

COUNTING HEADS or MAKING VOICES COUNT?

WOMEN and DALITS in NEPAL'S LOCAL POLITICS

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Abstract

Nepal adopted a federal governance framework in its new constitution of 2015, which introduced a quota system to ensure representation of women, Dalits, and other marginalized groups at the federal, provincial, and local levels. However, the question persists: does constitutionally mandated political representation effectively stimulate the participation of disadvantaged groups in local democratic processes across multiple roles? Based on qualitative data gathered from 2021 to 2023 across Nepal, this study finds that marginalized groups primarily engage in local democratic processes as voters and campaigners, but rarely as an electoral candidate except in reserved quota positions. While there is an increased participation in local planning and decision-making, disadvantaged groups have yet to assume proactive roles to facilitate the functions of local governments. The study contends that while constitutionally mandated quota system facilitates mere surface-level representation, it does not foster organic diversity and inclusion. Substantial involvement of marginalized groups in the decision-making bodies of political parties and civic organizations, therefore, is required for a meaningful representation. Moreover, alongside political inclusion, social inclusion needs to be guaranteed for broader democratic engagement, which requires a proactive approach to assert one's rights in their society for a truer representation.

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1

Introduction

Countries that emerge from violent conflicts often undergo structural reforms in governmental, economic, electoral, and security systems through peace treaties (Hassall 2019). One notable area of reform involves altering representation systems in bureaucracy and politics through quotas and other country-specific measures (Debiel & Terlinden 2005; Rondinelli 2007; Agborsangaya-Fiteu 2009; Holzner 2021). These changes aim to strengthen the democratic process by providing an equal space to the historically underrepresented. Proportional representation, including quota systems, ensures the participation of diverse socio-cultural groups in different state organs.

Following a decade-long armed conflict from 1996 to 2006, the Maoist rebel group and the then Government of Nepal (GoN) signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in November 2006. One of the several efforts to stabilize the country, a key component of the agreement, was the drafting of a new constitution. The promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal finally materialized in 2015 after eight years of hard-core negotiations among political parties and interest groups within the Constituent Assembly (CA). Among many important provisions, the new constitution of Nepal guaranteed gender and caste-based reserved seats in Local Government Units (LGUs). Among the two top elected positions in each LGU, it mandates that one must be held by a woman. Among the four elected Ward¹ members, at least one must

¹ Ward is the smallest local government unit, per the new Constitution of Nepal 2015

be a woman and another a Dalit woman. Likewise, the constitution also guarantees the inclusivity of women, Dalits, and ethnic people in the Municipal Council bodies. These institutional arrangements implemented since 2017 demonstrate a radical shift in local representation and are a significant achievement for Nepal. Through two rounds of local government elections, one in 2017 and another in 2022, thousands of women, Dalits, and minorities got chance to contest elections, to get elected, and to participate in the local-level democratic processes.

While the constitutional provisions that promote an active involvement and representation of women, Dalits, and minorities are commendable in-themselves, criticisms exist regarding the system's efficacy. Concerns include tokenistic participation in the decision-making processes, nepotism and cronyism in candidate selection, limited governing capabilities of elected representatives appointed through quotas, and the subjugated voices of minority representatives. The current inclusive system additionally faces criticism for holding qualified candidates back and eventually dissuading them from contesting local elections through open competition. However, a deeper exploration of the system, especially its contribution to ensuring the constructive representation of marginalized groups is yet to be seen. This study is an attempt to fill this gap by incorporating the perspectives of current and former elected women and Dalit representatives, local political party leaders, civil society leaders, media persons, and the general public. It seeks to analyze the contribution of a quota-based representation system in promoting the participation of historically marginalized groups in local-level democratic processes.

Inclusion and representation in democratic processes for women, Dalits, and other marginalized groups at the local level can be broadly classified into three main categories. The first category is participation in the electoral process; this involves understanding the dynamics of their engagement in electoral processes as voters, campaigners, supporters, and candidates. The second category pertains to representation in the local government structures that focuses on their roles as elected representatives and decision-makers. The third category concerns involvement in various community groups, which includes their representation in user groups, school management committees, and other public interest groups.

This study, however, mainly examines representation from two aspects. First, it explores the representation of women and Dalits as candidates in local elections within Nepal's federal governance framework. It encompasses initiatives such as creating an environment conducive to contesting elections and the candidate selection processes within a political party. Second, it dives into the roles of elected

women and Dalits in the local government-level decision-making processes, covering issues such as how they articulate their concerns and how they are acknowledged by executive powers within LGUs. Overall, the paper provides a critical perspective on the existing system and factors influencing candidate election.



2

Methodology

This study is mainly based on an analysis of qualitative data gathered over a three-year field study conducted between April 2021 to March 2024. The study was part of broader research project commissioned by Centre for Social Change (CSC), a Kathmandu based research institute, on post-conflict governance in federal Nepal. The fieldwork involved interviews with 150 respondents drawn from 18 LGUs of Sunsari, Dhanusha, Sarlahi, Bara, Makwanpur, Rupandehi, Surkhet, Dailekh, and Kailali districts, representing six provinces: Koshi, Madhesh, Bagmati, Lumbini, Karnali, and Sudurpaschim. Respondents included elected officials, government personnel, local political representatives from diverse caste and ethnic backgrounds, youth and student political leaders, civil society figures, journalists, and members of the general public. The method of data collection comprised Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews, and consultation meetings, all supported by semi-structured and open-ended questionnaires. Quantitative data, in addition to qualitative data, was primarily sourced through the official website of the Election Commission of Nepal.

This study acknowledges a few limitations. Firstly, it adheres to a specific definition and conceptualization of participation and representation within democratic processes, focusing primarily on the involvement of women and Dalits as electoral candidates in the local government and the subsequent influence of their roles in decision making bodies. Secondly, conclusions drawn rely heavily on the analysis of the perceptions and firsthand experiences of individuals directly engaged in local government formation and decision-making. It is important to note that the voices reflected here may not capture as well as represent the voice of all women and Dalit participants in recent local elections in Nepal.

3

Constitutional Provisions for Women and Dalit Representation in Nepal's Local Government

The 2015 Constitution of Nepal marks a milestone in advancing the inclusion and representation of women and Dalits within local government bodies. Recognizing the nation's socio-cultural diversity, the preamble of the constitution demonstrates a commitment to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on class, caste, gender, language, religion, and other factors.

