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Fixes and Flux: Frontier Brokers, Political Settlements and Post-War Politics in Nepal and Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT   *This article examines post-war politics in Nepal and Sri Lanka through the prism of centre-periphery relations, drawing upon and expanding political settlements analysis. We highlight two key features neglected in existing research on political settlements: first, the spatial dimensions of these settlements – particularly the salience of frontier regions in shaping post-war orders. These 'sensitive spaces' continue as sites of struggle in the post-war period and frontier battles over the reordering of space and the delineation of rights, authority and citizenship are central to the emergence of post-war political settlements. Second, within these post-war frontiers we highlight the role of 'frontier brokers' who mediate between national and local levels of the political system. Post-war frontiers provide an opening and a demand for brokers who act as both gatekeepers and go-betweens, balancing demands from communities at the margins with the need to forge alliances and extract resources from central actors. We argue that questions of space and agency need to be foregrounded in political settlement analysis, and studying the lives of frontier brokers provides a lens for understanding shifts in political settlements and the changing relationship between the national and subnational levels of the political system at war's end.*

KEYWORDS: Sri Lanka; political settlement; Nepal; conflict; peace

1. Introduction

'Perhaps I'm not fit lfor politics'.[1] These words, delivered in a tone of wistful resignation, are spoken by Tula Narayan Shah – a prominent Madhesi activist from the Tarai in Nepal, an historically marginalized and lowland region that lies along the southern border with India.[2] Tula became an advocate of Madhesi rights following violent protests that emerged from the Tarai in 2007. These protests were triggered by constitutional proposals that followed the end of the People's War (1996–2006) between the Maoists and the Nepali state, which Madhesis claimed entrenched the historic marginalization of their community. As Madhesi demands and political

unrest grew, Tula established an NGO in 2007 – the Nepal Madhesh Foundation (NEMAF) – playing a role in shaping national debates on Madhesi rights and political inclusion.

While Tula initially stayed out of formal party politics, he became increasingly frustrated about his inability to further Madhesi goals through activism. Following the introduction of a new federal system in 2015, he took the plunge and joined the Sanghiya Samajbadi Forum Nepal (SSFN), a leading Madhes-based party, hoping to exploit new political spaces opening at the provincial level. Yet Tula's excursion into party politics was short-lived. He struggled to gain a foothold within the party and found it riven by internal divisions and patronage politics. He quickly became disillusioned, and the above quotation was given in an interview after Tula had decided to withdraw from formal politics and return to activism.

Tula's experience provides an insight into the role of individuals – referred to in this article as 'frontier brokers' – who engage in the messy politics of post-war transitions. These brokers are part of the connective tissue linking the political system at the centre with new forms of claim making in the periphery. Tula's struggles can be seen as part of a wider story of post-war change in which brokers may be central (albeit fitfully and sometimes unwittingly) to the negotiation, contestation and management of post-war political settlements.

In this article we draw upon and extend recent work on political settlements to better understand the dynamics of change in contested post-war transitions, by studying two frontier brokers in post-war Sri Lanka and Nepal.[3] Our contribution is in three areas. First, in spatializing analysis of political settlements, we attempt to move beyond methodological nationalism, bringing into focus subnational bargaining processes and the role of frontier regions in post-war transitions. This approach helps unpack political settlements, revealing the significance of subnational variation and the constitutive role of the margins in shaping power relations at the centre. Second, by focusing on the role of brokers we show the importance of individual agents in shaping (and responding to) the bargaining processes that consolidate or challenge post-war political settlements. Third, we seek to better understand the dynamics of change within political settlements, by focusing attention on the role of people and places in processes of change. Sub-national variation is a striking characteristic of many post-war environments; post-war political settlements forged at the centre may therefore have very uneven, and even perverse effects on those living at the margins of the state. Our approach sheds light on the persistent state of 'political unsettlement' found in post-war orders in Nepal and Sri Lanka (Bell & Pospisil, 2017), which we characterize as contexts of fixity and flux, where new forms of order co-exist alongside churning politics and periods of sudden change or rupture.

This article is based on research conducted between 2015 and 2019 in borderland and frontier regions in Nepal and Sri Lanka.[4] The research was conducted in partnership with *[project partner details anonymized]*. We conducted research at three levels: (1) National-level studies based on interviews with key informants in Colombo and Kathmandu, (2) District level surveys – Batticaloa and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Saptari, Bardiya and Dolpa in Nepal – aiming to capture subnational variation in post-war dynamics. Over 250 semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted in Colombo, Kathmandu, and across the 5 districts. (3) Life histories of 20 'frontier brokers' – including politicians, bureaucrats, civil society leaders and businesspeople – were conducted which involved repeat interviews with men and women who originated from frontier regions and played a role in mediating between the centre and the margins – as coercive, political, economic or social brokers. The two life histories presented here were chosen as the focus of this article, not because they are representative of the wider sample, but because their lives help to demonstrate the different broker roles and dynamics that emerge in the context of contrasting post-war transitions. Conducting research at three levels allowed us to map and analyze shifting relations and coalitions connecting centres and peripheries across time, space and scale. For a fuller discussion of the ethical and security challenges associated with the project, please see Appendix 1.

Writing individual life histories is a delicate task and involves reconciling brokers' own accounts with contrasting narratives presented by other respondents. We managed these tensions by triangulating findings from a range of respondents. Since both brokers are high-profile public figures, we chose not to anonymize them. While we conducted several extended interviews with Tula, the research team were not able to interview Pillayan, partly due to his imprisonment during the course of the fieldwork. Our account is based upon interviews with respondents from the East with direct experience or knowledge of Pillayan, a background study on brokerage in Batticaloa district, and a range of secondary sources.[5] Tula's life history draws on six extended interviews with Tula in Kathmandu, existing published material, a background study on brokerage and politics in Saptari district, and interviews with other key informants in Saptari.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section presents our conceptual framework, outlining how this advances existing work on political settlements, frontiers, and brokerage. Section three provides a comparative background to post-war transitions in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Section four presents life histories of two 'frontier brokers' – Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (also known as Pillayan) from Eastern Sri Lanka, and Tula Narayan Shah from the Eastern Tarai region of Nepal. Section five concludes by providing some comparative analysis of these two life histories and drawing out some wider implications for the study of post-war transitions and political settlements.

