Out of the Barrel of a Gun: Maoism and Women’s Political Participation in Post-Conflict Nepal

by

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ANWA</td>
<td>All Nepal Women’s Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>BPA</td>
<td>Beijing Platform for Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Constituent Assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women</td>
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<td>CPN</td>
<td>Communist Party of Nepal</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPN (M)</td>
<td>Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPN (ML)</td>
<td>Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>First Past the Post</td>
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<td>GAD</td>
<td>Gender and Development</td>
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<td>MA</td>
<td>Muluki Ain</td>
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<td>NC</td>
<td>Nepali Congress</td>
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<td>NDP</td>
<td>Rastriya Prajatantra Party (National Democratic Party)</td>
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<td>PR</td>
<td>Proportional Representation</td>
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<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
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<td>ULF</td>
<td>United Leftist Front</td>
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<td>UML</td>
<td>Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninists)</td>
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INTRODUCTION

“Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”
Mao Zedong, 1938

In July 2010, Hisila Yami, the highest ranking female Maoist in the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M), told me over tea that “we need to make sure that whatever gains we made for women during the People’s War are now held onto.”¹ She insisted that the People’s War in Nepal (1996-2006) “liberated the women” and she urged the Nepalese to not let this liberation fade. In further conversations with both her and with other Maoist women in Nepal’s Constituent Assembly (CA), it became evident that other female Maoists shared Yami’s position.² The Maoists believed that their party had advanced the position of women in Nepali society. They claimed that the People’s War had created new avenues for women to voice their political concerns, new spaces for women to participate in public life, and new forums for women to achieve empowerment.

Hisila Yami’s intent to “hold on to this liberation” that women had gained from their involvement in the People’s War implicitly reflects a fear of succumbing to a well-documented trend regarding women’s experiences in post-conflict states.³ During the course of a revolution, women often experience various forms of empowerment through their direct or indirect involvement in revolutionary efforts. This empowerment occurs either through increased participation in public life or

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¹ Unless specified, I will be using women’s real names, not pseudonyms. This is how the women have asked to be identified. Hisila Yami, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 2 July 2010, Kathmandu.
² The Constituent Assembly (CA) is Nepal’s current parliamentary body. In 2008, they were given the task to write Nepal’s new constitution.
³ Yami, interview by author.
through greater responsibility within domestic life. All too often, however, the return
to peace forces a transition back to the pre-conflict “gender status quo.” Despite the
nontraditional role assumed by women during the conflict, issues of gender equality
are consistently neglected in the immediate post-conflict political conversations. The
result is that women often have no role in post-conflict governments. This trend is
observable across the globe, from Africa to Latin America to Asia. Particularly in
South Asia, women critically assisted and supported the revolutionary efforts in
Kashmir, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. However, in the post-conflict years,
women were systematically denied participation at the elite policy-making level.

This thesis examines how Nepal fits into this pattern of women’s political
participation in post-conflict states. Considering women in the revolutionary conflict
itself, estimates suggest that between thirty and forty percent of the Maoist guerilla
forces were women. Beyond this figure, women throughout mid-western Nepal were
actively involved in mobilizing the public for support of the insurgency by holding
district committee meetings and campaigning for the party. The war also had
significant effects on women who did not support the insurgency. For example, when
the husbands, fathers, or brothers of women fled their homes to avoid the Maoists,
women were left to take on typically male roles, including increased responsibility
with finances and agriculture. However, unlike the gender paradigm in so many post-

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5 Ibid.
conflict states, women in Nepal have been included in the post-conflict government. The Constituent Assembly currently has 197 female members out of 601 total seats, nearly one-third of the total. In this thesis, I will explore why Nepal appears to be an exception to the historical trend of female marginalization in post-conflict governments.

When I left for Kathmandu in June 2010, I did not know what path my research would take. What I did know was that I was fascinated by Nepal’s recent political history. I was intrigued by what it meant to be a Maoist in contemporary Nepal, especially given that the Maoist party—a party that is committed to ultimately achieving statelessness—was democratically elected as the majority party in the 2008 elections. Given Nepal’s own history of excluding women in government and trends typical of post-conflict nations, I was curious to know why so many women were elected to the Constituent Assembly (CA). Most importantly, I was eager to learn about women’s experience within the CA. Over the course of eight weeks in Kathmandu and with the help of a wonderful translator, I interviewed ten female CA members. Of these women, five were CPN (M) members, three were Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninists: UML) members, one was a Nepali Congress (NC) member, and one was a National Democratic Party (NDP) member. I also conducted numerous interviews with women who were not CA members. I met with three women who had been victimized by the Maoists during the war, one female combatant forced to fight with the Maoists, and one female lawyer working primarily with female widows from the war. Furthermore, I had many informal conversations with female widows at the first International Conference on
Widowhood, I spoke with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) working with female victims of war, and I attended a conference on the challenges of peace building in Nepal.

What emerged from these conversations was a complex web of how Nepali women understand the Maoist party, how they interpret the political changes that have manifested in Nepal, and how they perceive their own role as a woman engaged in the political sphere of Nepal. One might think that there would be a neat and predictable mapping of party affiliation with favorable or unfavorable opinion about the Maoists. That, however, was not the case. Instead, these conversations represented a diverse range of opinions. Often Maoist women were critical of their own party’s failure to fully address gender issues, while NC and UML women often spoke positively of the Maoist party’s initiatives to help expand women’s participation in the CA. My attempt to find a pattern from these conversations has led me to directly confront the role of the Maoist party in post-conflict Nepal and its intricate relationship to women’s political experience.

Maoism embraces a wide array of political ideology. Nepali Maoism has roots in both the traditional ideas of Marxism and Leninism as well as Mao Zedong’s creative interpretation of Marxism-Leninism for the Chinese context.\(^8\) Like Marxism and Leninism, the ultimate goal of Nepali Maoists is a stateless, classless society. However, like Mao Zedong, Nepali Maoists understand the revolution as a two-step process, the first step being a transition to a new democratic society and the second step as a transition to a socialist state. Nepali Maoists employed Mao’s vision of a

People’s War to achieve these transitions. Mao’s People’s War advocated a guerilla warfare concept that mobilized the rural peasantry as a means to revolt against the dominant feudal and semi-colonial relations. Similar to Mao, Nepali Maoists considered the rural peasantry of Nepal to be the force of the Maoist movement.

The Maoist party emerged in Nepal largely as a response to the failures of the 1990 constitution and constitution writing process to reflect Nepal’s diverse background. The CPN (M) proclaimed that the 1990 constitution writing process reflected the same elitist influence that existed before the 1990 movement. Additionally, the CPN (M) was disenchanted by the discriminatory elements of the new constitution. In 1996, the Maoists initiated the People’s War in the mid-western districts in Nepal. The ten-year long insurgency was fought largely in the mid-western, rural districts of Nepal. Estimates suggest that from 1996-2006, anywhere from 10,000 to 15,000 people were killed. Accounts of rape and targeted violence against higher castes, as well as reports of looting and arson from the war years are numerous. As a result, the Maoists are typically despised by non-Maoists. The fact that the Maoist party is now the majority party, holding 220 of the 601 seats in the CA, has caused many non-Maoists to further resent the party.

The decade long Maoist insurgency culminated in the signing of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, ending over 240 years of monarchal rule and marking the beginning of the transition to a federal republic. The Seven Party

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11 I was confronted with these sentiments nearly daily. When I was en route to one of my first interviews at the Maoist headquarters in Kathmandu, my translator and I stopped to ask for directions. Person after person led us in the wrong direction. It was only after multiple attempts that we realized they were purposely sending us in the opposite direction, thinking that we ourselves were Maoists.
Alliance (SPA), a coalition of seven political parties in Nepal, negotiated a twelve-point agreement with the Maoist party to end the insurgency, dethrone the king, and reestablish a democratic process in Nepal. In 2006, the SPA and the leaders of the Maoist party drafted an interim constitution that established the CA as Nepal’s legislative branch and as responsible for drafting Nepal’s new constitution. Since 2008, the CA has been drafting Nepal’s new constitution. Elections were delayed twice and finally held in April 2008. The CA abolished the monarchy officially in May 2008 and declared Nepal a Federal Democratic Republic with the president as the head of state. Of the 601 members in the CA, 240 members were elected by direct popular vote (First Past the Post: FPTP), 335 were elected by proportional representation (PR), and 26 were appointed by the Council of Ministers.

Gender issues were prominent in the post-conflict discussions. The Interim Constitution of Nepal, written by both the CPN (M) and the SPA, set a gender quota at 33% for women’s representation in the CA. Further, in 2007 the CPN (M) and the

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12 The SPA was comprised of members Nepali Congress, Nepali Congress (Democrat), UML, Nepal Workers and Peasants Party, Nepal Goodwill Party, ULF, and People’s Front. Sten T. Brand, "Communicating the Constituent Assembly Election in Nepal" (Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2008), p. 3.
13 After the CA voted to make Nepal a federal republic, Ram Baran Yadav was elected as the first President of Nepal in July 2008. In August of 2008, Prachanda was elected prime minister of Nepal. He resigned in May of 2009, at which point Madhav Kumar Nepal (UML) was nominated as the prime minister. Madhav Kumar Nepal announced his resignation as Prime Minister on June 30, 2010. On 3 February 2011, after seven months of political gridlock in which no candidate could muster enough votes to be elected as Prime Minister, Jhala Nath Khanal was elected as Prime Minister by the CA.
14 Originally set to be completed by May 2010, this deadline has been extended to May 2011 in response to the political stalemate and slow progress that had been made.
15 Elections were postponed because of internal disputes. The Maoist party withdrew from the interim government after the other parties refused to agree to their demands for a pre-election proclamation of a republic and a fully proportional representation in the assembly. I will take this issue up in the second chapter. The Maoist party reentered the government shortly thereafter but public sentiment toward them was low.
16 It also mandated proportional representation of different ethnic groups, including Dalits, Madhesis, indigenous groups, and other historically excluded groups Dalits are members of the historical “untouchable” caste. Madhesis are the indigenous people from the southern Terai region of Nepal.
SPA drafted the Constituent Assembly Member Election Act that mandated that women constitute fifty percent of candidates from each ethnic group. Both of these changes resulted in a significant change in the makeup of Nepal’s decision-making body. The impetus, however, behind these significant legislative changes has not garnered much scholarly attention. As a result, the larger questions remain unanswered: how has Nepal been able to avoid the gender trend typical of post-conflict states? How has it been able to foster such large political participation of women in the CA? And equally important, what has women’s experience within the CA been?

There is a striking gap in the literature regarding women’s political participation in post-conflict Nepal. Most of the existing literature has focused primarily on tracing women’s involvement in the insurgency itself and its effects on gender roles in various spheres of society. Few scholars have attempted to explore the underlying reasons why women’s political participation in post-conflict Nepal is so significant, nor have they analyzed the greater consequences of women’s participation in the CA. Further, few scholars have sought to untangle the complicated relationship between Maoism and women’s political participation in post-conflict Nepal. The notable exceptions are Seira Tamang, and Rita Manchanda, both scholars who have written extensively on the larger effects of the Maoist party.

17 These groups included Dalits, Madhesis, and other indigenous groups. Rita Manchanda, "Nepali Women Seize the New Political Dawn: Resisting Marginalisation after Ten Years of War," (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2010).
on women in post-conflict Nepal. Tamang focuses on how the Maoist party has become complicit with the Nepali state apparatus by facilitating the homogenization of identities and the creation of a hegemonic “Nepali woman.” Manchanda focuses on the effects of the authoritarian, male-dominated nature of the Maoist party on polarizing women’s participation in the CA. However, despite Tamang and Manchanda’s valuable contribution, the puzzle remains unsolved. No scholars have looked at how the Maoist party’s ideological commitment to women’s issues and their urge for the adoption of a PR and gender quota system has shaped women’s political participation. My project attempts to fill this gap.

My central claim is two-fold. First, I contend that the Maoist party of Nepal has been able to create new structural spaces for women’s participation in politics, namely the Constituent Assembly. I argue that the party’s support for the adoption of both a gender quota system and a proportional representation (PR) system in the CA elections as well as the party’s ideological commitment to women’s issues more broadly facilitated female participation at the highest tier political level in Nepal. It was these principles that allowed Nepal to avoid the gender trend typical of post-conflict states. Second, I propose that women have been able to express their agency within the CA, even as they continue to battle against patriarchal attitudes.

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19 The political scientist Mahendra Lawoti has also produced a cost-benefit analysis of the People’s War that details the insurgency’s positive and negative consequences. However, he does not focus on the insurgency’s effects on women’s political participation. *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal*, ed. Mahendra Lawoti and Anup K. Pahari (London: Routledge, 2010).


21 Manchanda argues that the institutional male-dominated hierarchy in the party has challenged women’s ability to voice their concerns in the CA. Manchanda, "Nepali Women Seize the New Political Dawn: Resisting Marginalisation after Ten Years of War," p. 12.

22 This concept of agency will be explored more fully in the third chapter. My focus on women’s agency evolves out of a long history of women’s empowerment and autonomy studies. I employ an
Paradoxically, often as a response to gender discrimination and inequities within the CA, women have been able to recognize their individual role, the collective ability of women, and the potential long-term significance of their position in a post-conflict government.

This thesis will add to the literature on post-conflict studies in three important ways. First, my analysis of the specific factors that contributed to women’s increased participation in post-conflict politics adds a causal argument to why Nepal has been successful in including women in the post-war government. Recognizing exactly the circumstances that have made Nepal unique is important for an understanding of how Nepal has defied typical gender trends in post-conflict states. Secondly, as the Maoist movement in India continues to grow, an in-depth analysis of Maoism in Nepal and its direct relation to gender roles in a post-conflict period is a highly valuable exercise. There are many similarities between the Indian Maoist uprisings and the Nepali movement and thus this work will contribute to a better understanding of the gender issue in the Indian Maoist movement. Finally, exploring what the female experience in the CA has been is important because it strengthens the argument for women’s inclusion into post-conflict governments. Although multiple studies have proven the advantage of having women included in post-conflict discussions, these studies are often ignored. Recognizing what women’s real experiences have been like in Nepal’s CA creates further incentive to include women in post-conflict governments.

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understanding of agency that conveys a sense of women working toward the pursuit of their own goals and desires, a sense of their own recognition of their role as both and individual, and a sense of their own ability to instigate change.

My claims in this thesis are based on critically analyzing women’s own testimony about the Maoist’s role in facilitating new spaces for women’s political participation. These testimonies are drawn from interviews that I conducted in June and July of 2010 through a translator, Ritika Adhikari. Although there were some concepts that were lost in translation, I have tried my best to remedy any errors. All interviews were digitally recorded, allowing Ritika and I to re-listen to them and make any clarifications if needed. I have tried to stick as closely as I could to the words that the women specifically used and to convey their tone and mannerisms in an attempt to emphasize the individuality of each woman and avoid painting an image of a singular Nepali woman.

Due to my own time constraints and women’s schedules, I only interviewed ten CA members. While these interviews were incredibly informative and interesting, they strictly reflect these women’s individual perspectives. I do not aim to illustrate their perceptions as universal claims, nor do I assume that the women of Nepal’s CA have a coherent group identity. Rather, I attempt to carefully construct individualized portraits of the women who I interviewed. In doing so, I heed feminist calls to avoid creating a monolith Third World woman.24 With that said, there are nevertheless interesting and valuable conclusions that can be drawn from these conversations that are relevant to other women’s experiences in the CA. These conversations offer a glimpse into a world that few are familiar with. I had the rare opportunity to meet with these women—often in their own homes and offices and always over tea—and hear their unique story. They shared with me their own understanding of their role in

politics, their hope for the country’s political future, and their deep commitment to improving the status of women in Nepal. This project thus offers a unique chance to understand what it means to be a female parliament member in a Maoist led government in this rare moment in history.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, I expand on what Maoism means and its different historical and geographical contexts. This chapter begins with a discussion of Maoism in China under Mao Zedong. I examine the ways in which Maoism represented a departure from strict Marxist-Leninist theory by identifying the key components and factors of Maoism. I then examine how and why Maoism has been so popular in other South Asian nations and how it has evolved from its original Chinese context. Finally, I address what Maoism in Nepal entails. I examine how Maoism developed in Nepal, why it was popular, and how it became a movement with such strength.

In the second chapter, I explore women’s political participation in the Nepali state. I start with an analysis of women’s historical lack of political participation in the decades leading up to the 1990 People’s Movement for Democracy. I then discuss women’s absence in politics in the new Nepali Congress (NC) led government of the 1990s. I contend that the significant increase in women’s political participation can be attributed to the effort of the Maoist party to include women in the post-conflict government. The Maoist party’s ideological commitment to women’s issues and their support for a PR system and gender quotas was the defining factor in creating an unprecedented avenue for women’s participation in politics.
In the third chapter, I contend that the CA has emerged as a forum where women have been able to express their agency. Often, in response to women’s frustrations with the process, such as the lack of female leadership and continuing gender discrimination across parties, women have been able to articulate their demands and recognize the significance their role. This chapter is critical to the overarching aim of this thesis because it explores the real consequences of women’s participation in the CA.