Protecting and promoting unity in diversity, social and cultural solidarity, tolerance and harmony, by recognizing the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural and geographically diverse characteristics; and resolving to build an egalitarian society based on the proportional inclusive and participatory principles in order to ensure economic equality, prosperity and social justice by eliminating discrimination based on class, caste, region, language, religion and gender and all forms of caste-based untouchability. (The preamble of Constitution of Nepal 2015)

Likewise, several fundamental rights outlined in the constitution guarantee the rights of women and Dalits. Article 38 ensures the rights of women, with clause 4 stipulating that "Women shall have the right to participate in all bodies of the State on the basis of the principle of proportional inclusion." Additionally, Article 40 guarantees the rights of Dalits, with Clause 1 stating the following

The Dalit shall have the right to participate in all bodies of the State on the basis of the principle of proportional inclusion. Special provision shall be made by law for empowerment, representation and participation of the Dalit community in public services as well as other

sectors of employment (Article 40, Clause 1, Constitution of Nepal 2015)

Rights of women and Dalits are further emphasized in Article 42, "Rights to Social Justice" and article 51, "Policies of the State", with special focus on policies relating to social justice and inclusion.

The economically, socially or educationally backward women, Dalit, indigenous nationalities (Aadibasi Janajati), Madhesi, Tharu, Muslims, backward classes, minorities, marginalized communities, persons with disabilities, gender and sexual minorities, farmers, labourers, oppressed or citizens of backward regions and indigent Khas Arya shall have the right to participate in the bodies of the State on the basis of principle of proportional inclusion. (Article 42 Rights to Social Justice, Clause 1, Constitution of Nepal 2015)

To make special provisions for opportunities and benefits to minority communities to enjoy social and cultural rights, having maintained their identity. (Article 51 Policies of the State, Clause 9 Constitution of Nepal 2015)

The constitution encompasses specific provisions to ensure representation of women and Dalits in local government bodies. For instance, within a Ward, two of five seats are exclusively reserved for women, one of which must be designated for a Dalit woman. Additionally, if a political party nominates candidates for both Mayor/Chairperson and Deputy Mayor/Chairperson, one of these nominees must be a woman.

Articles 222 and 223 of the constitution focus on the Composition of Rural Municipal Assembly and Municipal Assembly, respectively. Both the Rural Municipal Assembly and the Municipal Assembly are required to have representation from at least two women from each ward. Likewise, Article 215, Clause 4 of the constitution outlines the structure of the Rural Municipal Executive, ensuring the election of four female members among the Rural Municipal Assembly and two from Dalit or minority communities. Similarly, Article 216, Clause 4 of the constitution mandates the inclusion of five female members amongst the members of the Municipal Assembly and three members elected from Dalit or minority communities in the Municipal Executive.

The Political Party Act 2073 (2016) emphasizes, furthermore, on ensuring inclusive organizational structures within political parties in addition to these constitutional provisions. It mandates that parties at all levels should reflect Nepal's social diversity through mechanisms of election, nomination, or appointment of members to committees, providing for participation in accordance with the principle of proportional representation. The act requires that at least one-third of members in

all levels of party committees should be women.

The legal frameworks outlined above feature strong provisions for the inclusion and representation of women, Dalits, and minorities in local government bodies through the quota system. Since the provisions are novel mechanisms of democratic representation in Nepal, their broader impact on promoting true representation remains a phenomenon to be continually observed and analyzed. Additionally, it is crucial to consider how these provisions are perceived by those who benefit from these arrangements, and those who witness the everyday governance practices of these provisions.

3.1 Women and Dalit Representation in Local Elections: 2017-2022 Analysis

Table 1: Number of candidates by posts in the local election 2017 and 2022

Post	2017		2022	
	M	F	M	F
Mayor/Chairperson	5468	368	5949	384
Deputy Mayor/Vice Chairperson	771	3596	1055	3080
Ward Chairperson	31209	1057	31578	948
Women Member		26708		25609
Dalit Women Member		24096		23287

Source : Election Commission of Nepal

The examination of the numerical representation of women and Dalits as candidates and elected representatives at the local government level in 2017 and 2022 provides us with valuable insights into the political inclusion trends. Table 1 illustrates that the total number of female candidates, excluding the Mayor/Chairperson positions, decreased between 2017 to 2022. Similarly, a downward trend can be observed in the candidacy of Dalit women members as well. While there was a slight increase in the number of women running for Mayor/Chairperson positions, 16 more women filed candidacy, a significant decline is registered in female candidacy for Deputy Mayoral positions. The reason behind the uneven trends seems unclear. While the increase in women running for mayoral positions can be attributed to nominations from political parties or the rise of independent candidates, one cannot corroborate this opinion with data. Conversely, the decline in the number of women

in Deputy Mayoral position is linked to the strategy embraced by political parties, especially their decision to forge election alliances with other parties. The decline in the number of Dalit women member candidates is noticeable, yet there is no clarity whether it is due to general unwillingness to engage in the electoral processes or other factors demotivating them from participating in politics.

Table 2: Number of elected representatives by gender in local elections 2017 and 2022

Post	2017		2022	
	M	F	M	F
Mayor/Chairperson	735	18	728	25
Deputy Mayor/Vice	53	700	185	568
Ward Chairperson	6681	61	6676	67
Member	13221	264	6676	442
Women member		6742		6742
Dalit women member		6567		6620

Source : Election Commission of Nepal

Table 2 provides an overview of the number of elected female representatives by their position within the local government level. It shows a marginal increase in the number of elected female Mayors/Chairpersons in 2022 compared to 2017, yet the numbers remain significantly low in comparison to their male counterparts. Likewise, there has been a slight increase in the number of elected female Ward Chairs in 2022, yet the overall number is quite negligible compared to elected male Ward Chairs. Table 2 indicates a notable rise in the number of Dalit women members in 2022, which may be attributed to the increased willingness and ready availability of Dalit women to run for candidacy. The overall increase aside from the Deputy Mayor/Chairperson position appears to be a modest sign of hope for advancing participation in democratic processes, however, the pace of incremental change from one election cycle to another appears problematic.