2. Space, brokerage and agency in political settlements and post-war transitions

Political settlements analysis has increasingly been deployed to better understand and respond to post-war transitions (Bell & Pospisil, 2017; Cheng, Goodhand, & Meehan, 2018; DFID, 2015; World Bank, 2018). This has widened and deepened the analytical focus, moving beyond issues that have tended to preoccupy 'liberal peacebuilders' – such as constitutional design, the characteristics of the peace agreement or the establishment of democratic institutions – to look at the underlying configurations of power that underpin these formal processes and shape the 'real politics' of post-war transitions. The political settlements approach is one of several that in recent years have challenged the Weberian view of social order as being based on the rule of law and a state monopoly of violence. A number of different approaches and analytical frameworks have been developed to better understand contexts where political authority is disputed and the means of violence are diffuse. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, work on 'twilight institutions' (Lund, 2006), institutional hybridity (MacGinty, 2010), public authority and the political marketplace (De Waal, 2015, Kirk & Allen, 2021) and 'limited access orders' (North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009). Though we draw, in places, on insights generated by this wider literature, we have chosen to work primarily with a political settlements approach. We do so because it provides an analytically robust, parsimonious and empirically convincing framework for studying comparatively the shifting dynamics and outcomes of post-war (dis)orders.

It is important to recognize that although there has been a growing interest in political settlements analysis, there remain differences amongst academics and policymakers around their understanding and deployment of the term. A key point of divergence is between those who see political settlements as either 'planned' or 'interactive' orders. Kelsall (2018), reflecting a dominant position within the policy community, views political settlements as the product of conscious agreements between elites. Consequently, policies need to be focused on generating the 'right' elite incentives to build more inclusive and therefore more stable political settlements.

In contrast, other scholars including Di John and Putzel (2009) and Mushtaq Khan (2017) conceptualize political settlements as interactive orders, in which the alignment of power and rents that underpin the social order, is arrived at through complex interactions of many players. A political settlement is based on, and supportive of, a distribution of power that emerges in imminent fashion as a result of bargaining between 'elites that matter' – and the extent to which

they 'matter' is shaped to a great extent by complex coalitions of formal and informal organisations (corporations, political parties, or civil society organisations) that underpin elite influence. Formal agreements between elites (such as a peace agreement) can be inclusive but unsustainable because they include 'elite' organisations that are not organizationally powerful and exclude other salient players who have 'holding power', or disruptive potential (Khan, 2017).

This second understanding of political settlements is largely the approach we adopt here.

However there is scope to build upon and extend this framework in three key areas – space, agency and political change:

2.1. *Spatialising political settlements: the centrality of the margins*

Political settlement analysis has tended to take the nation state as its primary frame of reference, focusing on national level elites, and bargaining processes that take place within the bounded territory of the nation state (Goodfellow, 2018, Goodhand & Meehan, 2018). Much less attention has been paid to the subnational dimensions of political settlements. Territory, space and place are largely treated as backdrop for the (re)negotiation of political settlements, rather than as a fundamental source of contestation. There has also been limited work that draws upon the rich political geography literature on territory, to study how power is spatialized in post-war transitions and how questions of inclusion and exclusion are linked to space, place and territory (cf: Agnew, 1994; Elden, 2013; Lefebvre, 1991; Maier, 2016; Sack, 1983).

Existing work on political settlements tends to neglect the specific challenges posed by frontier regions, which are often characterized by weak state presence, a high degree of ethnic or cultural diversity, and contested legitimacy. These 'disruptive spaces' frequently create pressing demands on ruling elites in relation to coalition management and alignment (Goodhand & Meehan, 2018). Frontiers are dynamic, relational spaces – marginality is something that is actively created through state-centred discourses and practices, as well as being resisted by those living on the frontier (Eilenberg, 2012; Scott, 2009). Centres and peripheries are bound together and co-produce one another in a dialectical relationship that is always in the making (Nugent, 2004; Raeymaekers, 2009; Scott, 2009). Wars, and post-war transitions, are typically periods of territorial re-ordering, associated with the re-calibration of centre-periphery relations and efforts to re-define territorial boundaries. Post-war 'governance frontiers' are places where political authority is contested, unsettled and provisional; in which the forces of state expansion, territorialisation and enclosure are often kept in check by forms of resistance, and competing claims to authority, territory and resources (Thaler, Viana, & Toni, 2019).

Frontiers are zones of contact and friction. In post-war transitions they remain 'sensitive spaces' (Cons, 2016) that exercise a disproportionate amount of the time and attention of central state elites. The margins of the state can be become incubators of grievance and critical arenas for clashing centripetal and centrifugal forces that are often unleashed in post-war moments.

Post-war transitions, rather than involving the steady and almost frictionless diffusion of power outwards from centre to periphery, are highly uneven processes and in which relatively inclusive political settlements at the centre may coexist alongside exclusion and emerging violence at the margins of the state. As explored below, post-war 'frontier governance' can involve clashing and competing registers of public authority, manifest in tussles for power between central and peripheral elites. The signing of a peace agreement may open up new economic and political frontiers, facilitating flows of people and capital into and out of conflict-affected regions. The relative salience of particular state margins is liable to shift over time.

2.2. *Bringing in agency: brokers and brokerage*

Political settlements analysis has a bias towards structure rather than agency (Hudson & Leftwich, 2014); it struggles to account for the role of individuals, contingent events and

moments of rupture. The mid- or meso level also tends to be an analytical blind spot. A focus on brokers foregrounds questions of agency and scale, and the processes through which constituencies and coalitions are made, unmade, aligned, cemented or fractured during post-war transitions. This may help illuminate and increase understanding of the processes of change within political settlements.

We understand brokers as 'network specialists' who mediate power, resources or ideas between different arenas and places. Brokers tend to occupy or straddle key synapses, points of friction (Tsing, 2004) or boundaries between groups, territorial spaces, markets and jurisdictional orders (Wolf, 1956). Brokers are both go-betweens and gatekeepers; they act as a lubricant and a point of friction (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018). They seek to maintain a position of privileged access to key synapses or nodes – through a range of strategies including deployment of threats and violence, leveraging access to networks and information, demonstrating an ability to 'get things done', and creating relations of trust and local legitimacy. Brokers are typically Janus-faced: they must respond to, or serve, different constituencies and are often accused of being dishonest or disloyal (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018; Wolf, 1956). The politics of reputation and self-representation are central to brokerage (Lewis & Mosse, 2006) and brokers' legitimacy depends to a large extent on their ability to script a particular narrative about themselves.

