

Women's Representation in Nepal's Political Landscape

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF POLITICAL PARTIES
AND LEADERSHIP IN NEPAL

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Policy Brief

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Introduction

With the promulgation of the new federal structure in 2017 in Nepal, there was a higher percentage of women participation in the election and representation in the House of Representatives (HoR). The constitutional mandate of 33% representation for women played a crucial role in this progress. In the 2017 federal election, 90 members of the federal parliament (32.73% of the total 275) were women. Similarly, since the 2022 federal election, 91 members of the federal parliament (33.1% of the total 275) are now women.¹ The number reflects a significant quantitative women representation as Nepal ranked 54th in the world ranking of women in the HoR (Lower House) in April 2023.²

However, a disaggregation of the data paints a different picture, with only a negligible improvement in the number of women elected through the First Past The Post (FPTP) electoral process. In 2017, only six women were elected through the FPTP; in 2022, the number increased to just nine.³ The constitutional mandate of 33% representation was met with the Proportional Representation (PR), a seat the party assigned to their female member. The selection of women's candidacy for PR can contradict the democratic process as typically a selected group of individuals, predominantly male and elite, hold the decision-making power within a political party. In Nepal, although women successfully made it to top state posts such as the President, the Speaker, and the Chief Justice, their representation in political parties remains abysmal.⁴ Systemic and generational problems have long plagued women's participation in the political sector. While the constitution has guaranteed basic representation, the quota system has been perceived as a mere tokenism of women's

¹ Devkota, Khim L. "History of Women Lawmakers." *The Kathmandu Post* (Kathmandu), March 22, 2023. <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2023/03/22/history-of-women-lawmakers>.

² <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=4&year=2023>

³ Adhikari, Arpana. "Women Representation Still Remains Bare Minimum." *Rising Nepal Daily* (Kathmandu), December 25, 2022. <https://risingnepaldaily.com/news/20498>.

⁴ Poudel, Purushottam. "When Will Women Lead Big Political Parties?" *The Kathmandu Post* (Kathmandu), February 21, 2023.

representation—political parties as enabling institutions and political leaders as enabling actors play a major role in this crisis. Existing leadership has yet to recognize the benefits of selecting and engaging female candidates. This policy brief aims to explore challenges, including regressive actions perpetuated by political parties, leaders, and patriarchal norms/ behaviors contributing to women's stagnant progress in Nepali politics.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors Impacting Women's Representation

Myriad factors influence women's participation within the political sphere. These include well-known challenges such as geography, socio-economic development, and cultural norms. It would be remiss not to address the well-known systemic injustices that have long plagued the gender equality movement in Nepal—cultural norms, caste, socio-economic systems, access to education, and violence. Cultural norms such as early child marriage often reduce girls' access to opportunities as they are married off at a young age and are forced to take domestic roles early in their lives. The 2021 census reported that approximately 36% of women were married at 18-20.⁵ Gendered social roles due to entrenched patriarchal structures reduce women's access to education and resources from a young age. Traditional roles and expectations of running a household typically precede education or a career. When women's identities are limited to the domestic sphere, the notion of a “professional” woman is dismissed. As a result, women are often discouraged or limited from entering politics—a challenging field for women to enter.⁶

It is doubly difficult for women from low socioeconomic status or lower “caste.” For instance, Dalit women face marginalization due to descent-based and gender-based

⁵ "National Population and Housing Census 2021." Census Nepal. National Statistics Office, Accessed May 19, 2023. <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/population>.

⁶ Le Barbanchon, T., & Sauvagnat, J. (2022). Electoral Competition, Voter Bias, and Women in Politics. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 20(1), 352-394. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvab028>

discrimination embedded from birth.⁷ The generational stigma experienced by Dalit women follows them in all aspects of their lives from birth to death, stripping them of their right to decision-making, education, economic, and political opportunities. Historically, Nepali women's access to economic resources such as land, property, and credit have also been limited. As a result, women cannot explore opportunities for growth and learning. Violence Against Women is another significant factor that restricts women's roles outside of the household. Violence is often a manifestation of cultural norms and structural inequality that reinforces power structures.⁸ The subjugation of women creates hierarchies in the domestic sphere, which is reinforced in the communities and environments around them.

