



Graduate School of Development Studies

**CHILD SOLDIERS IN TRANSITION  
A Gender Aware Case Study of Maoist Young Adults in  
Nepal**

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## **List of Acronyms**

CA	Constitution Assembly
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CPN-M	Communist party Nepal –Maoist
DDR	Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration
IDDRS	Integrated Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
INSEC	Informal Sector Service Centre
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
PLA	People's Liberation Army
SSR	Security Social Rehabilitation
UNCRC	United National Convention on the Rights of the Child
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children Fund
UNMIN	United Nations Mission in Nepal
VMLR	Verified Minors and Late Recruiters

## **Abstract**

This short research paper is an attempt to explore the involvement of girls in the Nepal Maoist war, the push factor, and their empowerment during their association with the Maoist. It also looks at the rights perspective and the conscious decisions taken by the young combatants to join the Maoist to fight for the cause of equality and justice. Contrary to the common outlook of girl soldiers as victims of forced recruitment, abduction and abuse, the paper looks at the voluntary recruitment as expression of agency in the light of a conflict situation where the systems are not geared towards taking care of their needs and rights. The paper draws on interviews from ex-combatants and NGO/INGO personnel and analyses them to get a understanding of their involvement and their present life post the signing of the peace accord.

## **Keywords**

Gender, Ideological Commitment, Child Rights, Nepal, Maoist, Reintegration, Empowerment.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction and Background**

### **1.1 Children in the War**

The UNICEF fact sheet on child soldiers estimates that there are nearly 300,000 children, both boys and girls involved in armed conflict in 30 countries across the world. These children serve in various capacities. They are trained for direct combat, if not, they serve in roles such as messengers, spies, porters, cooks, laying mines, sentry or forced sexual services, wives (<http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/childsoldiers.pdf>). The use of children in war is a serious concern. “In over three fourths of the armed conflict around the world, there are now significant numbers of children participating as active combatants. These are not just youth who are on the cusp of adulthood, but also include minors as young as six years old” (Singer, 2006: 6).

In African societies, boys appeared to have joined the warrior groups 3-4 years after puberty. When children did join at a lesser age, they mainly served in menial jobs such as porters, cooks, herding the cattle, carrying shield and supplies to senior warriors. Similar trend was observed in European history too. While the general rule was that children were not to be used in war, there have been exceptions in this (Singer, 2006). But one can see the increasing number of child recruits into armed groups, both State and non-State. Non State armed groups in 24 countries have extensively involved children in hostilities (Child Soldiers Global Report, 2008). And often the children form a large group in the force. The ‘little bells/little bees’ form up to 30 percent of the Colombian rebel army. One cannot turn blind eye to the number of children recruited in armed conflict. ‘Of the ongoing or recently ended conflict (37 of the 55) 68 percent have children under eighteen serving as combatants. Eighty percent of these conflicts where children are present include fighters under the age of fifteen’ (ibid. 29).

### **1.2 Girl Soldiers**

When one speaks of child soldiers, the image that generally comes to mind is that of a boy soldier and seldom of a girl. The role of girl soldiers is downplayed. Their role, involvement, experiences have been given very little attention. Even the Demilitarization, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process does not really address their needs. Although historically, girls always have been involved in the battlefield. Dating back to 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C, Persian armies are said to have marched into battlefield with large number of women and children. Sixteen years old Joan of Arc, Mariana Yurlova (14 years), Angela Jimenez (15 years old) are actually named in the history of war. Female warriors of Dahomean were considered to be superior to male forces. They were also enlisted as slave girls and carried weapons into the battle field (Mazurana, McKay, et.al, 2009: 101-102).

Their presence, role and importance should not be ignored. One look at the statistics shows that they have been/are being recruited in large numbers. One third of the children participating in the war around the globe are girls (Gilbertson, J. A. 2008: 219). Between 1990 and 2002, girl soldiers were present in 54 countries. And of the 54, they were actively involved in armed conflict in 36 countries. And within the armed forces they are present in large numbers. Peru, is said to have one of the largest female units. In Angola, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Uganda 30% to 40% of the child soldiers were girls (Mazurana, McKay, et.al, 2009: 105).

Their entry into the armed conflict includes active recruitment, volunteering, abduction. There are also push factors. When the State fails to provide adequate services such as education and employment they have very limited option and are pushed to join the armed groups. "Girls may enter fighting forces and groups because they provide food, shelter, and a sense of security" (ibid: 106). Also one of the reasons they have joined the movement is out of frustration, anger, hatred and wanting revenge against the killing of their family members.

When one thinks of the term girlhood, the image that may come to the mind is that of what a typical/normal girlhood should be. Happy growing years within a protective family setting. It would signify a stage of development; physical, emotional, social. One would think of a normal development phase of life. However, the cycle of girlhood/childhood is not the same across all culture or society. These are influenced by the many factors. A girl child or adolescent girl living on the streets would not experience the same life experiences as that of girl living in a middle class or upper middle class family in a developed country. Often these experiences propel you to a different life course and compel you to make choices under difficult circumstances.

It can be either a demanding time, like performing heavy work, learning gendered responsibilities from their mothers and females in family/community – house work, child care, and agricultural work while others may be over protected or not allowed to move about freely. And the process of initiation in adolescent and womanhood preparing for greater roles and responsibilities expected culturally. A girl in the armed conflict/combat begins to play a very different role. In case of the Sri Lankan, combatants, they undergo similar tough training as the boys do and perform a wide range of functions within. "Girl's role typically overlaps and includes working as spies and informants, in intelligence and communications, and as military trainers and combatants. They are health workers and mine sweepers, and they conduct suicide missions" (Boothby, Strang, Wessels, 2006:95).

They undergo major changes in term of identity, human relations. "Exposed daily to a culture of violence and themselves perpetrators in acts of terror such as attacking their own families and neighbours, abducting other children, and killing civilians, they are no longer normal girls either in their own eyes or on the eyes of those who know them. Instead, girlhood is inverted and distorted. They have experience what most of us never imagine and they can never go back to girlhood innocence" (Boothby, Strang, Wessels, 2006:97). "Many girls brutalized by violence found their identities changed, often gradually, from being victims of violence to perpetrators".

Some of them who have been able to resist sexual violence, rebel against authority and structure, and perform violent acts have gained confidence and the power. Even the simple act of using light weapons gave them a sense of confidence and the power to be able to do things. Adding on to this, the status of being called the ‘wives’ of the commander also gave them a sense of protection and important position.

Hence, one can see that there can be major shift in roles and identity and I believe is very crucial to be taken into consideration during the rehabilitation and reintegration process. One can see a shift in the socially expected/accepted roles of girl/women in a conflict situation. A female combatant is expected to take on tougher roles as well. All the rigorous training and hard life has made them committed and tough warriors in the world. As a result their identity, relationships and human networks have changed too.

Also in terms of their involvement and participation, the general thinking is to consider them as victims. Victims of abduction, sexual abuse, rape, pregnant and left to fend for the child, bush wives to the commanders. However, researches do argue that girl soldiers can develop resilience and agency and be active participants, and not mere victims. In order to protect themselves from being sexually abused by men in the rebel group, they are known to attach themselves to men in power position. This association with a person in power status keeps them protected from other men. “DDR planners are accustomed to thinking of women as victims of war, with young girls in particular portrayed as the ultimate victim in need of rescue. Yet broader work on war shows females to be active agents: they make choices, possess critical perspectives of their situations, and organize in response to those situations”. (Annan, Blattman, Mazurana and Carlson, 2009: 2).

### 1.3 Purpose of the Study

There has not been much focus on girl child soldiers, one main reason being the gendered outlook. Gender and gender roles are social creations. Girls/women are stereotyped with performing softer domestic roles and are not viewed as perpetrators of violence. And hence are not considered to be active participants in the war. The neutral term child soldier is used but this is often understood in term of boy child soldiers and seldom includes girls. There is not much focus on their involvement and experiences in the forces during the conflict period and post conflict period.

Through this research paper, I would like to explore the association of girl soldiers with the Maoist movement, factors leading to recruitment, the participation/agency and voluntary recruitment. Their status post the war and return to civilian life, “reintegration”. How has their involvement shaped their lives and how does this affect their return? How does the family see them on their return? Do they expect them to just slip into their expected social/domestic roles?

## 1.4 Relevance and Justification

The subject of child soldiers is a new area for me. Professionally I have no experience of having worked with child soldiers. I am motivated by the aspect of researching a new area that I have not ventured into. It is at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), that I have had the opportunity to explore and discuss various issues during some of my class in Children and Youth Studies Specialization. One of the primary relevance for me is to add on to my personal knowledge and experience.

And second would be to contribute towards the literature of experiences and girl soldiers in Nepal and since not much has been written on this area. A lot of literature on child soldiers focuses on Africa. The study would give voices to the girl child soldiers. It is known that only a very small number of girl soldiers go through the DDR programmes. The reason why the International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGO) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are not able to access the girl soldiers is believed to be due to miscalculations around the experiences of girl soldiers and the multidimensional role of gender as it affects girls in the conflict and post conflict periods (Mazurana, McKay et.al. 2009:118). In a study report by Spelling, she states that girls represents between 6 to 50% of the child soldiers in an armed group. In Congo, the girl soldier's proportion is 30 to 40 percent. In Colombia they represent 25-50% of total child soldiers.

Spelling identified forty eight empirical studies on girl soldiers published between 1999 and 2008. Further bibliographies of studies/articles were used and of the total studies on girl soldiers, 70% focused on Africa girl soldiers, 16% experiences in Colombia and El Salvador and remaining 14% on Sri Lanka and the Philippines. This again reflects limited or negligent focus on experiences of girl soldiers in South Asia region, which includes Nepal. (Spellings, 2008:24).

## 1.5 Statement of Research Problem

The focus of this research would be to explore the association of girl soldiers with the Maoist, return to family post conflict. The research will trace their recruitment (participation/voluntary decision to join the army), and life after the conflict in light of the peace agreement.