Rather than adopting the dominant rational choice approach, which has tended to view brokers as utility-maximizing individuals (Meehan & Plonski, 2017), we instead draw upon the political anthropology and political economy literatures, which understand brokerage as a structural relation linked to longer-term processes of state formation, state crises, market expansion and violent conflict (cf, Blok, 1975; Gutierrez-Sanin, 2019; Wolf, 1956), whilst also acknowledging the agency of the individuals who occupy these key spaces (Bierschenk, Chauveau, Olivier De Sardan, & Kossi, 2002; Koster & van Leynseele, 2018; Lewis & Mosse, 2006; Sud, 2014).

Narratives that represent brokers as self-interested individuals miss the complex ways in which brokers may perform roles and tasks that are valued by their constituencies and generate local legitimacy (Anwar, 2014; Piliavsky, 2014; Sud, 2014). There is therefore a need to be attuned to the forms of political agency, and the sites of contestation through which legitimacy is created in post-war governance frontiers (cf, De Waal, 2015).

Our focus is on a subcategory of brokers who we call 'frontier brokers' – individuals who mediate between the political centre and peripheral frontier regions – with a particular interest in the spatial and temporal aspects of their role. *Spatially*, we are interested in individuals who originate from and have a recognized constituency within frontier regions, but also have relationships with key players at the centre. These actors play a role in the spatialisation of power and are active agents in processes of post-war statebuilding and (re)territorialisation. *Temporally,* we are focused on individuals who perform brokerage functions at war's end. Our assumption is that post-war brokerage tends to be radically different because it takes place during a moment of rupture – a charismatic moment in politics, where; the stakes are high, new rules of the game are up for grabs and political settlements are in a state of flux or 'unsettlement' (Bell & Pospisil, 2017).

Brokers, we argue, can play a crucial though often fleeting role in shaping political settlements at such moments, though this varies according to the nature of the post-war settlement and the kind of frontier spaces from which brokers emerge. Frontier brokers may be instrumentalized by more powerful actors at the centre, as part of a strategy to fragment power structures in the periphery. But moments of rupture may open new spaces for brokers who can shape the bargaining processes that underpin political settlements. Brokers' autonomy and influence is shaped by the kind of deal space they occupy; drawing on Koster and van Leynseele (2018) we can differentiate between brokerage in 'invited spaces' and 'negotiated spaces'. We understand the former as post-war spaces linked to relatively powerful expanding states, which are intent

on closing the governance frontier. Brokerage in this sense takes place in a situation of highly asymmetrical power relations in which a dominant central coalition dictates the terms of the post-war order to peripheral elites. Brokers provide a mechanism for fragmenting broad-based opposition and helping manufacture consent, bringing the state closer to those it governs (Sud, 2014, p. 596). They are 'invited' to participate in a process of inclusion through incorporation, on the terms of the centre, rather than the margins.

On the other hand, where post-war sovereignty is more fragmented and state capabilities open to question, 'negotiated spaces' may be prized open by actors from the margins. This creates a more open and fluid deal space for brokers. Brokerage can provide a mechanism through which disempowered individuals and groups gain access to systems of power and representation (Anwar, 2014) and over time may lead to more stable and inclusive interdependencies between centre and periphery. As we see in the case of Nepal below, this may lead to redistributive outcomes that can work in the favour of frontier communities. Whereas brokerage in 'invited spaces' tends to reproduce marginality, in 'negotiated spaces' there is the potential for it to challenge and transform marginality.

Therefore, post-war frontier brokers, to paraphrase Marx, do not operate in contexts of their own choosing. They emerge in different frontier spaces, are positioned differently in relation to dominant power structures, and as a result take on different roles during post-war transitions. While some are 'embedded brokers' (deeply rooted in, and answerable to, communities at the margins), others act as 'representative brokers' who leverage, and are reliant upon, power and authority from state actors at the centre (Meehan & Plonski, 2017).

Their positionality also shapes the kinds of roles they perform. In 'invited spaces' representative brokers can help bring about *alignment*, by strengthening vertical relations, bringing borderland communities in line with the agendas of central actors or making them 'legible' by delivering votes, extending patronage networks, or facilitating contracts. Other brokers may be involved in *co-ordination*, building horizontal connections within the borderlands between disparate organisations and sets of interests – for example developing coalitions for elections, incorporating local elites into resource-sharing pacts, or managing local conflicts. In 'negotiated spaces' embedded brokers may play the role of *claim-making*: by funneling and making demands or claims on behalf of borderland constituencies on the state. They may also be involved in acts of *translation*. By operating between different fields of meaning and discourses, brokers may frame issues and make them accessible to constituencies in the centre and the periphery.

2.3. *Understanding the dynamics of change: fixes, flux and unsettlement*

The political settlement literature has struggled to explain how change happens within a political settlement. Bell and Pospisil (2017) notion of 'political unsettlement' represents one framework for making sense of post-war change. They eschew the idea of a once and for all post-war settlement, highlighting the volatility of post-war politics in which there is an ongoing state of flux linked to the use or threat of violence and the inability of political elites to credibly commit. Such environments provide an opening for brokers who seek to address problems but never fully resolve them, as to do so they would make themselves redundant. Meehan and Plonski (2017) have characterized this dynamic as a 'brokerage fix', something that, like Harvey's (2001) notion of the 'spatial fix', provides a way of dealing with contradictions but is always contingent and untenable in the long term. Brokerage fixes end up creating new sets of contradictions or social impasses, which in turn must be addressed through new fixes (Gutierrez-Sanin, 2019). In the accounts of two frontier brokers below, we explore how they provided fixes on behalf of more powerful actors at the centre, or constituencies in the periphery. These life histories show that common representations of brokers as crafty opportunists are a misrepresentation. They are always partially sighted, often insecure, usually reacting to events

rather than shaping or manipulating them. Often their decisions can only be understood by appreciating how multiple forces pull the broker in different directions, leading to compromises, tradeoffs and decisions that manage, rather than resolve, problems.