Together, these chapters give new meaning to Mao Zedong’s famous slogan, “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” Maoism in Nepal helped to create not just the physical space (the CA) for women to participate in politics, but it also created a forum in which women have been able to express their own agency. Thus, the Maoist movement has been able to create both a very concrete sense of political power (women’s position in the CA) as well as a more abstract understanding of political power (women’s own agency in the CA). Maoism has facilitated the inclusion of women into the post-conflict political structure and in turn, this structure has become a space for women to actively express their own agency in the political sphere.

The Maoist headquarters in Kathmandu is an ambiguous building. Its concrete structure, pastel colored walls, and gravel driveway all blend into the cityscape of Kathmandu. However upon closer look, one defining characteristic makes the building distinct. There is a red banner displaying the faces of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. It hangs by the doorway of the building, welcoming visitors as they enter the building. Below the banner is a map of Nepal with the leader of the Maoist party Pushpa Kamal Dahal (commonly known as Prachanda) raising his fist towards the classic hammer and sickle emblem.

These two hangings took me off guard. There was something about seeing these iconic faces displayed prominently on the outside of the building that made me instantly acknowledge how the Nepali Maoists understand their relationship to traditional communist leaders. The starkness of the bright banner against such an otherwise traditional Nepali building allowed me to draw this connection in a way that I had failed to fully do so before. “Wow,” I thought to myself, “they really think of themselves as Communists.” This simple realization sparked an infinite list of questions. How do the Maoists understand Maoism in relation to Marxism and Leninism? What do they see as the role of the state? How do they understand the economic development of Nepal? How can they be Maoists but yet participate in the construction of a new, democratic constitution? Underlying all of these questions, I begged to know what it meant to be a Maoist in contemporary Nepal.
Answering these questions requires understanding the evolution of Maoism from its origins in China to its development in other nations. The term “Maoism” has many connotations that vary not only from context to context, but like any idea, also change from person to person. For some, Maoism may spark images of the Great Leap Forward and of the Cultural Revolution. Others may think of the Naxalite uprising in India or the Shining Path revolution in Peru. The goal of this chapter is to provide the historical context of Maoism to enable an informed discussion of what Maoism means in contemporary Nepal.

This chapter is comprised of three sections. The first section of this chapter untangles what Maoism originally encompassed in China. I explore both the ways in which Maoism was a continuation of Marxism and Leninism and also the ways in which Maoism departed from Marxism and Leninism. In the second part of this chapter, I consider both why Maoist thought appealed to other countries and how it developed. An understanding of the Nepali Maoist movement would be incomplete if it did not locate it within the larger history of Maoist uprisings worldwide. I have chosen to focus specifically on the Peruvian and Indian Maoist uprisings because both movements had a significant role in the formation of the Nepali Maoist party. In the third and final part of this chapter, I examine how Maoism developed in Nepal. What does Maoism mean within the Nepali context? What aspects of Maoism in the Chinese context were particularly appealing in Nepal? What were the circumstances that led to the evolution of Maoism in Nepal? I highlight the most important ideological components of Maoism and frame the development of the Maoist movement within Nepal’s larger political history.
The First Seeds of Maoism:

Understanding Maoism’s relationship to the thought of Marx and Lenin is critical to understanding Maoism at large, but it is also one of the more controversial aspects of the ideology. Although most historians accept that Mao interpreted Marxism for the Chinese context, other scholars go beyond this basic presumption and instead insist that Mao’s interpretation of Marxism-Leninism represents an entirely new form of Marxism. These scholars claim that Mao’s contribution takes Marxism-Leninism to a “new and higher stage of universally valid revolutionary theory.”¹ The historian Isaac Deutscher asserts that Mao “stands on the shoulders of Lenin” as firmly as Lenin stands on the shoulders of Marx.² The Chinese communists also agree with this line of thought, arguing that Mao’s thought represents a “completely new, higher stage” of Marxism.³ This ambiguous and often convoluted relationship between Maoism’s inherent connection to Marxism-Leninism is made all the more vague because often Mao’s departure from Marxism-Leninism was intentionally obscured by Maoist theoreticians. For instance, the historian Maurice Meisner argues that just as Lenin and his successors presented Leninism as orthodox Marxism, so do Maoists proclaim Maoism as traditional Marxism-Leninism as a means to validate Maoism. As a result, often the most “significant departures, innovations, and revisions [of Marxism-Leninism] tend to be obscured by the use of orthodox ideological formulae, by the psychological, intellectual, and political needs

to reaffirm the tie to the inherited revolutionary tradition.”

However, untangling this ambiguity is critical to understanding what Maoism encompassed. In this section, I will illustrate the ways in which Mao remained true to Marxist-Leninist principles and more importantly, where he departed from them.

Early in his political thought, Mao insisted that Marxism-Leninism must be interpreted for the specificities and uniqueness of China. In a 1942 speech, he stated that:

“If we have only read this theory [Marxism-Leninism] and have not used it as a basis for research in historical and revolutionary actuality, have not created a theory in accordance with China’s real necessities, a theory that is our own and of specific nature, then it would be irresponsible to call ourselves Marxist theoreticians.”

Both Marx and Lenin had anticipated that if Marxism were to be incorporated in China, it would require adjusting the ideology for the unique conditions of China. Marx speculated that the relationship between Chinese socialism and European socialism would be similar to Chinese philosophy and Hegelian philosophy. Similarly, Lenin insisted that the task of applying Communist theory and practice to “conditions in which the bulk of the population are peasants, and in which the task is to wage a struggle against medieval survivals and not against capitalism,” would require repeated changes to traditional Marxism. China was a large, semi-colonial, semi-feudal country. Economically, it was far more backward than czarist Russia in 1917. Its working class made up less than one percent of the total population, whereas

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7 Ibid.
the overwhelming majority were peasants. This combination of factors was thus bound to make any adoption of Marxism-Leninism in China look vastly different from how Marxism-Leninism evolved in Europe.

Mao sought to create an ideology that drew from the framework of Marx and Lenin but that was in strict accordance with China’s unique needs. He understood his relation to Marxism-Leninism as the distinction between *theory* and *thought*. This dualism is seen in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) constitution, adopted at the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969:

“Communist Party of China takes Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-Tung Thought as the theoretical basis guiding its thinking. Mao Tse-Tung thought is Marxism-Leninism of the era in which imperialism is heading for total collapse and socialism is advancing world-wide victory…. Comrade Mao Tse-Tung has integrated the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of revolution.”

This distinction between the universal truth (the theory) of Marxism-Leninism and the concrete practice of revolution (his own thought) represents the crux of how Mao perceived his relationship to Marxism and Leninism. Maoism in China integrated the universal truths of Marxism-Leninism with Mao’s own thought that emphasized the cultural and historical uniqueness of China. This distinction between theory and thought can also be conceived of as the difference between the pure ideology of Marxism and the practical ideology of Mao. The historian Franz Schurmann defines a pure ideology as a “set of ideas designed to give the individual a unified and conscious worldview” whereas practical ideology was a “set of ideas designed to give

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the individual rational instruments for action.”

Maoism was a combination of both the pure ideology (theory) of Marxism-Leninism and his own practical ideology (thought) that reflected the uniqueness of China’s history, culture, and economic conditions.

Mao welcomed the universally true principles that Marx and Lenin articulated. In a speech from 1942, Mao stated that “Marxism-Leninism is the theory that Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin created on the basis of actual fact, and it consists of general conclusions derived from historical and revolutionary experience.” The most important “general conclusion” was the idea of class struggle and thus, the traditional Marxist understanding of class struggle comprised the essence of the Chinese Communist worldview. The Chinese Communists held consistently that all conflict, whether internal or external to China, revolved around class. Similar to Marx and Lenin, Mao held that a manifest polarization exists at all times between progressive and reactionary forces in the world and that this struggle forms the foundation for all human interactions. His thought was fundamentally grounded in the classical Marxist theory of class struggle.

However, Mao often interpreted classical Marxist ideas in his own unique way. Mao’s interpretation of Marxism-Leninism is referred to as Mao’s thought. For example, a major difference between Mao’s method of understanding classes and that

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10 Ibid., p. 22.
11 Ibid., p. 25.
12 Mao stated that he had learned something that could be described by only four Chinese words Jie Ji Dou Zheng or class struggle, and he then became committed to studying Marxism. Tang and Zuo, *Maoism and Chinese Culture*, p. 156.
13 Chiou, *Maoism in Action*. p. 27.
of Marx was that Mao did not relate class status to the mode of production.\footnote{Tang and Zuo, \textit{Maoism and Chinese Culture}, p. 161.} Instead, Mao emphasized the importance of the battle of one class against another. This emphasis is seen in his “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society,” in which Mao lists the six classes that comprised Chinese society: the landlord class, the comprador class (those whose interests are closely aligned with those of the imperialist in China), the middle bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie, the semi-proletariat, and the proletariat.\footnote{John Bryan Starr, \textit{Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). p. 99. He further classified these six classes into three main categories: ourselves (the industrial proletariat), our friends (petty bourgeoisie, left wing of the middle bourgeoisie, the semi-proletariat), and our enemies (warlords, landlords, bureaucrats, compradors, reactionary intellectuals, and the right wing middle bourgeoisie).} Marx, on the other hand, tended to describe a society where the formation of class rested heavily on one’s relation to the material means of production and property. For example, he wrote in \textit{The German Ideology} that, “industry and commerce, production and the exchange of the necessities of life, themselves determine distribution, the structure of the different social classes and are, in turn, determined by it as to the mode in which they are carried on.”\footnote{\textit{The Marx-Engels Reader}, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978). p. 134.} Starr suggests that Mao’s emphasis on class status rather than on one’s relation to the means of production and property was a result of the emphasis in Chinese culture on one’s class status in relation to other classes.\footnote{Starr frames these two determining factors of class as a materialist element (relating directly to one’s relation to the materials means of production) and as an existentialist element (relating more to the battle of one class against another class to form class consciousness. Starr, \textit{Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao}, p. 99.} He suggests that the Chinese tradition of weak property allowed for class status to change between generations, which
produced a strong sense of the importance of class status for Mao.¹⁸ The historians Zongli Tang and Bing Zuo similarly recognize that although Mao’s understanding of class illustrates his “inadequate understanding of Marxist and Leninist theories, it nevertheless reflected Mao’s attempt to apply Marxism to China’s reality.”¹⁹

Another prominent example of the influence of Chinese culture on Mao’s thought can be seen in Mao’s theory of contradictions. His Confucianist worldview led him to see the world as composed of countless contradictions. This idea, known as the theory of contradictions or the law of unity of opposites, is critical to Mao’s thought. Mao often explained this theory using Chinese proverbs:

“No contradictory aspect can exist in isolation. Without his opposite, each loses the conditions for its existence…. Without life, there would be no death; without death there would be no life. Without above there would be no below; without below there would be no above….”²⁰

Mao’s emphasis on the contradictory nature of the world grew to be a defining part of Maoist ideology. Mao’s emphasis on contradictions represents a stark departure from Marxism-Leninism. Whereas the Soviet ideologies claimed that a socialist society is characterized both economically by planning and politically by its moral-political unity and the leading role of the Party, these aspects were largely unmentioned in Mao’s thought. Mao insisted instead that even when building socialism, a multitude of conflicts would exist. He acknowledged that contradictions between the working class and the peasantry, between workers and intellectuals, and between the working

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¹⁸ For example, a common myth was that a family could go from peasants to officialdom and back to peasants within five generations. As a result, Mao was less concerned with the material aspect of class, as this tended to fluctuate, but more concerned with class status against other classes, as this defined one’s position in society.


class and other sections of the working people would inevitably arise.\textsuperscript{21} However, rather than bemoan such contradictions, Mao welcomed them. Out of this thought grew his famous slogan: “Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.”\textsuperscript{22}

Mao’s insistence on the omnipresence of contradictions and class struggle underlined all aspects of his thought. The most apparent influence of Mao’s understanding of continuous struggle can be seen in his commitment to a revolution in stages. For Mao, a singular revolution would never be enough because he recognized that class enemies and class struggle would always be present. Instead, Mao proposed a broad vision for the Chinese Revolution that differed vastly from the Soviet idea of revolution. He insisted that if the “present society of China is colonial, semi-colonial and semi-feudal in character, the process of China’s revolution must be divided into two steps.”\textsuperscript{23} He deemed his two-step revolution as the “New Revolution.”\textsuperscript{24}

The first step was to change the semi-colonial and semi-feudal nature of society into an independent democratic society. Mao proposed that this would take the form of a national revolution to overthrow foreign imperialist oppression.\textsuperscript{25} The national revolution was necessary to create a people’s republic that represented anti-imperialist interests.\textsuperscript{26} The national revolution would create a “new democracy” that

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 233.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{24} Mao Tse-Tung, \textit{China’s New Democracy} (Toronto: Progress Books, 1941). p. 16
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 217.
included members of all the classes.\textsuperscript{27} Mao insisted that it his new democratic revolution differed both from Marx’s idea of a revolution because it would “not destroy any section of capitalism which is capable of contributing to the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle.”\textsuperscript{28} He wanted to promote capitalism in the first stage of the revolution because capitalist ventures would help in the second phase of the revolution.

The second step in Mao’s plan for China’s revolution was to “push the revolution forward to establish a socialist society.”\textsuperscript{29} The new democratic government was only a “transitional…state to be adopted in the revolutions of the colonial and semi-colonial countries.”\textsuperscript{30} The ultimate political objective was the establishment of socialism in China. Mao insisted that although this “would take quite a long time,” the democratic revolution was a natural transition stage to socialism.\textsuperscript{31} “For the present period, new democracy, and for the future, socialism; these are two parts of an organic whole.”\textsuperscript{32} He understood the development of a democratic revolution as enabling the gradual, organic development into a socialist revolution. Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution as a means to prepare for the transition from a democratic government to communism.\textsuperscript{33} Mao was confident that a socialist revolution would evolve gradually from the new government.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 218.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Mao Tse Tse-Tung, \textit{China's New Democracy}. p. 17.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Leonhard, \textit{Three Faces of Marxism: The Political Concepts of Soviet Ideology, Maoism, and Humanist Marxism}. p. 218.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Mao hoped that the Cultural Revolution would quell any attempts to restore capitalism. Mao was not blind to the “constant dangers” that stemmed from ideas inherited by class societies, bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeois influences, the emergence of new bourgeois forces and the degeneration of some
\end{itemize}
Mao understood violence as playing a key role in both the transition to a democratic government and in the transition from a democratic government to a socialist government. Although the idea of violent revolution was not unique to Mao, his emphasis on the role of peasants in a violent revolution was. This became known as his idea of a “People’s War.” The People’s War was a guerilla warfare approach that mobilized the peasantry in rural areas. Eventually, the war would converge onto metropolitan areas. Mao commanded that “peasants are the main force in the revolution” and that “victory in the Chinese Revolution can be won first in the rural areas.”35 More so than his European communist predecessors, Mao held “revolutionary war to be the highest form of struggle” for resolving contradictions when they have developed to a stage between classes, nations, states, or political groups.36 Some scholars attribute this to the strong impressions that the Chinese Revolution of 1930s and 1940s had on Mao.37 Mao’s insistence upon guerilla warfare became critical to future Maoist movements.

Although the debate will continue on whether Maoism represented a Sinification of Marxism, or whether it represented more than just a modification of an existing idea, it is evident that Mao relied immensely on his own thought and his own ideas in the creation of his ideology. It was specific aspects of Mao’s thought—the People’s War model for revolution with an emphasis on the peasantry, the changed

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34 This idea of a two-pronged revolution has played a large role in the development of Maoist thought in Nepal. I will take up this discussion later in the chapter.


36 Ibid., p. 221. Leonard also suggests that this emphasis on a violent, revolutionary struggle against imperialists marks one way in which Mao departed from Marx, Engels and Lenin.

37 Ibid., p. 220.
concept of the Party, and perhaps above all, his unique understanding of a transition to socialism in stages—that appealed most to the Chinese, but also to other Third World nations that were plagued with similar colonial and feudal forces.

**Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom:**

In the years and decades following the Cultural Revolution in China, Maoism became a model for revolution for the Third World.\(^{38}\) Maoist uprisings spread to places as diverse as India, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Somalia, Guatemala, and Peru. Maoism appealed to many Third World nations that lacked the resources or conditions necessary for a Marxist revolution. A Marxist revolution demands a strong, unified industrial working class, while a Maoist revolution instead employs the nation’s peasantry in a guerrilla-warfare based approach. Third World nations that were plagued with various forms of imperialism and feudalism were naturally drawn to the tenets of Maoism because it appeared to offer an all-encompassing panacea their many economic and political woes.\(^{39}\)

In reality, however, Maoism did not have the remedying effecting that was hoped for in many Third World nations. Instead, Maoism often evolved into a bloody conflict that lasted for years, if not longer.\(^{40}\) One explanation for this pattern is that leaders failed to root the Maoist movement within the specific circumstances of the country and within the country’s particular history of revolution. Although the

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38 I have chosen to use the term Third World because it is the term that most of the literature that examines the growth Maoism in poor countries utilizes. I use the term Third World to demarcate these nations from more wealthy and developed nations, where Maoism did not have the same appeal. I have chosen to refrain from using the term “developing nations,” as this implies a positive progression that is neither the point that I wish to make, nor is it particularly relevant to my project.


People’s War was an integral part of Mao’s vision, it was based on the specific circumstances of China. Thomas Marks argues that Mao’s vision of a People’s War depended on two necessities: both the incorporation of the masses and convincing the masses of the broader aim of the People’s War. However, many countries lacked both a willing peasantry and peasantry committed to the larger aims of the People’s War. Lacking these two factors, the only realistic alternative to effect mobilization was terror. As a result, Maoism has become nearly synonymous with a violent, guerilla-warfare insurgency.

The Shining Path revolution in Peru exemplifies this violent, drawn-out revolution. Led by Abimael Guzman, the Shining Path promised to replace the state with Mao’s vision of a “New Democracy.” He insisted, in traditional Marxist fashion, that the trajectory of modernity could be written as a struggle between the proletariat and the reactionaries. Guzman located the Peruvian revolution within the Maoist tradition with his demand for a strong vanguard party comprised of peasants. “The peasantry,” he stated, “is by far the major portion of our fight.” Guzman promised to offer the rural peasants a way to fight against both U.S. imperialist forces and the dangerous effects of capitalism. Maoist thought initially appealed to the peasantry of Peru because it was an ideology that promised to return power to the peasantry in a fight against imperial and feudal forces.

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41 Ibid.
43 Ibid., p. 408.
44 Guzman chastised the Peruvian political party American Popular Revolutionary Alliance for separating the struggles against imperialism and capitalism, insisting that they must be fought together.
However, Guzman failed to adapt Maoism to the specific circumstances or conditions of Peru. The historian Orin Starn argues that the ideology of Shining Path “eschewed completely any appeal to indigenous or Andean roots.” He insists that Guzman illustrated a conspicuous indifference to Peruvian culture and traditions, placing himself within the line of Marxist ideologues and notably not identifying with Tupac Amaro II, Peru’s own leader of an uprising against Spanish rule. The combination of Guzman’s emphasis on incorporating Peru into the global struggle against capitalism and his lack of adapting Maoism for the conditions of Peru created a bloody warfront for many years. With a blind eye to Peru’s historical roots in revolution, the Shining Path relied on terror to create interest in the revolution. Often Guzman utilized terror to show what happens to traitors and as an instrument of vengeance against capitalists and imperialists. While the Shining Path was certainly wedded to a Maoist form of revolution, because it failed to adapt Maoism to the conditions of Peru, it evolved into a revolution utterly dependent on terror.

Unlike Maoism in Peru, the contemporary Maoist movement in India very much grew out of India’s rich history of left-wing uprisings. The Telangana peasant movement against feudal oppression from 1946-1951 marked the first significant communist uprising. In 1967, the Naxalite uprising began, drawing upon the legacy of the Telangana movement. The contemporary Communist Party of India (Maoist) is a continuity of the ultra-left wing radicalism that was articulated in the Naxalabar

45 Ibid., p. 408.
46 Starn argues that Guzman placed the Shining Path within the “long legacy of the imperial inscription into the preconceived categories and linear narrative of Western philosophy and science. Ibid., pp. 407, 399.
47 Thomas Marks contends that the primary reason the movement was able to continue to expand was because of its mechanisms of terror, recruitment, and infrastructure. Marks in The Shining Path of Peru, ed. David Scott Palmer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992)., p. 192.
movement. Today the terms “Naxalites” and “Maoists” are used almost interchangeably in India. Like the Telengana uprising, the Naxalite movement is also primarily an agrarian struggle against feudal exploitation that has led to massive anti-state confrontation. It had its origins in the Indian state of West Bengal in the debates within the Indian communist movement of the 1960s about the ‘correct’ strategic line to be taken in order to establish communism in India’s particular circumstances.

The current Maoist movement in India reflects a continuation of this history of uprising against feudal oppression. The Maoist movement in India today remains an ideological movement seeking to replace the semi-feudal state that marginalizes the poor, lower castes. Like the Telengana and Naxalite movement, the contemporary movement also seeks to mobilize the rural peasantry and workers. The scholar John Harris suggests that the Maoist movement in India has “reaffirmed the programmatic line of the Naxalite movement of 1970, committing to a people’s war for seizure of power whilst also stating that it will wage struggles against the Government of India’s plans to set up Special Economic Zones and against the displacement of tribal and forest dwellers by mining and other projects.” Their objective remains to mobilize against imperial forces that are reflected in India’s economic liberalization and the effects of globalization. Once they achieve Mao’s idea of a new people’s democratic state, the party proposes to redistribute land to poor peasants and landless laborers, to ensure land rights for women, to regulate wages and ensure that they are equal

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50 Ibid., p. 11.
between the sexes, and to guarantee the right to work and improved living conditions for peasants.\textsuperscript{51}

Although the fighting continues nearly daily with little sign of ceasing, scholars recognize that the Maoist party in India has “kept alive the agrarian demands of the rural poor through persistent but not always successful struggles.”\textsuperscript{52} The Maoists’ emphasis on armed resistance appealed to many of India’s historically oppressed people. More so than the Peruvian case, Maoism in India has drawn upon its own history of left-wing uprisings to mobilize peasants for a political cause. Both Peru and India—two countries that experienced vastly different forms of Maoist uprisings—were influential to the Nepali Maoist movement. Nepali Maoists have looked toward the Peruvian case as a model for the People’s War, while they have looked toward India’s success of an uprising rooted in the nation’s unique history. Prachanda and his comrades have also admired the growth of Maoism in India as a response to feudalism and as a response to the vast economic inequalities that plagued the country. An informed picture of Nepali Maoism would be incomplete without an appreciation of the development of Maoist thought in Peru and India.

\textbf{A Nepali Maoism:}

In a dimly lit room with bright blue walls, and pastel-flower curtains, I sat with Jayapuri Gharti, a member of both the CPN (M) and of Nepal’s CA. It was my first interview with a Maoist and, naturally, I was unsure of what to expect. At this

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 13.
\textsuperscript{52} Tilak D Gupta in Harris, "The Naxalite/Maoist Movement in India: A Review of Recent Literature," p. 13.
point, I had read about Maoism in books, journal articles, and newspapers, I had seen their graffiti on the building walls and I had heard stories of the incredible suffering that the Maoists had inflicted but yet, I had little idea what it would be like to sit and talk to a Maoist. However, Jayapuri’s kind smile and friendly laugh assuaged my anxiety. Her warm presence did not match the image of a Maoist that I had formed in my mind. Intrigued by this juxtaposition of a fierce Maoist warrior and the bubbly woman who sat before me, I asked Jayapuri how she understood what it meant to be a Maoist in contemporary Nepal.

She responded without hesitation: “Equality. Equality is everything that we care about.”53 She described a utopia where no people were hungry, where there was no discrimination between men and women and between the rich and the poor, and where each citizen had an equal opportunity to pursue an education. This was a common answer among the Maoist women with whom I interviewed. A commitment to equality appeared to be a driving theme in what it meant to be a Maoist. Although some women made reference to Marxism in Soviet Russia—for example, the Vice-Chairwoman of the CA and member of the CPN (M) Purna Kumari Subedi implied that Marxism was the predecessor to Maoism—most women simply held that Maoism represented a goal to eradicate unequal treatment in all forms.54

These answers struck me as too simplistic. They seemed to neglect defining aspects of what I understood to be Maoism. What about the People’s War? What

53 Jayapuri Gharti, interview by author, CA and CPN(M) member, Kathmandu (June 30, 2010).
54 Purna Kumari Subedi, interview by author, CA and CPN(M) member, Lalitpur (July 8, 2010). One thing that I found was that often more elite leaders at higher levels had a very different, more complex understanding of what Maoism was. For example, both Hisila Yami and Purna Kumari Subedi spoke at much more length about the historical precedent of Maoism. This discrepancy became apparent as I continued to interview women who were not as high up in the party’s hierarchy. Their answers were frequently less informed and paid less tribute to the historical predecessors.
about capitalism and Nepal’s dependency on foreign aid and tourism? What about statelessness and the contradictory element of a Maoist party being the majority party in a democratic movement for a new constitution? The goal of this section is to reconcile these different understandings of Maoism. I will discuss both the party’s ideological components, as well as how the party developed in Nepal.

Officially the Maoist party of Nepal declares Marxism-Leninism-Maoism as its ideology. It is clear, however, that Mao’s influence in Nepal is especially important. Like Maoism in China, the underlying goal of Maoism in Nepal is to overthrow the bureaucrat-capitalist class and state system, to uproot semi-feudalism, and to drive out imperial forces. The urge to decentralize power and place political power into the hands of the Nepali people stems from Nepal’s long history of monarchical rule. The Maoists insist that the monarchy created a semi-feudal and semi-colonial system of relations. The Maoists understand semi-feudalism to be the system of relations that the monarchy and the civil code promoted. Although Nepal has dismantled the monarchy, Yami insisted that the “feudal productive relation” still exists.55 Semi-colonialism is a more complicated idea that refers to India’s big brother relationship with Nepal. The Maoists insist that although Nepal was never formally colonized, Nepal’s dependent relationship on India is semi-colonial. They trace this relationship to 1815 when the rivalry between Nepal and the British East India Company came to a head over the princely states bordering Nepal and India. The Nepali people were defeated and the monarchy was forced to surrender large parts of

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55 Yami, Hisila, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 2 July 2010, Kathmandu.
Nepali territories to India under the Treaty of Sugauli.\textsuperscript{56} Prachanda argues that this treaty marked the point when Nepal became a semi-colonial country.\textsuperscript{57} The Nepali Maoists believe that before a transition to socialism can occur, the country must first fight against the feudal and colonial relations that pervade Nepal. This leads us to the way in which Maoism in Nepal is most closely aligned with the thought of Mao.

Similar to Mao, Nepali Maoists are committed to a revolution in stages. They embrace the first stage as necessary to overthrow feudal and imperial forces to create Mao’s vision of a New Democracy. Eventually, they predict that a second revolution will develop that will create a stateless society. Hisila Yami explained this trajectory to me. “Of course statelessness is our ultimate goal!” she exclaimed. “But it takes stages to reach statelessness.”\textsuperscript{58} She explained that the Maoists understand history in stages: feudalism to national capitalism and federalism to socialism to communism, and ultimately to statelessness.\textsuperscript{59} “We are at a transition stage from feudalism to federalism now.”\textsuperscript{60} Mao understood the development of a democracy as a transitional state that was necessary to foster the conditions for socialism. This is exactly how the Nepali Maoists envision the development of federalism in Nepal. Yami insisted that federalism will help to “decentralize power” to create the conditions for the development of a future revolution en route to statelessness.\textsuperscript{61}

The Maoist movement developed gradually in Nepal. Although officially the Maoist party was founded in 1994, the party has roots that reach back to the late

\textsuperscript{56} The ceded territory amounted to nearly one third of Nepal’s total land. Prachanda in Seddon and Karki, \textit{The People’s War in Nepal: Left Perspectives}, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Yami, interview by author.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
1940s. The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) was first established in Calcutta in 1949 and spread quickly through underground networks. During the 1950s and 1960s, King Mahendra’s regime was more concerned with tackling direct challenges from the Nepali Congress (NC), which allowed the CPN to flourish with little opposition from the state. In 1971, the CPN launched a violent movement against feudal landlords, who they deemed as “class enemies.” Although the government quickly crushed the opposition, the uprising marked the beginning of communist parties playing a more substantial role in Nepali politics. After the rebellion, the more moderate communists formed the Communist Party of Nepal-Marxist Leninist (CPN-ML) in 1978, while the more radical leaders of the 1971 rebellion established what they called the Communist Party of Nepal-Fourth Congress (CPN-Fourth Congress). Often scholars point toward the formation of the CPN-Fourth Congress as marking the beginning of the present day Maoists. Although in the years leading up to the 1990 struggle for democracy there were various fissures between different factions of communists, it became apparent that the communist parties were growing in force and popularity.

One of the most evident explanations for communism’s appeal in Nepal was that it was the only party that focused on the interests of minority groups. Nepal is a country made up of over one hundred ethno-cultural groups, a country where over ninety languages are spoken, and a country that spans the height of Mount Everest to the low plains of the Terai. However, for centuries these many voices from different

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., p. 42.
65 Ibid.
regions and cultures were not heard. Instead, elite Hindus (most namely the Brahmans) ruled Nepal. The lower-castes were not only ostracized from public life, but they were treated as second-class citizens with no significant rights. For a multicultural country as rich as Nepal, the emphasis that the communist parties placed on the rights of traditionally marginalized groups was a pillar in its growth. The non-communist parties, such as the Nepali Congress (NC) and the National Democratic Party (NDP) were associated with only traditional interests of elite groups and failed to espouse the concerns of the underprivileged. The communists monopolized the issues of minorities and thus attracted support from indigenous minorities, discriminated ethnic and caste groups, politically active youth, and women.

However, despite preaching the rights of the poor, communist parties often did not attract the support of the poorest, most disadvantaged members of society. For example, in the far-western, least developed regions of Nepal, the NC party typically had more support than communist parties. Although the communists espoused the issues of the poor, their support came largely from those that were not quite as impoverished as peasants and landless laborers. College students, public schoolteachers, and those with regular blue-collar jobs made up the majority of communist support. Similarly, although the communists raised the issues of minorities, women, and Dalits more than other parties, the communists often failed to represent what they preached. There were few minorities and few women in positions

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68 Often these groups were drawn to the political stability that parties like the NC promised. Ibid., p. 44.
69 Ibid.
of power in the communist parties’ leadership. However, although communist parties often failed to fully practice the policies of equal opportunity that they advocated, communism continued to grow throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Eventually, the call for liberation from traditional, discriminatory politics gave birth to the People’s Movement for democratic reform in 1990.

The struggle against the Panchayat system culminated in the 1990 People’s Movement for Democracy. Led by the United Leftist Front (ULF), a communist faction composed of moderate members of the Fourth Congress and other moderate communist groups, the movement aimed to overthrow the absolute monarchy and construct a constitutional democracy. Through large-scale protests and rallies, King Birendra submitted to the call for democracy, marking the end of absolute rule and the dismissal of the Panchayat system. Together with the Nepali Congress (NC), the ULF formed a constitution that King Birendra was forced to accept. The movement created a parliamentary monarchy, where the king acted as the head of government and the prime minister became the head of state.

However, despite the promising look of the People’s Movement, the constitution-writing process and the new constitution itself reflected the same elitist values that the movement had sought to overturn. For example, the new constitution promoted a majoritarian system that asserted that the majority (categorized by religion, language, class etc.) was entitled to a certain primacy in society and governmental decisions. Majoritarian systems often are successful in homogenous

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^70 Even as late as 1999, the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxists Leninists (CPN-UML), Nepal’s largest communist faction formed in 1991, had the highest number of elite caste males than any other political party. Ibid., p. 44.
and non-plural societies, but in multicultural societies they are a roadmap to political exclusion. They have been found to exclude non-dominant sociocultural groups and frequently lead to violent conflicts in multicultural societies. The majoritarian system established in 1990 disregarded minority issues, failed to recognize marginalized sociocultural groups on equal terms, and discriminated against women, indigenous nationalities and Madhesi. It did not address the cultural differences that existed in Nepal’s multicultural society, nor did it address any sort of protection of group rights. When power is concentrated in the majority, minority sociocultural groups not only lack power in the government, but they also are more prone to alienation, frustration, and disillusionment with the government. In addition, there were numerous articles in the Constitution’s that promoted male, elitist rights and exclude minority rights. Further, the constitution-drafting process itself was a small, select group of people representing the NC party, the ULF, and members representing the king’s wishes.

