



National Governance Symposium 2024

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL ELECTION: INSIGHTS INTO WOMEN'S NETWORKS, COALITIONS, AND GENDER BIASES

Strengthening Subnational Governance for Inclusive Economic Development

SESSION BRIEF



Inclusion
Economics

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Executive Summary

Women in Nepal have shown increasing political aspirations, aiming to become policymakers and leaders. Over the years, there has been gradual progress in women's political participation. Despite these improvements, the increase remains marginal, especially considering Nepal's federal system has introduced inclusive rights and policies to encourage women's participation at local levels.

Several barriers hinder women's political participation. In 2023, out of 7,000 women aspiring for political roles, only about 700 were nominated at ward or local government levels, reflecting a significant gap between aspirations and opportunities. Within party structures, gender disparity is stark—only 5% of members in party selection committees were women, further limiting their influence in decision-making processes.

Cultural and societal norms also pose challenges, as many voters are not yet prepared to accept women in leadership roles. Unlike male politicians, women politicians are fragmented and isolated, especially at the local level. Male politicians have been able to capitalize their support networks and relationships not only in terms of getting election tickets but also getting promoted within the party hierarchy. On the other hand, due lack of capacity and experience in forming political relationships, women politicians have not been able to move beyond the quota protected seats.

Female politicians, despite their desire to run for higher offices, lack political knowledge and skills impeding their political mobility. They lack skills pertaining to effective communication, building constituent relations, party engagement, campaign strategy and other soft skills. Research highlights that targeted interventions such as providing incentives, information, and encouragement can significantly enhance women's participation at ward and municipal levels. To truly empower women in politics, Nepal must address these societal attitudes, strengthen institutional inclusivity, and ensure that existing policies translate into tangible opportunities for women at all levels.

I. Introduction

Nepal's 2015 Constitution established gender quotas in local governments, requiring parties to nominate at least one woman for the two municipal positions of mayor and deputy mayor. In 2017, women held 47.7% of municipal positions, almost exclusively as deputy mayors. However, during the 2022 elections, coalitions formed by major parties typically fielded only one male candidate, circumventing the quota and reducing women's representation by almost 20 percentage points (Pande et al., 2024a; Pande et al., 2022).

More generally, since Nepal's first fully democratic elections in 2017, women have struggled in contesting higher-level, non-quota positions like ward chairperson and mayor. Few women build on electoral success in a reserved position to access a higher-level open position in the next election. In 2022, only 1.34% of elected female ward members (quota seats) ran for ward chairperson, compared to 22.43% of male members (open seats).

More women in political positions ensures that women's demands are considered when crafting policies and reduces the gender gap in political ambitions and involvement (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al., 2012; Bandyopadhyay et al., 2024). However, even with electoral quotas, women's political representation remains low. In 2023, out of 7,000 women aspiring for political roles, only about 700 were nominated at ward or local government levels, reflecting a significant gap between aspirations and opportunities. Within party structures, gender disparity is stark—only 5% of members in party selection committees were women, further limiting their influence in decision-making processes.

Women's representation in local offices rose from 0.6% in 1992 to 41% in 2017. Yet, representation remained limited almost entirely to quota-protected seats, and in 2022 women's representation in municipal positions (Mayor and Deputy Mayor) dropped by 8-percentage points as parties strategically evaded quotas through coalitions (Pande et al., 2024a; Pande et al., 2022). Nepal is not unique in facing difficulties with translating electoral gender quotas into lasting representation for women representatives as many countries fail to meet quota mandates (Diaz, 2003), and women elected officials often face discrimination once in office (Heinze et al., 2024; Purohit, 2021).

II. Underlying Problems

Fragmentation of women politicians

Unlike male politicians, women politicians are fragmented and isolated, especially at the local level. Male politicians have been able to capitalize their support networks and relationships not only in terms of getting election tickets but also getting promoted within the party hierarchy. On the other hand, due lack of capacity and experience in forming political relationships, women politicians have not been able to move beyond the quota protected seats. Even in the quota protected seats, party elites have been able to undermine female politicians. In the 2022 local elections, as the parties formed coalitions, they were able to circumvent the constitutional provisions of having to field a female politician in one of the mayor or deputy mayor positions.

Inability to access to influential party committees

Women's inability in accessing and influencing party committees is a major challenge that they face. It is nearly impossible to get tickets for executive positions like ward-chair and mayor without having strong ties with the members of the party selection committee. Since the majority of members in these party committees are men, and powerful positions within the committees, namely committee chairpersons and secretaries are almost always men, women politicians find it extremely difficult to build relationships with them at individual levels.

Lack of political knowledge and skills

Female politicians, despite their desire to run for higher offices, lack political knowledge and skills impeding their political mobility. They lack skills pertaining to effective communication, building constituent relations, party engagement, campaign strategy and other soft skills. Existing training programs are mostly lecture based and have not significantly contributed to skill building.



III. Problem Statement

Stringent legislation for quota implementation

As mentioned above, in 2022 local elections, political parties were able to evade quotas through coalitions. In order to prevent such happenings and ensure equitable representation of women in local politics, stringent legislation whereby political parties cannot circumvent quotas is required.

Formation of inter-party women's network.

International research shows that women's networks increase skill, voice, and social capital to promote political inclusion from the ground up, even in patriarchal societies (Feigenberg et al. 2014, Prillaman, 2023). The 2008 interparty caucus of federal legislators in Nepal was seen as promising for women's political advancement. Cross-party networks offer a promising solution to increase representation. They lower barriers to participation by providing women opportunities to develop knowledge, experience, and skills often limited to predominantly male social and political networks (Prillaman, 2023). Networks can unite women across party lines, signaling solidarity to male political leaders. They expand women's political networks, which are crucial when male-dominated party leadership controls candidate selection.

About NGS

National Governance Symposium (NGS), an annual event organized by Governance Lab (Govlab) at the Daayitwa Abhiyaan, has been convening government, private sector, civil society and academia stakeholders since 2022 to foster discussions on and create a collaborative community for governance innovations and inclusive development in Nepal. This year, with the theme of **"Strengthening Subnational Governance for Inclusive Economic Development,"** the Symposium was organized on December 19-20, 2024 in partnership with Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC) and with support from government partners Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, National Planning Commission and Ministry of Finance, as well as organizing partners Daayitwa and Nepal Leadership Academy.

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Session 4: Women's Political Participation in Local Election: Insights into Women's Networks, Coalitions, and Gender Biases

Chair: Hon. Dr. Janaki K Tuladhar, Election Commissioner

Presentation: Ms. Pratigya Neupane, Program Coordinator, NARMIN and Dr. Prabin B. Khadka, Inclusion Economics Nepal at Governance Lab (IEN)

Panelists:

- Dr. Binda Pandey, Former Member of House of Representatives, Communist Party of Nepal- United Marxist Leninist
- Ms. Mahalaxmi Dina Upadhyay, Joint General Secretary, Nepali Congress
- Hon. Rekha Sharma, Standing Committee Member, CPN (Maoist Centre) and Member of Parliament
- Ms. Rita Thapa, Anupam Abhiyaan, Tewa

Moderator: Dr. Prabin B. Khadka, Assistant Professor, University of Essex

Knowledge Partner: IEN

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