## 1.6 Research Objective

1. To understand how girl soldiers get associated with the armed conflict.
2. To study the effects of participation/volunteer joining in the conflict on their life.

## 1.7 Research Questions

1. What are the factors (push and pull) responsible for the enrollment of girls compared with boys into conflict?
2. What is the influence of the above factors in lives of the ex-combatants in their post-war lives?
3. What is the role of the NGO/INGO and the State in recognizing the factors in planning post war life packages?

## 1.8 Methodology

The research was planned to be primarily qualitative based. The initial design was to conduct one to one in depth interview using Life History Approach to gain understanding of their life course, motivation to join the Maoist Group and the present status of their lives. It was planned to interview around 10 young women in the age group of 19-22. Young women who have come out of the war and are now back with their families. This will help to build up a life story from the beginning and not concentrate on their life course during the conflict alone. In a way this will be less threatening and direct.

Apart from the ex-girl soldiers, semi-structured interviews were to be organized with the family members and NGO personnel working with ex-girl soldiers.

The research could not be carried out the way it was envisaged. Due to unplanned circumstances in the field (discussed in the section on challenges), the research had to be more open and accommodating all possible sources for information gathering.

The participants identified through NGO staffs. Five ex-child soldiers, two male and three females, in their early 20s were interviewed. Since gaining access to ex-girl soldiers was proving to be very difficult, two ex-male soldiers were interviewed to fill the gap and gain perspective and information on the involvement of girls in the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The interview with the participants lasted for 45-60 minutes. A semi-structured interview schedule was used, and questions were built up as the interview flowed. Providing participants the flexibility to answer the questions.

Table below provides a bird's eye view of the ex-child soldiers interviewed for the research.

**Table 1**  
**Brief Description of the Ex-child soldiers**

Sl.No	Details
1.	<p><b>Ex-Combatant 1.</b>  <b>Male, 21 years</b></p> <p>Joined the Maoist at the age of 12-13 years. Joined as porter and helped carry rice from one place to another. Formally underwent Military training at the age of 15-16 years. Stayed with the Maoist for 5-6 months and later decided to leave the group and continue his education.</p> <p><b><i>Motivation to join the Maoist</i></b></p> <p>It was voluntary decision to join the group. As a child he had observed the atrocities and ill-treatment of the army and wanted to fight back. The Maoist too had the same view. Other factors influencing his decision to join the armed group was regular interaction with the visiting Maoist in the village and peers who has already joined the group.</p>
2.	<p><b>Ex-Combatant 1.</b>  <b>Male, 26 years</b></p> <p>Joined the Maoist at the age of 15-16 years. Was associated with the armed group (PLA) right from the beginning. First came in association with the Maoist student union and continued to be with them.</p> <p><b><i>Motivation to join the Maoist</i></b></p> <p>The prevalent socio-economic conditions in the village and lack of proper support system or addressing system to look into the issues. The only group that was reaching out to the people or assuring/promising to handle the grievances of the people was the Maoist group. And hence decided to join the Maoist.</p>
3.	<p><b>Ex-Combatant 3</b>  <b>Female, 27 years</b></p> <p>Came in contact with the student union of the Maoist army at the age of 13-14 years. Joined the PLA at the age of 17 years. Was involved in 15-16 wars (“Morchas”).</p> <p><b><i>Motivation to join the Maoist</i></b></p> <p>The status of girl and women was an always a point of concern. Wanted to know why they are treated unequally, cause for domestic violence, abuse. Harboured a strong desire to improve their condition.</p>

	<p>She was influenced by the Maoist Student Union who shared their views of equality in the armed group.</p>
4.	<p><b>Ex-Combatant 4</b> <b>Female, 22 years</b></p> <p>Came across the Maoist group during one of her visits to her grandmother's house. The Maoist took shelter at her grandmother's house. She was 15 years old.</p> <p><b><i>Motivation to join the Maoist</i></b></p> <p>Was very impressed and carried away with the way the Maoist presented themselves, spoke and shared their views. Felt that change is necessary and was convinced, revolution and fighting against the discrimination was the ultimate way out.</p> <p>Joined the cultural group, as she liked to dance and sing. Later she also worked as messenger, carrying letters from one group to the other.</p>
5.	<p><b>Ex-Combatant 5</b> <b>Female, 23 years</b></p> <p>She joined the PLA at the age of 16 years. Her association with the Maoist was through her elder sister, who had joined the PLA.</p> <p>In her case it was not really a motivation, rather a no way out. When her sister dies, she decided to join the Maoist group.</p>

## 1.9 Ethics

As the topic of research is very sensitive, the researcher was aware of the issues of dignity, self-respect, confidentiality etc. of the participants. Participants were interviewed only after gaining their consent for the interviews. This was done after they were briefed about the nature of research, what the researcher is trying to study and the types of questions the researcher will be asking. Participants entered the research study with the full understanding that at any point if they don't want to be a part of the study, do not want to answer any questions; they are free to do so. They were under no compulsion and were made to feel free.

## 1.10 Study Area

Following communication and discussions with the NGO staff in Nepal, it was decided to focus the research in the mid-Western region of Rolpa, Rukum and Salyan. The districts considered to be the fort of people's war. Dang was also chosen as one of the study area. According to the NGO staff in Dang district, this was also one of the main strong holds of the Maoist war. The idea was to identify ex - girl soldiers from these districts, stay in the villages/district for a

couple of days and interact with ex-girl soldiers and conduct Focus Group Discussion with the family/village members. But, due to lack of information, permission and cooperation from the donor organization it was not possible to access primary data from these chosen districts.

Thereafter the researcher had to change the design and go with the flow and depend on information sources as and when available. So the study was basically concentrated in Kathmandu and Chitwan district.

## **1.11 Challenges**

The research project was conceptualized at the beginning of the year. Initially it was planned to conduct the research in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka, from my readings and view point formed a very interesting ground for conducting the study on Girl Soldiers. Contrary to all the literature, depicting the girls as victims, in the Sri Lankan context, they were described as, 'internationally, as among the toughest, most committed warriors in the world [...] half of the guerrillas are women armed with rifles, grenades or bombs' (Briggs. 2005:114). The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had a separate women's front called the 'Liberation Birds'. And they underwent tough training like their male counterparts. This gave an image/understanding of girl soldiers as opposed to those read about in the African context.

However, due to logistic and security issues and unavoidable circumstances, the study focus had to shift from Sri Lanka to Nepal. The shift took place as late as late June 2011, while the study was planned to commence in mid-July. In the first instance, Nepal was also chosen, as so far the limited literature on girl soldiers, as in the case of Sri Lanka, did not depict them as being victims of war. Studies/literature did not show them to be used for sexual favors or being abused by fellow male soldiers or men in power position. They were provided training alongside men and had the capacity to go up the power ladder, if they had the ability. There was no stopping them on the grounds of being females.

This helped to decide Nepal as being possible research field to explore girls having joined voluntarily, being active agents, and capable of taking on responsibilities in adverse conditions too. Also the availability of resources (NGOS listing, NGO personnel, key informants and contacts) was a crucial deciding factor for choosing Nepal.

### ***Getting access to the ex-girl soldiers***

With communications and contacts in hand, and assurances of all possible support, including providing contacts and interviews with ex girl soldiers, the researcher implemented the study in Nepal. Based on interactions with the field staff of the NGO, Dang District was chosen as one of the study areas. Dang was among the highly influenced Maoist areas. Also post interactions with some of the NGOs, many of them had their project sites in Dang.

After having travelled half a day from Kathmandu to Dang, I began contacting various NGOs and field staff to provide me with contact details of girl soldiers. All communications and attempts met with a dead end and no

support or help whatsoever in contacting the participants. Everyone suggested I contact their Head Office in Kathmandu, who in turn suggested I contact the funding organisations for the project dealing with rehabilitation of child soldiers.

The funding/implementing organisations were very reluctant to impart any details or access on phone, and suggested the researcher come to Kathmandu to meet them personally. The visit to Dang resulted in returning without being able to gather any data/interviews.

Though the NGO staff in Kathmandu and their field staff in Dang had assured of full support in identifying and contacting the participants, it took the researcher almost two weeks to understand the situation and the dynamics.

The reason provided was that the data pertaining to the child soldiers is very confidential. The group of children, here they were referring to the Verified Minors Late Recruiters (VMLR) groups, numbering around 4008. This group was termed as disqualified and were highly resentful, frustrated and angry for being disqualified and called 'Ayogya'. The disqualification was done on the basis of age; they were below the age of 18 years and could not be kept in the cantonments with the other ex-combatants. The demarcation was done by United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN), a special body set up by the UN.

The researcher could finally interact with three ex girl soldiers. But did not have the freedom of easy access and interaction. The date, place and time were prefixed by a young male ex-combatant and the researcher was not in the best position to bargain for a better location. Had to agree with logistics set. As a young female student in a foreign country, it was intimidating to reach an unknown area and hotel for the interviews. The researcher did not have the freedom of holding one-to-one interview and had to do a group session. This was unexpected and the initial plan had to be changed in the last minute. The three girls had to be interviewed together; this probably would have influenced the responses of the girls subsequently interviewed. With limited time and access, there was no opportunity to have second round of interviews. The researcher had to cover all grounds, as much as possible in the first interview. There was no chance to verify information/details.

Another major challenge was the authenticity of the information shared by the ex-girl soldiers. Prior to the session, one of the girls was taken to a separate room where she was probably briefed on what to share or what not to. And this would have been repeated with the other two ex-soldiers as well. Hence, there is no way to cross verify the details through subsequent round of interaction.

During the fourth week of the field visit (last week) the researcher was successful in getting permission to interview 5-6 ex-girl soldiers. The initial meeting got postponed as the girls were participating in a torch march and a procession against the State and CPN (M) for not addressing their issues. These girls were arrested by the police and taken into custody. After their release they refused to come for the interview or cooperate. Their question was, 'what do we get after talking to them (researcher)?' Under the circumstances the researcher did not press for an interview.