To summarize, our approach to political settlements advances existing work by paying greater attention to sub-national bargaining processes and the brokers who connect national and sub-national spaces. Our approach illuminates the varied roles performed by these individuals in post-war transitions. In the two sections that follow, we examine post-war transitions in Nepal and Sri Lanka through an exploration of the lives of two frontier brokers. The two life histories illustrate brokers' diverse and often indirect effects on political settlements. The first broker, Pillayan, plays an important role in shaping the post-war settlement by filling a vacuum created by the defeat of the LTTE, and enabling the central government to extend its control over the periphery. Although Pillayan's role is a critical one, it remains heavily circumscribed by the agenda of the central state and contingent upon the turbulent and unusual political circumstances at war's end. The second broker, Tula, has greater autonomy but his influence is indirect and involves opening space for emerging Madhesi politicians to move into and exploit. His experience highlights how frontier brokers can simultaneously inhabit a variety of roles, including claim-making, coordination, and translation. Returning to Khan's notion of political settlements, both brokers' careers and political influence are closely tied to their organizational power; building and then losing a supportive organizational base was key to their rise and fall as influential brokers.

3. Systems in flux: comparing Sri Lanka and Nepal's post-war transitions

Sri Lanka and Nepal both experienced long-running 'peripheral' conflicts ending in 2009 and 2006 respectively. Although the two countries differ in their histories of state formation and experiences of democracy, both can be understood as post-colonial majoritarian states, where power is highly centralized. Both countries have 'unruly' frontier regions, where state rule has been contested and in both countries state margins were important incubators of grievance and became sites of hybrid authority where rebel governance co-existed alongside state institutions.

However, the two countries differ in important respects. In Sri Lanka, war ended through government military victory, whilst in Nepal there was a negotiated settlement. War termination also led to very different political settlements linked in turn to contrasting shifts in centre-periphery power relations. In Nepal, the war ended largely as a result of a legitimacy crisis at the centre with a breakdown in relations between the monarchy, the army and the mainstream parties. The People's Movement opened a new space for negotiating a more inclusive political settlement between the Maoists and the mainstream political parties. In Sri Lanka, the war ended partly as a result of the fragmentation and subsequent defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by a nationalist government that relied almost exclusively on support from the majority Sinhalese community, resulting in an exclusive, Sinhala-dominated political settlement (Venugopal, 2018).

Contrasting political settlements in the two countries contributed to divergent post-war outcomes. In Sri Lanka, the centre sought to incorporate and re-establish control over the periphery. With the defeat of the LTTE, a new post-war frontier opened up in the war-affected areas of the north and east, which became a zone of pacification, securitized development and social engineering. With the end of the military struggle, the 'holding power' or capacity of the Tamil minority to disrupt or challenge the political settlement was significantly curtailed – strengthened further by the co-option or repression of Tamil elites and the continuation of counter-insurgency operations (Byrne & Klem, 2015). In Nepal, peripheral elites moved into, and were incorporated by, the centre as Maoists entered government, giving them access to new sources of rent in Kathmandu (Jha, 2014). Though the post-war political settlements were very different, in both cases, victors' attempts to centralize power and monopolize the 'spoils of peace'

provoked violence or electoral defeats. Widespread perceptions of corruption and grievances from constituencies at the periphery led to legitimacy crises and the unseating of incumbent regimes. In both cases, pushback came from disgruntled groups at the margins who had not been anti-government rebels during the war but felt they had been disadvantaged by the 'peace'.

Post-war transitions in both Nepal and Sri Lanka have involved protracted 'unsettlement', churning politics and periods of sudden rupture. In Sri Lanka, a relatively stable post-war settlement appeared to emerge after the military victory of 2009. Yet a rapid and unexpected shift occurred with the defeat of President Rajapaksa in the 2015 elections. The new coalition government (which brought together members of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) loyal to the new President Maithripala Sirisena, and supporters of the United National Party (UNP) incorporated a wider range of elites but was less vertically inclusive with its western orientation and commitment to re-empowering the old cosmopolitan political elite. The new coalition suffered from severe infighting and failed to move its constitutional reform and transitional justice agenda forward, making only limited progress on de-militarization and human rights (Walton & Thiyagaraja, 2020). These failings provided scope for the resurgence of the Rajapaksas as a political force, coalescing around a new party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). The SLPP re-gained power with victory in the presidential election in 2019, followed by a resounding victory in the 2020 parliamentary elections, where it secured the two-thirds majority required to reform the constitution.

Although in Nepal the CPA of 2006 appeared to be an inclusive settlement, there was a strong push back from established elites at the centre, as well as Madhesi and Tharu groups in the Tarai; the latter manifesting itself in the Madhesi *andolan,* a violent uprising against constitutional proposals in 2007 and 2015 (Jha, 2014, 2017). A new constitution was finally agreed in 2015, introducing a federal governance structure and the creation of a Madhesi-led Province (Province 2) in the Eastern Tarai. The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist, UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) (CPN (MC) formed an electoral alliance in the run up to the 2017 legislative elections, emerging as the largest group. This alliance was cemented in May 2018 when the UML and CPN (MC) merged to form a unified party – the Nepal Communist Party (NCP). Shortly following the unification, two leading Madhesi parties joined the government, with Upendra Yadav, leader of the Federal Socialist Party Nepal (FSPN), being appointed Deputy Prime Minister. While the post-war period opened new political spaces for marginalized groups such as women or Madhesis, there were also strong continuities with the past, as dominant Bahun Chettri elites in Kathmandu clung onto power (Adhikari & Gellner, 2016). Significant questions remained about how much power new local and provincial level politicians would be able to wield, and many other borderland regions remained cut out of political bargaining processes (Goodhand, Walton, Rai, & Karn, 2021).

