' in Nepal are found to complain that having babies is like being under disciplinary action, because they are cut off from the Party activities for a long period. (2003a).

While an experienced Maoist section commander in the field told Pettigrew that, "if a female cadre becomes pregnant she does not have to fight and after birth also she does not have to fight, rather she can do other support activities," this ideal may not often be achieved in reality. In Pettigrew's field area informants report seeing pregnant female Maoists amongst groups of combatants. While it is possible that they do not take part in organised attacks, the fact that they remain with the fighting force puts them in vulnerable situations. Some pregnant or post-partum women are unable to keep up with their group and other situations are arranged: Pettigrew documented the story of a village woman who was forced to hide and support for a month an unwell combatant woman who had just given birth. She has also collected several stories of Maoist women giving birth in the forest. Such babies often died despite efforts to keep them alive, or were abandoned, due to lack of food or harsh living conditions. Other Maoist women are known to have left their infants in the care of extended family members while they returned to the battlefield. This can create difficulties for the family, who may be targeted by state forces if such children become known, and the children themselves carry an unavoidable stigma.

This suggests some of the ways in which it may be difficult for Maoist women to return to "normal" life if they choose to leave the party. While Shneiderman has observed male ex-Maoists returning to their villages and resuming their responsibilities as if they had never left, women Maoists may be shunned by their families upon their return. Hisila Yami highlights this problem in a 1997 interview: "Sons will be welcomed back with open arms, but for the daughters, can there be a return? When they become guerrillas, the women set themselves free from patriarchal bonds. How can they go back?" (as cited in Gautam et al. 2003 [2001]:109). Yami may be correct that women, and particularly caste-Hindu women, who become party members distance themselves from expected social norms in the village, but it seems that in choosing to join the Maoists they subscribe to another set of hierarchical social relations. On one level, this choice is no different from the many others that rural women make every day: it is an option chosen consciously from a range of many possibilities, constrained by specific conditions of ethnicity, religion, economics, individual history and so forth. Yet on another level, it is an irreversible decision: once a woman becomes known as a Maoist, even if she leaves the party, she may continue to be targeted by state forces and risks imprisonment, torture and death.

VIII. Motivations

So why do women make such dangerous choices to join, particularly *janajati* women, whom it would appear have more to lose? Seira Tamang suggests that arenas of agency for *janajati* women have been circumscribed by the closely intertwined processes of state-building and development at work in Nepal since the 1950s, and that "the specific form of 'traditional Hindu patriarchy' that exists in Nepal today is actually quite 'modern', traceable via legal and developmental activities to the attempts by the male, Hindu, Panchayat elites to construct unifying national narratives with which to legitimate

their rule over a heterogeneous populace" (2002:170). The result has been that "modernity" for younger generations of *janajati* women may in fact mean a more limited set of choices than their mothers and grandmothers had in the past. Anecdotal evidence from the community in which Shneiderman worked also bears out the hypothesis that marriage practices have become more restrictive, and notions about womanhood more Hindu-influenced over the past two generations. Pettigrew's research with Gurung women shows that acquisition of Nepali language skills over the last two generations has brought women more into the sphere of Hindu influence, creating additional restrictions on their movement and increasing scrutiny of their behaviour. But in spite of widely expressed normative ideas, there continue to be multiple scripts for agency, of which becoming a Maoist is just one.

Instead of seeing *janajati* women's attraction to the Maoists purely as a result of a 'gender gap', it may in fact be more of a 'generation gap' that motivates both young women *and* men to participate in a movement which provides a means for them to challenge the legacy of the past generation: an increasingly dysfunctional state in practical terms, but with paradoxically increasing ideological influence that constrains their lives in ways unknown by their parents or grandparents. As Pettigrew has previously argued, "Participation in the Maoists enables village youth to realign themselves in relation to the discourse of modernity, which up until now has entirely focused on the town." (2003). For many rural individuals who see themselves as marginal to the "good and proper life" (McHugh 2001:114) enjoyed by those with the money to re-locate to urban areas, the Maoists' expressions of complex ideological notions in local idiom are compelling, as are other localized strategies which do not assume previous political knowledge, or even literacy. In this regard, becoming a Maoist may provide a powerful alternative national identity within a 'modern' Nepal for those who have otherwise felt excluded from such national imaginings.