One of the interviews arranged on the last day of the field turned to be false respondent. The researcher was given the contact details of female Constitution Assembly (CA) Member and an ex-Maoist. During phone commun-

cation to fix a possible date for meeting, she confirmed herself as a CA. However half way through the interview she said she is not a CA member and questioned what does CA member mean. The researcher has received the wrong contact details. And hence interaction with a CA ex-Maoist female member could not take place.

Talking to the young women of their experience was not a difficult task, but probing them further, asking for details of their roles and what they did while in the armed group was a challenge. Asking sensitive question resulted in them closing up and refusing to provide more details. The researcher had to avoid asking these questions.

Other logistic challenges included finding a local investigator to help with the interviews and translation. This took two weeks and some of the interview could not be scheduled until then. Also the translator being very fresh with no prior experience, the researcher was not sure of the flow of conversation between the ex-combatants and the translator and had to frequently request for the brief of the responses in order to flow the interview in the right direction. While the researcher posed questions in Hindi, the ex-combatants responded in Nepali and not Hindi.

Data collection proved to be a challenging task when the NGO personnel failed to provide any further assistance after having assured of all possible cooperation and assistance. Lack of proper understanding of the protocol to gain permission and access to the ex-combatants was another factor responsible. The NGO/INGO were also hesitant in sharing data/information or interviews being recorded, fearing that these information may be published in newspapers. The funding organization had refused to provide any contacts or help. Although the researcher was told that she could try and explore on her own to get access, this would have been easier had the researcher been a Nepali national. But being a foreign national it was not easy to gain confidence and access in a short span of four weeks and had to be highly dependent on local contacts. Another challenge is quoting the interviews without giving details of the respondents since many of them refused to be recorded or name quoted.

## Chapter 2

### Background

Nepal at one time was known as a peaceful country in South Asia. In 1970s, Nepal was called as “Zone of Peace” by the late King Birendra. There are various debates on the cause of civil war in Nepal. The outlook on civil varies according to the field one is looking at it from. Sharma (2006:1237), in his paper puts forth the view that political scientist and anthropologist base their view on lack of political will and ethnic discrimination leading to grievances and thereby leading to civil unrest. The paper highlights the study conducted by Collier and Hoeffler as one of the comprehensive studies in understanding Civil war from political science, anthropology and economic viewpoints. And sites economic factors as the major cause in civil war rather than ethnicity or political suppression. Bista (1991:1) explains that certain sections of the society in Nepal became impatient with slow pace of development and the increasing economic disparity among the sections of the society, leading to dissatisfaction and accumulation of wealth in the hands of privileged class.

The Nepal civil war, according to Sharma (2006:1238) is not caused by ethnic or religious tension. Bista (1991:3) too states in his book, that the conflict should not be seen as an ethnic or for that matter religious. He argues that religion has been a central feature of Nepali life and they have always been open to imbibing the various religious traditions and colorful rituals. It is not political either, because the civil war broke out even when political rights and civil liberties were increasing during the democracy process in early 1990s. According to the Maoists, social and economic injustice against the poor, particularly in rural and remote areas, is the reason for their fight against the government (Sharma. 2006:1238). Developing and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are seen as being 17 times more prone to civil unrest than the developed countries. And economic failure is at the root of this unrest.

Lack of sustained economic growth, failed development efforts and decline in development expenditure leading to cut down/suspension of irrigation, health and education projects, high rate of unemployment, poverty, rural-urban inequality, lack of alternate source of employment lead to frustration among the rural youth (especially). And this was irrespective of ethnic and religious background. The grounds seemed just right for the Maoist to mobilize the youth in their fight against the system. The Maoist, a left wing party, demanded for the abolition of the Monarchy and called for a one party communist rule. They began to mobilize youth from the rural and remote areas, and trained 2,000 armed fighters. They declared a people’s war in February 13, 1996.

The Maoist struggle began from February 1996 to April 2006. Main objective of the uprising was to protest against the Monarchic rule and that by the dominant upper class/caste people and to call for a New People’s Democracy (Shah. 2009:225). The Maoist believed that only armed struggle would help them replace the inadequate ruling class with a democratic republic that would represent the poor and the peasants. The Maoist group was operational in the mid-west parts of Nepal; Rolpa, Rukum, Salyan, Jajarkot and

Sindhuli districts. Gradually the movement expanded to the rest of the country. When the Nepal Monarchy finally pulled back from power, the Communist Party of Nepal won the elections and formed the coalition government (Shakya.2011:557). The Maoist group also slowly began to take shape of a formal political party; they collaborated with seven mainstream political party and went on to become one of the strongest political parties of Nepal. November 21, 2006 a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the Government and the Maoists, formally bringing to an end the ten year insurgency.

## 2.1 The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), 2006

November 21, 2006, the CPA was signed by the Prime Minister of Nepal and Maoist Chairman. The CPA covered aspects under broad headings such as (1) political, social, economic transformation and conflict management; (2) management of armies and arms, (3) relating to Maoist Army, (4) relating to Nepali army, (5) ceasefire, (6) human rights, fundamental rights and following humanitarian laws, (7) dispute settlement and implementation mechanism, (8) implementation and follow-up.

The peace agreement calls for 'progressive restructuring of the State by resolving prevailing problems related with class, ethnicity, regional and gender differences'. It prioritizes democracy, peace, prosperity, progressive social and economic transformation, independence, integrity, sovereignty, and prestige of the State.

The peace agreement states end of armed conflict, guaranteeing sovereignty, progressive political solution, democratic restructuring of the State and social, economic and cultural transformation of Nepal constituent assembly.

As per the agreement, ceasefire is defined as restriction of all kinds of attacks, abductions, disappearance, imprisonment, mobilization and strengthening of the armed force, attacking or armed actions targeted against each other (Nepal Government and Maoist) and any form of destructive provoking or inciting activities in the society.

The peace agreement also laid down certain agenda for the Maoist combatants. It states that the combatants were to be placed in seven temporary camps and three smaller camps, also called satellite camps, located in the periphery of the seven main camps. On completion of the cantonment, the time period is not specified in the peace agreement; Nepal government would take up the responsibility of providing for their ration and other facilities. A special committee will be formed to carry out the monitoring, integration and rehabilitation of the combatants.

As per the agreement, children below the age of 18 should not be included any kind of military force. And those already affected should be rescued immediately and adequate provisions should be made for the rehabilitation.

On one hand, the peace agreement looks quite comprehensive and appears to cover all the fields/areas broadly. However, at a closer look, it does not cover or describe how the combatants would be rehabilitated. The agreement does not define or describe what they mean by rehabilitation. As far as children are concerned it agrees to specially protect rights of children and the stop all forms of sexual exploitation and violent acts against children, but does

not state how. Though it mentions children affected will be rescued, there is no specifications of which groups of children are they referring to. It makes no mention of Children Affected by Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG) or the child combatants. This is left rather vague and no specifications regarding the kind of provisions for their “rehabilitation”.

## 2.2 Militarization of Children

The Maoist used cultural medium that included programmes such as singing and dancing and carried strong messages of political ideology. The ideology was based on equality, and this went very well with the people of lower caste/class and ethnic groups, who were the most deprived.

“Indoctrination during the recruitment process may play a stronger role in many Asian conflicts because of the political sophistication and clear political agenda [...] child recruitment by these groups often is marked by a strong element of political indoctrination, as armed groups endeavour to convince children that it is their duty to join the armed struggle” (Becker. 2007:3). One of the indoctrination forms, short-term abduction solely for indoctrination sessions was said to be used in Nepal and not by any other armed groups. Children are taken away from schools to another place and forced to witness cultural programmes. These sessions last from a couple of days to weeks and sometimes longer. Children are allowed to return home after these sessions (also called *shiviras*), but it is not unusual to see many of them choose to join or forced to stay back and join the Maoist. Other ways of staying connected is through collecting donations for the armed group.

Children were recruited both by the State and the Maoist movement. Children were forcefully recruited through the ‘one House, One Person’, policy. They were recruited as combatants, scouts, spies, porters, cooks and part of cultural troop. Whereas the State army used them as informants, spies and cooks. An unpublished report of HimRights, 2008 states, in 2006 post ceasefire and during the peace negotiations the Maoist abducted nearly 10-200 children from schools. The school was the recruitment ground for both the Nepal army and the Maoist group. Students unions were created and music and culture was used to mobilize people and encourage them to join the Maoist movement. The school recruitment based on cultural programmes assuring everyone equal rights, free from discrimination of caste and gender, liberation of the oppressed, ensure identity, language and cultural rights of the underprivileged and marginalized. (Shakya. 2011:560). And the children were influenced by the ideology, cultural programmes. “Children were told that Maoist are fighting for the people, fighting against government corruption, and that they must support the cause” (Becker. 2007:11). These programmes are often conducted by children of same age group they are trying to mobilise or encourage to join. Some children were greatly influenced by these programmes and decided to enlist; another factor is also seeing their friends join the group. [...] the vast majority of his classmates had joined. He decided to join too, and said, “I was impressed by their speeches and very influenced by what they said about fighting for the people and fighting corruption”. (ibid: 11)

Other factors that influenced their decision are promises of opportunities to continue education, free meals and the status of power.

### **2.3 Girl Soldiers in Nepal – The Maoist Volunteerist View**

Following the Peace Agreement, 4008 combatants were identified as Verified Minors and Late Recruiters (VMLR), and of these 74% (2,973) are identified as minors and 30% are girls or young women (Colekessian. A. 2009:4). Thirty percent of the Maoist army is said to consist of women. In the Maoist stronghold regions, one third of the composition is said to be female.

Girls' participation in the Maoist struggle is also looked upon as positive step towards gender equality, by the Maoist as well as girls and women. The existing social socio-economic scenario that the Maoist used for their benefit and motivated the girls to join the Maoist "Voluntarily". Limited opportunities for education, arranged marriage, lack of property rights. "One seventeen-year-old 14 girl said that the Maoists initially convinced her to join their campaign by explaining that as a woman she would never be able to achieve anything, even if she continued her studies. She said, "I had finished sixth grade by then. They were saying that young girls like me should join them because in Nepal there was no point in studying, since in any case I would not be able to get a job". (Becker. 2007:13-14)

It could be seen as a dream come true of liberation, freedom from oppression, forced marriages, and revenge for the death of loved ones. Girls were molested, abused by the Royal Nepal Army. The existence of strict sexual rules was also a push factor, to know that you are promised of liberation and freedom and no more sexual violence. In the Maoist they provided training alongside male combatants and were encouraged to reach the top with encouragement stating 'you can do it'.