Table 3: Number of elected Dalit representatives by post in local elections 2017 and 2022

Post	2017	2022
Mayor/Chairperson	7	9
Deputy Mayor/Vice	27	16
Ward Chairperson	197	148
Member	797	878
Women member	6567	6620

Source : Election Commission of Nepal

Table 3 provides an overview of the number of elected Dalit representatives by post in the elections of 2017 and 2022. In 2017, only 7 Dalit Mayors/Chairpersons were elected that which increased to 9 in 2022. While there was a slight increment, this number does not proportionately represent the Dalit population in top executive roles who comprise nearly 14% of the nation. Additionally, there is a sharp decline in the number of elected Dalit Deputy Mayors/Chairpersons from 2017 to 2022: 27 to 16 between 2017 and 2022. A similar decrease is observed in the elected Dalit Ward Chair position. It is also interesting to note the increased number of elected Dalit women in the Ward and Dalit women member positions and the decreasing trends in upper-level positions. Further analysis is required to determine whether this decline can be attributed to how political parties decreased candidacy in minority groups, or if they could not compete with other economically sound and socially stronger candidates.

Systemic Barriers to Women's and Dalit Representation in Nepal's Local Governance

Although electoral laws that, as highlighted earlier, include provisions to promote inclusivity and diversity in local political landscapes, sometimes these laws don't take effect as intended. As outlined in Tables 1 and 2, women running for and elected in Deputy Mayoral positions are much more common than in Mayoral positions. Women made up two percent of all Mayors/Chairpersons in 2017, a figure that only slightly increased to three percent in 2022. Conversely, women took 93 percent of all Deputy Mayors/Chairpersons seats in 2017, which decreased to 75 percent in 2022. The reason for this remarkable disparity in representation in Mayoral vs Deputy Mayoral positions is outlined in the provisions of the Local Level Election Act of 2017, specifically in Section 17. When political parties field candidates for both Mayor/Chairperson and Deputy Mayor/Chairperson, this electoral law mandates that

at least one among two candidates must be a woman. In provinces where voters primarily send in a straight-party ticket, this aimed to ensure equal representation in executive positions.

(4) In addition to subsection 1, when presenting endorsement letters, the party shall establish a provision to present endorsement letters with fifty percent female candidates for the positions of Chairperson and Vice Chairperson, Chief and Deputy Chief, as well as Chief and Deputy Chief of the District Coordination Committee (Election Commission of Nepal, Local Level Election Act 2017).

While the goal of diversity and inclusivity between the two high-level roles seemed to be clearly achieved in 2017, it fell prey to the emergence of a trend dubbed "alliance politics" in 2022. This tactical maneuver in election strategy of allied political parties allowed them to field only one candidate for just one of the two roles where the gender-based provision did not matter.

(4) However, if the party nominates only one candidate, this provision of subsection shall not apply (Election Commission of Nepal, Local Level Election Act 2017).

This "loophole" in the Act allowed for political parties with similar platforms and goals to form alliances with each other. Each could field a male candidate, and voters could vote for a male candidate from one party for Mayor, and a male candidate from another party for the Deputy Mayor.

The Local Level Election Act of 2017, although it had provisions to promote diversity and inclusion of marginalized groups, led to two significant issues concerning representation. Firstly, when the quota was met, it had the negative effect of putting women in a subordinate position of a Deputy Mayor compared to the position of the Mayoral position that went to their male counterparts. This trend reflects the broader societal view towards gender and leadership, rooted in patriarchal structures, where women are perceived as being less capable of fulfilling executive roles and are relegated to secondary roles. Secondly, the emergence of alliance politics in contesting elections and a strategic exploitation of a loophole in the Act resulted in the deliberate exclusion of women. This reversed a provision that intended to mitigate systemic barriers by paradoxically repurposing it to instead create a new hindrance for women to overcome. Beyond just undermining gender parity, this exploitation of the law highlights a broader issue of political integrity and accountability. Overall, this served as a significant impediment to the general participation of women in local-level democratic processes, which may continue in future elections if not sufficiently addressed.

Additionally, while the existing legal provisions attempt to foster representation among Dalits, another barrier exists to the participation of Dalit women in LGUs. In Tables 2 and 3, it is seen that in 2017, 6567 Dalit women were elected as ward members, and in 2022, this number increased to 6620. However, this falls short of the 6742 seats reserved for them throughout all these wards. Furthermore, in Table 1, there is a noticeable decrease in the number of Dalit women running for candidacy in a reserved ward spot. While this may be attributed to unwillingness to run for candidacy and a lack of desire to be in politics, it is important to recognize the legal provisions surrounding the lack of representation.

Section 17 of the Local Level Election Act of 2017 highlights that when a political party nominates women to the position of Women Ward Member, at least one must be a Dalit woman.

(5) In addition to subsection 1, when presenting endorsement letters for the position of Women Ward Member in the Ward Committee of the Rural Municipality or Municipality, the party shall establish a provision to present endorsement letters with at least one Dalit (people who belong to the low caste category who used to be neglected and untouchable before) woman candidate (Election Commission of Nepal, Local Level Election Act 2017).

Similar to section 4, this provision presents another loophole in nominating Dalit women to wards.

(5) However, if the party nominates only one female candidate for the position of Women Ward Member, this provision of subsection shall not apply (Election Commission of Nepal, Local Level Election Act 2017).

It is important to note that this does not hold the same effect as alliance politics. Political parties cannot band together to exclude Dalit women from this role, as the quota system specifically reserves this spot for them. Furthermore, almost all wards fill the spot of Dalit Woman Ward Member. Political parties want representation of their groups, and many times they are willing to increase representation through Dalits.

However, the issue arises when the nomination of a Dalit woman isn't a mandate, but more so a suggestive extension on the general nomination of women. This creates a ward-wide problem, especially in more socially conservative communities. As established earlier, not all wards have the role of Dalit Woman Ward Member filled. This primarily happens in communities where Dalits feel increasingly marginalized, and do not feel comfortable running for candidacy. It perpetuates a

vicious cycle in representation: less representation means fewer voices advocating for marginalized groups, resulting in stagnancy in social equity. With limited representation, the concerns of marginalized groups often go unaddressed, increasing structural barriers to equality. Consequently, these groups become disillusioned with the political process and become alienated from society. This distrust and lack of a supportive environment discourage them from seeking candidacy, perpetuating the underrepresentation of Dalit women in local-level planning and decision-making processes.

