

## Dalit Women's Political Participation at the Local Level: Perspectives of Elected Women Representatives in Nepal

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Political representation is believed to be a tool to enhance the competency of Dalit women. It is also acknowledged as a factor for the socio-political empowerment and advancement of the communities they represent. However, it is always fascinating to explore what political representation meant to them, why and how they could come to represent, and how consequential and substantial their representation was. This article interprets the construction from the narratives that come through one-to-one interviews with 19 Dalit women in Biratnagar Metropolitan City as the research participants on the status, opportunities and challenges of their political representation at the local level. After gathering the narratives, the data is discussed to reach the conclusion that political representation can be a gateway to enhance the leadership potential of Dalit women. The research reveals that political representation is taken as a crucial tool for enhancement of their competency and it can support the empowerment of the community one represents, though there are some issues to be addressed with due time and efforts. Most of the time, a contextual need overcame a Dalit woman's absence of political awareness to enter politics. Lack of prior experience not only constrained their political mobility and advancement but also, in situations, their male colleagues and the ward 'chairman' intimidated them due to their 'politically inexperienced' background. For some others, their own community too was not excited with their election process or their roles at the local government. Higher levels of political socialization and leadership training would be more goal-

oriented. This paper contributes to comprehending the contextual rationale and the status of Dalit women's political representation and creates scope for additional scholarly and political discourse.

**Keywords:** Political representation, political socialization, leadership, empowerment

## **Introduction**

Amid male domination in Nepali politics, the stake of women in local political leadership has increased substantially. Leadership is frequently viewed as a foundation for boosting participation and representation of Dalit women. However, Dalit women's political representation in Nepal is primarily due to the quota shares reserved constitutionally for women (Paswan, 29 Oct 2017). The question is, whether the elevated number of women in politics significantly impacts policies for the interest, preferences of the women representatives, women in general and the community they represent. A few areas are of general interest while studying Dalit women's political representation in Nepal, which importantly include but are not necessarily limited to: Dalit representation and structural change and community development at the local and national levels; political representation and empowerment of Dalit women, and the quota system and Dalit representation. 50 percent of the seats designated for women at the municipal wards are reserved for Dalit women (MoWCSC, 2020). Despite the fact that the overall Dalit representation at the leadership level in 2017 was quite low with only 194 ward chairs, 10 heads and 25 deputy heads of the 753 local governments, it was found that Dalit women had significant representation holding a full of 85 percent of the reserved seats for Dalit women in each of the 6,554 wards of the 753 local governments in Nepal (Adhikari et al., 2022). As per Acharya (2013), rather than only "cosmetic representation", women, Dalits and indigenous community members have mandatory provisions for their inclusion in political public spheres.

The constitution of Nepal is understood as a supportive piece of legislation for women. There are claims that universally recognized human rights are highly anchored in the constitution (MoWCSC, 2020). This fundamental statute guarantees women rights and women representation in every sector of the state apparatus. Article 38(1-5) describes ‘Rights of women’ with individual, familial, socio-economic and political rights. Women in Nepal are with equal rights to property and family affairs, equal lineage rights without any gender discrimination, safe motherhood and reproductive health, and are not subject to physical, mental, sexual, psychological, or any other forms of violence on grounds of religion, social, cultural, tradition, practice and so on. More crucially, the article 38(4) guarantees the rights of proportional inclusion of women in all entities of the state. Based on the principle of ‘positive discrimination’, women are entitled to special opportunities in the areas of education, health care, employment and social security. Furthermore, the article 18(3) of the constitution, under its provision of fundamental right to equality, reads as “nothing shall be deemed to prevent the making of special provisions by law for protection, empowerment or development of citizens including the socially or culturally backward women...”. However, Dalit women are unable to profit from these constitutional and legal stipulations (Dhaulakoti 25 Oct 2021). As, Mohtey (2020) argued, various social, economic and cultural elements should be of government’s attention for the success or failure of Dalit women’s political representation as mandated through the quota system at the local level.

Instead of the ‘influential and high-profile women leadership role’ (Acharya, 2013), Dalit women’s mandatory political representation can gain more rationality behind the purpose of women’s representation in politics. The provision of including Dalit members at the village municipal and district council levels was introduced by the Local Self Government-Act of 1999 (Adhikari et al., 2022). Article 40 of the constitution of Nepal prescribes that the Dalits shall have the fundamental rights to participate in all

governmental bodies in accordance with the principle of proportional inclusion, and there shall be special legal provisions ensuring the empowerment, representation and participation of the Dalits in public service and other sectors as well. Sharma (2019) argued that federalism was implemented in Nepal with an attempt to extend democracy to all, bring the governance closer to the people, and resolving disputes between the state and the marginalized section of population, and thereby to provide opportunities for equality and development of the marginalized. Constitutionally, Nepal's federal structure empowers the local government with twenty-two different rights and functions ranging from developmental, administrative to judicial (Timilsina, 2018).