# Chapter 3

## Conceptual Framework

### 3.1 Ideological Commitment

Punamaki, 1996 defines Ideological commitment as a “consistent belief in the justification of the national war and the readiness to participate in it and to interpret its consequences in favourable terms, as well as a defiant stance toward the enemy”. Ideological commitment was further described as glorification of war, patriotic involvement and defiant attitude towards the enemy. In a study conducted by Kanagaratnam. et al 2005, on ideological commitment and posttraumatic stress in former child soldiers, it was found that “individuals with strong ideology are those who have been successful in integrating the past experiences into a whole [...] and therefore report having less frequent symptoms [...] those with a weak ideological commitment at the present are having trouble adapting to the mismatching information and integrating it into their assumptive world” (Kanagaratnam, 2005:513).

An anthropological study on women guerrilla army, it was found that even twenty years after their involvement as guerrillas, ideological commitment was the cause for their feeling of being empowered than seeing themselves as victims of war. Ideological commitment has a very important impact on the mental well-being of the child and in turn on post conflict adjustment. Also in another study by Punamaki and Suleikman, the more the Palestinian children were exposed to political hardships, the more they employed active and courageous mode of coping. They are not necessarily the passive victims any more but are taking active part in political struggles taking place in their society. (Kanagaratnam. et al 2005: 511-513).

The ideological commitment of children living in a war zone/prone society is described as consistence belief in the justification of national war and readiness to participate and interpret the consequences as favourable (Punamaki. 1996:56).

‘Children’s involvement in war, whatever the ‘justifications’ may be, should always be considered as forced, as they cannot truly comprehend their action in war. The responsibility must be taken by the adult caregivers. They cannot truly comprehend their action in war’ following definition of the abuse of children in armed conflict is proposed: ‘The involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in armed conflict they do not truly comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent, and which adversely affects the child’s right to unhindered growth and identity as a child’ (De Silva. H, C. Hobbs & H. Hanks., 2001:125)

“[...] increased experience of political violence may increase commitment to traditional group ideologies, while greater commitment to one's group ideology may in turn lead young people to be perpetrators of violence, thereby increasing their experience of conflict” (Muldoon. O.T, K. Wilson., 2001: 114-115).

### 3.2 The Rights Perspective

Participation is one of the guiding principles of the Convention, as well as one of its basic challenges. **Article 12** of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affirms that the State Parties shall assure to the child capable of forming his/her own views the right to express the views freely in all the matter affecting the child and the child being given due weight in accordance with his/her age and maturity.

The child's right to participate is one of the guiding principles of the UNCRC and is also said to be one of the challenges. Children have the right to participate in decision making process, relevant to their lives and influence any decision taken for them.

At the same time it also explains that their views should not be ignored, and does not mean that their opinion should be endorsed automatically.

The UNCRC document on Right to Participation explains that expressing an opinion is not the same as taking the decision but, yes, ability to take the decision is influenced. It calls for a process of dialogue, a process where the adults must provide direction and guidance. A process where the children will understand why particular options are followed, or why decisions are taken (<http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Right-to-Participation.pdf>).

The question arising here is how do you define maturity? Age and maturity of children of one group would not be the same as the other group. Children on the street may have different level of maturity corresponding to their circumstances to that of children in children's home/State institutions or those with families. A child living in conflict free State may not necessarily question his/her rights and decide to resort to arms to fight injustice/discrimination/liberation/abuse.

While on one hand the UNCRC speaks of age and maturity and give the child the right to express, the preamble puts down that the child due to its physical and mental immaturity needs special safeguards and care, including legal protection.

Article 13 gives the child the right to freedom of expression which includes freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds in the form of art or any other media of the child's choice. How can one interpret the rights of a child in the context of the Maoist cultural group? In the light that the ex-combatant was convinced of the ideology of the Maoist group. Joins the cultural group to express his/her views and communicates using the medium of songs, drama and dance.

Article 16, this article focuses on the protection right, of safeguarding against arbitrary or unlawful interferences with his or her privacy, family, or correspondence, unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation. But in a conflict State, these very rights are denied and violated. With the breakdown in law and priority on other issues, children tend to slide down the priority list. The State too appears not take notice of the protection of children leading to children wanting to take revenge and getting convinced of armed group ideology which promises of all that is denied or not fulfilled by the State.

Article 39 speaks of the responsibility of the State to take appropriate measures for physical and psychological reintegration of a child victim,

includes armed conflict among others such as abuse, torture, degrading treatment or punishment. The article calls for recovery and reintegration in an environment that fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child. However, here the State appears to have set a limit to the rehabilitation package benefits. For example: setting the limit of education to class 12 or maximum four years and not beyond that. The rights of the child were violated then and today too it appears that they are not fulfilled.

While we have the CRC to safeguard the rights of the child, giving it the right to express his/her views affecting their lives, forming associations, and the right to be protected and be provided with all appropriate measures for reintegration, what about in a conflict situation? In a situation where the circumstances compel the children to think out of the box, charge up their thinking with questions and trying to find answers. Finding answers leading to making decisions and going a step ahead and joining groups to implement them.

#### ***From Ideological Commitment to Voluntary Recruitment***

Can we see a journey here from ideological commitment to development of agency, and children wanting to stand up for their rights? Seeing war as a natural, justified means to achieve the end. Economic and political unrest, inequality, marginalization creates atmosphere that affects the children too. A situation where a segment of child population raises questions and wants answers. When taking into consideration these factors what would the stand be from a rights perspective? In the light of a conflict situation where the State is standing on crumbling foundation ridden with violence, killing, abuse, discrimination, and violation of rights, children are exposed to environment which is not stable. They are greatly influence by what they see around them and experience, especially seeing their family and friends suffer. These real life experiences influence their way of thinking and acting, compel them to question the system and look out for solutions. They live the experiences.

### **3.3 Reintegration**

“Reintegration is the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and a national responsibility and often necessitates long-term external assistance’, as per UN, 2010 Operational Guide (*Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (IDDRS).

Having defined reintegration, the next question would be “what are we trying to reintegrate ex-combatants into? [...] A recent review of DDR processes in the DRC, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan indicates that in all three cases one of the largest constraints to reintegration programmes was the fact that ex-combatants were to be integrated into a largely destroyed economy” (Specker. 2008:6). Not just a destroyed economy but also a society, community and family. A society, community, family that has also undergone changes during the time the girl joined the Maoist and has now returned probably as a youth or an adult. The changes might not be as drastic as in the cases of civil wars in other countries; nevertheless, the family has faced the trauma of war,

killing, abuse, violence. The decision of joining the Maoist group might not necessarily be accepted by the family of the girls.

The reintegration programmes focus on the individual more than the other support system in and around the ex-girl soldier.

Also the programmes are donor driven and restricted due to budgetary constraints. This further limits the scope of the process. “The reasons why support for longer-term reintegration often have not been forthcoming are: 1) a lack of funding; 2) a lack of proper preparation of DDR programmes; or 3) a conscious decision to limit targeted assistance to ex-combatants only. (Specker L . 2008:4). Also limited time period means lack of sustained programme.

### **3.4 Weaving back into the web of social life**

‘Women and girls join armed groups as a means by which to flee oppression and obtain gender equalities and liberties. Returning to contexts in which they no longer have the same equalities they have struggled for can create tensions and lead to conflict’ (Colekessian. 2009:6). And it is very important to take into consideration the transformation the girl child has undergone during her association with the Maoist force. They have transgressed values and gender roles. As explained by Colekessian. (2009), women have transformed gender identity with the armed groups and their return can pose challenges.

“Returning to contexts in which they no longer have the same equalities they have struggled for can create tensions and lead to conflict. Such an understanding is important within the Nepal context in which many women were drawn to the PLA under the framework of an egalitarian system (including gender equality). Having obtained a sense of empowerment and equality, the traditional gender norms to which many women and girls return can produce specific threats to peace, including the expulsion of women from their families and communities and re-recruitment into armed forces and rebel groups in which they feel supported. Female ex-combatants have opted to relocate [...] rather than return to their respective communities in which they encounter stigma and a pressure to return to traditional gender conventions” (Colekessian. 2009:6).

Having gained a sense of empowerment, this can be threatened post the conflict phase, when the family expects the girls to return to traditional roles and norms.

In report compilation by Saferworld (INGO), it is stated that many female ex-combatants fear losing their newly acquired empowered status in return to a society entrenched with patriarchal values, norms and expectations. They are filled with sense of rejection and fear. “Hoped to dismantle the old society and replace [it] with a new progressive society that respects equal rights of women,” (Shanta Karki, female excombatant, Nepal) and that in cases now, “My family doesn’t accept me and society looks at me with hatred...I don’t know how I will survive now and where to live” (Rachna Shah,21, female excombatant, Nepal). Among the 136 female combatants interviewed by Saferworld in an ongoing study, 80% feared rejection from their families and communities based upon their changed gender role and community perception of Maoist female combatants as promiscuous and aggressive because of their role in the PLA. The study also identifies a fear of loss of empowerment upon

return. The reports emphasize the importance of supporting the transgression of gender roles through efforts that do not reaffirm traditional gender norms and facilitate community understanding. (Colekessian. 2009:12)

“Having experienced what is unimaginable for most people; girls now face reconstructing fragile lives as civilians” (Boothby, Strang and Wessells, 2006). With the families and community have a gendered perspective about girl and their roles, the reintegration can be painful, especially when the girls have undergone sexual violence and have been involved in violence. It becomes difficult to perceive them doing these acts and can hamper their acceptance into family. In a traditional conservative society like India and Nepal, the girl has to face all the more humiliation and stigma of having stayed in the Maoist camp with men and having to perform acts not acceptable for a girl.

