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Unexpected Consequences of Everyday Life During the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal¹

By Judith Pettigrew²

Abstract

This article examines gendered aspects of women's lives in a hill village in central Nepal during the decade-long civil war (1996-2006). The predominantly middle aged and elderly women discussed in the paper were not directly influenced by Maoist equality agendas, nor have they been – as yet - significantly empowered by the recent post-conflict gender reservations. Rather, the paper argues that it was via the unintended consequences of the conflict - their unexpected leadership of a village development project – that these women forged an alternative path towards gender transformation.

Key Words: Nepal, 'People's War', unintended consequences, gender transformation

Introduction

The 'People's War' (1996-2006) in Nepal presented the opportunity to create new (generally unanticipated) experiences for Nepali women of all backgrounds. This article examines gendered aspects of rural Tamu (aka Gurung)³ *janajati* (ethnic or 'indigenous nationalities') women's lives in a hill village in central Nepal where, despite the involvement of some locals in the Maoist movement, the vast majority of people were non-aligned civilians.⁴ The predominantly middle income and middle aged/elderly women in this paper were not directly influenced by the Maoist women they encountered, or by Maoist rhetoric, nor have they been significantly empowered – as yet - by the post 2006 gender reservations. Rather, I argue that they forged an alternative path towards gender transformation through their unexpected leadership of a development project. These transformations resulted in part from learning to negotiate a precarious margin of safety between the government forces and Maoists insurgents during the conflict and by discovering that when thrown back on their own resources they could run (and expand) a

¹ For comments on earlier versions I am grateful to Sara Shneiderman and the editors of this special edition.

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³ Tamu' is the singular of 'Tamu-mai', the term that the people who are better known as 'Gurungs' apply to themselves when they speak their own language Tamu Kyui (a Tibeto-Burman language indigenous to the Tamu-mai). As this paper is based on research carried out in a predominantly Tamu village and conducted primarily through Tamu Kyui I use the term 'Tamu' throughout.

⁴ This article is based on more than twenty fieldtrips, ranging from two days to two weeks, conducted during the period 2002–2012, and building on my earlier work, which commenced in 1990.

development project. Thus their greater confidence in participating in public life is largely due to the unintended consequences of the conflict rather than Maoist gender equality rhetoric or post conflict state-sponsored equality policies.

Much attention has been paid to the claimed 30-50% female participation in the Maoist 'People's War' in Nepal. Although the exact percentage of women in the People's Liberation Army is contested (the Maoists state that up to about 30% to 50% of their force were women (Yami, 2007, p.6) while the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) stated that women made up 19% of registered combatants (Whitfield 2010, 12) it is clear that the Maoists attracted considerable numbers of women to their cause. During the decade-long conflict, photographs of young insurgent women holding guns were prominently displayed in international Maoist publications and on the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), now the Unified Communist Party of Nepal - Maoist (UCPN-M) website. The aim of these images was apparently to provide evidence of the Maoist movement's empowerment of women. These representations could be contrasted to those which emerged out of the Kathmandu-based conflict resolution programmes which repeatedly portrayed village women at the mercy of both the Maoists and the state (Pettigrew and Shneiderman, 2004, p. 20). Contradictory narratives of agency and victimization are not new, and have often featured in feminist debate. The reality was somewhere between these extremes as most Nepali women were neither combatants nor dependent victims. . As Lauren Leve (2012: 180-181) states "... we need to clearly understand that rural Nepali women are neither mute victims of socially oppressive traditions, nor naturally blessed with a revolutionary instinct." Referring to women's agency she notes that women become themselves "... through gendered physical and emotional engagements that often involved sacrifice and pain ... it's in the particular ways that each woman manages the *dukkha* [suffering] she is dealt that individuals exercise agency" (ibid, Desjarlais 2003). A key consideration of my article is the manner in which women in my research site exercised agency via their management of the contingencies, challenges and *dukkha* of the People's War.