3.2 Local Voices on Representation: Electoral Processes and Inclusive Decision-Making

This section mainly incorporates the views of multiple respondents on the existing representation system, candidate selection processes and contesting for the election, and female and Dalit representatives' participation in decision-making processes

3.2.1 View on the existing representation system at the local government level

The majority of respondents who engaged in field interactions acknowledged that the quota-based representation system outlined in the new constitution heavily contributed to promoting the representation of women and Dalits in LGUs. The mandatory inclusion provisions created new opportunities for hundreds of individuals who were previously less involved in active political participation. Furthermore, it facilitated gender and caste diversity, this mass representation was not possible in the previous system.

The best aspect that we saw was inclusivity. Marginalized groups/communities were able to represent in the local offices due to this particular provision. Dalits communities, conflicting communities, women, and other socially excluded groups of people secured their representation in the election. (Interview with Political leader from Rupandehi district)

Before this system was implemented, Dalit, marginalized groups, and women were politically excluded. Things have changed due to quota system. (Interview with a Mayor from Rupandehi district)

Respondents widely acknowledge that the new system of representation has directly contributed to fostering democratic development in the country. Individuals, especially women and Dalits who were previously not engaged in politics, were given the chance to run for local government, win elections, and exercise political power to

a somewhat equal extent. These democratic processes enabled the general public to openly campaign, express their needs, and choose suitable representatives from their own demographic groups.

Through the quota system, a marginalized and discriminated woman got the chance to be represented and to exercise constitutionally guaranteed power. As a Dalit woman, I see our community's issue raised at ward offices and municipality due to the provisions for our representation. Thus, representation has done well. (local political leader, Sarlahi district)

Inclusive representation has also led to increased competition among the party cadres and elected representatives, motivating them to enhance their performance in order to secure re-election.

Since unexpected candidates have made significant contributions at some local units, this has created pressure for others to perform better. Even women candidates who were less competent in the past showed better performance. Now it has created pressure among the elected representatives to work hard to ensure their candidacy for next tenure. (Interview with a University Professor in Rupandehi district)

Representation of Dalit women as ward members has contributed to positive social transformation by upholding their dignity. While their voices are not always adequately recognized in governmental structures, Dalit women have been given a chance to participate in community-based and local-level government meetings on equal footing with others from so-called "upper caste groups".

18 women from Dalit background got elected from 18 different wards in our municipality. These elected women are now equally treated in the society. In the past, some of these women were boycotted by the society to use the public water pump in the community (Municipality Mayor, Sarlahi District).

Despite its positive aspects, respondents have highlighted several ambiguities and shortcomings within the system. For instance, while the representation of women and Dalits have increased, it has yet to ensure the inclusion of other marginalized groups who continue to be underrepresented in the local governments. Moreover, beyond the quota allocated to women and Dalits, there is a negligible representation of these groups, as very few women and Dalits are elected as Mayors or Ward Chairs.

The increase in inexperienced representatives poses a challenge in achieving the desired results through the current representation system. While the quota system provided an opportunity for women to be elected into government bodies, many, through not much fault of their own, were not prepared to fulfill their constitutional

role, in terms of both skill and psychological readiness. For instance, in the 2017 local elections, over 95 percent of elected Deputy Mayors were women, but many of the elected women found their task of administration post electoral win challenging. For instance, the job of a Deputy Mayor demands the coordination of the judiciary committee, but many were out of their depths since they lacked sufficient knowledge of justice making processes. Similar issues were observed among Dalit women representatives due to the lack of defined clarity in the roles of their positions.

The undermining of women and Dalit roles is also reported as one of the critical concerns of the present representation system at the local level. In numerous cases, women elected as Deputy Mayors, Ward Chairs, and members lack decision-making roles due to the dominance of male family members in decision-making processes.² Moreover, local government planning and decision-making are often monopolized by, mostly male, Mayors and Ward Chairs, leaving women and Dalit representatives marginalized³. This scenario has led to conflicts between male Ward Chairs and female and Dalit Ward Members. Similar disputes are observed between male Mayors and female Deputy Mayors.

The Dalit representatives and Women representative are not given any importance. They are not assigned important roles in the local government bodies. (female political leader, Makwanpur district)

Respondents also expressed that the quota-based system has caused division among the local women and Dalit leaders, due to individual ambitions of securing representation in LGUs through general elections or municipal council elections. Some Dalit political leaders claimed that only local Dalit cadres with strong connections to higher political leadership were able to secure their candidacy.

Our people who are near to the political party...can move forward in the political party... Dalit community they themselves are not united. Suppose I become a representative in the local government unit, that does not mean I only represent myself. When one Dalit member is an elected representative...other Dalits have started arguing why not me? Dalit community have to unite themselves first (local political leader, Makwanpur district)

Power clashes between Mayors and Deputy Mayors representing different gender groups have been a recurring issue in many LGUs. Female Deputy Mayors interviewed in the field expressed that they have experienced male mayors, regardless of political party, attempt to overstep their mandates guaranteed by the law.

2 Interview with local political leader in Sarlahi district

3 Interview with elected women leader in Dhanusha district

Unnecessary demand of power and resource mobilization have created a tussle between the Mayor and Deputy Mayor. The Mayor often attempts to intervene the Deputy Mayor's mandate of presenting annual budget and programs (Interview with elected Ward President, Rupandehi district)

A prevailing perception of certain segments of society carries the notion that LGUs are operating from groups of incompetent individuals selected merely to fill quotas. Thus, developing trust in the effectiveness of the existing representation system remains a crucial challenge. The competency of the elected leaders, especially those elected for the first time through the quota system, is questionable. Many women and Dalit representatives entering LGUs are inexperienced in democratic processes, requiring considerable time to acquire governing, planning, and servicing skills from the ground up.