In a study that was conducted of 111 girls and young women, it was concluded that “community initiatives that lack local support have not been very effective in promoting girl’s acceptance, protection, and reintegration; further, local communities were perceived as one of the biggest obstacles to girls’ reintegration” (Boothby, Strang, Wessels, 2006:100).

While being in the war zones, these girls/women have performed tougher roles, but once they return to family and community what is expected is for them to perform their traditional roles. How does this help in reintegration? The identity, resilience and agency that have developed, is it taken into consideration? Are the strengths used for the welfare of the girls?

But at the same time taking part in the conflict is looked at as bringing positive changes in the lives of the children and women involved. “It helped create space for greater leadership amongst women and youth, and the inclusion of diverse groups of Nepal like Dalit women, indigenous Madhesi, differently abled/disabled, sexual and gender and other ethnic minorities” (Shakya. 2011:559).

Girls and women are now and aware of their strengths and willing to take on more active leadership roles. “Travel to different parts of the country exposed many of them to human and geographical diversity and changed their worldview, whereas usually they would have been limited to their villages and their communities. They did not have opportunities to deal and interact with diverse groups of people, which they later got with the start of the conflict” (Shakya. 2011:559).

## Chapter 4

# Experiences and Reflections from the Field

This section brings in reflections from the field. Voices from the interviews of ex-child soldiers, NGO/INGO staff. Sentences in italics presented in quotes are from the field. The focus was to gain understanding on experiences of girl soldiers, their recruitment and life post the signing of the peace accord. The section has been categorized into broad headings based on the data.

### 4.1 People, Family and Girl Soldiers

The section on people, family and girl soldiers deals with the experiences of the ex-girl soldiers post the conflict. The view points are basically from NGO personnel, some from the ex-girl soldiers and also the INGO staff.

On a whole the respondents (I/NGO) shared that they do see issues/problems in the society and family accepting the ex-girl soldiers back. One of the staff members shared that Nepal, like India has traditional value system where girls are concerned. This she explained stating that when a girl leaves the house and stays away even for a night, questions are raised by the people and the society. The system of marriage prevalent is marriage with consent of the family members. But when in the Maoist group, the girls have been away for a considerable and would have got married within the group. They return home with children and there is high possibility that you would not be accepted by the family. Stigmatised for disgracing the family. The issue is double fold if the marriage has taken place with a member from another caste/community.

*“But after discharge, yes, girls face stiffer challenges. Due to various reasons, stigma. The way the community looks to them. Nepal has traditional values, the way we look at females. If one has left the house, stayed away, even a night there are questions asked by the society. Even more for those who have married. When they were combatants they were married. Again we have the culture of marrying with consent. So it is usually the parents who take the initiative to get the girls married. So if you have gone out with the Maoist for three years and come back with a child the possibility is that you will not be accepted by the families. And more in the case of if you are married in different caste” (NGO Staff).*

Acceptance within the family and the society, apparently also depends on the caste/community and the tribal group. Acceptance is more among the indigenous/tribal groups. Based on interaction with one of the staff, among the tribal ethnic groups there is more freedom among them on sexual relationship. *“But in general I think if she is from different ethnic groups, indigenous groups I think it is slightly easier to reintegrate than if they have come from Brahmin, Kshatriya you know, and Hindu or Muslim background”*. So even if the girl has been away from the house, she is not looked down on or stigmatised by the people.

*“They have said for them it is very hard to reintegrate. Marriage is very difficult. On the other hand in Bardiya district, we also saw that those ex child soldiers, girl soldiers who returned they were married off as soon as they returned. It is very difficult to say, I think depending on the community, ethnic group I think there is lot of difference. I think amongst*

*Tharo, may be particularly that district we saw lot of marriages. But in other places, I think that is one of the biggest challenges, for them to return. One of the ways of reintegration, verification of reintegration is marriage and I think that has been very difficult” (NGO Staff).*

The push was more towards getting the girls married off immediately on their return and sends them away. Although no statistics is available to support this claim by the staff, but a phenomenon that was observed.

Acceptance into society, family and the experiences of it also depend upon the family of the ex-girl soldier. If the family is very supportive, then it is easier for the girl to adjust to life post conflict and return home. The three ex-girl soldiers also shared that they had no problems in returning home and being accepted by their respective families and society.

Apart from caste and ethnic background, economic status (class) is another deciding factor in readjustment of the ex- girl soldier. “*Those who have well off family, they have good chance to reintegrate into their family. But who have poor economic condition they have really difficult reintegrate in their family also*”.

The UN Operational Guide defines Reintegration as the process where the ex-combatant acquires the civilian status, sustainable employment and income. A process that takes place in the community at local level. But in the context of Nepal, the ex-combatants (includes the ex-girl soldiers too) and the Maoist argue that they have never been away from the community and family, so they don't need reintegration. And had also disagreed on accepting the DDR programme, instead they have the Security Social Rehabilitation (SSR). “*DDR is not used here. It is a SSR process, because the Maoist do not like the word DDR. Because they say, they don't have to be reintegrated into the society. They have always been a part of the society. They have not been away from the community*”.

Acceptance and adjustment is not easy for the girls too. During the conflict and as a part of the Maoist Army they were trained and motivated to reach the top. They have been empowered. Especially when the decision to join has been their own, influenced by the ideological stand of the group where they felt that this is the right choice. To return to the society and go back to the earlier role is not easy. “*For those girls returning it is hard for them to go back to traditional roles. And for parents to accept the girls because I think they are expect girls to be as before when she left. They don't expect the changes in her*”.

While the ex-girl soldiers deal with rejection from the society and people in and around her family, she also has to deal with the rejection from her own family. “*Last time I talked to one girl, she expressed dissatisfaction over parents like, you have gone out of your interest, so why you came here. I don't want you to be here. First of all she joined Maoist group because of the false promises made to her*”. During the Girl Child National Consultation organised by one of the NGOs in Nepal, an ex-girl soldier expressed that the community does not accept them.

The girls have been away from home, lived with male combatants and the family and the society tends to have a negative thinking. “*Because they have been in Maoist army one thing has to do with sexual relationship. The main problem is the community people have a negative disposition. Living with the male combatant, they have just developed negative disposition like the girl spent lots of time with male combatant. She might*

*be sexually harassed or abused. This kind of social stigma they are facing mainly in the society. Not only society ....they are not getting supportive role from the family also”.*

So where they were treated as equals in the Maoist Army, returning to a society that is still embedded in social norms and expectations becomes difficult for them. “*But the women, who were treated as equals in the PLA and bore arms, are now encountering rejection from their communities and struggling with traditional female roles*”.

“*My family doesn’t accept me and society looks at me with hatred. Not only did her family in Dailekh District, 500km northwest of Kathmandu, prevent her from entering the house, neighbours demanded she leave the village for good*” (Humanitarian News and Analysis, November 7, 2011). Many families believe that while their daughters were on the battlefield, they were with other men outside marriage - something that could bring shame on their family.

## 4.2 Joining the Maoist Movement

There is no statistical data to reveal how many joined voluntarily, or were driven by ideological commitment. There are rough statistics on the number of children that were abducted and recruited in to the Maoist group. “*It is hard to say how many children were involved because it is very transient. Children who joined, some left, some left within a month, in couple of years. So it is very hard to say what the percentage was*”.

“*The main ideology the Maoist had, they are fighting for the deprived people, marginalised people, dalit janjathi people. And they are going against of those elite groups. They have discriminated against them long time. So this kind of ideology they spread through song and dance. I think from my opinion children fascinated with these kind of cultural programme and they started to join. I think they are not only fascinated, I think some of them are also forced to join in the Maoist*”.

The ideology was spread through the cultural groups. The cultural wing of the Maoist Army conducted camps and awareness programmes and villages, mainly in the schools. And under the prevailing conditions children were drawn towards the group. “*They used to come in the school and say if we resolve the problem, when the war is over you will have better future. Immature children they are fascinated by the promises, false promises. Then they join. And mostly in the Tharu community like indigenous people, children from these families have difficult to survive in their family. They have low income and low economic condition so ...because of that reason they themselves decide it is better to join Maoist*”.

The voice here (referring here to the NGO staff), looks at children being immature. But in the light of right to Child Participation, where one sees children having the right to express their opinion, views, and decisions can they be called immature?

The girls were assured and convinced that this is where and this is how they can get their rights and fight against the inequality. “*Most of the marginalised, those who have no voice they think this is the space where they can get their rights. And some joined because their friends joined as kids influenced by their own peers*”.

The three ex-girl soldiers that I interacted with claimed to have joined the Maoist as they were convinced with the ideology of the group. They recog-

nised the cause to be the same and that joining the Maoist would help them realise them.

Ideological indoctrination is seen also in the cases of Sri Lanka (LTTE) and Colombia (FARC). Prabhakaran, LTTE Leader in recruiting the female force put forth the ideology that, “[t]he ideology of women liberation is a child born out of the womb of our liberation struggle. The Women’s liberation movement is, [...] an integral part of the greater Tamil struggle. [...] Tamil women are subjected to intolerable suffering as a consequence of male chauvinistic oppression, violence and from social evils of casteism and dowry [...] the struggle against male chauvinistic oppression is not a struggle against men. It is an ideological struggle against the ignorance of men” (Alison, 2003:45).

Female combatants on FARC also claim to be won over by daily ideological indoctrination which included lectures on values of organisation, its self-possessed commitment to a better society and principle of gender equality (Herrera & Porch, 2008:616-617).

### 4.3 Life in the Maoist Group

From the interviews not much information could be gained on lives of the girls in the armed group. The limited sharing comes from the NGO interactions with the ex-girl soldiers. They had strict rules and regulations to be followed and not adhering to these meant being punished. Especially if the male soldiers teased the female soldiers.