4. Lives in flux: a tale of two brokers

We now zoom in on the lives of two frontier brokers – Pillayan and Tula Narayan Shah – who come from the frontier regions of eastern Sri Lanka and southern Nepal respectively. Both figures were part of a broader class of frontier brokers, who emerged at war's end, whilst also being 'special cases' with unique personal histories and roles. In Tula's case, there were other prominent Madhesi figures who combined some of the roles he performed in the Madhesi movement – liaising between the factions, shaping public discourse through the media, connecting Madhesi politicians and key figures in Kathmandu, or vocalizing the demands of Madhesi communities in political debates. Tula was unusual in his ability to combine these roles. Pillayan, on the other hand was perhaps more of a 'one off', as the leader of an LTTE splinter group, that became the main government-aligned Tamil militant group and representative of the Tamil community in the East. Other figures have, however, performed a similar 'alignment'

role in other frontier regions, or on behalf of other identity groups during and after the war. For example in the Eastern Province, these have included politicians like ALM Athaullah and MLAM Hizbullah, who represent different Muslim communities in Batticaloa and Ampara districts, and who carefully balanced claims to serve as 'local champions' with their role as representatives of the Rajapaksa government, for which they were rewarded with ministerial positions.[6] Whilst many frontier brokers examined in our research came from high-status backgrounds and were able to leverage family connections to establish their position, neither Tula nor Pillayan possessed these advantages and in both cases their rise to prominence was based more on their strong political and networking skills.

4.1. *Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (Pillayan): the coercive frontier broker*

Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (known as Pillayan) is a former LTTE cadre, then paramilitary leader turned politician. He was born in 1975 in Pethalai 30 km north of Batticaloa town in in Eastern Sri Lanka. He joined the armed movement as a 15-year-old and driven by the killing of classmates and then the formative experience of being slapped and humiliated by a soldier at a checkpoint (Sánchez Meertens, 2013). By the age of 16 he was a combatant, known as *Kuperan* (god of wealth), but remained a relatively minor figure in the movement during the war – working initially as a cook – and there was very little in his early background to suggest his rise to power later.[7] Unlike many other brokers who ended up playing an 'alignment' role in the East after the war, Pillayan was an outsider – he had limited education and he had no family or political networks to draw on within the established political class in Colombo or Batticaloa.[8] His political outlook was forged during his time as a cadre and was founded on an understanding of political authority rooted in violence. Pillayan's experience of LTTE infighting helped him to develop an acute appreciation of the complex tensions that existed within political coalitions and their inherent volatility, whilst underscoring the importance of maintaining flexibility and responding quickly to changing circumstances.

Batticaloa is a frontier region on the margins of the Sri Lankan state. It can be considered a dual periphery in the sense that it has remained on the margins of both the Sinhala and Tamil polities, centred in Colombo and Jaffna respectively. Batticaloa district was badly affected by the war, with protracted conflict dividing the population into Tamil and Muslim enclaves.

Pillayan rose to prominence as the deputy of Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (known as 'Karuna', the Eastern commander of the LTTE), when the LTTE split in 2004 during the Norwegian-backed peace process.[9] The peace process and the defection of Karuna radically changed the balance of power in the long-standing conflict – the LTTE lost some 40 per cent of its manpower, 50 per cent of its territory as well as a huge intelligence breach. Peace talks exposed divisions between the northern and eastern Tamils which were exploited by the state, and along with intra-LTTE personal rivalries, contributed to the splintering of the movement (Sánchez Meertens, 2013, p. 72).

At the time of the defection, Pillayan was unsure about which way to jump, but when the Vanni LTTE (the group based in the northern province under the command of the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran) started killing his cadres in the east, he moved in support of Karuna: 'I felt that 13 years of sacrifice and violence were for nothing' (cited in Sánchez Meertens, 2013, p. 81). In April 2004, Karuna and Pillayan were both on the run from the Vanni Tigers and fled the East for Colombo. Karuna was provided with safe passage overseas by the government while Pillayan decided to stay behind, creating an opening for him to assume a leadership role ('[a]s we had lost even our respect and we couldn't stay anywhere, that day we decided to fight the Vanni tigers') (Sánchez Meertens, 2013, p. 72). After war resumed in 2006, the military worked closely with the Karuna faction, who provided 'muscle' and intelligence to the government's counter-insurgency efforts, leading to the LTTE's withdrawal from the East in 2007, followed by their final defeat in the North in 2009.

In 2008, with government backing, the Karuna faction established itself as a political party – the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP, lit. Tamil Peoples Liberation Tigers). After an internal struggle with Karuna, Pillayan assumed the leadership. TMVP performed well in the local council elections on 2008, and Pillayan was appointed, in May 2008 as Chief Minister of the Eastern Provincial Council, remaining in this position until September 2012.[10]

These shifts were linked to wider changes in 2007, when the government regained military control of the East. It initially needed coercive brokers like Pillayan who were relatively pliant, but who could navigate the formerly LTTE-controlled areas in the East. Pillayan's role was one of 'coordination' – strengthening horizontal ties by bringing disparate Tamil armed and political groups together – and 'alignment' – consolidating the emerging political settlement by establishing vertical ties and bringing these groups behind the government's agenda, in return for the promise of development in the East and to help easterners break free of Jaffna's perceived hegemony. Pillayan was a pawn in a wider government strategy of closing the frontier through a three-pronged strategy of counter insurgency, political mobilization and securitized development.[11] The TMVP were seen as useful allies, building support for the new regime through local and provincial council elections in which Pillayan could deliver a Tamil vote bank through a combination of intimidation, violence and patronage.[12]

Pillayan kept to his assigned script, extending patronage networks and attempting to deliver a peace dividend in the form of development projects to his constituencies. But his time in power was short and his power rapidly drained away, particularly after the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) (the dominant Tamil political party, with its historical base in Jaffna) returned to contest elections in 2010 and 2012, having boycotted the 2008 Provincial Council elections.[13] Pillayan had limited political networks to draw upon and the weak organizational power of the TMVP contrasted starkly with the much more deeply embedded political network and ideological force of the TNA. His position was further undermined by the centre, which increasingly bypassed the Provincial Council based in Trincomalee and provincial-level brokers like Pillayan (see Goodhand, Klem, & Walton, 2016). The field of brokerage involved complex intra-periphery intermediation, as well as brokerage with at least three different centres (Sinhalese and Muslim politicians in Colombo, and Tamil politicians in Jaffna). Real power lay outside the formal institutions and centered around the informal political-military nexus forged by the Rajapaksa family.