Only one point of the original 40 Maoist demands submitted to the government prior to the launch of the People's War explicitly refers to women while a second one relates directly to women's rights. Point 19 states that: "Patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women should be stopped. Daughters should be allowed access to paternal property" (cited in D. Thapa, 2003, p. 393). Nepali law historically prevented women from inheriting paternal property unless they were aged over 35 and unmarried. This legislation was amended in 2001 and came into effect in 2002 following a long campaign by Kathmandu's mainstream feminist organizations (M. Thapa 2003, p.53-54). In theory it grants equal property rights to women. Point 18 of the Maoist demands indirectly relates to women's rights, declaring "Nepal should be declared a secular state" (cited D.Thapa, 2003,393). Senior female Maoist party leader Hisila Yami makes it clear that "Women's social oppression is firmly rooted in state sponsored Hindu religion which upholds feudal Brahminical rule based on caste system, which disparages women in relation to men" (Yami, 2007, p. 15). The reference to "patriarchal exploitation and discrimination" and to the need for a secular state sums up the fact that in what was, until May 2006,⁵ the world's only official Hindu state, dominant (and frequently state-supported) ideologies towards women were premised on conservative Hindu

⁵ Following a People's Movement in April 2006 the country became a secular state.

understandings of femininity (Bennett, 1983). However, multi-ethnic Nepal has over 60 non-Hindu groups who make up a substantial proportion of the population and who often pattern gender relations in very different ways to Hindu groups.

Pettigrew and Shneiderman (2004, p. 23) point out one of the primary problems in Maoist attitudes towards women is that the underlying vision of “Nepali women,” upon which Maoist claims of transformation were based, appears to be very similar to existing dominant discourses. Seira Tamang (2002) argues that the stereotypical image of a “universal Hindu Nepali woman,” who is oppressed and in need of empowerment, is the fictional product of a development discourse created by and for high-caste Hindus in Kathmandu. As she explains,

“The patriarchally oppressed, uniformly disadvantaged and Hindu, ‘Nepali woman’ as a category did not pre-exist the development project. She had to be constructed by ignoring the heterogeneous forms of community, social relations, and gendered realities of the various peoples inhabiting Nepal” (Tamang, 2002, p.163).

The Maoist movement is one of many social change projects that have occurred in Nepal. As Pettigrew & Shneiderman (2004, p. 8) point out, despite the Maoist critique of the Nepali state and foreign-funded development programs, they originate from and are embedded in the same context, and in many ways they uncritically appropriated the terminology and symbolic vocabulary of these institutions. For example, the Maoist rhetoric of ‘women’s empowerment’ appears to indicate an implicit acceptance of the idea of a universally disempowered Nepali woman. In contrast to this stereotypical image women from Nepal’s non-Hindu and largely Tibeto-Burman language-speaking *janajati* groups have multiple opportunities for agency. While the representation of *janajati* communities as egalitarian is equally inaccurate —as there are many restrictions on the ‘freedom’ of *janajati* women —in many cases, they do have access to different forms of cultural, economic and symbolic power than caste-Hindu women (it is important to acknowledge that there is also diversity among Hindu groups). Furthermore, the gendered division of labour in these communities has traditionally been more flexible, with women engaging in heavy labour such as portering for cash wages and men often participating in household tasks such as cooking and cleaning. The multi-ethnic diversity of Nepal raises questions about the Maoist claim to have transformed social relations.

aoist statements on gender relations have focused on overturning gendered hierarchies as part of their program for radical social transformation. However, as Pettigrew and Shneiderman (2004, p. 29) observe, the picture of Maoist attitudes towards gender relations that emerges is contradictory. Despite an ideological commitment to gender equality, criticisms about the gap between rhetoric and practice have been made many times both by outside commentators and also within the movement. Senior party leader Hisila Yami draws attention to the high number of women in the movement (and in senior positions) but is also critical of the party’s gender record (Yami, 2007, p. 40). In 2002-2003 the CPN-(M) conducted a survey of women who had been recruited during the war. The findings revealed that 74.56 per cent of those interviewed believed that gender discrimination was ‘normally present’ in the movement and 3.66 per cent believed it to be ‘excessively present’. Significantly, 61.32 per cent of surveyed female members

who were members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) believed that there was gender-based promotion discrimination in the Maoist army (Yami, 2007, p. 79).