These challenges reduce women's access to education and opportunities beyond. Girls from low-income families surrounded by practices of early child marriage that face gender violence and live in poor learning environments often drop out of school at a young age. In rural areas, more than 70% of girls drop out of school by the time they are 16 years old.⁹ The lack of role models in the education system also makes it difficult for girls to envision themselves pursuing education or professional careers. These significant issues must be addressed to ensure women have equal opportunities to participate in politics and contribute to decision-making processes affecting their lives and communities. Such systemic challenges make it difficult for women to pursue a future in politics.

In addition to these challenges, there are inconspicuous factors that operate through informal networks, institutions, actors, and attitudes that impact the participation of women in

⁷ Nepali, Radha. "Dalit Women in Nepali Politics: Underrepresented, Undermined, Discriminated and Oppressed." Nepal Live Today, November 2, 2022.

<https://www.nepallivetoday.com/2022/11/02/dalit-women-in-nepali-politics-underrepresented-undermined-discriminated-and-oppressed/>.

⁸ Dahal, P., Joshi, S.K. & Swahnberg, K. A qualitative study on gender inequality and gender-based violence in Nepal. BMC Public Health 22, 2005 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14389-x>

⁹ "6 Facts About Girls Education In Nepal." Little Sisters Fund. Little Sisters Fund, March 4, 2020. <https://littlesistersfund.org/2020/03/04/6-facts-about-girls-education-in-nepal>

politics.¹⁰ These issues are deeply rooted yet unaddressed, requiring shifting the political landscape, disruptive activism, and radical tactics against the status quo. The interplay of systemic challenges and the complacency of political leadership and governing institutions, party hierarchies, attitudes, and behaviors have hindered women's growth in the political realm in Nepal.

Political Parties as Key Players in Stagnating Women's Representation

The political parties in Nepal operate under a multi-party democratic system. As essential institutions for the functioning of democracy, they offer citizens and political participants unique choices and opportunities to engage in the country's political decisions and processes. The post-civil war ushered in a new era of alternative politics in Nepal with promises of advocating for the needs of the people, with the people. However, political parties in Nepal have failed to achieve inclusion and represent their electorates' interests.¹¹ Within major national parties of Nepal, the proportion of women in leadership positions is appalling.¹²

Political parties play a significant role in empowering women's political participation by providing capacity building, improving access to high-ranking decision-making positions in the party, and providing tickets to run for election at the preferred candidacy. In Nepal, female political leaders, who are already unrepresented in Nepali society due to various socio-economic factors at the grassroots level, have been disappointed by political parties as

¹⁰ Tamang, Seira, Sumina R. Karki, Amol Acharya, and Srijana Nepal. "Beyond "Capacity": Gendered Election Processes, Networks, and Informality in Local Governments in Nepal." The Asia Foundation (Kathmandu), March 2022.

https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Nepal_Beyond-Capacity-Gendered-Election-Processes-Networks-and-Informality-in-Local-Governments.pdf

¹¹ Joshi, Pushpa R. Dr. "How Political Parties in Nepal Are Failing in Moralistic Culture and Civic Responsibility." Nepal Live Today, August 15, 2022.

<https://www.nepallivetoday.com/2022/08/15/how-political-parties-in-nepal-are-failing-in-moralistic-culture-and-civic-responsibility/>

¹² Bhattarai, Kamal D. "The Woeful Presence of Nepali Women in Politics and Government." The Annapurna Express, February 26, 2019.

<https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/the-woeful-presence-of-nepali-women-in-politics-and-government-1265>.

well. The composition of the cultural legacies within political parties, such as relegating the visibility and recognition of active female political leaders, limited access to leadership roles, and the practice of “tokenism” to acquire tickets, have further discouraged women’s participation and representation.

For instance, the central committees (CC)—the decision-making authority within the political party—have a poor representation of women. Similarly, the composition of the selection committee and the party’s nominations for election is controlled by elite groups, primarily men.¹³ This contradicts the Political Party Act of 2017, which requires that one-third of the members of all official political party committees are women.¹⁴ The representation gets worse with the hierarchy as top decision-making positions are held by men from traditionally elite or “upper-caste” groups. Political parties must have at least 33% women in their respective CC. Yet, in major political parties such as the Nepali Congress and CPN (Maoist Center), women occupied 27% and 26% of the posts within the CC, respectively. CPN-UML was just over the reservation, with 35% of women in their CC.¹⁵ Even when women hold positions within these spaces, it is occupied by individuals from privileged socio-economic strata. Female candidates who are marginalized based on their culture and caste fare even worse.