The Maoist group had strict code of conduct as far as relationships were concerned. Similar phenomena were also seen in the Tamil Tigers. “The LTTE due to their strict code and respect for women, sexual abuse was prohibited. Any forced sexual assault or abuse meant immediate death of the offender (Briggs, 2005).

*“But they said they were very very strict in terms of having relationship, teasing girls or whatever. But they talked mostly about war, walking all night, how they were able to move from one place to another. That’s what they talked about rather than human relationship or what kind of relationship they had”.*

### 4.4 Empowerment/Agency post-Civil war

The general view of the NGO/INGO staff is that girls have been empowered during their association with the Maoist army. The training and the roles they have had to undertake provided them the opportunity to voice out their concerns. The twelve years civil war is seen as having empowered the girls. Coming out from an oppressed patriarchal society. *“Now also if you look at the other girls in the society, in the community and the girls who were a part of the movement, if you look at the difference between that, then these are more open minded, more vocal, these can fight for their rights. But the other ones, they are like dominated part of the community or dominated part of the society like right from the beginning, so they are not that vocal .....they know that these are their right but they cannot fight for their rights”.*

Sections of society such as the ethnic women and girls, who never raised voice or put forth their concerns, joining the Maoist seems to have provided them with an opportunity to voice their concerns and fight for their rights. *“Especially among women and girls are that there is lot of change. Among communities,*

*ethnic groups which never voice, would not have any voice, who were not visible I think the conflict positively looking at, it really raised the issues, it really gave power to, space and power to women and girls. In very young people, in battalion commanders they were taking up lot of roles they would have never done otherwise. And I think it was a very empowering process for them”.*

Not really critiquing the Child Rights, the NGO staff also shared that not everything needs to be looked at as violation of Child Rights. Looking at the empowerment and the positive changes, it is believed that girls have been given space to grow as well. *“So you can’t say it is all against child rights or whatever. I am not saying war is good, but I think in some ways it had lot of positive impact”*. However, not every organisation tends to think the same. My understanding from the interactions is, some of the organisations look at them as needing protection and looked after, again as victims not as individuals in their own right, empowered and capable of practicing their agency, make their view/opinion known and capable of making decisions concerning their live. To provide the rehabilitation and see them get into a normal life.

## 4.5 Reintegration

The rehabilitation and reintegration programmes are presently organised by UNICEF in collaboration and support from other INGOs and local NGOs at the field level.

1. UNICEF: education support, psycho social component, and some social reintegration component, peace building activities.
2. UNDP: vocational training and micro enterprises.
3. UNFPA: health related packages.

As defined by the UN Operational Guidelines, it is a process by which the ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income, a process with open time frame and taking place in communities at the local level.

The definition here appears to be more adult centric and not child/youth centric. In case of a child, how would one plan work on acquiring civilian status? And what are the sustainable employment options? Especially for child soldiers who are below 18 years of age or for that matter presently in their early 20s after being discharged from the cantonments, as in the case of Nepal. Having spent their considerable productive part of life in the conflict zone. Again, here, from the child’s point of view the combat life was its productive life and not necessarily attending school.

The rehabilitation package/programme planned by the UN comprises of educational support, vocational training, health education and training and support small business initiatives. However, the planning and implementation is designed in such a way that they fall within the limit set by the Government. Example: Education. The maximum limit is fours of education or grade 12 and not beyond that. The government decides on the highest level. Any programme/package planned should not exceed the amount of one thousand Nepali Rupees.

The programmes also takes into account the gender aspect and special gender related support is provided to ensure that women (30 % of the 4008 VMLRs) have the opportunity to fully participate in the programme including mothers with infants. Provisions include nutritional diet for pregnant women and lactating mother, child care grants for children under -5 years for up to two children during the training period for the mothers. According to the UN Newsroom report, “noting that more than 30 per cent of ex-combatants coming from the cantonment are women. And this this is indeed a very high number and probably the second highest number of any similar type of rehabilitation programme in the world.”

Within these programmes, ex-girl soldiers are provided some additional benefits and support, like providing additional financial assistance to pursue education outside their district. The Maoist and the disqualified ex-combatants are not happy with this package offered by the UN and Government. The Maoist leadership refused to accept the rehabilitation package and demanded for cash incentives also. Their argument being the programmes do not ensure job security post completion of their education and vocational training (Republica, Kathmandu, 2009) This is also in the light of the Maoist movement recruiting the young children (boys and girls) promising jobs and cash incentives.

*“Of course as Maoist they were asking for better packages in terms of money, guaranteed jobs. But the Government defined the highest limit for any package that they would be offered. And came to the figure of 1000 rupees. So any package that they receive will not exceed that amount. So that was the limit that was set by the Government and the Maoist was not happy. They did not agree to the package. So you can offer the packages but we will not approve it. We will not proactively encourage our participants to take up your packages. They can do if they want to but we will not encourage it. We will not facilitate the enrollment”.*

However, there is critique to the programmes and dissatisfaction expressed by the NGOs and the Maoist as well. *“Not much is done, that is the problem with the whole reintegration package. The only thing the people are looking right now in the reintegration package is that they go to school, or some income generation. They are not looking at the differences, the problems, real reintegration into the community. So actually work is not done. ....the only thing they are looking at now is that disqualified child soldiers are getting training. That’s it. Training or education It is not going to be easy at all. And it is not really working with them, it working with the community. Only then they can do reintegration. So right now is all one sided”.*

Critiquing this further is the roles the girls had to play. They were trained equally with their male counterparts and were encouraged to take up top positions in the battalion as well. The programmes planned do not take this into account. *“They have lost a lot coming back in the community. I think when they were in the war...they really transcended lots of norms and barriers. And I think that empowerment should have been maintained. They were used during war and now there is no war so they are just discarded. The kind of whatever that they gained is lost... So they had to just to go back. Some of the girls just did not want to go back. To their own community because they felt that it will be really hard for them to readjust. And also that being in urban area they got access to education, access to other activities. Once they go back, they are from moun-*

*tains.....so whatever empowerment or educational growth they were getting partly that is going to get stopped”.*

#### **4.6 Present Status of the ex-girl soldiers and collective responses**

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between the Maoist and the Government on 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2006 concluding the decade long people’s war. Post the peace accord, the verification process was initiated by UN team (UNMIN, UNICEF, and UNDP) called the Joint Coordination Committee (JCC). The verification process involved identifying and verification of the combatants and also all those who were below 18 years of age and those who were recruited after the signing of the peace accord. A total of 19,602 were identified as members of the Maoist Army, 2,973 as minors and 1,035 as late recruits (<http://www.undp.org.np/programs>). Post the verification process, the ex-soldiers (thirty per cent of whom were girls) were finally released from the twenty cantonments in January – February 2010.

Having been disqualified by the UN, which was done as they were below the age of 18 years or recruited after the peace accord was signed, the ex-child soldiers (includes the girls as well) are not happy with the status of being called disqualified. They were not eligible for any of the programmes meant for the combatants in the cantonment. Also associated with the word “disqualified”, it has a negative ring to it. Translating the word into local Nepalese language, it means ‘ayogya’, which has a negative meaning to it. *“It totally has this negative impact/ connotation. So they are really angry. To be said like you are unfit, is like....and they are like how can we be unfit when we were in all the battles and we did a good job. Whether it is killing or whatever. From whatever point of view they did, they did a good job for them. And I think there is lot of dissatisfaction, lot of anger”.*

The result of being called labelled as disqualified or verified minor has further implications in adjusting to civilian life and being accepted by family. *“You just labelled as verified minor. This kind of response she got from her parent. So she is living with her aunty instead of her parents”.*

As a result of being grouped as VMLRs, they are disqualified from the regular PLA and not entitled to the benefits the PLAs are likely to get in due course. Like the monthly salary the PLAs are drawing in the cantonments. *“Whatever reintegration support that the 19,000 may get so they are not entitled to that”.*

They feel humiliated by the discharge process, being disqualified and would not accept the rehabilitation package.

*“I joined the Maoist army for the sake of liberating my country from repression but now I am suddenly not qualified any more to be in the army,” fumed Karki, who was only 15 when he joined the PLA and has been on the battlefield.*

*“I always wanted to get into politics to liberate our repressed people. I’m not interested in making candles or baskets” another teenager and former combatant (International News and Analysis, 7 November, 2011).*

So the VMLRs are not only angry for being disqualified, but also frustrated at not getting any of the benefits that rest of the ex-combatants are getting and would be getting in the future. “*The group of Verified Minors and Late Recruits (VMLRs) are frustrated because they have been disqualified. They are not part of the regular People’s Liberation Army soldiers any more, which means they will not be entitled to the benefits. The monthly salaries that the PLAs are getting at the cantonment*”. Since they are verified as VMLRs and do not qualify as combatants, they were separated from any benefits the regular combatants will receive. Post the peace accord they continued to stay in the cantonments until January 2010. And probably this might have raised their hopes of receiving a more benefiting settlement in terms of the possible promises made. However, the consequent settlement and to be termed disqualified was not expected.

*“Almost for three years (the ex-child soldiers were placed in the cantonment). So that’s the reason why they are not happy. And with the packages, well, the reason why they were not happy with the packages, they were asking for more. And there was no kind of approval from their mother party. And they had these high expectations that were not managed by the party when they were discharged. They wanted University level education at least, they wanted guaranteed jobs, they wanted good amount of cash to be provided”.*

In the last week in Nepal, the researcher came across photographs in the Nepal newspapers of uprising among the VMLRs. The VMLRs are mobilising support and forming support groups and carrying out protests and torch light marches against the Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (CPN-M) and the State. Unlike the status of ex-girl soldiers in other regions, one can see that they have come together to fight for their rights. Would we be right to see them still victims? Not consider the empowerment and agency developed further during their association with the Maoist also considering the fact that one of the many reasons they decided to join the army was to break the barriers of oppression, fight for equality and the ideological commitment they were convinced about.

That the ex-girl soldiers can stand up for their rights is also reflected in the responses from the NGOs, although this is not necessarily the case for all the ex-girl soldiers. Referring to two of the quotes from the field. “*They are really able to bargain their / make their own choices. And if you want to do it, it will be on their own terms and conditions, which they never did before*”.