Lack of trainings have created the representation problems...Local representatives who have won the election are not competent enough. (District political leader, Rupandehi district)

Female respondents interviewed in the field were dissatisfied with the prevailing practice of mainly appointing women to secondary posts such as Deputy Mayor, Ward Members, and Municipal Council members within LGUs. Conversely, men predominantly occupy executive positions such as Mayor, Ward Presidents, and Thematic Committee Coordinators. As a result, there is a call from female political leaders and elected representatives to reform gender-insensitive representation practices adopted by political parties, advocating for a new approach that provides opportunities for women to hold executive positions.

Women are elected only as a Deputy Mayor. If the law had not obliged, women would not even be sent to the Deputy Mayor's post (Women political leader from Makwanpur district).

In contrast, some respondents contend that the quota system hinders women's advancement to top positions in local governments. They argue that while the quota system aims to bolster diversity at the local level, entrenched patriarchal practices within political parties confine women to non-executive roles. Political parties have rarely made decisions where women have secured more positions than is provisioned through the quota system, establishing the system as a tokenistic gesture rather than a mechanism to actively address the systemic barriers faced by women in government.

Irrespective of the quota system, a woman deserves the opportunity of better representation. Whether women are incapable to lead the main positions like Ward Chair and the Mayor? Why are women limited only in Deputy positions? This discrimination is prevalent while practicing the quota system. Women are not trusted by the political party to file the candidacy for the lead positions in the local government. (Interview with elected women ward member, Makwanpur district)

Challenges regarding Dalit women's participation in democratic decision-making stem from factors such as low self-esteem, lack of education and skills, and a limited learning environment within government bodies that are required to be an effective representative. Decision-making structures led by Mayors or Ward Chairs hamper marginalized groups from exploring their leadership potential at the local level. Concerns have been raised about the lack of proactive involvement of Dalit women and other ward members in the ward-level decision-making and service delivery processes.

There are 5 people running this ward office. Elected representatives should be active in solving issues of their respective ward, instead I have only seen them during meetings. I do not know if they lack specific responsibilities or just not doing their duties. Most of the works in the local government office are done either by the Ward Chairperson or the Municipal Chairperson. (Dailekh interview with local leaders)

Along with the legal provisions relating to inclusion and representation, the leadership of political parties at different levels influences the creation of opportunities for women, Dalits, and other marginalized groups. Therefore, there is a strong consensus, especially from female respondents, that it is pivotal to make political party leadership more supportive of minorities in the decision-making structure.

If our Constitution had not mentioned the compulsory inclusion of females in the position Mayor or Deputy Mayor structure, maybe we would have had to struggle more. Back then during the election, the environment also created more discussions centered around the inclusion of female representatives as Deputy Mayor rather than focusing women on the position of Mayor. Different media and discussions inclined towards female's representation as a Deputy Chief made me think about the patriarchal thoughts engraved in our society. I told the party about my wanting to stand up for the position of chief in the election. I wanted to do so because I was working quite long for the party and I believe I had a good understanding of the local level. I had closely observed local municipality's meetings and councils including its planning processes. Therefore, I had confidence in my capability of working as a Chief, and yet, people's wish remained on seeing women occupy subordinate positions. (Women deputy mayor from Surkhet)

Respondents from other marginalized groups express their discontent regarding the inadequate political representation system that fails to represent

historically underrepresented minority groups.

The representation is inadequate in my view. Marginalized group are still left behind. Muslim and “Raute” communities are still backwarded and underrepresented. From the economic, social, and political point of view, those marginalized group should be encouraged and represented adequately. The Dalits were suppressed and discriminated for a long time. Today they are represented in some proportion, but not in the ratio that correctly represents the population of Dalit communities (FGD in Surkhet district).

3.2.2 Candidate selection processes and contesting for the election

Candidate selection processes within major political parties play a pivotal role as the determinants of the democratic space afforded to women, Dalits, and marginalized groups at the local level. These processes decide who will run for election, who will win, and who will participate in decision-making processes. Respondents generally expressed that factors such as public popularity, diligence, and engagement in party activities play a decisive role in candidate selection for local elections. However, the actual decisions of political parties are influenced by a myriad of underlying factors. For example, respondents highlighted the influence of affluence in candidate selection and election contestation. Numerous cases where political parties prioritized candidates from dominant caste and ethnic groups at the ward and municipal level were noted. Within these scenarios, wealthy and well-connected individuals were often chosen as official party candidates. While financially disadvantaged candidates without strong party relationships have occasionally won local elections, trends indicate candidates with substantial monetary backing mainly contest and triumph in local elections.⁴

Financial constraints faced by women and Dalits are often attributed to their weak representation beyond the quota system. The financial limitations of these groups pose significant barriers in securing candidacy in elections across various political parties. Party leadership often gravitates towards endorsing affluent individuals, such as local businessmen, contractors, and real estate brokers, even if they lack prior involvement in active politics.

It is very challenging for financially weak people to obtain ticket and fight in the election process in the existing system. Most often political parties were also pressured to select those candidates who have economic power to create win-win situation. (women political leader, Dhanusha district)

4 Summary of several field-based interactions

While assessing the candidate selection process in the 2017 and 2022 local elections, respondents criticized the absence of a true democratic process, despite gender reforms, proportional inclusion systems, and electoral quotas provisioned in the new constitution and electoral laws for political parties to adhere to. Most candidates, particularly in positions for Mayor, Deputy-Mayor, and Ward Chair, were selected from the central, provincial, and district committees of respective political parties. Local party cadres had minimal influence during candidate selection for major local government posts. Candidates for these vital positions were often influenced by central and provincial committee leaders. In some cases, the selection of ward-level candidates was hindered due to the vested interests of upper committee leaders seeking to influence local-level decision-making processes. Municipal, as well as other lower committees' autonomy to select candidates for local elections was taken over by upper committees due to extreme conflict and competition observed within committees during the candidate selection process.

The existing model of candidate selection is that the candidates for elections are selected by leaders at higher position/authority of the respective political parties. We should change this model, as better candidates are eliminated from the battleground at the initial stage of the candidates' selection. (FGD, Birendranagar, Surkhet)

The limited participation of women and Dalits in politics, coupled with their subjugated voices in political party decision-making structures, serves as a barrier to securing sufficient numbers of candidacies in local elections. In most cases, what women and Dalits have currently obtained is legally provisioned in the electoral quota system. Women and Dalit leaders interviewed in the field additionally cited factors such as growing nepotism and favoritism pervasive within political parties as barriers to qualified candidates running for office. Several respondents observed that women and Dalits close to the top-level political leadership or representing political families secured the post of Mayor and Deputy Mayor in many LGUs. Likewise, several female Deputy Mayors are from families where men are actively engaged in politics but did not have an opportunity to run in local elections due to current constitutional provisions of gender equality.