Women’s participation in leadership positions is also hindered primarily by male leaders who have held power over the past two decades.¹⁶ The major political parties, still dominated by

¹³ Tamang, Seira, Sumina R. Karki, Amol Acharya, and Srijana Nepal. "Beyond “Capacity”: Gendered Election Processes, Networks, and Informality in Local Governments in Nepal." The Asia Foundation (Kathmandu), March 2022. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Nepal_Beyond-Capacity-Gendered-Election-Processes-Networks-and-Informality-in-Local-Governments.pdf.

¹⁴ Sharma, Ila. "Forgotten Commitment by Political Parties." *The Kathmandu Post*, December 16, 2021. <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2021/12/16/forgotten-commitment-by-political-parties>.

¹⁵ Ghimire, Pratik. "Nepali Political Parties Far from Inclusive." *The Annapurna Express*, January 14, 2022. <https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/nepali-political-parties-far-from-inclusive-3975>.

¹⁶ Tamang, Seira, Sumina R. Karki, Amol Acharya, and Srijana Nepal. "Beyond “Capacity”: Gendered Election Processes, Networks, and Informality in Local Governments in Nepal." The Asia Foundation (Kathmandu), March 2022.

old guardians for several decades, are hesitant to nominate women for top leadership roles. Older political leaders are busy playing musical chairs of power grabbing amongst themselves to pave a path for the next generation. The manifestation of traditional thinking and cultural roles is revealed when the male counterparts refuse to advocate for the role of women beyond what is mandated by the constitution or the law.¹⁷ It is apparent that when women hold political positions, they are selected primarily not because of their qualifications but because the constitutional provisions require the political parties to do so. Even when women are elected to leadership roles, they are often confined to deputy/vice positions.¹⁸ Several male politicians often claim that the reason for the discrepancy is either the participation of women or their lack of political experience and academic qualifications.¹⁹ However, when there are opportunities for male candidates to advocate for their female counterparts, they remain silent. Politicians in power often favor their kin, choosing nepotism over diversity and inclusion. This trend has, however, been redefined by new political parties introducing alternative politics as they have elected women as a party-chief.²⁰

The narrative touted by the status quo against nominating women to leadership positions is prejudiced. Asia Foundation's report, "Beyond Capacity," discusses that traditional parties often value candidates based on seniority, investment, loyalty, etc.²¹ These qualities are often

https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Nepal_Beyond-Capacity-Gendered-Election-Processes-Networks-and-Informality-in-Local-Governments.pdf

¹⁷ Shrestha, Elisha. "There Are More Women in Politics, but Few and Far between at Decision-making Level." The Kathmandu Post (Kathmandu), March 8, 2022.

<https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2020/03/08/there-are-more-women-in-politics-but-few-and-far-between-at-decision-making-level>

¹⁸ Poudel, Purushottam. "When Will Women Lead Big Political Parties?" The Kathmandu Post (Kathmandu), February 21, 2023. <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2023/02/21/when-will-women-lead-big-political-parties>

¹⁹ Shrestha, Elisha. "There Are More Women in Politics, but Few and Far between at Decision-making Level." The Kathmandu Post (Kathmandu), March 8, 2022.

<https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2020/03/08/there-are-more-women-in-politics-but-few-and-far-between-at-decision-making-level>

²⁰ <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2023/02/21/when-will-women-lead-big-political-parties>

²¹ Tamang, Seira, Sumina R. Karki, Amol Acharya, and Srijana Nepal. "Beyond "Capacity": Gendered Election Processes, Networks, and Informality in Local Governments in Nepal." The Asia Foundation (Kathmandu), March 2022.

associated with politicians who are already in power and have had the opportunity to work within the political sector in Nepal. The prejudiced criteria that define the “necessary” qualifications inevitably disapprove of candidates who do not have long-standing experience within the political sector in Nepal, which often tends to be women and other individuals from marginalized backgrounds.²²

Interrelated with the “qualifications” reasoning is the processes by which the candidates are recruited or selected for the election process. Political parties continue to prioritize well-known candidates over new progressive candidates. When political leadership is asked why female candidates were not a priority, they mention a lack in the “supply” of female candidates.²³ This reasoning is tied to the prejudiced perception of what makes a female candidate qualified. Female candidates are historically marginalized and financially disadvantaged; as a result, they are deemed unqualified during the selection process.