*“Also if you look at the other girls in the society, in the community and the girls who were a part of the movement, if you look at the difference between that, then these are more open minded, more vocal, these can fight for their rights. But the other ones, they are like dominated part of the community or dominated part of the society like right from the beginning, so they are not that vocal .....they know that these are their right but they cannot fight for their rights”.*

But at the same time, this has led to them thinking that if there is an alternative armed group they would like to join it. And this process is taking place. Although there is no data show that re-recruitment is happening. One of the NGO maintaining data collaborating with UNICEF, said they were not sure on this aspect. “*No idea if they have been re-recruited from the Maoist groups. That also happened, but we do not have detailed information*”.

On the other hand, some of the ex-girl soldiers have expressed through the forums organised by the NGO that they would like to join other armed groups. “*I think it creates a very volatile situation I would say. Some of the disqualified are also saying if there is any other army we will join. This girl she said, I was in the Maoist army and she got disqualified. And I think she has so much anger, she feels that if there is another army she will join. It is not only to get justice; I think she really liked to be in the army. And also reintegration was so difficult for her. Because she feels that is her space*”.

In the light of the frustration and dissatisfaction felt by group of ex-girl soldiers it is easier to create another group and re-recruit them. A group of military trained ex-combatants are readily available. “*Children who come to our programme, the first day they say I want revenge. And if we can join any other army to get our revenge we are willing to do it*”.

#### 4.7 Return to arms

In the present context two new phenomena are seen. One, the VMLRs forming support groups and conducting rallies, torch light protest marches, strikes and expressing their dissatisfaction and anger in the manner they are being treated. And very much willing to join any other armed group. Second, there are smaller armed groups forming in the Terai belt (the region bordering India). As of year 2011, Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) recorded 91 cases of recruitment. Of which 5 are girls below 18 years. The exact reason for the formation of smaller groups was not explored in depth however one of the assumptions is easy way to attain power. “*After the agreement there are so many new problems emerging. Actually what happened when the Maoist came into the power that phenomena also established the legacy of that someone win the struggle with weapons then it is easy ladder to go to the Government. So after the peace agreement there are so many armed groups that emerged/mushrooming in the name of political parties. So they also recruited children. These are not Maoist, but other armed groups. Especially these groups are concentrated in Terai belt*”.

The new groups do not specifically have any political ideology. They operate through creating fear/terror, kidnapping, claiming ransom. And children (does not refer to the present group of ex-combatants but also new group of recruits) are recruited to carry out these tasks also. They are provided training in martial arts, provided combat dresses (the olive green uniforms) and are called during processions to participate. In the event of any conflict a ready army of child brigade seems to be readily available. Adding on to this is also a existing willing group of ex-girl soldiers too ready to join any armed group to seek revenge and fight, after feeling being let down and rejected.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

War disrupts the fabric of society. And children are essential part of this fabric. They are referred to as makers or breakers. But who decides or defines if they are makers or breakers and how? So if they are out of trouble, not on streets, not delinquents then do we call them makers? But on the other hand if they are delinquents, child soldiers then do we label them as breakers?

So in a sensitive war situation how do we look at them? Because they choose to join the armed group are they breakers? If we look at them as breakers, then are understood to be war victims and they need to be taken care of and it is the duty/responsibility of the NGOs/INGO and the State. But the question is also what are the factors and why do they choose to join the Maoist army?

My foray into studying the gendered aspect of child soldiers was to explore and understand the push factors for joining the Maoist Army and more importantly to understand them not as victims but as active participants. Coming across literature, they were not described purely as victims, or recruited primary for the purpose of sexual abuse. The scenario was quite different from that of other countries where girl child soldiers were a part of the war. And was interesting to read that within the armed group they had strict code of conduct to treat the female combatants.

Often from Child Rights perspective, we tend to look at issues either being against the rights of the child, violation of the child or in the best interest of the child. What happens when the child has made a decision for him/her to join the armed group? A decision based on freedom of expression, forming view/opinions based on the realities of the life experienced by the child, participation to make their view/opinion known.

Their decisions making process affecting their life course, views and expressions are influenced by the circumstances around them and the experiences they live, personally and also those affecting the family, friends and community. The five ex-combatants I had interacted with for the paper, none of them were either forced or abducted for recruitment. They joined the armed group of their own accord. The political ideology of the Maoist was similar to their ideology and what they wanted to achieve and fight for. The pull factor responsible for them to join the Maoist.

An aspect to think about here is the role of the Maoist in enticing children to join them. Can we look at it as the Maoist having taken undue advantage of the situation and playing on the needs of the children? Could be? Looking at the promises made by them to the draw the children, they probably played on to the emotional level of the children. And on the other hand, when we say children have the right to express their views, opinions, decisions and forming associations, then should everything be looked purely as violation of their rights, especially when they have made their own choice?

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# Appendices

## Annex 1: Interviews with Ex-Combatants

This section is a snippet of the interviews with three ex-girl soldiers and also point of view of two ex-boy soldiers on girls in the Maoist army. The cases read in the voices of the ex-child soldiers.

### ***Case 1***

***Ex-Child Soldier, Male***

***Age: 21***

*I was born in a remote hilly Khurag Village Development Committee (VDC) of Chitwan District (towards east from Bharatpur). The village was highly influenced by Maoist. It was also known as the Maoist village. The Maoist would visit the village frequently and interact with us more frequently. Due to this the army would visit the village and pressurize and give “yathna & tanav” (trtorture/ trouble) to the villagers.*

*There were many other kids like me in the village. After observing the activities of these Army, we would discuss/ interact among friends (peer groups) “these people (army) are always torturing us (giving yatana) so we have to fight against them.” Maoist and some of our friends would have the same version and would think in similar way. We were seeing both the good and bad version of Maoist activities. But army/police would think we are helping them. So, they would torture us. This would again increase our anger.*

*I joined Maoist group at an angry state, (army/police used to blame us for supporting and being Maoist). It was my own decision; no one pressurized or influenced me directly to join the group. Informally I started helping the Maoist when i was studying in class 5 (12-13 years old). I would help them as a porter, carrying rice from place to place. But formally I joined them when I was studying in class eight (15/16 years old). I stayed away from home with them for 5-6 months. Maoist frequently used to visit our village and I had interacted with them. So, I think in a way it was obvious for me to get influenced by them.*

*My maternal uncle also had some kind of affiliation with Maoist around his home. Once when my maternal uncle and aunt were away from home, Army had come to our home (my maternal uncle’s home) I was studying in grade nine then. Three of my younger brothers (maternal uncles son, young age), my old grandmother and myself, were in the house then. We were scared and we were sleeping in the same room. They burnt the quilt we were using. Ill-treated my old grandmother (kicking here, pushing her), took out all our belongings from the cupboard and scattered them.*

*It was obvious for me to be angry with the Army seeing all these activities. I think these kinds of behaviour from army might have influence me to think more in favour of Maoist than the Army. It was less of the ideological influence towards Maoist to me.*

*A lot my friends had joined the group earlier, when I was studying in class five. Hearing them, it is good to be inside the group. Later I also wanted to join the group. And finally I joined and spent some months inside, but willing to continue my education I returned back.*

*Maoist would operate short term "shivirs"/ camps near village at different locations and time. I had joined one of them. We had to go through 3 months of intensive Military Training. Learning the technical skills of using weapons and skill used by soldiers like crawling, jumping, hiding, walking on ropes, climbing the ropes...etc. After three months we learned physical exercises to remain fit and active. After learning all these skills we would repeatedly practise all these techniques.*

*Similar logic/reason as mine, Maoist used to perform cultural programs at village level. Those groups used to come in a group in the village. I used to be attracted in cultural programs they would show. Maoist used to come in group? Ask the villages to gather, and then would make the audience sit down. This was normally done during free times, where larger no of people can gather, often in the evening. They would choose safer place to perform this. The cultural group would bring their cultural dresses especially for dances. Especially "Kranti-kari" revolutionary songs and dances would be shown.*

*I have realized girls were also attracted in these programs. Some of them shared, Maoist are not bad, they want this,,, it is due to this.... So we are joining them. Maoist ideology was male and female are equal so while training them equal kinds of trainings were provided to them. They never thought girls cannot take these trainings.*

*I have seen Younger age group of girls, smaller than my age where also taking training. The trainers would always motivate girls 'you can do it'. I think these motivational phrases would have worked because all girls would be able to do the same kind of training. They used to get different kinds of positions depending on their capability. Some were Section Commanders, commanders. Depending on their capacity to handle the duty and responsibilities they would be given equal posts. E.g if a lady had capability she would also be brigadier of the Commander.*

*Personally I did not face any problem, because the environment where I was grown was already influenced by Maoist. People had affection on them. My community, my family had already seen and interacted with Maoist so there was no problem accepting me as a Maoist. I have seen no problem in accepting them later, because I have seen two young girls getting married and accepted by the society.*

*Along with this, after Maoist war ("Janaudha") new trend of accepting Inter caste marriage slowly developed in our society. I don't know if I am right or wrong but I have perceived it this way. (He meant society was slowly opening from conservative society)*

*My society / family never had different perception on people returning back from Maoist because Maoist people and their activities were familiar to us. They were no problem accepting them.*

**Case 2**

**Ex-Child Soldier, Female**

**Age: 27**

*Nepali society is prevalent with poverty, unjust and ill practices. One of the major causes for these is Poverty. Further, as an impact of all these Nepali women are suffering from domestic violence. To overcome this we, our party and I was particularly involved with this party. Our party has a big formation, I being a member of this party, joined to change these ill happening of our society.*

*Slowly, as I grew up, I started realizing unjust and ill practices of our society, I thought education might be one of the reasons and the way girls/women are looked at as second grade citizens. I always wanted to know why they are treated like this and tried to find a way out from this situation. Women in our society are suffering from domestic violence, there are restrictions, and they cannot move out, they are not able to show their capabilities. I wanted to improve these situations.*