It was against this background that the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) emerged in 1994. There were three specific political conditions and shifts that allowed the CPN-M to separate themselves from other communist factions. First, there was a growing sense of disillusionment from the democratic process. The combination of young radical revolutionaries who were disillusioned by the political

71 Ibid., p. 118.
72 Ibid., p. 115.
73 The Constitution promulgated one language (Khas-Nepali, the native language of the dominant group), one religion (Hinduism, the religion of the dominant group), one community (the hill community, ignoring the Madhesi and other regional groups that descend from non-hill areas), and one culture (the culture surrounding the caste-hill Hindu elite males, often abbreviated as CHHEM). Further, the Constitution failed to acknowledge customary and personal laws of minority religions, such as Muslims and Buddhists, and it failed to recognize the land-holdings of indigenous peoples. Ibid., p. 122.
workings of the new constitution with a populace that was equally frustrated with Nepal’s traditional, hierarchical and classist society undeniably acted as catalyst for the Maoist uprising.\textsuperscript{74} Second, major political shifts and splits within communist factions helped to give rise to the Maoist party. Most importantly, two of the larger parties in the ULF, the Communist Party of Nepal-Marxist-Leninists (CPN-ML) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Marxists, united to become the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxists Leninist (CPN-UML).\textsuperscript{75} The UML evolved into a more moderate party, embracing both a constitutional monarchy and free-market policies.\textsuperscript{76} The UML has a large basis of support that thought that the party could win seats in the ballot box. However, this allowed for the leaders of the UML to ignore the demands, issues, and concerns raised by smaller, often more extreme communist factions.\textsuperscript{77} This shift was the origin of more conservative communist factions in Nepal and eventually served as a platform for the Maoists to define themselves against. Finally, amidst the growing popularity and strength of the UML, the more radical and often younger leaders separated themselves from more moderate, often older communist leaders. The 1994 split separated Prachanda and Baburan Bhattarai (younger and more radical leaders) from Nirmal Lama (an older, more moderate leader). This monumental split marked the birth of the Maoist movement in Nepal.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p. 46. The CPN-UML became the largest communist faction in Nepal by the end of 1990. I will refer to the CPN-UML from here on as simply the UML.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p. 45. In an interview with Newsweek, Prime Minister Man Mohan Adhikari, the first communist in the world to be elected to a head of government, went so far to admit that the communist label was just a trademark.
\textsuperscript{77} Although the CPN-UML did raise some objections to the 1990 Constitution, they did not follow up on these objections once they emerged as the dominant opposition party in the Parliament in 1991. Specifically, the CPN-UML was not concerned with winning the approval of Nepal’s women and thus, they did not prioritize women’s issues (such as rights to privacy, property, and education).
The combination of disillusionment from the democratic process, the growth of the more moderate UML, and the separation of more radical revolutionaries from the more conservative leaders were all important factors in the birth of the Maoist party. The Maoist party emerged as the voice of Nepal’s poor and marginalized, indigenous ethnic nationalities, lower castes, peasants, workers, students, and women.78

The Maoists initiated the Mao’s vision of a People’s War in 1996 as a revolution that would attempt to break from the feudal, elitist rule of Nepal.79 Modeled after Mao’s idea of a People’s War with the core of the revolution occurring in the rural areas, the People’s War in Nepal focused on mobilizing the peasantry (mostly farm laborers who did not own their own land) in the Western part of the country. Prachanda stressed that the People’s War was a good strategy for the unique conditions of Nepal, a poor country where more than 85% of the country lives in rural areas.80 “While Nepal is a small country, the mountainous region is very favorable for guerilla warfare, for a People’s War,” he contended.81 The People’s War in Nepal was also adopted to help form a new “type of revolutionary party.”82 The party envisioned the war as a “process of training the masses to run society in a new way, to train the

79 The growth of the Maoist insurgency is in itself a fascinating area of study. It defied several layers of conventional wisdom about politics and insurgencies. First, it grew despite the fact that Nepal had restored democracy in 1990, challenging the notion that democracy can settle conflicts nonviolently. Second, the insurgency gained momentum even experienced Nepal’s economic growth, expansion of development, and improvement in human development index. Third, the rise (and success) of a violent communist rebellion in the 21st century defies the historical precedent that suggests that the growth of communist ideology was over. *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal*, ed. Mahendra Lawoti and Anup K. Pahari (London: Routledge, 2010). p. 3.
80 Ibid.
82 Ibid., p. 97.
masses ideologically and politically in Marxism-Leninism-Maoism and to begin transforming themselves and society.”

Embarking on the People’s War meant not “only crushing the enemy—it means also changing ourselves, changing the masses.”

The Maoist movement in Nepal has become one of the most defining aspects of Nepal’s recent political history. Drawing upon Marx, Lenin, and Mao, the Maoist party of Nepal initiated a revolution that has forever altered the political spectrum of Nepal. Drawing upon the warfare techniques of Peru and the necessity to root the revolution in Nepal’s specific conditions as the Indian Maoists have done, the Maoist party has been remarkably successful. In 2006, the Maoist insurgency came to a halt with the signing of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the state and the party. In the 2008 CA elections, the Maoist party emerged as victorious, claiming over a third of all seats. In the next two chapters, I will explore how these sweeping changes have altered women’s relationship to the state.
II

A BREAK FROM THE PAST:
WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

*The New Yorker* reported on March 14th, 2011 that for eighteen days, millions of women gathered alongside men in Tahrir Square to protest the autocratic rule of Hosni Mubarak. Yet, despite their presence in the revolutionary struggle, women were denied participation in the immediate post-conflict political conversations. The post-revolution committee to revise the Egyptian constitution was all male. Nawal El Saadaw, an eighty-year-old Egyptian dissident and writer who has been called the godmother of Egyptian feminism, was both disappointed and angry. “The blood of the women killed in the revolution was still wet, and we were being betrayed,” she lamented.¹ Unfortunately, however, El Saadaw’s frustration is neither unique nor surprising. A well-documented trend exists in nearly all instances of women’s involvement in a revolutionary movement. Despite widespread female political participation during the revolution—from joining the violent struggle itself to mobilizing public support for the movement—when the revolution is over, women’s inclusion in political structures is neglected. In the immediate years following a conflict, women are largely absent at the highest political levels.

There are numerous studies that trace women’s experience in post-conflict states. This literature reveals that in the immediate post-conflict years, the nationalist project for peace and stability tends to undermine efforts to include women in the new government. The human rights activist and South Asian scholar Rita Manchanda

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argues that although revolutions often create dramatic shifts in gender roles, when the conflict ends, women’s issues and women’s participation in the new government are systematically excluded. Similarly, the historian Mary Ann Tetreault asserts that a model of revolution that draws on mobilizing women with the promise of freedom followed by a counterrevolution that re-imposes controls on women’s daily lives and productivity for the benefit of the male-dominated state is widely observable in the modern world. She argues that women’s status in the longer term in a post-conflict state depends less on the ideology of the new regime, but more on the needs of the new regime to assure a productive new state. Often leaders of various movements take the stance that the country’s first priority is to establish peace and stability rather than work for women’s issues. The result of this kind of thinking is that women are left out of the new political structures and “return to their status quo.”

This trend has been observed in many post-conflict states. In Kashmir, women were at the forefront during protests yet they were denied participation at the decision-making level. In Bangladesh, although gender issues were formally recognized within the political agenda of the Chittagon Hill Tracts, women’s issues always took a backseat to the question of the nation’s peace and security in the post-conflict years. In Sri Lanka, Manchanda argues that although the war opened up new spaces for women’s agency and leadership within changing family and community

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2 Ibid., p. 13.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
8 Women, War, and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency., p. 284.
structures, the post-war period witnessed the exclusion of women in parliament. In Afghanistan in the late 1970s, the implementation of feminist policies was part of the Afghan revolutionaries strategy for a new regime. However, the success of counter-attacks by dissident tribal groups caused the new regime to back off from their initial commitment to rural Afghan women in order to pacify tribal groups and preserve the new regime. In each of these cases, the nationalist project to reestablish peace and stability circumscribed the new regime’s commitment to feminist principles.

Some scholars have argued that often this effort to promote the new regime results in an increased backlash of violence against women. Evidence from post-war situations in places as diverse as Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia shows that often women not only face a continuation of the violence they endured during the conflict, but that they also face new forms of violence. In her analysis of women’s struggles in post-war situations, Donna Pankhurst argues that two elements are common in post-war situations: an “anti-woman discourse with associated restrictions on the life-choices of women regarding social, economic, and political activity,” as well as increased “violence against women.” The backlash discourse, she argues, is reflected through state institutions, the media, and in everyday public and private

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10 Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World., p. 429.
life.\textsuperscript{13} Women are often targeted for achieving economic independence or for adopting a more urban lifestyle that includes education in a rural setting.\textsuperscript{14} Further, she suggests that post-conflict violence is an expression of patriarchal social structures that are often strengthened after wars.

Women’s experience in post-conflict Nepal, however, represents an exception to these trends. Although women played a large role in the insurgency—with estimates as high as between 30 and 40% of female forces in the Maoist army—they have not been neglected nor have they faced with an increased backlash of violence in the post-conflict years. Rather, quite the opposite has occurred. Women have been very visible in Nepal’s highest-tier of government. Nearly one third of the 601-member Constituent Assembly (CA) are women—a figure that makes Nepal the fourteenth best legislature in the world in terms of women’s representation.\textsuperscript{15} In this chapter, I will explore how this was able to occur. I contend that the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)’s push for proportional representation (PR) and a gender quota system coupled with their ideological commitment to women’s issues facilitated the inclusion of women into the new post-conflict government. Although there were other developments in Nepal that created a more hospitable environment for these changes, such as the development of a stronger women’s movement in Nepal and the influence of international norms surrounding PR systems and gender quotas more broadly, these developments did not result in more women in positions of political power. It was the efforts of the Maoist party that facilitated the participation of women in

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Rita Manchanda, "Nepali Women Seize the New Political Dawn: Resisting Marginalisation after Ten Years of War," (Centre for Humanitarian Dialouge, 2010). p. 4.
Nepal’s post-conflict government and has thus made Nepal an outlier to the post-conflict trends.\textsuperscript{16}

This chapter is divided into three sections that reflect three major periods in Nepal’s political history. To present the immensity of the change in Nepal, I must first illustrate women’s historical relationship to the state prior to the formation of the Maoist party. In the first section, I explore the kinds of political participation and political engagement women partook in prior to the 1990 People’s Movement for Democracy. My goal here is to paint a brief history of women’s past relationship to the state by looking closely at the patriarchal underpinnings of Nepali society.

In the next section, I discuss women’s political participation after 1990. Despite participation within the 1990 movement, I will show that women were denied equal rights in the new constitution, neglected from the constitution-writing process, and participated in small numbers in the Nepali Congress (NC) led government throughout the 1990s.

In the final part of this chapter, I will elaborate on the current post-conflict (post-2006) government in Nepal looks like for women. It is here that I contend that Maoism as an ideology committed to women’s issues facilitated the legislative changes to increase women’s political participation at the highest government levels.

\textsuperscript{16} Throughout this chapter, I will use the term “political participation.” I use the term to refer specifically to women’s involvement, representation, and influence over national political decision-making bodies. In this chapter, however, I will also talk about women’s involvement in lower levels of civil society, such as grassroots organizations or women’s movements. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to these lower level forms of participation as “political engagement.” This is not to discount these forms of involvement in politics or to privilege participation at higher levels over participation at lower levels.
Women’s Historical Relationship to the Nepali State:

Historically, women’s participation in Nepali politics was limited. Often scholars are quick to attribute this fact to the dominance of Hinduism. However, it is not enough to label this ideology as the sole reason why women were largely absent in political structures for most of Nepal’s history. The Nepali scholar Seira Tamang insists that it is too simplistic to “glibly blame ‘patriarchy,’ ‘Hinduism,’ or ‘nationalism’ to account for the path that women’s participation in politics has taken.” In a similar vein, it is equally insufficient to attribute women’s lack of participation in politics to patriarchy. Ania Loomba suggests that “patriarchy, is articulated alongside other economic, social, cultural, and historical factors and therefore in practice works differently in various parts of world.” She asserts that while patriarchy is useful in “indicating a general process with some shared features across the globe,” if it is uprooted from its specific context, it “cannot be meaningful investigated and instead, the term begins to obscure the very relations of domination that it seeks to uncover.” Thus in order to develop an understanding of women’s relationship to the Nepali state, we must contextualize both Hinduism and patriarchy within the Nepali context by examining the legal and social structures that have historically inhibited women’s participation in politics.

A point of entry to begin to untangle this intricate relationship between women and the Nepali state is the country’s first civil code, the Muluki Ain (MA). The MA was established in 1854 by the Rana regime as a comprehensive legal code

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19 Ibid.
20 The Muluki Ain is translated as “territorial law.”
that sought to arrange the entire population into a caste hierarchy with Brahmin and Chettri castes at the top. The goal of the MA was to rank the entire population according to caste.\textsuperscript{21} The MA was derived from Hindu beliefs that emphasize the need to keep property within the agnatic group. In this way, the MA excluded both women as well as \textit{Dalits} from participation in politics. The MA included codes that ranged from appropriate relations between landholders and tenants, to punishment for improper defecation, to state regulation of sexual relations.\textsuperscript{22} The whole system of family laws that dictated marriage, divorce, and property rights for women systematically subordinated women and limited their freedom.

As a result of the strictness of the MA, women’s earliest forms of political activism were an expression of their frustration with the Rana regime.\textsuperscript{23} Although the MA excluded women from participation in elite level politics, women participated at the local level. The first women’s organizations in Nepal were established to create greater awareness of women’s issues and the overall injustices of the monarchy. In 1917, Dibya Koirala established the \textit{Mahila Samiti} (Women’s Committee) with the intention of teaching women how to weave and provide a forum for women to discuss issues important to them. In 1947, Revanta Kumari Acharya formed \textit{Adarsha Mahila Sangh} (Model Women’s Organization) to raise the social and political consciousness...
of women.\textsuperscript{24} However, these organizations were made up solely of upper class, well-connected women whose husbands or fathers were involved in politics. Dibya Koirala was the wife of K.P. Koriala and mother of B.P. Koriala, both of whom were leaders in the first democracy movement. Revanta Kumari Acharya was the wife of Tanka Prasad Acharya who was then serving a life sentence for his anti-Rana political demonstrations.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, although there were some forms of political engagement during the Rana regime, it was limited to the wives, mothers, and daughters of male political leaders.

The anti-Rana struggle culminated with the end of the Rana regime and the beginning of Nepal’s first experiment with democracy (1950-1960). This relatively liberal period witnessed the growth of more women’s organizations. Although these organizations were often closely aligned with one political party, they frequently joined together in nonviolent protest demonstrations to support women’s issues. For example, when an all male advisory board was established to assist the king, the Adarsha Mahila Sangh and the All Nepal Women’s Organizations united in protest. However, the 1951 movement for democracy was still dominated by women from upper class and well-connected political families. When writing about the 1951 movement, the Nepalese scholar Meena Archaya contends that, “Nepal has been dominated by the emerging rich, industrial bourgeoisie, the urban middle class, and the rural landed gentry. Against this background, only women from rich households and from rural and urban elites have some scope for active participation, and only

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
they have a chance to rise to positions of power.”

The 1959 Parliamentary elections reflected this low level of participation of women. Only two women were elected, both of who came from elite families.27

In 1960, King Mahendra introduced the Panchayat system, which marked the end of Nepal’s short-lived democracy experiment. Although the Panchayat period represented a regressive era in Nepal’s history (the state banned all political parties and repressed political speech), it coincided with the development of a strong international movement that challenged the notion of male supremacy. Nepal was not isolated from this international movement. The United Nations (UN) organized international women’s conferences across the globe that encouraged increased awareness of women’s issues. Nepal established various government programs, such as Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) to study hierarchal and patriarchal gender relations. In 1977, the government established the Women’s Services Coordination Council to coordinate various women’s institutions. In actuality, this council served more to glorify the queen and control foreign funds. In 1975, Nepal became a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), forcing the country to make legal reforms to the status of women in Nepal. For example, there were noteworthy reforms to the MA that expanded women’s rights.28 These included the expansion of equal inheritance laws, divorce laws, and property rights.

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26 Ibid., p. 491.
27 Ibid.
28 Tamang, "Gender, State, and Citizenship in Nepal,” p. 177.
for women. However, women themselves were largely absent from many of the discussions that led to the changes. Instead, elite Brahmin and Chettri males made all of these legal changes. Thus, while these legal changes represented a slight break from their traditional beliefs, they nevertheless reflected their own high-class refined views on marriage, inheritance, and property and ignored women’s views. While there was certainly an improvement in the legal status of women, the fact that it was men who were making the changes cannot be ignored.

Although there was clearly improvement in how women were recognized by the state, these changes were not reflected in women’s participation in government. With the exception of the queen, women were denied access and participation at any policy-level decision making body. As anti-Panchayat sentiment grew, women became more involved in the underground struggle against the regime but they were not included in the government itself. A benign paternalism acted to systematically exclude women from participation in government.