After the abrupt shift in the post-war political settlement that followed the defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa in the 2015 Presidential elections, Pillayan was arrested in connection with the murder of a TNA MP in 2005 and jailed. Although he remained in jail, Pillayan was able to continue his political coordination work from the inside, and the TMVP improved its position in the 2018 local elections, winning 53 seats across Batticaloa district (concentrated in the northern part of the district near his hometown), making them the second largest party in the district after the TNA.[14] This result was testament to Pillayan's enduring skills as an organizer and signaled scope for a 'comeback' linked to the resurgence of the Rajapaksas and the SLPP after 2018. In 2020, he was elected MP for Batticaloa District and in 2021, he was acquitted of murder charges and released. Although Pillayan's role was heavily circumscribed, his political skills were often contrasted favorably with Karuna, and some commended him for his 'sense of mission and vision'.[15] As one interviewee said in 2017: 'Pillayan was more rooted than Karuna and he really worked with people … people still support him … When he was Chief Minister he tried to understand people's needs. Karuna didn't have this kind of character'.[16]

Pillayan's trajectory as a broker can be summarized as follows. He started as a rebel, became an embedded broker and then, by throwing in his lot with the ruling regime, transformed into a representative broker. His role shifted from one of 'claim making' to one primarily concerned with performing 'alignment' and 'coordination' functions on behalf of the government, helping to consolidate an exclusive post-war political settlement. As part of the Karuna faction, he delivered a first 'brokerage fix' for the government in 2004 by providing them with an entry

point to re-establish their military position in the East. In 2007, he provided a second 'fix', facilitating and legitimizing governmental control over East. In both cases, he was operating in a severely circumscribed 'invited space'; in which the boundaries were set by the state. At the same time, Pillayan has shown remarkable agility throughout his career: in his rise to prominence in the treacherous climate following the Karuna split, in maintaining his position despite widespread opposition, and then finally in rebuilding a political constituency in the 2019 local elections and 2020 parliamentary elections.

Pillayan was a small player in a wider project of post-war state expansion and power consolidation in an unruly governance frontier. For a time, he was part of the 'connective tissue' that enabled the state to project its power, stabilize and 'fix' the periphery, and consolidate an imposed post-war political settlement. Once the frontier was closed, he became surplus to requirements, but through personal tenacity and strong networks, he was able to maintain his foothold. New opportunities for brokers like Pillayan also emerged out of the unique national-level conditions in the run up to the 2020 parliamentary elections, when the SLPP pushed for an unprecedented two-thirds majority, providing renewed leverage for figures like Pillayan.

Pillayan's career sheds light on a wider story in which the state margins play a role in reconstituting the centre in the aftermath of war. Karuna's defection gravely weakened the LTTE and played a key role in the government's eventual military victory. The faction's transition to a political party was central to the government's post-war strategy of territorial consolidation, subsequently rolled out to other state margins (Goodhand, 2010) and echoed in military-led slum clearance and urban beautification schemes in Colombo (Amarasuriya & Spencer, 2015).

4.2. Tula Narayan Shah: the reluctant political broker

Tula Narayan Shah was born in Saptari district, in the Eastern part of the Tarai region. He belongs to the *Teli* or trading caste and grew up in a traditional mustard oil trading family. The Tarai is an open and integrated borderland, located on the Indian plains. It is a zone of intense interaction with strong cross-border connections. Saptari district has historically served as an educational and economic hub, as well as a centre of political mobilisation, with strong cross-border links to the Indian anti-colonial movement. The district and the wider Tarai region have been economically and politically marginalized by the ruling elite in Kathmandu, with Saptari's economy retaining an extractive and semi-feudal character (Background Study A – full details to be added after peer review).

Tula struggled in his early education because he had to study in the Nepali language, rather than Maithili, his mother tongue. Nevertheless, he completed his schooling and gained admission to college in the border town of Janakpur. His first engagement with politics began when he joined the Nepali Congress Students Union (NSU) during the 1990 *Jana Andolan* or People's Movement, whose goal was to establish a multi-party democracy.

When Tula moved to Kathmandu he became further politicized as a result of anti-Madhesi discrimination. Personal experiences shaped his journey into identity politics. Particularly formative was the public humiliation of this father, who was visiting him in Kathmandu, and had his *dhoti* pulled down by a *pahadi* neighbor.[17] His experience was also shaped by disillusionment about the lack of opportunities in the labour market for Madhesi engineers. Although Tula became a National Students Union President for his college in Kathmandu, he was frustrated by the limited representation of Madhesis within the Nepali Congress (NC) and eventually quit.[18]

During the war years, Tula stayed relatively detached from the main parties; working as a journalist specializing in water issues, establishing a union for Tarai engineers, and setting up his own engineering consultancy. The Maoist class-based ideology didn't resonate with him, and there was mutual suspicion because of his former NC connections.[19]

The Madhesi uprising of 2007 was a real turning point. This period saw growing protests across the Tarai, and the emergence of several new Madhesi political parties and armed groups. These parties challenged the post-war political settlement that had emerged following the CPA. In the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections, the Madheshi Janadhikar Forum (MJF), which led Madhesi protests, won 54 out of a total of 601 seats. The MJF was subsequently weakened by factionalism and suffered two major splits and the two main factions were reduced to only 27 seats in the 2013 elections.

In this volatile environment Tula began to write about the issues facing Madhesis and established a research and advocacy NGO – NEMAF – which played an influential role in shaping political and development discourses on Madhesi issues. Tula became a translator and gate-keeper, mediating and shaping the flow of data, ideas and discourses, which indirectly shaped the emerging political settlement. He was a prominent public intellectual and media voice talking about Madhesi interests and providing recommendations to the government and contributing to constitutional discussions.[20] As Tula explained: 'we did not assume a leadership role in the movement … [but] we played an important role in shaping the agenda in the public forum'.[21] This was less part of a conscious strategy than a series of reactions to shifts and openings that emerged in a volatile post-war context.