Despite the ongoing criticism, the Maoists *have* focused attention on women's empowerment in a manner that was missing from previous political discourse. Based on the work of feminist journalist Anju Chettri, (who in 2003 mapped out the way in which the Maoist demands for women's rights focused state attention, and even initiatives, on the rights of women) Seira Tamang (2009, p. 76) notes that in the 2001 peace talks, the CPN-(M) proposed that women be given rights in each sector and that the trafficking of women should be stopped. During the 2003 peace talks, the government negotiators stated that all oppression of women and trafficking must cease. Women were to given equal rights including inheritance. In the next round of talks, the states team's demands included, "...25 per cent reservations in all institutions representing people; constitutional safeguards for the reservations for women in education, health, administration and employment; and at least 25 per cent representation in both houses" (cited in Tamang 2009, p.76). Gagan Thapa, a youth leader of the Nepali Congress Party, commented on how the Maoists had forced the political parties to respond to women's issues and noted that "The Maoists are making us travel in 10 years a path we would have travelled in 50" (Goering, 2008).

In the aftermath of the April 2006 people's movement, which included large numbers of women, significant pressure was placed on the government to introduce reform. Commitments and laws followed including a declaration that Nepal is to be a secular federal democratic republic. Other laws included a new citizenship bill providing equal citizenship rights to mothers as well as fathers, a provision of 33% reservations for women in all state bodies and the passing of a bill on gender equality which allowed revisions in nineteen existing laws. Nepal adopted a mixed system to elect its Constituent Assembly members (tasked with drawing up a new constitution). Under the Proportional Representation voting system a 50 per cent women's quota was instigated (but not in the First-Past-the-Post system). Subsequently, 33 per cent of Nepal's Constituent Assembly were women (192 out of a total of 601).

However, in spite of these achievements it is necessary to be cautious about assuming that there have been significant gains. As Tamang (2009, p. 77) points out, when a six member interim constitution-making team was constituted (just a week after the announcement of reservations for women in all state bodies) it did not initially include women (or Dalits – the former 'untouchables' – or *janajatis*). Following protest, the numbers on the committee were increased and the composition became more inclusive, however, the additional members were chosen (by the parties) on the basis of party affiliations. Despite 33 per cent of the Constituent Assembly being female there was a clear lack of commitment on the part of the political parties during the 2008 elections as none put forward 33 per cent female candidates in the First-Past-the-Post system. According to Tamang (2009), women who ran in the Constituent Assembly elections stated that women were given candidacies to fulfil quotas and they were not given the same degree of support as their male colleagues. Shanti Uprety (2012, 6) notes that women's effective participation in political parties in Nepal continues to be hampered by "... pervasive male domination and masculine culture inside political parties".

These national-level transformations have to a greater or lesser extent impacted local contexts. For example, in my research site in a hill village in rural central Nepal I have observed the post 2006 adherence to filling quotas for women on local committees. Women's participation in local politics is new, but not entirely, as there have always been small numbers of women active in public life in Tamu villages. Rather, it can be seen to be an extension of pre-existing practice and not a completely new departure. For example, when I began my research in the early 1990s, one of the most prominent members of the VDC, Prem Kumari, was an unmarried middle aged woman. Women like Prem Kumari, however, often belonged to elite families with a long history of leadership, whereas today the engagement of women on village committees has widened to also include those from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. However, when questioned about the extent and depth of change women state that although they are present the number of women in key decision making positions is limited. Most of the senior positions on the village committees are still held by men. Despite their inclusion women feel that the patriarchal structures continue to limit their influence. The People's War presented the opportunity to create new (generally unanticipated) experiences for Nepali women of all backgrounds. The transformation in gendered roles and relations is due to the space opened by the conflict, and, as I show below, the fundamental shifts in women's participation in public life in the village of Kwei Nasa⁶ may have occurred less because of planned political policies and more because of the unintended consequences of the conflict that emerged regarding women's existing practices.

