

GRIG MAPPING REPORT — NEPAL

Present, But Not Heard

What 60 Local Governments Reveal About the Limits of Nepal's Gender Quotas

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Author: Samhita Rana

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By most formal measures, Nepal should be a case study in how to legislate gender equality into local government. Since 2017, the Constitution has guaranteed that at least 40 percent of elected local representatives be women, with a woman required to hold one of the two top executive seats in every municipality or rural municipality. More than four in ten local representatives elected that year were women, a milestone celebrated internationally as evidence that quotas work.

A mapping study of 60 local government units across Karnali, Lumbini and Madhesh provinces, conducted by Governance Lab (GovLab) suggests the celebration was premature. The structures Nepal built to guarantee inclusion are almost universally in place. What they were built to produce — women and marginalized communities with real influence over how public money and power are allocated — is, in most places, still missing.

60/60 LGUs report a gender unit or focal person	63% have approved GESI policies	28% of gender units are under-resourced
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THE PAPERWORK IS PERFECT. THE PRACTICE ISN'T

Every single local government surveyed reported having a designated gender unit, committee or focal person. Fifty-nine of sixty said they hold public hearings. Sixty-three percent have approved formal gender equality or social inclusion policies. On paper, this is close to full compliance.

But compliance and function have quietly diverged. Even where gender units exist, 28 percent operate with limited staff, resources or authority. Where policies exist, gender considerations are frequently acknowledged in principle and then “sidelined by competing priorities such as infrastructure,” as the report puts it — issues raised but not prioritized in 43 percent of cases, and integrated only inconsistently in another 40 percent. The institutions are real. Their teeth are not.

EVERYONE KNOWS THE TOOLS. ALMOST NO ONE USES THEM

The starkest finding concerns Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting (GRPB), the technical machinery through which Nepal has tried, since 2007, to make sure public budgets actually serve women, children and excluded groups. Awareness is high: forty-one of sixty respondents describe themselves as very familiar with GRPB. Application is not. Nearly half of local governments don't use GRPB tools at all, and only a small fraction apply them regularly. Cross-analysis in the report finds that even officials who report strong familiarity with the framework frequently fail to use it in practice — a gap between knowing and doing that no amount of training-on-paper appears to close.

The same pattern shows up in data use: 83 percent of local governments do not use gender-disaggregated data when planning or budgeting, meaning decisions about who benefits from public spending are still being made largely by guesswork rather than evidence.

REPRESENTATION IS NOT THE SAME AS POWER

Fifty-seven of sixty respondents said women hold key decision-making roles in their local government, a figure that, read alone, looks like success. Read against the next set of findings, it looks like something closer to a formality. Only a quarter of respondents said marginalized women can actually influence decisions; just 24 said women's voices are regularly considered, with most local governments saying they are heard only "sometimes" or "rarely."

"Representation and influence are not the same thing, and Nepal's local governance system has quietly optimized for the first while leaving the second largely untouched."

Women occupy the seats the constitution reserved for them. Whether they are heard once they're in those seats depends on institutional dynamics and social norms that quotas were never designed to touch.

SOME WOMEN ARE MORE INCLUDED THAN OTHERS

The report is unusually direct about a dimension often glossed over in gender-and-governance research: exclusion within exclusion. Dalit women face the steepest barriers to participation, followed by Janajati, Madheshi and Muslim women and women with disabilities. Caste, ethnicity, religion, education and economic status compound rather than simply add to one another. The general participation mechanisms local governments have built tend to benefit already advantaged women while leaving the most marginalized further behind. A governance system can hit its numerical quota for "women" and still systematically exclude most women who are not from dominant caste or class backgrounds.

CIVIL SOCIETY IS PRESENT BUT UNUSED

Eighty percent of local governments report that Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) are active in their area. But 28 of 60, nearly half, report no meaningful engagement with them at all, and only 10 engage regularly. Where engagement is strong, the mapping finds, collaboration and outcomes are visibly better. Where it isn't, local governments are leaving on the table exactly the community knowledge, trust and accountability pressure that WROs exist to provide.

VISIBILITY HAS A COST

Nine respondents reported direct backlash against women leaders; seventeen, more than a quarter of all local governments surveyed, flagged digital harassment as an emerging risk. Only about half of local governments report having any safety protocols in place. As women's public roles expand, so, it appears, does the informal cost of holding them.

25% of marginalized women can influence decisions	83% don't use gender-disaggregated data	17/60 flag digital harassment as an emerging risk
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THE ONE GENUINELY HOPEFUL FINDING

Every single local government surveyed said it was open to trying new approaches. That is not a minor data point. It suggests the barriers documented here are not primarily born of resistance or bad faith, but of the capacity of institutions that were handed a mandate for inclusion without the training, resourcing, or coordination to operationalize it. The report puts it bluntly: local governments are not constrained by a lack of intent, but by limitations in capacity, resources and enabling environment.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE WORK AHEAD

The report's recommendations follow directly from its diagnosis:

- Stop investing primarily in awareness-raising, since awareness is no longer the bottleneck, and invest instead in hands-on GRPB and GESI implementation support.
- Build the leadership capacity of the women already elected to executive roles, focused specifically on decision-making influence rather than ceremonial presence.
- Formalize engagement between local governments and WROs rather than leaving it to individual goodwill.
- Build institutional safeguards against the backlash and digital harassment that increasingly shadow women's public leadership.

Nepal's federalism experiment made an unusually strong bet on quotas as a shortcut to inclusive governance. This mapping is a reminder that the bet paid off exactly where quotas are good at paying off — in seats filled and structures established — and has, so far, mostly failed to pay off where quotas cannot reach: in who gets listened to once the meeting starts.

The GRIG mapping was conducted by Governance Lab (GovLab) in partnership with UN Women under the programme “Strengthening Gender Responsive and Inclusive Governance through Leadership, Fellowship, and Institutional Reform.”