Women’s Political Participation post-1990:

Despite cultural, economic, and social constraints, women participated widely in the 1990 People’s Movement for Democracy. Women from diverse backgrounds and castes joined the movement to overthrow the Panchayat regime and dethrone the monarchy. In fact, it was women who were instrumental in revitalizing the mass

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29 For example, before 1975, an unmarried daughter 35 or older was entitled to only half the share her brothers received upon their parent’s death, even if she remained unmarried. After 1975, she could receive a full share. Acharya, "Nepal: Political Participation of Women." p. 485.
30 Tamang even goes so far to argue that because men instigated these changes, they represented an intrusive and coercive form of power over women’s bodies. Tamang, "Gender, State, and Citizenship in Nepal,” p. 173.
movement in April—May 1990. However, despite such widespread participation in the movement, few changes resulted from women’s participation. The Nepali Scholar Stephanie Tawa Lama argues that “women seemed to vanish from the political scene altogether after the movement.” Women were excluded from the drafting of the new constitution, they were discriminated against by the text of the constitution, and they achieved few roles in the government throughout the 1990s.

First, the drafting process of the Constitution itself lacked women’s participation. The constitution was written by a small, select group of people representing the Nepali Congress (NC) party, the United Leftist Front (ULF), and members representing the king’s wishes. All members of the process were elite Hindu males. The demands and concerns of minority groups were ignored in the creation of the constitution. Any concerns of those belonging to political groups other than the ULF or the NC were neglected from the creation of the new constitution. While the 1990 Movement succeeded in creating a constitution, the exclusive nature of the drafting process and the failure of the constitution to include any of Nepal’s minorities delegitimized it in the eyes of women and minority groups.

Second, the text of the constitution itself became a source of exclusion for women. The 1990 Constitution failed to treat men and women equally on multiple fronts. The constitution denied a Nepali woman’s children citizenship if she was married to a foreign citizen but made no such restrictions on the children of a Nepali

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31 Specifically, pro-democracy leaders had planned to stage a protest on February 18th, to mark the day in history when the Rana regime was overthrown. However, most of the pro-democracy leaders were under house arrest and thus unable to organize or participate and thus, women played a vital role in planning and participating in the demonstration. Acharya, "Nepal: Political Participation of Women." p. 490.

man. Additionally, the Constitution denied women equal access to property
inheritance and discriminated against women in penal laws, marriage, divorce, and
reproductive rights. The racist and sexist articles of the constitution reinforced upper
class male dominance and gave rise to increased anger among women over their
political position.

Finally, women’s participation in the newly formed government itself was
extremely limited. At the national level, women’s participation was negligible. This
is a trend typical for many South Asian nations. Although South Asia has seen an
extraordinary number of female-head executives in most of its countries, excluding
Nepal, Afghanistan, and the Maldives, beyond the “top job,” women’s role in
executive and legislative matters has been minimal. Although this has changed
slightly in the last few decades due to the implementation of gender quotas, often the
result is still minor. In Nepal, the 1990 Constitution set a gender quota at five percent
for all seats in parliament to be reserved for women. As a result, women’s
representation in the 1991, 1994, and 1999 general elections hovered between three
and six per cent. In 1999, out of the 205 total seats in the House of Representatives,
women held only twelve. One of the biggest disappointments for women was that
the proportion of women in Parliament in 1996 was actually smaller than in the 1989

33 Lawoti, Towards a Democratic Nepal: Inclusive Political Institutions for a Multicultural
Society. Ibid., p. 124.
34 Durga Ghimire, “Women’s Political Participation: Challenges and Constraints,” in Gender and
Democracy in Nepal, ed. Laxmi Keshari Manandhar and Krishna B. Bhattachan (Kathmandu: Modern
35 Almost exclusively, women in executive positions of power are widows and/or from politically
connected families. Andrea Fleschenberg, "South and Southeast Asia," in Women in Executive Power:
36 Manchanda, "Nepali Women Seize the New Political Dawn: Resisting Marginalisation after Ten
Years of War." p. 4.
37 Prativa Pradhan, "The Status of Women in Political Participation in Nepal," The Himalayan Review
Panchayat Parliament. At the local level, political participation increased somewhat during the 1990s. In 1997, the Parliament created a provision that established that one seat must be reserved for women in each ward of the Village District Committee (VDC). As a result, women participated widely at the local level. However, at higher-level positions, such as mayors, vice-chairpersons, and chairpersons of development committees, women’s participation was low. Out of 7,826 chairperson positions in 1997, only 26 were women. The Nepali scholar Pravita Pradhan asserts that in “spite of constitutional provisions on women’s representation, their widespread participation in 1990 movement for democracy and increased awareness, women [were] not able to improve their political representation at various levels, positions of power and decision making.” The lack of women’s involvement and participation in the new government unfortunately fits the trend of lack of women’s involvement in politics despite their large efforts in the revolution. However, it makes women’s inclusion into the post-2006 government all the more fascinating.

**Women’s Political Participation in the Post-Conflict Government:**

As I walked around the International Conference Center in Kathmandu on July 23rd, 2010, I was moved by the abundance of color. Bright blue, yellow, pink, and green saris were abundant. I had become used to this vision on the streets of Kathmandu but in a professional setting, the scene was new. All the CA members had gathered to vote for a new Prime Minister. The vote did not happen, as no consensus

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38 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
was met, but my day at least was not in vain.\textsuperscript{42} The opportunity to be surrounded by all of the CA members—including all 197 women members—was a unique moment. It was here—surrounded by Nepali women adorned in their colorful saris—that I began to develop a greater appreciation for the enormity of the change that had occurred in Nepal.

The presence of 197 women at the highest political level in Nepal represents a dramatic shift in the political landscape of Nepal. The makeup of the CA defies both Nepal’s traditional exclusion of women in government positions and also exists as an outlier to the trends of women’s experience in post-conflict states.\textsuperscript{43} I suggest that we turn to Maoist party as an explanation for such drastic change. I contend that the Maoist’s party’s push for a PR and gender quota system coupled with their ideological commitment to women’s issues has been the determining factor in facilitating greater participation of women in politics in the post-conflict years.

When I first began my research, I did not set out with the goal of proving that Maoism was the reason why Nepal represented an exception to women’s experience in post-conflict states. Indeed, I had no idea what explained this unconventional pattern of women’s post-conflict inclusion in politics. Intrigued by it, I set out to find an explanation by engaging in conversations with female CA members. I inquired into their experience as a CA member, asking open-ended questions that I hoped would lead them to reflect on their own position in the CA. How did you become a CA member? How is this experience similar or different to any previous political

\textsuperscript{42} It was not until February 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 2011 that a new prime minister was successfully elected. The CA elected Jhalnath Khanal of the UML once the Maoist Chairman Prachanda withdrew his party candidacy and agreed to back Khanal.

\textsuperscript{43} The women in the CA represent a diverse group of women, unlike women in parliament in the 1990s. They come from all geographic areas and represent all major indigenous and ethnic groups.
experience you have? What has your party done for women in Nepal? It was women’s responses to these questions that encouraged me to look more deeply into the role of Maoism as an explanation for women’s presence in the CA. Women from all major political parties who I interviewed consistently recognized the role that the Maoist party played in pushing for women’s inclusion into the new government. Specifically, they acknowledged the role of the Maoist party in securing a PR and gender quota system for elections to the CA. It was these responses that have encouraged the direction of this thesis.

Yet, often attributing a positive role to the Maoist party did not come easily for non-Maoist women. Widespread disdain for the Maoists often made women initially resistant to admit to anything positive that the Maoist party had done for women. For example, when I first asked Bhotanidevi Khawas of the NC party what she thought about the claims by the Maoist party that they are working for women’s empowerment, she responded quickly and adamantly. “It is not just the Maoist party that is working for women’s empowerment! The NC party is also working for women’s empowerment!” She acted offended by the question, shaking her head and speaking so quickly in Nepali that my translator had to ask her to repeat herself. She shared all the work that her party was doing for women and talked at length about the negative allegations against the Maoist party, including rape and forced recruitment to join the army. She also questioned the Maoist party’s relation to women’s issues: “If [the Maoist party] talks about women’s empowerment, then why do they kidnap the women? If they want real empowerment, why do they take girls away from school?"

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44 Khawas, Bhotanidevi, CA and NC member. Interview by author, 22 July 2010, Lalitpur.
This is not empowerment.” However, as Khawas continued to talk, her position slowly changed. “Yes,” she eventually conceded, “the Maoist party did raise the issue of proportional representation and seat reservation in the CA more than any other party.” When I clarified that Khawas herself was elected to the CA by proportional representation, she seemed taken aback, as if realizing for the first time that the Maoist party had directly helped her to become a member of parliament.

This pattern was not unique. When I asked Julie Mahendra Mahaseth (UML) to talk about what her party and other parties had done to advance women’s position in Nepal, she argued that the Maoist party “has done nothing for women.” Yet, in her very next sentence, she stated that the “Maoist party did help [to] increase women’s participation in government. In the CA elections, we can see more women’s participation.” Similarly, Pravita Rana, member of the National Democratic Party (NDP), expressed initial frustration and animosity toward the Maoist party. “They cannot [create real change] by just giving political slogans,” she insisted. She criticized the undemocratic nature of the party itself and drew attention to the lack of women in leadership positions in the party. However, Pravita Rana also recognized that the Maoist party had “raised the consciousness of women by having more women in government.” When I asked her to elaborate on how the Maoist party specifically was responsible for “having more women in government,” she said that the Maoist

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Mahaseth, Julie Mahendra, CA and CPN (UML) member. Interview by author, 22 July 2010, Kathmandu.
48 Ibid.
49 Rana, Pravita, CA and NDP member. Interview by author, 7 July 2010, Lalitpur.
50 Ibid.
party had argued for proportional representation and a gender quota, which allowed for more women in government.51

Women’s initial resistance to admit that the Maoist party produced positive changes speaks to the controversial nature of the party. The persistent gender discrimination within the Maoist party has led many to criticize the gap between Maoist rhetoric and practice. Even Maoist women do not deny the party’s inability to fully depart from the patriarchal underpinnings of Nepali society. Nearly every Maoist woman whom I interviewed was quick to say that while their party was working towards ending gender discrimination, it had not yet departed from the patriarchal underpinnings of Nepali society. Discrimination took many forms, from the perpetuation of gendered division of labor to lack of leadership positions for women.52 Dama Sharma of the CPN (M) at first denied any discrimination in the party, but then admitted that, “when it comes to powerful posts, men are given a priority.”53 Even Hisila Yami did not refute this idea. While she insisted that the People’s War helped to “bridge the gap between the male and the female,” she also recognized that the “gravitational pull toward patriarchy is still there.”54 Beyond simple claims of gender disparity, there are also multiple reports of rape, forced coercion to join the Maoist party, and looting.55 I met with a woman who told me that after the Maoists brutally murdered her father and brother in her presence, they forced

51 Ibid.
52 In her visits to Rolpa and surrounding areas, the anthropologist Mandira Sharma reported that only women fetched water and only women worked in the kitchen. Sharma and Prasain, "Gender Dimensions of the People's War: Some Reflections on the Experiences of Rural Women." p. 163.
53 Sharma, Dama, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 7 July 2010, Kathmandu.
54 Yami, Hisila, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 2 July 2010, Kathmandu.
her to join the PLA. In tears, she told me she was forced to put on “cultural performances” for male comrades in which she was made to dance and sing.\textsuperscript{56} It is stories like this one that make women so reluctant to admit that the Maoist party has actually helped to advance the status of women in Nepal. The fact that despite these horrific stories, CA women like Bhotanidevi Khawas, Julie Mahendra Mahaseth, and Pravita Rana still attribute a positive role to the Maoist party speaks to the Maoist party’s influence in establishing a PR and gender quota system.

Other women were more willing to acknowledge the role of the Maoist party outright. Lucky Sherpa (UML) stated that the “Maoist party—especially the women leaders—have really fought for increased participation of women in politics. I have to give credit to them because without their prominent role, I don’t think that the government or even the parties could ensure this much representation of women.”\textsuperscript{57} When I asked her specifically if the situation for women in Nepal had changed because of the current make up of the CA, she responded quickly that it is “much improved” because women are now represented in the CA. Nepal has become “an example for all South Asian nations.”\textsuperscript{58} She attributed this representation to the proportional electoral system and insisted that because of the positive role of a PR system at the higher level, her party (the UML) is now demanding “full proportional representation from the local level to the higher level at every sector.”\textsuperscript{59} Although Lucky Sherpa was a member of the UML, she was very grateful for the work that the Maoist party had done to increase women’s participation in government.

\textsuperscript{56} Interview by author, 24 July 2010, Kathmandu. Name of interviewee has been omitted at her request.  
\textsuperscript{57} Sherpa, Lucky, CA and CPN (UML) member. Interview by author, 23 July 2010, Kathmandu.  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
The Maoist party indeed argued for a PR system and for a quota system. In the 2006 peace talks and the interim constitution drafting committee, the Maoist party demanded that a PR system that included a quota system be mandated for the elections to the CA. Although the Madhesis and other ethnic groups also wanted a PR system, these parties did not have the political strength required to convince the more conservative parties (NC and NDP) to adopt a PR system. Hisila Yami wrote that the Maoist party pushed for a PR system because it would be “able to bring about inclusive representation of the various oppressed groups present in Nepal.”

Dama Sharma echoed this thought, insisting that her party was “always supporting the end of gender discrimination and other discrimination. A PR system is the best way to end discrimination.” When it looked like support was wavering for a PR system, the Maoist party withdrew completely from the interim government to demonstrate their support for a PR system. Eventually, the Maoist party agreed to a mixed electoral system with both a PR system and a direct electoral component (First Past the Post: FPTP). At the insistence of the Maoists, the interim constitution requires all parties’ candidates to be thirty-three percent female. Of these thirty-three percent of the party’s total female candidates, fifty percent of them had to be filed as candidates to be elected by the PR system.

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61 Sharma, Dawa, interview by author.
The fact that the Maoist party pushed for proportional representation in combination with a quota system is significant for two reasons. First, historically women are almost twice as likely to be elected to positions in government under proportional representation as opposed to direct representation.\textsuperscript{64} In a PR system, voters vote for a party rather than for a specific candidate, allowing for party gatekeepers (those who choose the candidates to be on the list) to be much more conscious of trying to balance their ticket with diversity because the party expects to gain more seats. When a party expects to win several seats, the party’s gatekeepers are more likely to include women on the list of candidates in either an effort to reward women’s work or promote party unity.\textsuperscript{65} Once women are elected, multiple studies have confirmed that proportional systems also create environments where women are more successful in terms of voicing their issues.\textsuperscript{66} Further, PR systems have been found to be all the more effective when coupled with a gender quota. Mahendra Lawoti argues that both a PR system and a quota system are necessary to address institutionalized exclusion of minority groups.\textsuperscript{67} Similarly, Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall insist that quota systems are more compatible with PR systems than with any other electoral system.\textsuperscript{68}

Second, and more interestingly, the Maoist party’s push for a PR and a gender quota system reflects their deep commitment to women’s issues. The Maoist party

\textsuperscript{67} Lawoti, \textit{Towards a Democratic Nepal: Inclusive Political Institutions for a Multicultural Society}. p. 28.
was ideologically committed to women’s issues from the beginning of the party’s formation. Although under Mao Zedong the People’s War was primarily a class-based insurgency, the Maoist party in Nepal quickly evolved to become centered on group and ethnic identity issues. In ideological terms, the Maoist party sought to end the semi-feudal and semi-colonial relationships in Nepal. Inherently this included working to change how women and minority groups were treated. The Maoist party demonstrated their commitment to women by including women’s issues in the party’s initial 40-point to the state issued in February 1996. Point nineteen declared that the “patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women should be stopped. The daughter should be allowed access to property.” In addition, the party also established the All Nepal Women’s Association (ANWA) as a group within the party to keep women’s issues at the center of debate. Unlike in other post-conflict nations where the national project for unity circumscribes efforts to include women in the new government, national unity depended upon the inclusion of women and other oppressed groups into the new government.

Women’s importance in the insurgency further solidified their centrality to the Maoist ideology. From the outset of the insurgency, women participated in overwhelming numbers, causing the leaders to pause and acknowledge women’s participation. “Before the launch of the People’s War, the woman question was not so seriously debated in our party,” stated Prachanda in an interview with a Maoist

70 Especially because mainstream parties, such as the UML and NC, were more ambivalent towards women’s issues, this ideologically step proved key toward the Maoist party’s mobilization efforts. Lawoti suggests that the recognition of Dalit, indigenous nationalities and women “offered potential recruitment and mobilization opportunities.” Lawoti, Towards a Democratic Nepal: Inclusive Political Institutions for a Multicultural Society. p. 14.
comrade Li Onesto. “As communists, we know [women’s issues are important] but in a concrete sense…. before the launch of the war we were not serious on the woman question and because we were not serious, our women comrades were not at the forefront of the movement.” It was not until after the war began and the party leaders observed widespread participation and enthusiasm of women that they began to take women’s issues more seriously. “I was especially thrilled when, during the first year, I saw the sacrifice women were making in the main region,” Prachanda recounted. “When I saw the women masses come into the field, then we started to debate seriously the woman question.” As women’s participation in the insurgency grew and more women became members of district committees in Maoist strongholds, the party leadership was forced to recognize women’s participation with more seriousness. The party appointed more women to become members of district committees. Prachanda insisted that this represented “a big change in our national structure and how we are developing the leadership qualities of women.” The party also made it mandatory to include two women in every unit of 9 to11 members and even appointed a woman, Amrita Thapa, to be head of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) from 2004-2007.