The 'People's War'

In February 1996 the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (hereafter CPN (M)) submitted a 40-point list of demands to the Nepal government. When these demands were not addressed, the CPN (M) escalated its underground war. From their original strongholds in the mid-Western part of the country, the Maoists started to establish "base areas" elsewhere. Early on, repressive police responses antagonized local people and garnered support for the insurgents (D. Thapa, 2001). The Maoists also took advantage of widespread frustration with an unreliable and corrupt state, which despite promises of enfranchisement and economic development after the establishment of democracy in 1990 had provided little concrete improvement. The conflict escalated in November 2001, when the insurgents withdrew from a ceasefire and initiated a series of attacks across the country including ones targeted for the first time at Royal Nepal Army barracks. In response, King Gyanendra imposed a State of Emergency which effectively suspended most civil rights and for the first time deployed the army to fight the Maoists. In January 2003 a second ceasefire was called and a schedule for peace talks was established. Ultimately the talks broke down in late summer 2003 and 1000 people were killed in the following four months. In 2003 and 2004, Nepal had the highest number of

⁶ All personal names, place names, and the name for the village development project are pseudonyms. As my research focuses primarily on the majority Tamu (aka Gurung) ethnic population in the village and is conducted mainly through Tamu Kyui I have chosen to give the village a Tamu Kyui pseudonym rather than a Nepali one. Although official names are in Nepali all Tamu villages have a Tamu Kyui name which is always used when speaking Tamu language. Certain ethnographic details have been disguised in this piece in an attempt to protect the identity of my informants. I am responsible for translations from Tamu Kyui to English.

disappearances in the world (United Nations, 2004). Human rights organisations extensively documented the human rights violations committed by both the Maoists and state forces (Amnesty, 2002; Amnesty, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2004; Advocacy Forum, 2010), during the insurgency.

King Gyanendra took power directly in February 2005 and declared a State of Emergency. He suspended key constitutional rights, placed leading politicians under house arrest and ordered the army to enforce media censorship. Communications links between Nepal and the outside world were briefly cut. In November 2005 the Maoists and seven mainstream political parties agreed on a program intended to restore democracy. The *jan andolan* (People's Movement) of April 2006, which saw the political parties and the Maoists collaborating, led to the king relinquishing power. A ceasefire was negotiated, followed in November 2006 by a peace accord signed by the government and the Maoists declaring a formal end to the ten-year insurgency which had cost the lives of more than 14,000 people. In January 2007 the Maoists entered parliament under the terms of a temporary constitution. The Peace Agreement included plans for election to a Constituent Assembly (which was tasked with writing a new constitution) and the monitoring of the weapons and soldiers of the People's Liberation Army by the UN. Subsequently, just under 20,000 PLA soldiers were restricted to United Nations controlled cantonments across the country. Insisting on the abolition of the monarchy, the Maoists withdrew from the government in September 2007 and did not re-enter until December 2007 when parliament agreed to this condition. Elections for the Constituent Assembly (which were twice rescheduled) were held in April 2008. The Maoists won a spectacular election victory, gaining the highest number of seats in the new Constituent Assembly, although with 220 out of 601 seats, they did not secure a majority. Despite a series of extensions the Constituent Assembly did not complete its task of writing the constitution by the deadline of May 2012 and so collapsed. Elections have been proposed for the end of 2012.