An apparent out-group effect has been seen in parties whereby a default negative evaluation of female candidates is based on their capacity to contest with the prominent party elite. This has set clear informal rules in the parties that define a candidate's constituency for the election. Often, the ‘safe’ or ‘winnable’ seats go to male candidates, and female candidates are deliberately relegated to tougher seats, especially in the constituencies where male candidates have held supremacy for the longest time.²⁴ As a result, female candidates face the informal constraint to contest for the FPTP electoral system. The minimal candidacy of

https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Nepal_Beyond-Capacity-Gendered-Election-Processes-Networks-and-Informality-in-Local-Governments.pdf.

²² Tamang, Seira. "Why Aren't More Women Selected as Candidates?" Record Nepal (Kathmandu), May 16, 2022. <https://www.recordnepal.com/why-arent-more-women-selected-as-candidates>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Tamang, Seira, Sumina R. Karki, Amol Acharya, and Srijana Nepal. "Beyond “Capacity”: Gendered Election Processes, Networks, and Informality in Local Governments in Nepal." The Asia Foundation (Kathmandu), March 2022.

https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Nepal_Beyond-Capacity-Gendered-Election-Processes-Networks-and-Informality-in-Local-Governments.pdf.

female candidates in the 2022 federal election for the FPTP electoral system (only 225 female candidates among the 2,412 contesting candidates) is self-evident that the political parties still label females as less competent candidates.²⁵

The parties have also failed to take strategic actions toward recognizing women as candidates deserving of equal representation and encouraging them to contest for unreserved seats. While the constitutional mandate of 33% representation has created an environment for gender-responsive reforms for inclusive governance, there is less chance that it will progress to become a gender-transformative. The parties have not been enthusiastic about adopting strategic plans that change fundamental societal attitudes, power structures, and gender norms to achieve lasting gender equality. On several occasions, the major political parties in Nepal have fielded strategies in favor of male candidates. A recent example is the 2022 local election, where conferring with coalition partners led one party to withdraw its candidate in favor of one male candidate nominated by the other party.²⁶ Such practices and the lack of strategic plans will undoubtedly miss the opportunity to sustain the impact of mandated gender representation. In the event of the policy withdrawal, women's representation will drop significantly. A similar case was observed in Pakistan when the expiration of a three-decade-long mandate to empower women's representation in the parliament resulted in a drop from 10% to less than 1% of women's representation.²⁷

Of course, the onus for change also lies among women, as much as it does for political parties and the male political elite. The long history of exclusion from politics has internalized a

²⁵ "Nepali Women Go from Home to House." *Nepali Times* (Kathmandu), December 2, 2022. <https://www.nepalitimes.com/news/nepali-women-go-from-home-to-house>.

²⁶Ghimire, Binod. "Alliance Politics Impacts Female Candidacy in Local Level Elections." *The Kathmandu Post* (Kathmandu), April 28, 2022. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/04/28/alliance-politics-impacts-female-candidacy-in-local-level-elections>.

²⁷ Krook, Mona Lena. "Beyond Supply and Demand: A Feminist-Institutionalist Theory of Candidate Selection." *Political Research Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2010): 707–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25749243>.

narrative within women that they are unsuitable for public office and incompetent to their male counterparts. The Asia Foundation report highlights that women's evaluation of their unsuitability for leadership roles shows a lack of confidence and political ambition compared to men.²⁸ The study suggests that in the 2022 local election, where there was a constitutional mandate of either or both women's representation in the position of mayor and deputy mayor, women were more likely to run for the deputy position. Another research by Magda Hinojosa in Latin America also highlights a trend that women are less to put themselves forward as candidates and are unconfident in giving a self-nomination for the highest-ranking role in public office.²⁹

Moving Forward

Party's Regulation

The party's internal and external regulation is crucial in changing the ecosystem. The external regulation includes the constitution and laws relating to the electoral system, party financing, party organization, and structure.³⁰ On the other hand, external regulation depends on the party's ideological foundations, historical influence, internal bureaucracy, degree of influence of party elites, and level of decentralization within the party.³¹

As a part of monitoring the external regulation of a party, ensuring that gender equality is abide by the Political Act enacted by the Election Commission and the constitutional mandate

²⁸ Tamang, Seira, Sumina R. Karki, Amol Acharya, and Srijana Nepal. "Beyond "Capacity": Gendered Election Processes, Networks, and Informality in Local Governments in Nepal." The Asia Foundation (Kathmandu), March 2022.

https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Nepal_Beyond-Capacity-Gendered-Election-Processes-Networks-and-Informality-in-Local-Governments.pdf

²⁹ Wylie, Kristin N. *Latin American Politics and Society* 56, no. 1 (2014): 175–78.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43286520>

³⁰ Ballington, Julie. "Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties." National Endowment for Democracy, (2011). Accessed May 29, 2023.