The Maoist’s commitment to women’s issues also represented a strategic move. The most prominent female Maoist member, Hisila Yami, is adamant that women grew to become a central component of the “Prachanda Path” because it

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Thapa, Amrita, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 7 July 2010, Kathmandu.
helped to ensure Mao’s vision of a continuous revolution. The Prachanda Path depicts a revolution that models Mao’s vision of a protracted people’s war with the aim of expanding Maoists’ base areas in rural areas in order to use them as a platform to surround urban centers.77 Incorporating women into the party, she insisted, “will make for a continuous revolution because women will be the last to be liberated.”78 In an interview with me, Yami expanded on this idea. She explained that because women are the most oppressed, they would be the last to be liberated from colonial and feudal ties. Thus, their involvement in the revolution will ensure that the revolution will continue until full emancipation is achieved.79 She argued in an article for a Kathmandu based newspaper in 2004 that the party recruited women because “women make up the biggest segment of the population in the downtrodden communities… Since women have suffered class and sexual oppression they have double the capacity to revolt.”80 Through political classes, cultural programs, party media, and mass print media, the Maoist party advertised that full liberation of women and full gender equality would only be achieved in a classless society.81

78 Yami, People's War and Women's Liberation in Nepal. p. 4.
79 Yami, interview by author.
80 However, in the 2004 peace talks between the Maoists and the state to try to end the insurgency, there were no women present. Hisila Yami in Rita Manchanda, "Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Radicalizing Gendered Narratives," Cultural Dynamics 16, no. 2 (2004). p. 241.
81 Sharma and Prasain, "Gender Dimensions of the People's War: Some Reflections on the Experiences of Rural Women." p. 155. Sharma and Prassain argue that there were additional factors, besides this long term promise of liberation, that motivated women to join the Maoist movement. For example, women were drawn to the Maoist’s anti-alcohol movement, they wanted to escape the violence from the state, and women aspired for cultural change. Although these factors certiantly influenced women’s decision to join the Maoist movement, the Maoist’s ideolocial commitment to women’s issues remains a key part of their political strategy.
My argument that the Maoist party facilitated greater women’s political participation does not deny the development of a stronger women’s movement in Nepal that helped to improve women’s legal status in Nepal. I was fortunate enough to have interviewed many women who were involved with politics beginning in the early 1990s who spoke of the immense changes that they had witnessed in Nepal.

Bhotanidevi Khawas (NC) was involved with party politics since 1987. She spoke generally about the change in women’s role as family members and explained the consistent improvement in the status of women in Nepal that she had witnessed:

“There has been a lot of change since 1990. Twenty-years ago, there was no nuclear family. All the brothers [of a family] live together. Women did not go to school. There was no health posts in rural areas. A woman was a considered a nice woman, a good daughter and a good daughter-in-law if she did not go out from her home. Now, it is really different. Women are encouraged to go to school, even in the rural areas. There are health posts. Many INGOs and NGOs are working in rural areas and in Kathmandu on women’s issues. Now, women are encouraged to go out [of the home].”

This recognition of the gradual change in women’s own perception of themselves and how women are perceived at large in society is important. Asta Laxmi Shayka (UML) reiterates these changes, insisting that “women have become more exposed to new opportunities,” and that there are “less restrictions now on what women can and cannot do.” In the years leading up to the 2006 peace talks, the women’s movement in Nepal had been successful in promoting legislation that supported women’s issues. After relentless lobbying, the government passed a bill in 2002 that decriminalized abortion and a bill that allowed women to inherit property at birth. In 2006, the Supreme Court of Nepal nullified a law that allowed men to seek a divorce if their

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82 Shayka, Asta Laxmi, CA and CPN (UML) member. Interview by author, 30 June 2010, Lalitpur.
83 Ibid.
partner was infertile and parliament revoked the long standing law that prevented women from giving citizenship rights to their children. Although these changes are important, they do not reflect women’s political participation at decision-making levels. These legal changes improved women’s opportunities and status in Nepal, but they did not do anything to concretely increase women’s participation in politics in the way that the Maoist party’s push for a PR and gender quota system did.\textsuperscript{84}

Furthermore, my insistence upon the role of the Maoist party does not negate the influence of international norms surrounding gender quotas and PR systems more broadly. A leading argument as to why so many countries have adopted both PR and gender quota systems is because it has become the international norm. The diffusion of both PR and gender quota systems throughout the world has escalated in the past few decades. Mona Krook argues that while there are four basic causal stories for why countries adopt gender quotas—women mobilize for quotas to increase women’s representation, political parties recognize strategic advantages for supporting quotas, quotas are consistent with existing or emerging notions of equality and representation, and quotas are supported by international norms and spread through transnational sharing—the role of international norms is by far the most compelling explanation for the prevalence of gender quotas in recent years.\textsuperscript{85} Krook cites CEDAW as well as the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) as the meetings in which these international norms began to develop. Both CEDAW and PFA called on governments around the world to foster full and equal participation of women in

\textsuperscript{84} Women’s groups supported the Maoist initiative for a PR system. Manchanda, "Nepali Women Seize the New Political Dawn: Resisting Marginalisation after Ten Years of War." p. 5.

public life and proposed measures to guarantee women’s access to political opportunities. Krook suggests that these events legitimized candidate gender quotas and in many cases, offered renewed drive for campaigns to bring more women into politics. Because of the compatibility of gender quotas and a PR system, PR systems have also flourished in the past few decades.

As a signatory to CEDAW, Nepal was not immune to the development of international norms that supported gender quotas. Perhaps Nepal’s closest influence is India, which has a long history of PR and gender quota systems. In 1947, India established PR systems at local levels. Under the current system in India, reserved seats in PR elections exceed 50 percent. Although Nepal was not blind to these developments in India, it had little actual effect on changing any policy in Nepal. Prior to the Maoist party’s push for both a PR and a quota system, there was little talk in Nepal—let alone action—to emulate India’s initiative to include women. The Maoist party was the first to voice the demand for a PR system that included a quota system.

The participation of 197 women in the CA represents both a dramatic shift from Nepal’s own historical lack of inclusion of women in the CA and from global post-conflict trends. The Maoist party facilitated greater participation of women in the post-war period. The Maoist party’s ideological commitment to women’s issues—as

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86 Ibid., p. 319.
89 One third of all seats are reserved for women at the lower levels. There are also reservations for *Dalits* and other disadvantaged groups. However, it was not until March 2010 that the Indian parliament passed a bill that reserved 33% of seats for women in parliament and state legislatures.
demonstrated through their push for a proportional representation system coupled with a gender quota—was the key factor in establishing greater women’s participation in government. It is this factor that has allowed Nepal to depart from typical trends of women’s exclusion in post-conflict governments.
III

“I AM HERE TO RAISE MY OWN ISSUES:”
WOMEN’S AGENCY IN THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

In an article for The Himalayan to mark International Women’s Day, the Nepali Congress (NC) and Constituent Assembly (CA) member Arzu Rana Deuba questioned what has changed for Nepali women since the world started celebrating International Women’s Day. Although she recognized Nepal’s unprecedented political, economic, and social changes over the past two decades and acknowledged that social indicators for women have surely improved, citing women’s representation in the CA and women’s increased participation in private sector jobs, she also remained critical about the lack of substantial change. She wrote:

“Despite all the guarantees made for equality and inclusion in political manifestos and political speeches, the top rung of male politicians in Nepal are now in the process of undoing the equal rights granted to women by the Interim Constitution, while finalizing the new constitution of the Democratic Republic of Nepal. Despite accepting the doctrines of Karl Marx, Mao and promising to adhere to socialist principles and abolishing monarchy, feudalism still rules the hearts and minds of political patriarchs and equality for women in terms of citizenship rights under any and all circumstances is viewed by them as against “tradition” and “patriotic” values.”

Deuba is one of many women in the CA that remain frustrated and disappointed with the persistent gender discrimination within the CA. These frustrations led her to state that despite the changes in the structural make up of the CA, “things have stayed the same.” This chapter takes up the implicit questions in Deuba’s article. What is the significance of having 197 women in the CA? How are women’s voices heard? Have

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2 Ibid.
things “stayed the same” or have there been any substantial changes in terms of how women relate to the state? The goal of this chapter is to critically examine the significance of having an unprecedented number of women participating at the highest political level in Nepal.

When I began my project in June 2010, I approached this issue from all sides. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to meet with women in the CA. I was eager to get at the root of what it meant to be a female CA member. I asked women what kinds of decision-making power they have in the CA, how they feel they are treated or respected, and what kinds of frustrations they have with the current process. What emerged from these discussions were not just answers to these questions but rather a glimpse into how women perceive their own role within the CA, how they have responded to the many challenges that they face within the CA, and how they understand the importance of their involvement in the CA. Often, women spoke critically and harshly about gender discrimination and women’s issues failing to be a priority in the CA. The persistent gender discrimination and the lack of leadership opportunities for women may cause one to think that women’s presence in the CA is merely symbolic or that things have simple “stayed the same,” as Deuba feared. However, I urge us to depart from such a narrow understanding of women’s roles within the CA and I implore a more critical look into how women have responded to gender discrimination, how they have mobilized within the CA, and how they conceptualize their own role in the CA. Ultimately, I contend that women’s ability to articulate their demands, to act in pursuit of their goals, and to recognize the
significance of their role reflects women’s own sense of agency within the political process.\(^3\)

Recognizing women’s agency in the CA is important for a number of reasons. First, the fact that women have been able to express their agency is highly unique. In many gender quota systems around the world, legislatures reproduce patriarchal hierarchies and subordinate women. The anthropologist Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake suggests that this occurs because when women are awarded seats in post-conflict governments, they are viewed as victims. She argues that politics becomes “a violent space and process where women politicians are stripped and humiliated.”\(^4\)

Other scholars argue that gender quotas inadvertently reproduce gender differences and thus they further subordinate women.\(^5\) It is thus rare that women can express their agency in a post-conflict government. Second, the CA represents a new forum in Nepali politics for women to express their agency. Women’s presence in the CA is truly unprecedented in Nepal’s political history. Pausing to analyze what kind of significance this presence has had is necessary for a full picture of Nepal’s post-conflict experience. Third, appreciating women’s agency is important because there is potential for women’s agency to have external benefits. There have been numerous studies that have demonstrated that the presence of women’s agency, apart from

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being important in its own right, also has the potential to have positive effects in other areas. Although it is too soon to have the empirical research that traces what, if any, positive effects women’s agency within the CA will have, this may prove an interesting field of study for the future. This chapter offers a starting point for this research. I will weave each of these ideas into my analysis of women’s agency in the CA.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I explore different understandings of autonomy, empowerment, and agency. I suggest an agent-oriented approach to understanding women’s empowerment that represents a unique middle ground between two extreme interpretations of how to measure women’s empowerment.

In the second section, I raise three concerns of gender quota systems that question women’s ability to affirm their agency. I do this because often in attempts to promote women’s empowerment, many governments have turned to gender quota systems. Nepal is no exception. However, there are some inherent limitations in gender quota systems that constrain how effectively women can participate. Thus, in this section, I will illustrate three main patterns of gender quotas that are particularly relevant to the Nepali case.

In the third section, I argue that women have been able to express their own agency within the CA, despite the inherent obstacles of a gender quota system. I contend that women have demonstrated their agency in three diverse ways: through a recognition of their individual role in the process, by collectively mobilizing for

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women’s issues with other women, and through an awareness of the potential long-term significance of their role as CA members. Recognizing these unique ways in which women have affirmed their agency in the CA paints a more complete picture of the significance of the presence of nearly two hundred women in Nepal’s legislative body.

Conceptualizing Agency:

“I am here to empower the women,” Dama Sharma told me in her office at Singha Durbar, the house of the Parliament of Nepal. This sentiment was common among women parliamentarians. Women in the CA typically spoke broadly about women’s empowerment. In my interviews, I asked each woman to elaborate on what they meant by empowerment. I received various responses but they typically included economic and political freedom, education for all girls, property rights, and health care. However, breaking down where these notions of empowerment are derived from requires digging a little deeper. It necessitates a look into the larger discourse on measuring empowerment. In this section, I will outline three general schools of thought on how to understand empowerment. I will conclude by offering my own understanding of how agency fits into the larger picture, why I have chosen to look specifically at agency, and how I will define agency as we move forward.

First, one method of understanding empowerment is through a universal framework. Martha Nussbaum advances this “universalist” approach. Nussbaum elaborates on Amartya Sen’s “capabilities approach” to empowerment and proposes

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7 Sharma, Dama, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 7 July 2010, Kathmandu.
that we can arrive at an enumeration of central elements of “truly human functioning
that can command a broad cross-cultural consensus.” She argues that these central
elements should be used to guide basic political principles and underwrite
constitutional guarantees. These include a right to life, bodily health, bodily integrity,
senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species,
play, and finally, control over one’s environment. She argues that this approach both
recognizes certain universal values and also “treats each person as an end and as a
source of agency and worth in her own right.” This approach offers an ideal
understanding of what every citizen of each state should be able to achieve.

A second school of thought suggests that empowerment is completely
contextual. Unlike Nussbaum, this literature proposes that there can be no universal
standards to measure empowerment because empowerment is entirely dependent
upon context. Anthropologists often employ this understanding of empowerment. For
example, Aradhana Sharma writes that the term empowerment “condenses multiple
meanings; it is reinvented and practiced in different institutional settings and in
different spatial and historical locations by variously positioned actors.”
Empowerment takes on different meanings under different contexts and used by
different individuals, organizations, or institutions. Unlike Nussbaum, this
understanding of empowerment is continually remade through “transnational

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8 Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*
9 Ibid., p. 80.
10 Ibid., p. 69.
circulations and articulations with different histories.”\textsuperscript{12} Rather than employ a universalist framework, this approach instead values the localized conditions of an individual context.

Finally, Amartya Sen’s approach to women’s empowerment occupies a middle ground between these two extreme methods of understanding women’s empowerment. From a universalist approach, he recognizes the value in objective factors (what he titles the wellbeing of an individual) to measure empowerment, and from a relativist approach he also understands that there is a subjective quality to empowerment that is dependent upon a woman’s own ability to act within her environment. He argues that both objective criteria to measure women’s wellbeing and subjective criteria to measure women’s agency have a substantial intersection:

“The active agency of women cannot, in any serious way, ignore the urgency of rectifying many inequalities that blight the well-being of women and subject them to unequal treatment; thus the agency role must be much concerned with women’s wellbeing also. Similarly, coming from the other end, any practical attempt at enhancing the wellbeing of women cannot draw on the agency of women themselves in bringing about such a change. So the wellbeing aspect and the agency aspect of women’s movements inevitably have a substantial intersection.”\textsuperscript{13}

Sen suggests that we must be able to see individuals as entities that experience wellbeing, but to stop there would be too narrow of an understanding of women’s empowerment. While he argues that we must still pay attention to the wellbeing of women, there is also an “urgent and basic necessity...to take an agent-oriented approach to the women’s agenda.”\textsuperscript{14} Sen insists that an agent-orient approach to

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Sen, Development as Freedom, p. 190.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 191.
empowerment is valuable because women’s power can have far reaching impacts on the forces and organizing principles that govern divisions…in society as a whole and can in particular influence what are implicitly accepted as women’s entitlements.”¹⁵ Specifically, he suggests that often women’s own agency can play a large role in helping to remove some of the inequities (gender discrimination, lack of opportunity etc.) that depress the wellbeing of women.

For my analysis, I have adopted an approach to understanding empowerment that mirrors Sen’s agent-oriented method. While it is important to recognize women’s agency, this must not ignore the broader environment in which she acts. It should not ignore inequities that deprive her wellbeing. The universalist in me values the presence of women in the political process and wants a political process free of gender discrimination. However, the relativist in me also recognizes the value in appreciating women’s ability to act within their environment, to mobilize, and to recognize their own role within their respective society. Therefore I embrace an approach to empowerment that seeks to understand how women conceptualize their own agency in the new government. Accordingly, I propose a definition of agency that conveys a sense of women working toward the pursuit of their own goals and desires, a sense of their own recognition of their role as both a member of a group and as an individual, and a sense of their own ability to instigate change. In a practical sense, this means that while I am not blind some of the obvious inequities in the CA, I also value how women have responded to these inequities, how they have acted in the CA, and how they perceive their own role as a member of the CA. I do not promote

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 192.
an understanding of agency that assumes a universal interpretation across cultures and that would ignore the diversities of religion, caste, and class.\textsuperscript{16} My intention is not to judge whether women’s presence in the CA is good or bad, but rather to evaluate how women have responded, reacted, and mobilized within the CA.