Kwei Nasa

Kwei Nasa is a village of several hundred households located along the upper slopes and top of a ridge in the Himalayan foothills in central Nepal. It has a health post, rice mill, post office and teashops that serve as general-purpose stores. It was the last village in the area to become electrified in 2010. Although most villagers are Tamu, Kwei Nasa is a mixed community that includes Dalits, (Blacksmith and Tailor castes)⁷ and in nearby hamlets Bahuns (hill Brahmins), and Chettris (both caste Hindu groups). The primary occupation is farming and the staple crop is rice, but maize and millet are also grown. Stretching below the village on either side of the ridge are the steeply terraced fields, some close to the village but others up to an hours walk away. Agricultural work involves steep climbs and descents and long walks with heavy loads. Both men and women undertake this extremely strenuous work. Women are also responsible for running households and play the major role in food preparation and childcare. Most consumer goods that people use come from the town. Vegetables sellers visit each week and other merchants come less regularly to sell dry goods, glass bangles, and sundry items. In the winter months traders from the north sell herbs and turquoise and coral beads. For everything else people make shopping trips to the urban center which is less than a day's walk away.

⁷ Formerly considered to be 'untouchable'.

Out-migration of young people, especially men, from this area has a long history. Many villagers have relatives working overseas and remittances make a significant contribution to the local economy. Kwei Nasa, like other Tamu villages, has a lengthy tradition of male recruitment in foreign armies and every family has army links. Although the numbers serving in the Gurkha regiment of the British Army are now relatively small, higher numbers serve in the Indian Army and a small number serve in the Royal Nepal Army. Significant numbers of men (and increasingly women) also work overseas in the Gulf, and Southeast Asia. Due to the lengthy history of male out-migration Tamu women have long headed households, run farms and brought up children alone. The conflict-related changes which have been noted elsewhere as radical departures in women's practices (such as heading households and running farms) were therefore of much less impact in Tamu villages.

The People's War in Kwei Nasa

Armed Maoists first appeared in Kwei Nasain the late 1990s. Initially their visits were infrequent and included cultural performances, speeches, and requests for financial donations and guns. Their presence increased when a training camp opened in the forest above a neighbouring village. A villager recalled that it was common for the insurgents to come into Kwei Nasa en route to the camp and to see porters ferrying foodstuffs and equipment. On one occasion, a Maoist leader showed a Village Development Committee (VDC - the lowest level of local government) member the guns they had captured from the police and boasted that they would capture many more.

On a spring morning in 2000 standing in my village 'sister's' courtyard looking over the familiar village landscape I heard what I thought was the sound of a gunshot. When I told Dhan Kumari, she asked me a series of detailed questions, "Where did the shot come from?" "How many shots did you hear?" "Are you sure it was a gun?"⁸ I was not, but it was some time before she was satisfied that I had made a mistake. Previously, a comment like this would have triggered minimal curiosity and would have been dismissed as, "Just someone hunting in the forest". Surprisingly, however, Dhan Kumari appeared to be frightened. "What are you frightened of?" I asked. She was quiet for a while and then replied, "I am frightened of the Maoists."⁹ An unmarried middle-aged woman, Dhan Kumari lived alone although a young female relative, Dil Maya, and her son, Raju, spend much of the time in her large family home. When I asked her if locals were involved she acknowledged that there were Maoist activists in the area, particularly in some of the surrounding hamlets where there are families with long histories of left-wing political activism. Dhan Kumari was frightened because she was well off and owned a large amount of land, which was sharecropped, a practice that she had recently heard the Maoists disapproved of. As a well-resourced villager she was vulnerable to being asked by the Maoists for large monetary 'donations' and as a householder she was vulnerable to ongoing requests for food and accommodation.