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Empowering-Women-PolitParties-ENG_0.pdf

³¹ Ibid.

of 33% of women representation of women in the party's membership is significant. Similarly, enacting the policy governing the 33% representation in the party's central committee is also an important measure to improve the democratic process of candidate recruitment and nomination for the election.

External regulation alone cannot affect the sustainability of the transformative change if internal regulations are not addressed. The party and its elite group need to introduce strategies that affect how different needs, interests, and social demands in society get represented in the party. A strategy like implementing separate forums for women delegates to meet at a party convention offers networking opportunities and builds allies. Another strategy can be establishing an internal party Task Force dedicated to women's engagement that held meetings and hearings. This would force women's issues at the highest levels of the party.

Candidate Recruitment and Nomination

Transparency in the candidate recruitment process is pivotal and can be achieved by establishing guidelines by party nomination committees. While the parties in Nepal have guidelines for recruitment and nomination, the process is always formal and democratic, and often, elite groups with a proficient financial background have higher access to tickets for the election. Likewise, as the issue of recognizing women for unreserved seats still prevents them from contesting for the FPTP, political parties should adopt strategies to ensure implementation and placement in winnable positions.

Another issue that is put forward is women's willingness and confidence to run for leadership positions within the party and in the election. This can be overcome by capacity and skills

development training that provides confidence and experience to stand for election. Such training will expand the pool of women candidates with the confidence and experience to stand for the election. Such training programs can be built in collaboration with parties and non-governmental organizations by incorporating international best practices.

Financial Incentives and Aid to Women Candidate

Access to direct and indirect financial resources critically affects women's decision to run for office. Access to financial resources such as family capital, asking for credit, and acquiring loans from banking and financial institutions is comparatively more difficult for women than men. Unfortunately, looking at the trend in the recent elections in Nepal, the necessary financial resources to run for office are exponentially high every term.

Various direct or indirect financial incentives and aid schemes by the political parties to their women candidates can catalyze the change. The scheme can decrease the financial burden, such as candidates' breaks on membership fee dues, registration forms, and other campaign expenses. Similarly, as campaign fundraising remains an important issue, political parties can play an instrumental role in providing women with equal access to public funds and creating special fundraising opportunities for women candidates. Unlike most male candidates, women are caretakers in families responsible for caring for children and other family members. In such cases, the political parties can also address the challenge by creating a subsidy program that allows women to be reimbursed for a certain amount for childcare expenses incurred in seeking a nomination and other costs like travel expenses and necessary items. A similar program was initiated by the Sam Rainsy Party in Cambodia. Women candidates were provided bicycles to support mobility and basic clothing while campaigning.

Similarly, the Liberal Party in Canada reimbursed CAD\$500 for childcare incurred in seeking a nomination for women and minority candidates.³²

Visibility Of Female Candidates

Public outreach campaigns and networking can counter cultural and societal challenges for women. With women's restricted mobility and dual responsibilities at home and work, the informal alliances formed outside political parties through gatherings and events can be inaccessible to women. These factors can be highlighted as some of the major reasons behind less visibility of women candidates. To overcome these issues, the political parties and their elite group, who have larger access to resources, can exercise their power and privilege to increase the visibility of women candidates.

Promoting women in political campaigns, where they are often absent, and including them in television adverts campaigning posters, and appointing women as party spokespersons are some actions that political parties and their leadership groups can take. In the new media world, where media acts as a mouthpiece for politicians to proliferate bad information or create a particular narrative about candidates, parties can encourage more women to participate in television interviews, talk shows, dialogues, etc., with the objective of building them a wider reach, name recognition, and popularity.

³² Ballington, Julie. "Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties." National Endowment for Democracy, (2011). Accessed May 29, 2023.
https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Empowering-Women-PolitParties-ENG_0.pdf.