Along these lines, Sharma and Prasain (2004) suggest that the CPN(M)'s focus on local knowledge and action is the key to their success. This argument signals an important interpretive shift away from trying to identify ethnicity and gender as isolated motivating factors and instead dwells on locality, which may mirror more closely Maoist recruitment strategies (see Shneiderman and Turin 2004 for a detailed discussion of local strategies). In our analysis, women are likely to join the Maoists for similarly diverse reasons as men within their own communities. The notion that women and men join revolutionary movements for similar reasons is supported by the literature on female combatants in Central America. Karen Kampwirth, whose work has previously been mentioned, states that in almost all cases women joined for the same reasons as men from their own community (2002). Disparities between urban and rural standards of living, lack of opportunities and frustration with class and caste-based discrimination may be more pertinent than gender-specific grievances. This insight provides an alternative to approaches that overemphasize essentialized gender or ethnic identities as factors in women's participation, a move which obscures the actual power of Maoist ideology—and both women's and men's real attraction to it. It is important to recall that in traditional Marxist formulations, the 'woman question' is always secondary to class liberation, and many women who support the Maoist ideological platform are likely to cite class issues as their primary motivation.

Political and personal factors clearly interact in complex and individualized ways to motivate women's action. It is widely recognized that excessive violence by the security forces has prompted many to take up arms. Intimidation by the Maoists and forced recruitment are other important dynamics at play. For some women, membership in political mass organisations has led to violent police repression, leading them in turn to join the CPN(M)'s military wing. Two female cadres interviewed by Pettigrew reported that membership in Maoist student organisations prompted their arrest, and their subsequent torture in custody led them to join the People's Liberation Army. The role of female torture in prompting women to become militants within the context of the 'people's war' needs further investigation. Literature from Latin America and elsewhere shows that torture is often gender-specific, with the torture of women systematically directed at their female sexual identity through rape and other forms of sexual harassment. Revenge can also be an important motivating factor for women whose kin have been killed by state security forces.

IX. Conclusions

The observations in this article are preliminary. Further ethnographic work on all aspects of the situation are required, and should include research on the diverse experiences and motivations of women at different levels and positions within the Maoist movement; party structure and gender policy and the 'fit' or disjunctures between rhetoric and practice; the psychological impact of militarisation for civilian women; the experience of military service for guerrilla women and the anxieties and fears of the wives and family members of the security forces. Future research can be enhanced by incorporating comparative perspectives that draw on the existing body of work on other insurgencies in South Asia as well as in other parts of the world.

Overall, the emerging picture of Maoist attitudes towards gender relations is contradictory. Despite an ideological commitment to gender equality, there is a clear gap between rhetoric and practice. The positions of the male leadership on women's issues remain largely unstated, and their commitment to bettering women's positions unclear. While senior Maoist women acknowledge some successes, they remain critical of their party's record. It appears that women's liberation is subsumed by the overriding Maoist goal of class struggle, and that in their devotion to this goal, the Maoists in some ways continue to replicate hegemonic Hindu attitudes towards women. Despite claims to have transformed such institutions as marriage, there are widespread intimations that marriage is used as a means of controlling female cadres. Conversely, the lack of attention given to recruiting married women can be considered a reinscription of traditional divisions of labor, as Maoists require householder women to provide a village-based support network. While informants interviewed by the authors state that they joined the movement in search of more egalitarian gender relations, Maoist women face a complex set of struggles within a party whose understanding of their past, and commitment to their future, is incomplete and ambivalent. The 'People's War' has certainly precipitated new experiences for Nepali women of all backgrounds, whether in learning to use guns for combatant women, or negotiating the fine line of safety between state forces and the Maoists for civilian women. While such shifts cannot be claimed entirely as the intentional achievements of Maoist policy, it is clear that on the individual level of

embodied practice they have introduced women to potentially transformative possibilities.

Bibliography

Amnesty International (2002a) *Nepal: A Deepening Human Rights Crisis.* AI INDEX: ASA 31/072/2002.
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA310722002?open&of=ENG-NPL>

Amnesty International (2002b) *Nepal: A Spiralling Human Rights Crisis.* AI INDEX: ASA 31/016/2002.
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA310162002?open&of=ENG-NPL>

Amnesty International (2003) *Nepal: Widespread "disappearances" in the context of armed conflict.* AI INDEX: ASA 31/045/2003.
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA310452003?open&of=ENG-NPL>

Bennett, Lynn (1983). *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles.* New York, Columbia University.

Cockburn, Cynthia (2001). "The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict and Political Violence". *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors?: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence.* Fiona C. Clark, ed. London, Zed Books**:** 13-29.

Des Chene, Mary (1998). "Fate, Domestic Authority, and Women's Wills". *Selves in Time and Place: Identities, Experience, and History in Nepal.* Dorothy Holland, ed. Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield**:** 19-50.