The middle-aged and elderly mainly female middle-income villagers I talked to in 2000 viewed the Maoists as a threat. For those who were better resourced the threat was greater. People with large houses, guns, money, and gold were more at risk than poorer less well-resourced ones. 'Maoists' were a shifting expanding category, which included

⁸ (personal communication March 2000)

⁹ (personal communication March 2000)

the insurgents and a puzzling mixture of others who posed as Maoists but were in fact thieves. I frequently heard people say, "While Maoists want money and guns they speak politely and explain their ideas and their activities whereas the others just want money." 'Fear of Maoists' also included what could be done in the name of the Maoist movement and people worried that those with whom they had contentious relationships might exact revenge through violence. When I asked people why they were frightened of the Maoists, they told me that it was because "people have died." What was also shocking and unexpected to them was that locals, including young women, were involved with the Maoists. When Maoists entered a friend's village, the enduring images that she and her relatives emphasized were those concerning the membership of the group and their behaviour. They were people they knew, young women with guns who threatened them with death should they reveal their identities to the security forces. My friend explained that while losing a gun and some money was very distressing and the threat of death even more so, the social and kinship implications of this encounter were deeply shocking. In this brief exchange, accepted notions of social relationships, based on a relatively orderly progression of age overlaid with ideas of gender-appropriate behaviour, were completely undermined.

By the end of 2001 the insurgency had escalated and the Maoists, now an outlawed underground movement, changed their relationship with the village. As their camps became targets for army raids and bombings they moved out of the forests and into the villages requesting food and shelter almost every day. This changed pattern impinged on householder women's daily activities and placed their homes at risk. No longer able to operate openly the insurgents movements became clandestine and their arrival and departure - although primarily timed for late in the afternoon or early in the morning - less predictable. Villagers' fears were realised as the deployment of the army meant that their homes were a target when the Maoists were present and after they left. The security forces visited relatively rarely but they were deeply feared as they were perceived to be "trigger happy," aloof and authoritarian and unlike the Maoists it was not possible to negotiate with them. The best strategy for dealing with the security forces was to have as little to do with them as possible. With the escalation of the conflict Maoist influence increased and through the threat of physical violence or actual violence they forced the Village Development Committee (VDC) to discontinue their work. The only Nepal government representatives remaining in the village were the health workers and the teachers and both groups came under scrutiny and pressure. With the dismantling, or partial dismantling, of the institutions of the state, the Maoist parallel administration became more influential. Used to administrations that exerted limited or minimal influence, the villagers found themselves under a shadowy regime characterised by random and unclear policies enforced by violence or the threat of violence. To complicate matters this Maoist administration had only partial control as the village remained officially under the remit of the Nepal government the representatives of which, the security forces, could appear at any moment to search for Maoists and scrutinise villagers for signs of collaboration.



During the People's War the activities of development projects were closely scrutinized (and in some cases prohibited) by the Maoists who accused them of collaborating with elites and ignoring the most marginalized and impoverished sections of society.¹⁰ A high profile Nepali NGO had opened a project office in Kwei Nasa in 1999 and initiated various development and resource conservation initiatives in the village including the opening of a day care center. The center had places for 25 children up to the age of five (children go to primary school in Nepal when they are five) and was immediately very popular as it provided pre-schooling and offered a safe place for parents (especially women) to leave their young children while engaged in field and forest work. The project paid the teachers and funded the center. A committee of village women was formed to run the center on a day-to-day basis. All the committee members were members of one of the four village Mother's Groups (the leading women's organisation in the village which among other things aims to support and empower local women). Mother's Groups raise funds (mainly by hosting dances for visitors) to repair and develop village infrastructure (such as the repair of paths) and undertake other small projects. Some members also participate in rotating credit schemes which provide loans to women.