We have to understand political power dynamics to understand the candidate composition during the election. Politics is the exercise of power, so people at the public domain are the faces of politics and thus candidates during the election as well. But we also saw some examples where leaders at the top favor particular person. And in some cases, we saw new members who are backed by adequate finance also getting tickets for election. (Birendranagar, Surkhet, April 2021)

I am...a representative of the Dalit community. I have also been a Treasurer of the Dalit Group in my Rural Municipality...we had to randomly pluck the representative candidate. The leader had planned an adequate process of candidate selection. Later they selected without any acceptable parameters. Do the voters know that the candidate is capable to understand their needs and requirements? Whether the candidate take their needs to the ward and municipality level? ...Dalit male don't have the power, knowledge, and qualification to raise his voice how can the Dalit women do that. Yes, there can be some deserving and qualified representative in some local bodies (FGD in Rupandehi).

Several respondents expressed patriarchal and systemic discrimination against Dalits and women as dominant factors in candidate selection processes within major political parties. As a result, eligible, intellectual, and promising candidates from these groups were deprived of running for local government. Patriarchy influenced election results: In several instances, the candidacy of women, Dalits, and marginalized groups was not positively received by society. Thus, their representations have been limited to positions guaranteed by the Constitution. Even when women get selected as candidates for local governments, some respondents noted a dominant practice of selecting elite, affluent, and political family-based candidates—regardless of current and former contributions to political and social movements.

Though the constitution ensures that women have rights to participate in all bodies of the state through proportional inclusion, it is very difficult for them to get candidacy for higher positions in their own parties or local government bodies because male dominated societies do not hold confidence on women's leadership roles.

Many respondents highlighted that major political parties lack standardized procedures and transparent guidelines regarding the qualifications and composition of cadres when running for local government. Candidate selection processes often led by party leadership show little regard for party cadres. As a result, they select less qualified and self-centered candidates who cannot work efficiently, including when elected through the party's local influence or mobilization of financial resources.

The level of competition among party cadres in particular local governments has also impacted the candidacy and the election of women, Dalits, and marginalized groups. Most local governments reported high competition among party cadres in securing candidacy for executive positions, disadvantaged groups had minimal chances of getting an opportunity.

Since place being head of the local government, there was much competition I would say. It was not easy to claim the position because more people and my friends wanted it too. (Women deputy mayor from Surkhet)

Respondents, in a consensus, noted that the nomination of female candidates in certain wards and local governments was facilitated due to the relatively low participation of women in party politics. In such cases, women engaged in cooperative movements, community forestry, mother groups, and NGOs were frequently chosen as candidates for several positions. Respondents highlighted challenges in identifying female and Dalit candidates in certain localities, primarily stemming from a scarcity of female involvement in party politics. Notably, there have been reported instances where women from the same Dalit family have contested local elections under different political party banners to meet the criteria.

For reservation seats, it was difficult to find the right Dalit candidates due to a smaller number of capable Dalit women. More capable women candidates were found in general category of representation. (elected ward president, Rupandehi)

3.2.3 Participation in decision-making processes at the local government level

Despite substantial numerical representations of female and Dalit representation in LGUs, their proactive decision-making roles are yet to be realized. Respondents report that while elected women and Dalit representatives are involved in local government planning and decision-making processes to some extent, they have not acquired sufficient influence to shape decisions within these bodies. The issue lies not solely in the quantity of women and Dalits that represent their communities and groups, but rather in the failure of addressing their needs and priorities by higher powers, coupled with the lack of their abilities and competencies.

One of the most prevalent problems regarding women and Dalits' participation revolves around their tokenistic participation and representation in local government decision-making processes. Respondents acknowledge that many who run for office under the current representation system are those favored by party leaders. Thus, they hesitate to express their concerns openly, and instead follow the instructions given by party leaders. As one of the respondents said, elected women and Dalit representatives, in most occasions, serve like a "rubber stamp".

Furthermore, respondents emphasize how societal discrimination against Dalits and women serves as barriers to their ability to perform well in government decision-making. This discrimination is reflected in the decision-making process through the lack of acknowledgment of their voices. One of the participants poignantly said, "our signature works, but decisions do not." (Interview with elected Dalit representative Birendranagar, Surkhet).

Male-dominated decision-making processes at the local level are another common concern outlined by respondents. Female representatives interviewed reported that they are seldom consulted by male representatives and hold fewer executive positions at the local governmental level. Elected women expressed discontent with their demands being treated as secondary priorities unless they are defined as mandatory programs through the government.

Yes, women have a certain position in the local government body, but have no grip on it. (journalist Makwanpur district)

Ward level governance is monopolized by male Ward Chair; where two elected women representatives' roles are limited to sign the meeting minutes and other documents as per the need of the municipal office. Ward chairperson spends budget through the formation of user groups of his favor; where these women ward members have no or least significant roles. (local political leader, Sarlahi district)

Elected women and Dalit representatives lamented how they lack sufficient responsibilities, further restricting them from claiming proactive decision-making roles. There are few local governments where roles are fairly divided among male and female representatives

Women are technically a member in the local government since they have won the election, but they are deprived of any significant responsibility. Once in a while they are called for a meeting... They cannot even present themselves effectively in different programs happening in the ward. They stay in their home and if called or send to represent any public program, then they show their presence. They are there to raise the voice of women, but their voice is ignored.

Several female leaders expressed dissatisfactions with the poor societal trust in female leadership. The prevalence of patriarchal mindset embedded within political parties and communities has resulted in women being excluded from executive and leadership positions in local governments and ward offices. Additionally, the decision-making competence of women who attain such positions face scrutiny from party colleagues and elected male counterparts. Numerous female leaders have voiced discontent over the lack of societal trust in female leadership. This skepticism towards female leadership is not rooted in actual performance but rather in overarching negative perceptions surrounding female leadership.