Tula carved out a space where he could remain relatively untainted by patronage and violence. This enabled him to have some influence on Madhesi politicians and lawyers at critical moments, for example by providing input into the successful challenge of the 16-point deal in 2015 (Jha, 2018, pp. 40–41). But he avoided becoming too closely aligned with, and indeed was critical of, Madhesi leaders.[22] Tula's brokerage shifted between 'translation', 'coordination', and 'claim-making' roles. He triangulated between mainstream parties, constituencies in the Tarai, and international donors. This involved vertical alignment, bridging the gap between Madhesi communities and political elites at the centre, as well as horizontal mediation between disparate Madhesi factions. His brokerage had indirect but significant effects on coalitions that shaped the overarching political settlement – helping create a new political space for politicians to exploit, by shaping public discourses and political subjectivities within the Madhesi movement.[23]

Tula's legitimacy as a broker was based on keeping a distance from established parties, and the violence and criminality of some Madhesi groups, while avoiding being typecast as an 'NGO dalal' dependent on, and accountable to international funders.[24] Tula expressed considerable self-doubt; he was concerned about NEMAF's capacity to bring about real change in the political arena while becoming embroiled in the everyday challenges of organizational survival.[25]

With the introduction of a new federal constitution in 2015 and the subsequent emergence of a Madhesi-majority Province 2, a new 'negotiated space' was forced open by the Madhesi movement – and Tula began considering whether to throw his hat into the ring. Following the provincial elections of 2017, he surprised many by joining the Sanghiya Samajbadi Forum Nepal (SSFN), a leading Madhes-based party.[26] The establishment of new federal structures convinced him that he might have greater influence as a politician. As Tula explained, 'at this time I came to the realization that social transformation via NGOs is not easy. It is more effective to set the agenda through a political party'.[27]

However, Tula's foray into party politics proved short-lived, and after a year he resigned from the party. He found limited commitment from the SSFN leadership for the goal of shifting the Madhesi agenda towards a more Tarai-focused transformation of Madhesi society, and he struggled to obtain a prominent position within the party. He was disappointed by the largely symbolic posts he was offered and perversely seemed to have less influence on politicians than had been the case when he was an activist. Before joining the party, junior party leaders would call him regularly to discuss ideas, however, following his move into party politics, he was quickly viewed as a rival and felt increasingly side-lined.[28]

In many respects Tula was a 'reluctant broker'; his ambition was to be more than a go-between or local power broker; rather than mediating the flow of power and resources, he wanted to 'set the agenda', shaping the trajectory of Madhesi political and economic development. Tula's initial 'fix' was to amplify the Madhesi cause, a role he was able to perform because of his education, connections in Kathmandu, and later because of the organizational power and resources provided by NEMAF. This work helped to indirectly shape the emerging political settlement by opening a new deal space for discussions about federalism and contributed to the federal constitution established in 2015.[29] Although Tula moved into a new deal space that he had helped to create, he found it difficult to occupy this synapse for long and to exert direct influence over the emerging political settlement, partly because he lacked the resources and clout needed to assert himself in an increasingly competitive and fragmented post-war political landscape.

5. Conclusions: post-war transitions, frontier governance and the negotiation of marginality

We have attempted in this article to extend and spatialize political settlements analysis to better understand changing post-war politics in Sri Lanka and Nepal. This focus on frontier governance and the role of brokers can improve understanding of post-war politics as well as generating wider theoretical, methodological and policy related insights.

Before reflecting on these wider implications, we return briefly to the lives and careers of Pillayan and Tula as frontier brokers. Although they are very different characters, they share a common experience of having lived through wartime and a volatile post-war transition, which involved major power shifts between the political centre and the margins. In this ecology of constraint and opportunity, they assumed the role of brokers, mediating (fleetingly) between the central state and frontier regions.

As our life histories reveal, Pillayan and Tula emerged in dissimilar circumstances and performed different roles as brokers. Pillayan, a 'coercive broker' whose formative years were spent fighting as an LTTE cadre, provided initially the 'muscle' and intelligence to enable the state to pacify an unruly post-war frontier. And then, through the vehicle of the TMVP and his subsequent position as Chief Minister, he helped legitimize the new political dispensation, extending and consolidating the reach of the state into the periphery. His room for manoeuvre was always limited; in the context of a victorious and expanding state, he occupied an 'invited space', soon becoming a representative broker, performing the role of coalition alignment and coordination.

Tula was never a man of violence. As a public intellectual and political activist, he was for many years a 'translator' and commentator who kept a safe distance from the political fray, whose brokerage generated indirect effects on the wider settlement by creating space for others to exploit. The opening of a 'negotiated space' following the Madhesi uprising, created an opportunity to become a provincial-level power broker. Tula saw an opportunity to help bring into being a long-held vision of political autonomy and local development in a Madhesi-dominated province. This dream was short lived; he was unable to occupy this deal space for any length of time, lacking the connections, the organizational base, and perhaps also the craft to survive and prosper as a political broker.

Returning to the wider implications of studying frontier brokers, firstly we have argued that such studies can generate valuable theoretical insights on the dynamics of post-war transitions. Rather than taking political and territorial power as a given, we have sought to understand how they come about, by drawing upon but extending and decentering political settlement analysis. By focusing on the geographical margins and the meso-level in the political system, we have highlighted how post-war transitions are ragged, uneven processes, experienced by those on the margins as periods of flux, instability, and violence, involving clashing and competing registers of public authority. Governance frontiers can be understood as 'special political

zones': sites of experimentation where new technologies of governance – from counterinsurgency doctrine to federal reforms – are tested, which may reverberate in, and transform, power relations and governance practices at the centre.

Brokers emerge in these contested spaces, and our life histories show both the agentive potential and the constraints on brokers. Opportunities for brokers to influence or shape the political settlement increase during moments of rupture, such as the signing of a peace agreement, a military victory, the emergence of new movements such as the *Madhesi Andolan*, or the fracturing of movements, as with the LTTE. These moments of change are partly caused by, and partly signify, shifts in the political settlement that create new coalitions and alliances and new openings for brokers. Brokerage practices continually adapt to shifting socio-spatial relations. As we have noted, 'invited spaces' and 'negotiated' spaces, provide different levels of opportunity for brokerage to either reinforce or challenge marginality. Occupying this deal space for any length of time is difficult in a post-war context of political unsettlement in which elite preferences may be oriented towards maintaining a durable disorder rather than definitively settling core issues. We have shown how studying the lives of frontier brokers can reveal a great deal about the wider political system; how it functions, how post-war political settlements can be negotiated from the margins or alternatively imposed by the centre, and in turn shedding light on the varied outcomes of post-war transitions.