By the summer of 2002 the project was targeted by the Maoists because it was under the auspices of a wildlife trust which had royal patronage. It was becoming increasingly hard for the workers to continue their activities and shortly afterwards the threatened staff had to leave their posts. In late 2002 the People's Liberation Army ransacked the project headquarters in another village and one evening in December they wrecked the office in Kwei Nasa. They threw all the furniture outside, ripped up the plastic sheets covering the seedlings and destroyed the horticultural nursery. Dhan Kumari explained what happened,

“Some of us women were very upset, as the project helped us do many things - like starting the day care center. Purna Maya and Sanu Maya wept as they were so upset. I was angry and when I asked the Maoists [who were staying in her house] ... why they had done such a bad thing they said, “We didn't do it Mother, we weren't involved, others did it”. After that we heard that they were planning to destroy the day care center as it had a project board nailed to the outside. I went out on the street along with some of the other women from the committee. We pleaded with them not wreck it. We explained that we just received some support from the project but it was our day care and we had built it and we run it. They removed the board [with the development project's name on it] but left the center alone.¹¹”

¹⁰ International development agencies were viewed by the Maoists as representatives of imperialism and a vehicle via which foreign governments could position themselves within the political and development arena of Nepal.

¹¹ (personal communication March 2003).

By coming out onto the streets after dark (a rare occurrence during the conflict) the women saved the day care center. In contrast to their common portrayal of themselves as agency-less in the face of the combatants the women drew on a range of strategies including confrontation and negotiation to achieve their goal of ensuring that the center was not destroyed. Their response to this threat was based on anger and a sense of injustice which they expressed through collective action. When questioned further they reiterated the importance of the day care center to their everyday lives, their reliance on it to manage child care and their sense of achievement in operating it (albeit at that time with quite a lot of support from the development project). Experience had also shown that it was possible – if you were cautious - to negotiate with the Maoists. Some women explained that the insurgents were rural people like them, who knew the ways and problems of the village. Long-term proximity and observation enabled women to identify the most appropriate negotiation strategies to use which they deployed as strategically as possible. Aware of the importance of the day care center to the women and perhaps unwilling to anger those on whom they were dependent for food and shelter, the Maoists backed down.

The women then took over the management of the center. Initially they received occasional secret visits from the project workers and then when it became too dangerous for them to visit they ran the center on their own with sporadic phone consultation from the project. In 2000 they had asked me to provide some support and on each visit I brought a small amount of money which I had raised outside the country. Subsequently, the Maoist commander banned meetings held by the committees which had been formed by the discredited development project. This included conservation committees and various other development committees such as the day care center committee. The committees were disbanded, he stated, and the members were forced to resign. This made the management of the day care center and other development activities, such as conservation of the forest, more complicated. The commander stated that things could be run “in the traditional manner”, leaving it up to locals to interpret this. No one was sure what exactly this meant; but it seemed that while ad hoc ‘committee’ meetings could be held, the bureaucracy relating to the formal committees, such as minute taking, official scheduling of meetings in designated buildings etc. was to cease. On one occasion I attended a meeting to decide the fate of a man who had burnt down his brother’s house which was held under a tree in order to appear “traditional”. Shortly after the commanders order, the day care center committee secretly held their formal monthly meeting inside a locked house, but became so frightened that they decided to comply with the ruling. The committee members wrote the required resignation letters to the development project; but the project did not accept them. This ambiguity enabled villagers to meet the Maoists demands yet retain their links with the project. It also provided a measure of protection, as it deflected the blame for lack of compliance away from the villagers and onto the absent development project. Equally ambiguous was the financial management of the day care center. Officially, it was a village project, yet it remained funded primarily by the development project and everyone, including the commander, knew this. As long as this was not openly acknowledged, the deception was ignored.

In 2005, I was contacted by an international trust which funds small-scale development projects. They had become aware of the day care center and stated that they