Despite favorable working conditions and eligibility, ... I have noticed a tendency of not having trust over the works performed by women. For ages, women have been treated as a second option due to which they lack confidence in performance. The system of electing a male as Mayor and a female as Deputy Mayor has created an obstacle in women in their eligibility to stand up for a position they are eligible for... We as a woman do not dare to

stand up as a leader in the first place. There are also cases where women have dared to choose the position, they are capable of and it is rare. But, when a woman in a society chooses to represent as a chairperson in a ward, the question like 'Can she work well?' arises. I do not know if its narrow mindedness of people or lack of trust over women in parties. (Elected Dalit women from Birendranagar, Surkhet)

While some elected Dalit women effectively raised their voices in front of the Ward Chair, Mayor, and Deputy-Mayor⁵, the majority struggle with confidence in asserting their demands in formal decision-making forums. This lack of confidence stems primarily from a limited understanding of their roles and positions within the decision-making processes. Often, women lack sufficient information about the agendas to be discussed among elected representatives for democratic decision-making. Additionally, a lack of clarity regarding their job functions has further impeded their decision-making abilities.

Many elected women ward members have a poor status. They do not fully understand their roles and responsibilities. They are just asked to sign the document without knowing the content and its implications. She can't distinguish between right or wrong and argue in case of confidently negating a wrong. (interview with elected women ward member, Makwanpur district)

In the 2017 local election, most women and Dalit representatives elected for the first time lacked governing capabilities. A similar situation was observed after the 2022 local election, leading to initiatives to enhance the governing capacity of the elected representatives. However, many respondents noted that such initiatives were targeted to female Deputy-Mayors and capacity development opportunities were rarely given to Ward members. Respondents particularly expressed dissatisfaction with their political parties for their lack of support in enhancing skills and expertise in planning, budgeting, and service delivery.

The government did very little to empower and teach the newly appointed women representatives of the local level. Some appointed women have no clue about the decisions made by the local level and neither they are included in the decision-making process. Some have fought for their rights too. (Women political leader from Makwanpur district)

5 Elected Dalit women from Birendranagar, Surkhet

4

Key Constraining Factors for Inclusion and Representation

Respondents observed a significant improvement in inclusion because of the new representation system envisioned by the 2015 constitution. However, it has been difficult for women, Dalits, and minority groups to obtain higher positions such as Mayor and Ward Chair. Weak financial mobilization capacity, lack of accessibility to and relationships with high-level political leaders of their parties, and an inability to garner relevance within parties prevent them from obtaining or running for key positions. Additionally, competing with other candidates to secure a ticket to run for the election, and psychological concerns are suggested as other key constraining factors for women and Dalits from running in the election.

Even if Dalit women are accepted as an electoral candidate by the society, many issues within political parties might occur. Due to internal power struggles and favoritisms, she might not even get a ticket to run for the election from the party. Dalit women also tend to have a fear of losing the election, which would have some serious financial and psychological implications (Elected Dalit women from Birendranagar, Surkhet)

In particular, it is also observed a negligible number of female candidates in the local election. They are discouraged from obtaining executive positions such as Mayor and Ward Chair in local governments, partly due to finances and accessibility, but mainly because of their numerous responsibilities in public and private life.

Women got an immense opportunity to participate in the local elections because of mandatory provisions of the constitution. They were not given executive positions. Women face several challenges as compared to male because women don't have an economic ability to run for the election, thus they cannot take part in election as like male. Women are supposed to fulfill family and household responsibility even in the midst of campaign. It was more difficult to women. In many places' women encountered violence from their husband because of participation as a candidate. Husband was not supportive. (civil society activist, Makwanpur district)

Access to property and election financing are observed as constraining factors for a majority of the women, Dalits, and minority groups for contesting elections and securing candidacy for executive positions such as Mayor and Ward chair.

In terms of expenditure, an ordinary candidate who is qualified cannot stand and fight on the election. S/he couldn't compete for the position of Ward Chair because her economic status will not be able to manage the election expenses. This is an obstacle. (CSO leader from Makwanpur district)

Women face more challenges. Women do not possess economic capability...a smooth election campaign, especially for Mayor, Deputy Mayor or Ward Chair position is quite challenging without a strong financial back up. Families are less supportive to women when it comes to spending money in the election. (Elected women leader Rupandehi)

Election financing through candidates is another crucial setback against women, Dalit, and minority groups securing their candidacy during a local election. There is a consensus among the respondents that political parties prefer candidates willing to mobilize sufficient resources during elections.

Political parties also tend to have the representation based on who can spend lots of money for election rather than who is eligible for the representation. (Interview with Political leader from Rupandehi district).

Acute poverty and the everyday fight for opportunities of basic livelihood are also reported as barriers to participation for women, Dalit, and minority groups.

Ethnically marginalized people and disadvantaged group who struggled basic needs fulfillment have no time for political inclination and run for candidacy. They fight for hunger and daily wages rather than struggle for inclusion and participation.

Additionally, some respondents shared that the lack of an internal quota system within each political party has been a hindrance for women, Dalits, and marginalized groups that run for executive or major positions in local governments. They found that political parties are obliged to follow the quota system and are somehow fulfilling it. There is no internal quota system within each political party that would encourage the

candidacy of more minorities in the local government election processes. Likewise, respondents who belong to these groups expressed that the existing constitutional provisions only guarantee the representation of women and Dalits to run for the local government. Other marginalized groups and minorities, such as Muslims and indigenous peoples, are significantly underrepresented as election candidates and elected representatives.

Quota system have included some communities, but there are still other communities/groups of people (Badi community, Raji community) who still have a long way to run for local elections. (Birendranagar, Surkhet)

Winning the internal and external elections is difficult for anyone, regardless of gender, caste, and ethnicity, but it is particularly demanding for the disadvantaged in society.

I would say there are two struggles, where one is an internal struggle and the other is an external...There is the party's internal ticket that one should win and the other is the real election. It is a tough struggle to impress the party leadership to obtain a ticket to run the local government. Despite having a favorable environment, if one does not manage to get a ticket from a party, it is a challenge for them to win the external election. Inside the party, one must win the trust of the party leadership through our works, struggles, perseverance etc. It is then shifted to win the faith of the people through external election. (Women deputy mayor from Surkhet)

A substantial and deep seated trust deficit exists among leadership within political parties, particularly regarding the capabilities of women running for executive positions such as Mayor and Ward Chair. Thus, many are discouraged from running for local government positions. Those who do pursue such positions often possess a strong self-belief in their abilities as well as faith in the power of citizens to select suitable candidates to represent them.