**Challenges of the Constituent Assembly:**

More than one hundred countries have adopted gender quotas as a means to guarantee women’s participation in politics. As the discourse on women’s empowerment has spread to all corners of the world, particularly in the last decade, gender quota systems have been adopted as a method of promoting women’s empowerment. Although quotas represent an effort to include more women in the government, they do not in themselves act as a panacea to all gender equity issues. Rather, the implementation of quotas faces inherent challenges. In this section, I want to explore some of the three main challenges that gender quota systems face. Each has a particular relevance to the Nepali case. Recognizing some of the challenges that women in the CA face is critical to understanding how they have been able to voice their own agency.

First, in any electoral system, there is a limit to how well representatives can accurately represent their constituents. In a gender quota system there is the possibility that this constraint is exacerbated. While a gender quota system has the benefit of placing more women in political positions, it also can have the effect of

silencing other defining features, such as race, ethnicity, and religion. It thus becomes difficult to determine how well a female in government from one culture, religion and ethnic group best represents a female from a completely different background. This concern over the neglect of ethnic, caste, and class differences in decision-making bodies is well expressed in literature regarding women’s participation in quota system. For example, in her article, “Beyond Bodies: Institutional Sources of Representation for Women in Democratic Policymaking,” S. Laurel Weldon contends that the “idea that individuals can represent groups through their persons or behavior is based on a problematic understanding of the relationship between individual experience and group perspective.” She insists that there is a “fundamental gap between the personal experience of individuals and their knowledge of the group perspective” that is dangerous to ignore. It becomes dangerous because if women do “not share a set of similar experiences, in what sense do women in office represent women?” Ultimately, Weldon suggests that the gap between the individual and group experience makes “bodies…extremely limited as an avenue of substantive representation.”

In Nepal, Weldon’s concern that single individuals are limited in their ability to represent the group is particularly relevant given Nepal’s diversity in both ethnic and cultural makeup. How can a Newari woman from Kathmandu accurately represent a Muslim woman from the Terai? Some theorists in Nepal, however, recognize that there is something more at stake than just the lack of accurate representation.

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18 Ibid., p. 1155.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p.1153.
representation in government. There is the fear that a gender quota system will silence caste and ethnic identity. The fear is that women will emphasize solely women’s issues, while neglecting ethnic and caste issues that are so important in Nepali society. Seira Tamang articulates this concern, insisting that the gendered subject in Nepal reinforces the image of a single-overarching Nepali woman.  

Tamang argues that the goal of the women’s movement in Nepal, whether out rightly expressed or merely implicit, is to “achieve a single feminist agenda” that works for women’s economic, political, and social rights. This is problematic because it can only be “achieved at the expense of respecting the radical diversity and difference” of Nepal. For example, Lila Nyaichai, of the Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party in the Constituent Assembly, stated that she is “sometimes taken only as a woman and not as the representative of the people.” Lila Nyaichai’s statement highlights the potential eradication of ethnic and cultural differences within the CA through a gender quota system.

However, while a gendered quota system may run the risk of promoting a singular feminist agenda, it is not the institution that is solely culpable. For decades this homogenous feminist image has been produced and reproduced by the state, NGOs, and political parties. Tamang insists that historically initiatives undertaken in

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
the name of women have been tied to the nationalist goals sponsored by the Panchayat state and its legacies. Particularly, she argues that the project of development in Nepal (bikas) has erased the heterogeneity of women’s lived experiences in Nepal. She argues that the language of development in Nepal created a singular, oppressed, and uniformly disadvantaged Hindu woman. It created a powerless figure that lacked agency and was in need of assistance in order to fulfill their potential. Tamang contends that the project of development is premised on defining women as not being “full individuals and not having the capacity for free choice and self-development.”

“She was constructed by ignoring the heterogeneous forms of community, social relations, and gendered realities of the various peoples inhabiting Nepal.”

The result is that while there is undeniable improvement in the legal status of women in Nepal (such as improvements in property and marriage rights) the result in the longer term for many women in Nepal who do not fall within the narrowly defined category of Nepali woman may be detrimental.

Political parties have been complicit in enforcing this homogenized, disadvantaged image of a “Nepali woman.” Women from political parties and NGOs, Tamang contends, have all “contributed to excluding and silencing radical diversity in the name of expediency and elite power brokering.” Tamang and other Nepali scholars argue specifically that the CPN (M) has been influential in furthering this homogenization of Nepali women. Judith Pettigrew and Sara Schneiderman suggest that the implicit premise of the Maoist party’s claims of empowerment for women

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27 Tamang, "Gender, State, and Citizenship in Nepal". p.100.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
were based on notions of a universally disempowered Nepali woman.\textsuperscript{30} They insist that the Maoists’ entire platform for recruiting women to join the insurgency in the first place was based on a unified image of a Nepali woman who was weak, discriminated against, and who lacked her own agency. They suggest that even the Maoist party’s use of the term empowerment seems to indicate an implicit “acceptance of the notion of a universally disempowered woman.”\textsuperscript{31} Tamang worries that a gender quota system that evolved from this framework is thus problematic because it creates a singular, oppressed “Nepali woman.”

A second concern in any gender quota system is the inability for gender quotas to foster women’s political engagement at lower political levels. While there is substantial literature that suggests that quota legislation increases the self-esteem, confidence, and motivation of all women, there is also literature that questions this common assertion.\textsuperscript{32} For example, Par Zetterberg challenges the notion that gender quotas necessarily generate political advancement of women in Latin America. He argues that quota legislations do not have a positive association with women’s political engagement at lower levels.\textsuperscript{33} He offers three plausible explanations for this. First, he suggests that women may have found quota legislation as nothing but a symbolic reform developed “as a response to demands from the outside but that is not intended to make any real difference.”\textsuperscript{34} A second explanation is that gender quotas

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\item[31] Ibid., p. 23.
\item[34] Ibid., p. 717.
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have not interfered with the often centralized and informal nomination procedures that promote only women who are politically well connected. As a result, the quota system has failed to promote political involvement of women who were not politically inclined already. A third explanation for the lack of positive impact on women’s political engagement at the lower levels is lack of information dispersal about the new gender quota law. Taken together, Zetterberg suggests that these three factors could represent the lack of impact of gender quotas at the lower levels in Latin American countries.

Zetterberg’s research is important for my project because it raises concerns about the ability of quota legislation to have a significant impact on women at lower levels in Nepal. Especially given the historical divide between the urban Kathmandu elite and the rest of Nepal, this is a concern that is particularly relevant in the Nepali case. Jayapuri Gharti of the CPN (M) insisted that, “traditionally, the government did not look after the minority peoples or the women in rural areas.” Their issues were continuously “ignored by the government.” Bhotanidevi Khawas (NC) also reiterated this common understanding of the divide between the rural areas and the urban center. “There is a vast difference between the rural and the urban. In rural areas, still women cannot go to school, cannot talk to boys, and the poverty is worse. In urban areas, girls are more educated and there is less poverty.”

The empirical evidence to determine whether Zetterberg’s observations in Latin America will

36 Ibid.
38 Gharti, Jayapuri, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 30 June 2010, Kathmandu.
39 Ibid.
40 Khawas, Bhotanidevi, CA and NC member. Interview by author, 22 July 2010, Lalitpur.
manifest in Nepal is not yet available. However, the divide between the rural and urban women in Nepal suggests that this might be a future concern for Nepal.

A third concern of women’s presence in the CA is the persistence of gender discrimination. This is not unique to Nepal. Gender discrimination has been well documented in gender quota legislatures. Although gender quotas have been adopted to boost women’s representation in male-dominated bodies, reserved seats do not always correlate with equal decision-making power. Gender quotas guarantee a minimum number of women in elected office, but they do not guarantee equal power. The political scientist Pippa Norris argues that, “being elected does not necessarily mean that women are given substantive decision making power, especially given the weakness of many of these legislatives bodies.”41 Instead, women are often sidelined when it comes to decision-making power. For example, in Pakistan, where women have reserved seats in the National Assembly and the Senate as well as lower political levels, they still face a continuous uphill battle. The researcher Gulmina Bilal Ahmad insists that derogatory attitudes of male colleagues, women’s own failure to internalize their political role, and the media’s portrayal of the women as mere “show girls” have all been at play in Pakistan.42

The result of such discrimination is two-fold. First, there is the possibility that women will face fewer opportunities for leadership within the legislature. Women from all major political parties have voiced their frustrations with the lack of gender equality within the CA. Lucky Sherpa (UML) even started laughing when I asked her

if she thought she was treated differently within the CA because she was a woman. “Of course we are!” she exclaimed.⁴³ “Men prefer women who will be submissive and do whatever things they want. So they will exclude women [from subcommittees] if they think that the women want to talk about things that they don’t want to talk about.”⁴⁴ Beyond just exclusion, women also spoke of the lack of opportunity for women to obtain leadership positions within the CA. Jayapuri Gharti insisted that when it comes to “opportunity, men are always given priority.”⁴⁵ Dama Sharma echoed this sentiment, insisting “male candidates always have priority over women.”⁴⁶ Such gender discrimination raises large concerns over the real significance of women’s presence in the CA.

Second, gender discrimination may result in no substantial changes in legislative policy. For example, Mala Htun and Mark Jones suggest that while women’s increased presence in government works to shift the terms of legislative debates, quotas “alone do not generate the political alliances necessary for real change.”⁴⁷ In Latin America, Htun and Jones observe a failure of women to unite across party lines to work for women’s issues.⁴⁸ Similarly, Neema Kudva observes that while gender quotas in the Panchayati Raj in India created increased self-efficiency of women representatives, it did little to “claim substantive change in

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⁴³ Sherpa, Lucky, CA and CPN (UML) member. Interview by author, 23 July 2010, Kathmandu
⁴⁴ Ibid.
⁴⁵ By opportunity, she later clarified that she was mainly referring to leadership positions within the CA. Gharti, interview by author.
⁴⁶ Sharma, interview by author.
⁴⁸ Ibid., p.50.
institutional priorities…” Although it is too soon to tell in Nepal whether women will be able to overcome gender boundaries and create substantive policy changes, the fact that women have been able to express their own agency within the CA represents a positive step for women.

**Women’s Agency in the Constituent Assembly:**

“Right now, I am here to write a constitution for my people. I am here for the women,” Lucky Sherpa strongly affirmed. We were at the International Convention Center in late July 2010. Lucky, along with all other CA members, were waiting to vote on a new prime minister. “I am here to raise the issues of women,” she stated. “I am here to raise my own issues.” Lucky’s assertion reflects a common feeling among CA women. Women spoke strongly and passionately about their roles in the CA. Often as a direct response to the challenges of quota systems discussed in the previous section, women recognized the importance of their role in the CA. In this section, I illustrate three ways in which women demonstrate their own agency in the CA. First, I suggest that women recognize their role as an individual in the process; second, I show that women have been able to mobilize collectively with other women in the CA; and finally, I contend that women are cognizant of the long-term significance and possible positive effects of their participation in the process. Through these various means, women have internalized the importance of their role as a CA member.

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50 Sherpa, interview by author.
51 Ibid.
First, women in the CA demonstrated their agency by recognizing their role as an individual. Often they used the persistence of gender discrimination as a force to mobilize behind. For instance, one woman who was particularly direct about her understanding of her role in the CA was Dama Sharma of the CPN (M). She explicitly stated that she understood her participation in politics as a “form of empowerment.” When I asked her to elaborate on what empowerment meant for her, she said:

“I have to fight not just for myself, but for all other women members of the CA and for all women of Nepal. This alone is an empowering realization. I have to fight for women to have positions at the main post and for women to have a greater role in the movement [for women’s rights]. Rather than be frustrated by the persistent gender discrimination, I have to fight for women to be empowered.”

Dama Sharma’s recognition of her own role in the struggle for women’s rights is an important component in her own agency. Her understanding of the significance of her role as a woman in the CA reflects her ability to act in pursuit of her goals. This realization reflects both her awareness of her own agency as well as an understanding of her own power.

Amrita Thapa, also of the CPN (M), echoed this recognition of the importance of her role as CA member. Thapa insisted that she was working for women’s empowerment in the CA, despite the many challenges she and other women face.

“I am working so that women can have an equal opportunity for government posts. In addition, I am working so that women will have access to food, good health services, and job opportunities. Women are not given equal opportunities. I am in the CA to help guarantee equal

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52 Sharma, interview by author.
53 Ibid.
opportunities for women at all government sectors jobs and in all aspects of their life.”

Thapa’s recognition of the importance of her own role is an expression of her agency within the CA process. It reflects an active step toward the advancement of issues important to her. Both Amrita Thapa and Dama Sharma were able to internalize their role as CA members. Women’s ability to see themselves as individuals who have an important role in the constitution writing process follows in line with Sen’s agent-orientated approach to conceptualizing women’s agency. Sen argues that one of the most important reasons to take an agent-orientated approach to agency is because women’s agency can play a role in removing the inequities that depress wellbeing, such as gender discrimination. It is when women fail to internalize their own role in the political process that a form of gender discrimination is perpetuated and women are viewed as merely symbolic. Thus, women’s ability to internalize the significance of their role in the CA is critical for removing the gender inequities within the CA.

A second way in which women in the CA express their agency is by mobilizing across both party and ethnic lines for women’s issues. Women have used their frustration with the persistent gender discrimination as a means to unite with other women. The 601-member CA is divided into eleven committees. Although each committee has female representation, often women feel frustrated with the lack of attention that gender issues receive in these committees. “It is not possible to channel our issues through [the 11 committees] because gender-related issues are not a

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54 Thapa, Amrita, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 7 July 2010, Kathmandu.
55 Ahmad, "Swimming against the Tide."
56 Rita Manchanda argues similarly that despite both gender discrimination as well as political polarization between the different parties, women “continue to assert their claim to equal political space.”. Rita Manchanda, "Nepali Women Seize the New Political Dawn: Resisting Marginalisation after Ten Years of War," (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2010). p. 12.
priority,” says CA member from the Nepali Congress party, Uma Adhikari. As a response to their frustration, women in the CA created the Inter-party Women’s Alliance in 2006. The Alliance was formed to pressure the newly formed government for 33% representation of women at all sectors, not just at the government level. Pravita Rana was a founding member of the Alliance. She insists that the Alliance has given women “one voice.” She stated:

“In every committee [in the CA], women’s issues are now addressed. It does not matter what political party you belong to. Women now have one, united voice. This has helped to safeguard [the treatment of] women’s issues in the new constitution… Although the political system has changed, the mindset of men and of leaders has not changed. Men still think that they are superior to women. The Alliance has helped women to express their voice.”

Specifically, Pravita Rana explained that through the Alliance, women members have been able to see their views reflected in issues of citizenship, property, and special reservation for women in the judiciary, decision-making positions and administration. It has also helped women demand that all women related issues be made into separate laws and not come under the government’s "plans and policies" list.

Bhotanidevi Khawas (NC member) echoed this sentiment of unity amongst women in the CA. In the new constitution, she insisted that:

“Every woman wants 50% involvement of women in every sector, from parliament to other government positions. Every woman is united on this issue, from all different political parties. It does not matter what party you belonged to. If you are a woman, then you act towards achieving greater women’s rights and recognition in the government.”

57 Aryal, "Women Push for Gender Equality in New Constitution."
58 Rana, Pravita, CA and NDP member. Interview by author, 7 July 2010, Lalitpur.
59 Ibid.
60 Aryal, "Women Push for Gender Equality in New Constitution."
61 Ibid.
Bhotanidevi Khawas reflects a united women’s movement that was absent in previous political systems. Women’s ability to mobilize across both party and ethnic lines is incredibly unique. It has fostered a sense of political activism that crosses both party and ethnic lines in an unprecedented way. Women themselves recognized the significance in this. For example, Jayapuri Gharti remarked that although she “began her involvement in politics in 1989 as a student leader and as a leader in the women’s movement,” this was the first time that she was “able to express her voice in the government. It is the first time that women have a voice together.” Asta Laxmi Shayka (UML) has similarly been involved in the women’s movement’s movement since the 1990 People’s Movement. She also suggests that this is the first time that she has been “included in the government and that other women from different parties come together in the government.” Although often in gender quota systems, women fail to cross party boundaries (as Htun and Jones observe in Latin America), so far this does not appear to be the case in Nepal. This suggests that in Nepal’s political future, women will play a significant role in advancing substantial legislation that promotes women’s status in Nepal.

However, Tamang’s response to this evidence for a united women’s movement is likely to be more critical than the positive light that I have placed it in.