would welcome an application to provide some support. The committee decided to apply for funds to open a child health clinic in the grounds of the day care center and employ a second teacher and a helper at the day care center. The first request was especially important as some of the government health post workers had fallen foul of the Maoists and consequently the Health Post was severally short staffed (and remained so until well after the conflict ended). During one of my visits an outbreak of conjunctivitis among village children was only treated after a lengthy delay because medicine had to be sent up from the town. Funding was approved and the committee members then applied to the ‘government’ (the Maoists) for permission to build it. My suggestion to also seek permission from the Nepal government was met with amusement from some women who pointed that “*that* government have not been seen for years”.¹² Eventually Dhan Kumari and Purna Maya negotiated with the Maoist commander and received permission to build the clinic. Rather than requesting a formal meeting which he might or might not attend they decided to approach him informally and so they put their request to him when he was sitting casually at teashop. This approach worked and he gave approval. There were conditions, however: no American money was to be used (the US provided military assistance - i.e. assault rifles - to the government forces) nor was funding to come from an official aid agency or national institution, and the project was to be sustainable and transparent. The fact that the day care center provided access (including scholarships) to the most marginalised and impoverished in the community was a significant factor in allowing it to continue running (when many projects had been closed down) and to expand. Sourcing local labour and in conjunction with the chair of the conservation committee the women arranged for the building to be built. By the end of the year the clinic was almost complete and plans were underway to employ a health worker.

In April 2006 following a successful People’s Movement, King Gyanendra relinquished power. A ceasefire came into force in June 2006 and in November of that year the government and the Maoists signed a peace accord. By 2007 the day care center project had grown into a health and educational project which incorporates a community library as well as the child clinic and the day care center. It employs nine people including the first Dalit (formerly ‘untouchable’) woman in employment in a public institution in the village. In early 2009 it was formally registered as the Dhi Project, an official NGO registered by the Nepal government. Its steering committee includes people from a variety of backgrounds and political parties including the Maoists. Purna Maya is the president and with one exception all its most senior post holders are women. The Dhi Project is run by the women who at the beginning of the insurgency felt unsure of their abilities to manage such an undertaking or to take lead positions in public life. They saved it from Maoist threat and having done so they successfully ran and expanded it and in doing so they surprised themselves. As Purna Maya, explained: “We can do things that before we thought only men could do. We can organise, run committees and lead just as well as the men”¹³. These achievements have led them to expand the main Mother’s Group meeting house in the village. They applied for a series of grants and also undertook substantial fundraising in order to build what is now the most impressive public building in Kwei Nasa.

¹² (personal communication 2005).

¹³ (personal communication January 2009).

Conclusion

Women in Kwei Nasa participate in greater numbers today on village development and political committees facilitated in part by government instigated quotas. This is not entirely new as there have always been small numbers of women active in public life in Tamu villages. When asked about the greater involvement of women in public life, Dhi Project president Purna Maya acknowledges the role of political change in enhancing women's involvement but points out the continued barriers to participation due to unchanged patriarchal attitudes. Women may be present – and that's a good thing, she says, as it brings possibilities for more influence and the development of greater opportunities for women - but on many committees women are marginal to the decision making process. The composition may have changed but the male dominated channels of power and influence are largely unchanged. Continuing, she points out the widespread endurance of attitudes that diminish women's opportunities. For example,

“Many girls would like to get a college education but their parents don't send them as they expect them to get married and instead they send their sons. Some things have changed, but lots of things have not and they won't until people's ideas about women change¹⁴”

Like women engaged in national political parties women in Kwei Nasa welcome greater opportunities for inclusion but they are also cautious about being too optimistic. Quotas to enhance women's participation in public life have only been used in Kwei Nasa in the last few years and it will take time to assess their impact. To date, however, the most influential factors in their increased confidence in public life have been gained unexpectedly by their experiences and success of managing - contrary to general trends - the day-to-day challenges and contingencies of a development project during the People's War. Provided with the opportunity to open a child clinic they readily took up the challenge and strategizing carefully gained the approval of the Maoist commander for their new venture. Clearly these women are not the passive victims that the dominant development discourse presents them to be, neither, however, are they the newly empowered agents according to Maoist gender rhetoric. It was not the ideals of formal equality agendas – that enabled these women to more fully act in the public realm - although they may facilitate their expanded participation in the future - but rather what they learnt via the unexpected challenges and contingencies of the People's War. Through a series of unintended eventualities these Kwei Nasa women have experienced potentially transformative possibilities.

¹⁴ (personal communication June 2012)

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