Secondly, as a methodology, comparative analysis of the life histories of frontier brokers, could be fruitfully deployed to a wider range of post-war contexts, to generate more granular, mid-level and comparative insights about post-war transitions, viewed from the perspectives of those on the margins. This approach complements and enhances more structurally-oriented accounts of shifting political settlements, by revealing the agentic role played by these key individuals – as well as the constraints on their agency – in the re-negotiation of political settlements. It also places a focus on the 'vernacular' of local politics (De Waal, 2015), the inseparability of personal biographies from wider spatial and political biographies, and the role of non-material factors, particularly discourses, identities and norms in shaping post-war orders. Studying the lives of these individuals, brings out the complex temporalities of post-war transitions; including the continuities between the pre-war, wartime and post-war periods, as well as moments of rupture and transformation, that are reflected in the life histories of our two brokers.

Thirdly, the foregoing analysis has implications for post-war development and peacebuilding policies. These include the need for interveners to; recognize the uneven, and often violent nature of post-war transitions; be attuned to the salience of marginal frontier regions that play a defining role in shaping post-war trajectories out of (or back into) large scale violence; recognize the roles played by brokers who often mediate and translate post-war reconstruction and peacebuilding programmes; support the emergence of 'negotiated spaces', in which brokers can amplify the political voice of people living on the frontier, leading to more inclusive and interdependent relations between centres and peripheries.

Notes

1. Interview with Tula Narayan Shah, Kathmandu, 15th May 2019.
2. For the purposes of this article, we define Madhesis as the Hindu caste groups in the Tarai sharing close cultural and linguistic ties with similar groups in neighbouring India, excluding Tharu and Muslim communities (Pandey, 2017). Madhesis constitute around 20% of Nepal's population.
3. The civil war in Sri Lanka was fought between the Government of Sri Lanka and a Tamil separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It began in 1983 and continued intermittently until 2009 when the LTTE were militarily defeated by the Government. The 'People's War' in Nepal began in 1996 and was fought between the Government and the Community Party of Nepal (Maoist), ending with the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006.
4. Research was conducted as part of two comparative projects: 'Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka and Nepal: War to Peace Transitions viewed from the margins' (funded by ESRC, Ref: ES/M011046/1)

and 'Living on the Margins: Using literary comics to understand the role of borderland brokers in post-war transitions' (funded by AHRC, Ref AH/P008216/1).

5. We are particularly indebted to Sánchez Meertens (2013) whose PhD thesis includes several interviews with Pillayan.

6. Interview with Tamil politician and former government official, Batticaloa, 17th September 2017. One interviewee attributed the following quote to MLAM Hizbullah: "In Sri Lanka, there are more than forty political parties and splinter groups. I'm the only one who doesn't belong to any of these parties. But still I have remained in government throughout my career" (interview with NGO representative, Batticaloa, 26th November 2017).

7. Interview with civil society representative, Batticaloa, 6th November 2016.

8. Interview with civil society representatives, Batticaloa, 24th April and 4th August 2017.

9. Peace talks began with the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 2002 and officially ended in 2006.

10. Provincial Councils were established in 1987 and were designed to devolve certain core government functions to the regions.

11. The Sri Lankan state centralised during Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency from 2005, generating closer alignment between its component parts. The President's family took direct control over key functions of the state, with the President's brother Gotabaya serving as Defence Secretary and another brother – Basil Rajapaksa – leading the distribution of patronage in the East via the Nation Building Ministry (interview with Tamil politician, Batticaloa, 17th September 2017; interview with civil society representative, Batticaloa, 24th April 2017).

12. Interview with civil society activist, Batticaloa, 8th August 2017.

13. The TNA was established in 2001 and is the leading alliance of Tamil nationalist parties, which had very close links with the LTTE during the war.

14. Interview with civil society activist, Batticaloa, 28th November 2017.

15. Interview with civil society representative, Batticaloa, 24th November 2017.

16. Interview with civil society activist, Batticaloa, 28th November 2017. This sentiment was confirmed by another interviewee (NGO coordinator, Batticaloa, 26th November 2017).

17. A *dhoti* is a traditional male garment associated with the Madhesi community. *Pahadi* is a term used particularly by those from the Tarai to refer to someone who originates from the hills of Nepal.

18. Interview with Tula Narayan Shah, Kathmandu 17th January 2017.

19. Ibid.

20. For an example of Tula Narayan Shah's writing in the English-language media see Shah (2015).

21. Interview with Tula Narayan Shah, Kathmandu, 15th May 2019.

22. Interview with Nepali academic, Kathmandu, 12th October 2017.

23. Interview with donor representative, Kathmandu, 18th October 2017. See also Novelli et al. (2021) and Pherali and NEMAF (2021).

24. Interview with Tula Narayan Shah, Kathmandu, 18th March 2017.

25. Ibid.

26. A new party formed from the merger of MJF and two smaller parties. The SSFN has since merged with another party to become the Samajbari Party.

27. Interview with Tula Narayan Shah, Kathmandu, 15th May 2019.

28. Interview with academic, Kathmandu, 16th May 2019.

29. For further evidence of the impact of NEMAF's role in legitimating the Madhesi struggle and translating 'grassroots narratives … into authoritative discourses to inform [the Madhesi] movement['s] actions' see Novelli et al 2021, p.44 and Pherali and NEMAF (2021).

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Appendix 1

The research involved significant ethical and security challenges. In contexts where political violence is prevalent, identifying individuals as brokers or community leaders can undermine their security (Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018). We took steps to ensure that the research process did not undermine the safety of participants and that the team included researchers with long-term research experience in each of the five research sites.

To ensure safety of participants, the research team communicated regularly with field contacts before undertaking any field visits and utilised established NGO security networks, which provided real-time updates on the ground situation. Conducting research in conflict-affected regions requires acute awareness of the shifting political boundaries of appropriate behaviour which will determine not only which areas research can be safely conducted in, but also what kind of questions can be asked. It also requires recognition of power imbalances and 'collective histories of violence' without which research may risk 'causing harm in the form of objectifying people and context, normalizing violence, or silencing voices' (Abdelnour & Abu Moghli, 2021). Where findings about research participants have been made public, we liaised closely with them to ensure they were comfortable with the accounts and details being published.

The two authors are both white, male academics from the UK. While our positionality shaped the research process and findings generated from interviews in which we were involved, we sought to mitigate this by (1) engaging in continuous reflection about how our own positionality shaped both the research process and our responses to it, (2) discussing issues of positionality and ethics with a large research team, (3) ensuring that research team included researchers from a variety of backgrounds and identities.

Data collected as part of this project is available from the UK data archive (full details to be provided after peer review).