Gautam, Shobha (2001). *Women & Children in the Periphery of People's War.* Kathmandu, Institute of Human Rights Communication Nepal.

Gautam, Shobha, Amrita Banskota and Rita Manchanda (2003 [2001]). "Where There Are No Men: Women in The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal". *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal.* Deepak Thapa, ed. Kathmandu, Martin Chautari**:** 93-124.

Gellner, David, ed. (2003). *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences.* New Delhi, Social Science Press.

Gurung, Harka (2003). *Trident and Thunderbolt: Cultural Dynamics in Nepalese Politics.* Kathmandu: Social Science Baha.

Hoftun, Martin, William Raeper and John Whelpton (1999). *People Politics & Ideology: Democracy and Social Change in Nepal.* Kathmandu, Mandala Book Point.

Hutt, Michael, ed. (2004). *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion.* London, Hurst & Co.

Kampwirth, Karen (2002). *Women and Guerilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Karki, Arjun and David Seddon, eds. (2003). *The People's War in Nepal: Left Perspectives.* Delhi, Adroit Publishers.

Kipnis, Andrew (2003). "The Anthropology of Power and Maoism." *American Anthropologist* **105**(2): 278-288.

Leve, Lauren (2002). *"Bringing Women In": Development and Maoist Revolution in Nepal.* Seminar on the Maoist Movement in Nepal at the South Asia Conference, Madison, WI.

McHugh, Ernestine (2001). "Sliding, Shifting, and Re-drawing Boundaries." *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* **20**(1): 113-117.

Moser, Caroline O. N. and Fiona C. Clark (2001). "Introduction". *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors?: Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*. Caroline Moser and Fiona Clark (eds). London, Zed Books**:** 3-12.

Onesto, Li (2003 [1999]). "Report from the People's War in Nepal". *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*. Deepak Thapa, ed. Kathmandu, Martin Chautari**:** 151-179.

Onesto, Li (2003 [2000]). "Red Flag Flying on the Roof of the World". *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*. Deepak Thapa, ed. Kathmandu, Martin Chautari**:** 181-209.

Parvati, Comrade (2003a). "The Question of Women's Leadership in People's War in Nepal". *The Worker*.

Parvati, Comrade (2003b). "Women's Participation in the People's War". *The People's War in Nepal: Left Perspectives*. Arjun Karki and David Seddon (eds). Delhi: Adroit Press. 165-182.

Peries, S. (1998). *Metamorphosis of the Tamil Woman in the Nationalist War for Eelam*. Women in Conflict Zones Network Conference, Hendaya, Sri Lanka.

Pettigrew, Judith (2003). "Guns, Kinship, and Fear: Maoists among the Tamu-Mai (Gurungs)". *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences*. David Gellner, ed. New Delhi, Social Science Press**:** 305-325.

Pettigrew, Judith (2004). "Living between the Maoists and the Army in rural Nepal". *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*. Michael Hutt, ed. London, Hurst & Co**.**

SAP-Nepal, ed. (2001). *Quest for Peace*. Kathmandu, SAP-Nepal.

Shakya, Sujita (2003). "The Maoist Movement in Nepal: An Analysis from the Women's Perspective". *The People's War in Nepal: Left Perspectives*. Arjun Karki and David Seddon (eds). Delhi: Adroit Press. 375-404.

Sharma, Mandira and Dinesh Prasain (2004). "Gendered Dimensions of the People's War: Some Reflections on the Experiences of Rural Women". *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*. Michael Hutt, ed. London, Hurst & Co**:** 151-164.

Shneiderman, Sara and Mark Turin (2004). "The Path to Jansarkar in Dolakha District: Towards an Ethnography of the Maoist Movement". *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*. Michael Hutt, ed. London, Hurst & Co**:** 77-109.

Tamang, Seira (2002). "The Politics of 'developing Nepali women'". *State of Nepal*. Kanak Mani Dixit and Shastri Ramachandaran (eds). Kathmandu, Himal Books**:** 161-175.

Thapa, Deepak (2001). "Day of the Maoist". *Himal South Asian.* **14:** 4-21.

Thapa, Deepak, ed. (2003). *Understanding the Maoist Movement of Nepal*. Kathmandu, Martin Chautari.

Thapa, Deepak with Bandita Sijapati (2003). *A Kingdom Under Siege: Nepal's Maoist Insurgency, 1996 to 2003*. Kathmandu, the printhouse.

Thapa, Manjushree (2003). "Girls in Nepal's Maoist War". *Himal South Asian.* **16:** 49-55.

Uprety, Aruna (2003). "Letter to the Maoist Leadership on Women's Day". *Nepali Times*. Kathmandu.