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62 Manchanda has questioned the ability of largely uneducated women coming from rural areas to compete to have their voices heard against educated, urban NC and UML women. Bhotanidevi Khawas comes from the rural Morang district of Nepal and has received very little education. However, when I brought up Manchanda’s fear, she did not think it was relevant. She insisted that all women have been able to work together despite economic, geographic, or social background. Manchanda, "Nepali Women Seize the New Political Dawn: Resisting Marginalisation after Ten Years of War." p. 5.
63 Gharti, interview by author.
64 Shayka, Asta Laxmi, CA and CPN (UML) member. Interview by author, 30 June 2010, Lalitpur.
Rather than representing a sense of agency, as I contend, she would suggest that it further promotes the creation of a singular and homogeneous Nepali woman. Similar to her on against the language of development in Nepal, Tamang would fear that a united women’s movement in the CA threatens to exclude the recognition of ethnic, caste, and class diversity. However, although CA women have mobilized with women of different ethnicity and class, they have not neglected their own ethnic, geographic, or class background. For example, few women whom I interviewed were willing to identify themselves as feminists. “I am not a feminist because I am also working for the issues of Dalits and ethnic groups,” said Dama Sharma.\(^{65}\) Similarly, Julie Mahendra Mahaseth asked, “How could I be a feminist when I am also working for ethnic group issues, not just women’s issues?”\(^{66}\) Even Uma Adhikari (NC) insisted that “we do not just represent women, we have to represent our community, ethnicity and political parties also.”\(^{67}\) Thus although women are united on women’s issues, this does not imply that they have turned their back on their ethnic identity.

Instead, the CA has become a space for women to raise both gender and ethnicity issues. The most prominent female Maoist, Hisila Yami, suggests that raising women’s issues alongside gender issues is necessary in order to ensure a full departure from the feudal productive relations. She stated in an interview:

> “The very fact that we have removed the king and we have liberated ourselves from the fear of the king is a big leap forward… Although we have removed the king, still the feudal productive relation is still there. We are trying to overcome it through raising gender and

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\(^{65}\) Sharma, interview by author, 7 July 2010, Kathmandu.

\(^{66}\) Mahaseth, Julie Mahendra, CA and CPN (UML) member. Interview by author, 22 July 2010, Kathmandu.

\(^{67}\) Uma Adhikari in Aryal, "Women Push for Gender Equality in New Constitution."
ethnicity issues. [Raising] these issues will help us fight against the feudal productive relation."

Indeed, raising the issues of gender alongside issues of ethnicity has helped to promote women’s agency. It has allowed for greater mobilization across ethnic boundaries and has created a stronger women’s movement. This mobilization is encouraging for the future of women’s status in Nepali society.

A third way in which women demonstrated their own agency in the CA was through their recognition of the long-term importance of their involvement in the constitution-writing process and what it signifies to the rest of the world about Nepal. For example, Lucky Sherpa recognized that despite the difficulties within the CA (mainly the gender discrimination and the challenge of incorporating women’s perspectives into all issues), the “situation for women has definitely improved because a good civil society is being created.”

She expanded on this idea suggesting that one of the “good outcomes of the war has been the creation of a civil society where women’s issues and gender issues more broadly have the opportunity to be heard. The situation is especially good for women, despite the difficulties. Nepal has become an example for other South Asian nations.” Sherpa’s recognition of the potential that women’s presence in the CA could bring reflects her own agency as a CA member because it demonstrates her own understanding of her ability to instigate meaningful change.

Other women also reflected on this idea of more long-term change. Dama Sharma spoke at length to this idea:

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68 Yami, Hisila, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 2 July 2010, Kathmandu.
69 Sherpa, interview by author.
70 Ibid.
“Now gradually, things are changing. It is not just the women that are becoming more empowered, but all people are gradually changing. Before, men dominated all aspects of everything but now things are slowly changing. The male does not dominate the female as much as he did ten years ago. Now girls can get the property of their parents. Now she has equal rights with her brother. Now children can get citizenship in the name of her mother…Now other women hear about women involved in government, women members of the CA and they think ‘If they can do it, why can’t we?’”

Although it is too soon for the empirical evidence to support Dama Sharma’s claim that women are inspired by her presence in the CA, the fact she sees herself as a leader is salient. This self-recognition of her own role and the potential significance of this role demonstrate her agency within the CA. It also alludes to the possibility of long-term change in Nepal.

This language of aspiration is significant for two reasons. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s argues that strengthening the capacity to aspire among the poor would help the poor find the resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty. He argues that poverty is “partly a matter of operating with extremely weak resources” where the poor or subordinate groups face adverse terms of recognition from dominant groups. Appadurai’s expression “terms of recognition” describes the adverse terms by which the poor negotiate with the norms that frame their social lives and how they interact with the dominant group. The dominant groups encourage the poor to “subscribe to norms whose social effect is to further diminish their dignity, exacerbate their inequality, and deepen their lack of

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71 Sharma, interview by author.
73 Ibid.
access to material goods and services.”

Thus, there is a need to “strengthen the capacity of the poor to exercise ‘voice’, to debate, contest and oppose vital directions for collective social life as they wish” both because this is a critical component to a democracy and because this is the only way in which the poor would be able to alter how they are viewed by the dominant groups. Applying Appadurai’s framework to women of Nepal, women’s presence in the CA is important for two reasons. First, it has the potential to alter how the dominant group (men) view women and ultimately, in the long term, the potential to change the terms of recognition that women command. Second, women’s presence in the CA has the ability to strengthen other women’s capacity to aspire to greater levels of political engagement and participation. Although the empirical evidence is not yet available to test this idea, it suggests that gender quotas will indeed have an ability to initiate lower level political participation of women and thus avoid Zetterberg’s observation of Latin America.

Women’s ability to affirm their own agency within the CA exists in contrast to other women’s experience in post-conflict governments. Women across South Asia have had little success in bringing about significant improvement in the lives and position of women in the South Asian region or in building bridges across ethno-religious lines. However, in Nepal the situation has been different. Women have been able to affirm themselves within “politics proper.” Further, they have been able

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74 Ibid., p. 66.
75 Ibid.
76 Without fundamental cultural and structural changes in society, she argues that the presence of women in leadership positions and polity rarely results in the advancement of the position of women. Rajasingham-Senanayake, "Between Tamil and Muslim: Women Mediating Multiple Identities in a New War." p. 198.
77 Rajasingham-Senanayake refers to “politics proper” as the traditional space for political participation, such as elected, decision-making bodies. She demarcates this space from other, less
to cross ethnic and cultural divides to unite on the issue of women’s rights. Often as a
direct response to their frustrations with the CA and its limitations, women have been
able to unite and voice their concerns. Despite the challenges of gender quotas,
women have been able to affirm themselves as active agents within the process.
Recognizing women’s own sense of themselves, their role, and their power provides a
more complete picture of the CA.

formal forms of political engagement, such as women’s mobilization around certain issues and
grassroots work. Ibid., p. 198.
CONCLUSION

As I put the final touches on this thesis, the deadline for the new constitution of Nepal quickly approaches. However, rather than eliciting excitement, the nearing deadline instead is generating much doubt and anxiety among many Nepalis. When I asked Lucky Sherpa (UML) if she thought that the new constitution would be completed, she practically shuddered. “Let’s hope so, but I do not think it will be finished by the deadline. There are too many contentious issues. The parties have so many differences. How will consensus be met?”¹ She admitted that she herself had a “big question mark” as to whether the constitution would be finished.² Other Constituent Assembly members shared this anxiety and doubt. Pravita Rana (NDP) insisted that she was really “suspicious [about] whether a new constitution will come or not.”³ She feared that if a consensus was not met, there would be no constitution and without a constitution, she did not anticipate any substantial change to how women are treated.⁴

This doubt is not limited to the women in the CA. In a recent opinion piece for *The New York Times*, Manjushree Thapa, a prominent literary figure in Nepal, expressed similar disappointment with the possible outlooks for Nepal. She wrote that Nepal has learned that “it is easier to start a revolution than to finish one. Overthrowing the monarchy was difficult, but institutionalizing democracy is harder still.”⁵ Thapa reported that with fewer than one hundred days to go before the May deadline, the constitution was still in a rough draft form and the will to complete it

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¹ Sherpa, Lucky, CA and CPN (UML) member. Interview by author, 23 July 2010, Kathmandu.
² Ibid.
³ Rana, Pravita, CA and NDP member. Interview by author, 7 July 2010, Lalitpur.
⁴ Ibid.
was “wholly lacking.” In addition, she wrote that rumors are circulating in Kathmandu that the CA—the country’s only elected body—will be dissolved through a military-backed democratic coup. Thapa predicted other equally dismal scenarios if a constitution does not manifest in May 2011, including a return to a civil war, the escalation of localized conflicts, or the rise of the criminal underworld. Even if the worst does not come to pass, Thapa argued that the struggle for power in Nepali politics has jeopardized the CA’s ability to produce a constitution by the deadline.

The uncertainty caused by the fact that there may not be a new constitution by the deadline may call into question whether this is the right time for a thesis that explores the political roles of women in post-conflict Nepal. However, while the production—or lack thereof—of the new constitution has important consequences for women’s political participation, the purpose of this project is broader than an exploration of Nepal’s proposed constitution. The time is ripe to pause and reflect on how Nepal has reached where it is today and to consider the interesting developments that have emerged from women’s presence in the CA.

The presence of 197 women in the CA is momentous in its own right. “It is a remarkable time for the women of Nepal,” Lucky Sherpa insisted. “Right now, there are a number of women in all political parties and we all come together and unite on the women’s agenda. Our committees get together and we work towards greater inclusion of women in the new constitution. We say ‘Let’s do something!’” Lucky Sherpa’s recognition of this specific moment in Nepali politics speaks to why it is important to recognize women’s achievements thus far in Nepal. She implies that

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6 Ibid.
there is a sense of agency among CA women in their ability to unite on a common women’s agenda. This is unprecedented in Nepali political structures and is largely absent in other post-conflict governments. Therefore, pausing now to recognize the significance of the political change that has swept Nepal is important.

My conversation with Lucky, however, stands out in my mind for another reason. Few women in the CA were able to express their understanding of the interconnectedness of the Maoist party, the insurgency, the post-war political structures, and their own role in the CA as articulately as Lucky. When I asked her to elaborate on how she understood the role of the Maoist party and her own role as a woman in the CA process, Lucky stated:

“Yes, [the Maoist party] have destructive mechanisms, such as kidnapping, rape, and the use of terror. But we cannot always blame one party… Right now, the Maoist party has changed the whole process. Of course they have a very different nature and they are still combatant, but [the Maoist party] has ensured the representation of women in the government sector. They have created a new space for women. They are raising women’s issues, so I welcome them. We are together on common issues. We are together no matter what party differences [exist]. We have a common agenda. If we want to build a nation, we cannot start blaming them.”

In her answer, Lucky highlights the two main ideas that I have attempted to illustrate in this thesis. First, Lucky attributes wide-scale change to the Maoist party and second, she suggests a sense of agency that has emerged from women’s presence in the CA. Insisting that there is a “new space for women” to raise their issues is demonstrative evidence of a sense of agency that was previously absent in Nepal’s political history. Above all, however, I am drawn to Lucky’s underlying tone of reconciliation. Although she does not excuse or even forget the brutal acts of the

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7 Sherpa, Lucky, CA and CPN (UML) member. Interview by author, 23 July 2010, Kathmandu.
Maoists during the People’s War, her ability to see beyond these factors and recognize the valuable contributions that the party has made to women’s inclusion in the political process is unique.

This project developed out of a personal desire to explore the two issues that Lucky wrestled with: on the one hand, her deep anger and disapproval over the methods employed in the People’s War, and on the other hand, her recognition that the Maoist party has been incredibly important in expanding women’s political participation in Nepal. When I first visited Kathmandu in the fall of 2009, I was immediately drawn to this pressing contradiction. The hatred toward the Maoist party because of the violence of the People’s War and the political instability that ensued was visible nearly everywhere. However, I was also drawn to the positive changes that the Maoist party had facilitated, including but not limited to the unthinkable presence of 197 female members in Nepal’s legislative body. I returned to Kathmandu in 2010 to try to better understand this dichotomy. I interviewed women who were directly confronted with this dilemma in their daily lives. I met with Maoist women who denied allegations of rape and instead, spoke of working for women’s empowerment; I met with non-Maoist CA members who condemned the People’s War, but appreciated the Maoist party’s commitment to women’s issues; and I met with Maoist victims who refused to attribute anything positive to the Maoist party. What became clear from these conversations was that women’s role in politics was shaped in many ways by the influence of the Maoist party.

The Maoist party has played an unprecedented role in the upheaval of Nepal’s political system. Maoism in Nepal evolved as a party committed to representing the
interests of minority groups and women, who for centuries had been marginalized by the state and society. The Nepali Maoists gravitated towards Mao Zedong’s idea of a People’s War that focused on mobilizing the rural peasantry to incite a revolution. Although Nepal was never formally colonized, the Maoists deem Nepal as suffering from a semi-colonial relationship with India. Through the People’s War, the Maoists in Nepal aimed to overturn both the semi-colonial and feudal relations that dominate Nepali society. Women’s centrality to the party’s ideology grew as women’s participation within the insurgency increased. The party recognized women as a strategic part of the Prachanda Path in order to guarantee the success of a continuous revolution.

When the insurgency culminated in the 2006 peace agreement, the Maoist party’s commitment to women’s issues did not falter. The Maoist party, which became the majority party in the 2008 CA elections, urged the people of Nepal to adopt both a proportional representation (PR) system—a system that has been proven historically to allow for greater participation of women—and a gender quota system to ensure women’s presence in the CA. It was the Maoist party’s support for the acceptance of these new measures that was the defining factor in the increased political participation of women in Nepal. Although there were gradual changes in women’s legal status throughout the past few decades, these improvements did not result in more women in government. Likewise, the influence of international gender quota norms did not have a significant impact on Nepal’s political system prior to the Maoist party’s initiatives. The Maoists’ ideological commitment to women’s issues as
reflected in their determination to establish a PR and quota system was the defining factor in facilitating women’s participation in Nepal’s post-conflict government.

By creating the physical space for women’s participation in politics, the Maoist party also helped to create a new platform for women to express their agency. When I began this project, I was eager to get at the root of what it really meant to have 197 women in Nepal’s CA. Given the patriarchal underpinnings of Nepali society and the many obstacles inherent in a quota system, I was intrigued to learn how women in the CA had been able to perform within the process. I wanted to know how women perceived their own role in the CA, how they interacted with other CA members, and how they understood their position in relation to the Maoist party. What I found was that women were able to affirm their own agency in multiple ways. Some women spoke directly, insisting that they were empowered by their own role in the CA. Others spoke more generally about the influence that their presence in the CA may have for women in the future. Perhaps one of the most noteworthy aspects of women’s presence in the CA is the new platform that it created for women to mobilize together across both party and ethnic lines. This kind of mobilization is unprecedented in Nepali political history.

Together, these three chapters combine to tell a story of women’s political participation in Nepal. The Maoist party’s commitment to women and their support for a PR and quota system created new opportunities for women to participate in Nepali politics. The creation of this new space, despite its problems, is unmatched in Nepal’s history. The CA has emerged as a new forum for women to express their own
agency. Recognizing this new sense of agency is critical for fully understanding Nepal’s post-conflict experience.

Although in any peace process there is the threat of reverting to old practices, I remain optimistic that the positive gains that women have made will not dissipate no matter what May 28th will bring. This confidence stems from two factors. First, the norms in Nepal towards women’s participation in politics have changed in irreversible ways. Both the political institutions and the male-elite have become more open to the inclusion of women in the political structures of Nepal as a result of women’s presence in the CA. Support for women’s issues has become a rallying cry for all major political parties, not just the Maoist party. Second, from my own conversations with women in the CA, I cannot foresee women accepting a political future for Nepal that excluded them. The women who I met with spoke with too much passion and excitement for me to think that they would submit to a future that denied their participation. The fact that women have been able to affirm their agency both as an individual and collectively with other women in the CA makes me hopeful for the political future for Nepal. I simply cannot imagine the political future of Nepal without the presence of women at the decision-making level. Hopefully, I will be right.
APPENDIX:
Women in the CA

Dama Sharma, CPN (M) member

Hisila Yami, CPN (M) member

Asta Laxmi Shayka, UML member

Lucky Sherpa, UML member

Jayapuri Gharti, CPN (M) member

Bhotanidevi Khawas, NC member
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Interview by author, 24 July 2010, Kathmandu. Name of interviewee has been omitted at her request.

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Rana, Pravita, CA and NDP member. Interview by author, 7 July 2010, Lalitpur.

Sharma, Dama, CA and CPN (M) member. Interview by author, 7 July 2010, Kathmandu.

Shayka, Asta Laxmi, CA and CPN (UML) member. Interview by author, 30 June 2010, Lalitpur.

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