*During that time I came in contact with some of the friends from 'Maoist Student Union'. I was studying in class eight (Age: 14-15). They used to share their views about equality, they had a view, and if women are given opportunity they are equally competent as men. We used to discuss how can we move forward walking in the roads of inequality? We used to have discussion on these topics. Government should be able to provide environment for improving this situation. Rights are not given to poor, backward and poor by anybody, we have to demand and fight for it.*

*Earlier we had a saying in society, 'Guns used by women do not work' but we were able to prove them wrong. I can be an example, I was involved in 15-16 wars "Morchas", and I was also wounded. The lesson we can learnt here: if opportunities are provided, women can also prove themselves just like men. They are not born just to give birth, or for household chores. We had to go through tough training procedure after joining PLA. There used to be no difference in training procedure given to males/females. We had to be mentally physically prepared to overcome all the obstacles coming in battle field. And prove ourselves competent in front of the males, and we used to be successful.*

*We were given this opportunity to fight together, same kind of trainings were provided but sometimes we also have to accepted the physical limitations of female body. We have to go through menstruation. Have to bear children after marriage. So, we also cannot neglect the biological obstacles for women. But there are cases where women had gone through these hard trainings when they were pregnant. So, I believe it is also about the will power. If a woman has strong will power she will definitely be able to be competent and for competent women equal opportunities were provided in terms of position as well.*

***Maoist is a party. We are soldiers under a party. Maoist as a party has its own plans, ideologies and belief. We as a member of this party follow these ideologies and beliefs. I think Party's ideology is important because it guides. Then I think Politics is different aspect. Both of these have their own value, so both are right.***

*We fought a fight against the 10% elite of our country, who have been exploiting the power and resources of this country. This fight was for 90% of the exploited group, for their rights for their share. This fight was not against Peace. We want Peace!*

*Now, my personal view: we are staying inside the cantonment, we have to follow certain rules while staying here so there are certain restrictions for us. We cannot just have our personal wishes. We have to follow Party's decisions.*

*I get respect from them because, there is a lot of difference in the life the local girls/women and we are living. They are always doing and busy with the same routine household chore but we fought for unjust in the society for 10 years handled guns just like men. We fought many wars for the society putting our lives at risk. Society accepts me now, may be due to respect or other reasons but they accept me. They say you have done good, shown your courage although you had left home revolting with your family. My family, particularly my father has also accepted me. We have very close and friendly relation now.*

*If our party's demand for the agreement gets accepted from the government, then I can plan accordingly but if it does not get accepted I have to prepare myself for different situation. We will have to move according to party's decision.*

*After working under PLA my confidence level has definitely increased. I have come to realize it is all about your will power and dedication; we can achieve what we want.*

### **Case 3**

**Ex-Child Soldier, Female**

**Age: 22**

*When I was at Baglung (town in Western Nepal), I came in contact with some of the Maoist, they used to come regularly around my grandmother's village. Through them I came to be associated with some of their programs. I used to be fascinated by the way they would speak. Whenever I listened to them, I used to feel I can also speak like them. I had confidence inside me, that I can also talk like them and give a lecture like them: continuously for one two hours. So, I wanted to join them. After listening to talks of Maoist, I realized this kind of discrimination can be reduced only after revolution so I supported them and became associated with them.*

*About two months, they used to come almost every night at our home for shelter. I used to listen to them talk and used to be impressed. Realizing the hardship, I had started feeling 'Change' is necessary.*

*I was convinced revolution and fighting for this discrimination was the ultimate way out. I realized fight for a change, is more effective with larger number of people, for example it is more effective if 10 people are fighting for a cause than just 5 people fighting.*

*I wasn't in the PLA. In the cultural program particularly I liked dancing. Apart from cultural program, later I also worked as a messenger, carrying letters from here to there. Inside Maoist group, I used to follow elder members ('sisters') from the group; they used to take care of me because I was younger to them.*

*Society would not easily accept people whose family members were involved in Maoist. Her sister (referring to the third ex-girl soldier in the field) had died from Maoist side in a war. She was very close with her sister; it was difficult for her in the society so she left with us. She was also young when she moved. I don't think society has any negative things to tell me. I was always good in my studies. I was also able to make good impression in my family and societies from my childhood. But I was different from other children of my age from my childhood. I never liked and never acted like a traditional girl. When they got to know I have joined Maoist they might have felt strange, but once I went back home, political situation was*

*different. All of them were happy to see me back. So, I did not have to face any difficulty in facing the society. Some of my neighbors shared, they never thought I am spoilt and joined Maoist.*

*As a group of female living together in similar environment, our problems would normally be of similar nature, we would handle them in a group, support each other. It was easier for us to handle difficulties when there were friends to support us.*

**Case 4**

**Ex-Child Soldier, Male**

**Age: 27**

*Normally we follow age barrier in recruiting someone in arm force. Media has blamed us for using children; yes we had to use some of them, at times of necessity. It was also our need.*

***Female have also proved themselves as role models in different situations. They had equally participated in all kinds of activities, in the field, war and planning process.***

*On the other hand, we also have to accept, women are not always physically competent to male due to biological reasons. But we cannot neglect their contribution!!! Women can prove themselves if opportunity is provided.*

*As a Battalion Commander, if I have to evaluate performance of women, I would say: despite all these challenges, in general their contribution was recognizable, they have made significant contribution. The highest post held by female members under PLA is 'Brigade Commander'. Other positions held by female members are Battalion Commander, Battalion VC.*

*Female numbers were fairly present in all those three groups (Arm force, union and cultural groups). Cultural group would have two groups of people: one experienced and relatively matured group and other would be newly recruited young ones; trained younger ones would be in arm force and female, who were not very fit for arm force, let's say physically due to age factors, but who had good knowledge and experience about Maoist system would be in Unions. In my opinion, arm forces relatively had highest number of female members among those three groups. Under arm forces, almost 40% of them would be female members.*

*40% is total female numbers; I don't know exact number of under aged population among those 40%. Under aged population would not be normally accepted in PLA. Very young ones would be returned, I am also an example of it, I was returned back from PLA because I was under aged when I first joined the PLA. (I was 15-16 years old then).*

*Union members had an important role. The main objective of Union groups was to increase its members, assign different roles/duties to members, and raise awareness about Maoist agendas. Manage logistics, food and other essential factors needed for arm force.*

*My village is not just financially backward; it is backward in every aspect. There is no proper infrastructure, caste discrimination is still prevalent. I would say there wasn't proper*

*environment for any kind of social development, individual development. Addressing our problems from legal procedure was almost impossible, because there were lack of sufficient environment for all these. So, we were always looking for a way out to come out from this situation. Maoist was leading for this way out so I wanted to join them in this process.*

## Annex 2: Guiding Questions for Interviews

Namaste, my name is Ajitha, and I am a student studying for my Masters. I am here today to talk to you and know more about you, your experiences, before and after the people's movement and also during your association with the Maoist.

Any information you are sharing is to be used in my research and not for any publicity, NGO, or newspaper. I would like to assure you that, your identity will not be revealed, it will be confidential. If any time during our conversation you want to stop and not continue, please feel to express. If any question makes you feel uncomfortable or you do not want to answer, please feel free to say you do not want to answer the question. Any information you share, but do not want to go into the report, please do say. During our session, I will be using a voice recorder to record our communication, this will help me to remember and take note of important issues shared.

And finally if there is anything you would like to know about me, I will be happy to share with you.

### *(A) Biographies*

Would start this by sharing a little information about myself and then encourage the respondent to talk about herself, basic information such as Name, age, caste/class.

- Where do you live?
- What do you do, studying/working? More information on studying/working.
- In case of schooling, which school did you go to? How was your relation with your teachers, neighbours, and school friends?
- Family details, how many and what do they do..in terms of occupation.
- Can you share with us about your childhood? How was it.? What do you remember about experiences...
- What can you tell us about your community/village when you were growing up/childhood?
- When did you first hear about the Maoist?
- How did you get associated with the Maoist? Why did you want to join the Maoist? Forced or by choice? Describe the process, time duration experience?
- How long were you with the movement? How old were you when you joined?
- Can you share with us about your experiences during your days with the Maoist? Difficult time, how did you face them?
- How was life in the Maoist movement? What were your roles and responsibilities? Tell us more about. What did you join as and were you promoted, what were the process/criteria for promotion?
- Was there a structure?

- How different was it from your life before you joined the movement? Do you think it was better and served the purpose you joined for?
- How did you come out of the movement, what was the process?
- What changed after the people's war?
- How did you feel today?
- How has your life changed, changed within you before and after joined?
- How do you feel to serve in the Nepalese army, the one you fought against?

*And so on...questions will be asked along the way as the interaction unfolds and based on the information shared.*

### ***FGD with Cantonment Young Women***

- Can you introduce yourself? Your name, how old you are, where do come from (district)?
- Family details, how many and what do they do..in terms of occupation.
- Can you share with us about your childhood? How was it.? What do you remember about experiences...
- What can you tell us about your community/village when you were growing up/childhood?
- I understand you have been active part of the PLA, since when were you associated with PLA? Can you share when did you first hear about the Maoist war? When and how?
- What were the reasons you decided to join the Maoist?
- Describe the process, time duration experience?
- How long were you with the movement? How old were you when you joined?
- Can you share with us about your experiences during your days with the Maoist? Difficult time, how did you face them? How was life in the Maoist movement? What were your roles and responsibilities? Tell us more about. What did you join as and were you promoted, what were the process/criteria for promotion?
- What was the structure, separate women's wing? What were the posts held by women? Were you treated equal?
- What were the training given to you?
- Any discrimination between boys/girls?
- Probe for instances of any sexual abuse/gender violence, how they tackled it?
- Did anytime girls tried to escape...what happened then?
- How different was it from your life before you joined the movement? Do you think it was better and served the purpose you joined for?
- How did you come out of the movement, what was the process?

- What changed after the people's war?
- How has your life changed, changed within you before and after joined?
- If you had not joined the Maoist, where would you be/how different would your life be? Where would you see yourself today?