We, the political parties still have the thinking that women are inferior and cannot do anything. They do not give ticket for the position of Mayor. (Elected women leader Rupandehi)

During interaction between members (men) of political parties, I have heard them saying, "constitution has mandated the representation of women, so let's give her a position". This highlights the mindset of male political leaders and the political power is still captured by a particular group of people. (Women leader in Dhanusha district)

Along with the trust shown by the party leadership, the psychological preparedness of women to face the election and compete with strong opponents is extremely important.

Women can do it but should be courageous enough to do it. It is not about discrimination against women, but are women willing to compete against other candidates? It was decided previously that the female would get the ticket for Deputy Chairperson and men would get the ticket for Chairperson for the local government unit. No women came forward to compete for the Chairperson's position. But I think that women who came through representation system are not qualified enough. Women should be more willing and competitive. (Dailekh interview with local leaders)



5

Capacity, Opportunity, and Voice: Reimagining Inclusive Political Representation

Respondents widely agree that political parties leverage the quota system. This extends beyond the empowerment of women and Dalits in enhancing democratic processes by fostering greater inclusion in decision-making within democratic institutions. Merely random representation of marginalized groups is deemed inadequate for fostering inclusive and democratic local governance. In this regard, political parties should nominate competent women and Dalits in each local government to contest and gain election.

For better implementation and management of quota system, political parties must be conscious to make it workable for the broader segment of the society (human rights activist, Dhanusha)

Some respondents proposed strengthening the quota system by reserving 33 percent of Mayoral positions for women, to increase female influence in executive-level positions. This would go beyond shallow representation and ensure minority perspectives are heard in decision-making and local planning. Likewise, members of the Dalit community have advocated for political parties to select candidates based on the principle of proportional representation. For this, existing legal provisions must be amended to incorporate more progressive provisions around representation.

There should be the provision of 33% female Mayor in the local government bodies (women deputy Mayor, Makwanpur).

Most respondents concurred that the electoral process poses a significant financial obstacle for women and marginalized groups seeking candidacy and conducting effective campaigns. To address this, respondents propose radical reform by allowing candidates, regardless of socio-economic status, to contest local government elections.

It is quite challenging for the ones who are economically backward to win the election. I feel that the state should have an improved electoral process. (Political leader from Rupandehi district)

There is a significant push for providing development opportunities, particularly aimed at female and Dalit ward members. Newly elected representatives should obtain robust capacity-building opportunities to harness their governing, planning, and service-delivering skills. However, mere training is deemed insufficient for development. Thus, respondents advocate for practical capacity-building measures, such as assigning appropriate roles within government processes. Additionally, some suggest the necessity of capacity-building training well before elections to enable immediate readiness to assume responsibilities upon election.

It would be problematic if people from the marginalized groups are elected for the specified position without undergoing a proper empowerment training and having an adequate knowledge of their particular roles and responsibilities. An opportunity must be provided for their capacity enhancement. (CSO leader from Makwanpur district)

6

Conclusion

Following a decade-long armed conflict and subsequent years of political transitions, adoption of the new federal governance structure stood as a beacon of hope for people not only to sustain peace but also to transform the centralized system of governance towards an inclusive representative system capable of facilitating the needs of all people in society. The quota-based representation system provisioned in the new governance structure has created an opportunity for people to elect the leaders of their own communities, not least those from historically marginalized backgrounds. As examined in this report, the quota system has had significant positive effects on Nepalese politics. From one perspective, it has greatly increased the representation of women and Dalits in democratic processes, and contributed to an increase in the confidence of thousands of these people who contested elections and those who got elected through a democratic process. These individuals, who are an integral part of society, are allowed by this system to assume their duty to their communities by representing and raising their issues and concerns.

However, there are clear barriers to achieving equal parity within politics for women and Dalit leaders in LGUs. The lack of institutional support and reluctance in terms of support from political parties are barriers that curb democratized candidacy from marginalized groups. Deeply ingrained patriarchal mindsets limit opportunities for women and Dalits to take on leadership roles, join politics, and stand for election. This has created a cultural barrier to their active participation in politics

and governance. People from ethnically marginalized communities lack resources in education, finance, and connections that people from upper-caste communities do not. Similarly, lack of knowledge of political processes and an absence of awareness regarding reform processes hinder women and Dalits' meaningful participation in the electoral process to engage in political arenas and to fight for candidacy.

There are two key ways to ensure the representation of historically marginalized and underrepresented groups in political landscapes. The first way is a gradual and an organic transformation of societal attitudes. This often comes with a change in the perceptual mindset of members of society, leading them to be more accepting of diverse leadership with which they are not habituated. It legitimizes the voices of elected minority representatives, lessening the prejudices and discrimination previously felt by marginalized groups. When societal attitudes evolve to prioritize inclusivity, it establishes trust in minority voices and catalyzes broader systemic change. The second way is to implement a quota system, which the 2015 Constitution of Nepal did, ensuring certain seats to women and Dalits in LGUs. However, societal problems that arise with this immediate representation can be seen. Although women and Dalits in local positions of political power exist, the environment still contains prejudices and biases. This leads to circumstances where fewer individuals from marginalized backgrounds run for office, or parties forming alliances with the sole purpose of exclusion. This contributes to mere surface-level representation, rather than true inclusivity.

Despite these challenges, it would be a mistake to characterize the quota system as a failure in this regard. Even a basic representation constitutes a meaningful step forward. Women and Dalits can still participate in local politics, bring up issues distressing their communities, and advocate for change. They have avenues of local planning and decision-making now open to them. It is their proactive and increased participation in these democratic processes that may lead to broader societal change. The strong presence of minorities in positions of power inspires others from similar backgrounds to engage in the political arena and gradually succeeds to persuade individuals from different backgrounds to accept the current phenomenon. Still, the quota system alone is unable to dismantle structural barriers and biases. Achieving organic and genuine inclusivity in democratic processes at the local level requires a proactive approach, where communities address systemic inequalities, promote education and awareness of democratic processes, and create enabling environments.

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