The theoretical foundation of local government in Nepal included people's access to public services and safety at their door steps, people's empowerment to strengthen democracy, people's participation in development and resource mobilization, and making laws required for the people on their own (Timilsina, 2018 a). However, as Dhaulakoti (2021, Oct 25) quoted a Dalit Women People's Representative (DWPR) from Kapilvastu of Lumbini Pradesh that the constitution defined the local level as an autonomous government, and since the local governments are close to the people, could have been people-friendly and Dalit-friendly. Pariyar & Lovett (2016) also found that even the urban Dalits haven't been able to pursue their political agenda to the same degree as other communities.

According to articles 222 (4) and article 223(4) of the constitution of Nepal 2015, a village body or a municipality shall have their ward committees composed of five members including a ward chairperson and four ward members where 40 percent of the ward level people's representatives elected through first –past-the-post-FPTP election system shall be women. Additionally, one out of the two mandatory women representatives must be a Dalit. However, if a party nominates a woman candidate for the position of woman ward member, this provision does not apply to that party (Timilsina, 2018a). Similarly, in the wards where there are no Dalit settlements,

the constitution keeps a silence on any alternative provision.

Dalit women and girls in Nepal are found particularly vulnerable due to the various forms of discrimination and they suffer from a default exclusion from the development process (K.C., 2020). Dalit women experience worse socio-economic conditions than Dalit men and women as a whole (Badi, 2012). In such a context, the 2017 municipal elections were viewed as the milestones for the socially, economically and politically marginalized women Dalit to enter the national mainstream with their opportunities and responsibilities to perform (Mohtey, 2020). Out of 753 local levels, 35,000 people's representatives have been elected in 6 metropolitan cities, 11 sub-metropolitan cities, 276 municipalities and 460 village municipalities. Out of that, the number of Dalit representatives was 9528 and of them, 6567 were Dalit women members. However, Dhaulakoti (2021 October 25) wrote for the Kantipur National Daily, that the DWPRs themselves were in discrimination.

Political representation is believed to benefit Dalit women in terms of strengthening their competency and empowering the community they represent. There are studies showing identical significance including an increased political trust, enforcement of democratic practices in representation and boosting up political accessibility of the marginalized communities, Dalits and women at the local level (CSC, 2022). However, as Manandhar (2021) emphasized, it takes more than just a numeric rise for their meaningful representation and it also requires social awareness. Absence of political experience has been a major obstacle for Dalit women representatives (FEDO, 2022). Thus, while attempting to determine the elements influencing Dalit women's representation; a few more queries came up. More specifically, the kind of political leadership opportunities the Dalit women got or accepted generated more curiosity. Additionally, the process by which they came to represent or they got selected to represent, the difficulties they encountered when they had no prior experience with representation or those who had never served in the government was part of the

research interest. The experiences on political representation, welcoming of their leadership in the community, and their sources of inspiration were of research attention.

In the aforementioned scenario, this research had three specific questions to answer: what political representation did the Dalit women receive, how the objective behind the representation was addressed and why was their representation significant.

### **Methods and Material**

This study follows a qualitative research design. Both the primary and secondary data are used for the analysis. The primary data is based on the perspectives received through the interviews and listening to the topical stories of the DWPRs from Biratnagar Metropolitan City (BMC) of Province 1 in Nepal. The analysis based on the narratives of the 19 DWPR in the city were gathered through informal conversations in Nepali, Hindi and Maithili languages as and when required for an in-depth understanding of the respondents with due ethical consideration and privacy to their names, party affiliation and contextual interpretations. On collection, the stories from all the 19 respondents, the data have been transcribed into English language and broadly prepared for both the narrative analysis to develop the core narratives and thematic analysis to comparatively develop the core theme of the subject. For the secondary data, the Constitution of Nepal and the Local Governance Act 2017 provide the foundation in advancing the discourse on the rationale of women and Dalit women representation in Nepal. Sociological perspectives have been applied to comprehend gender-based discrimination in the private and public domain, caste hierarchy stereotypes and the political hegemony within the Nepali social structure.

### **Results and Discussion**

As stated in the methodology section above, for a thematic analysis and to comparatively develop the core theme of the subject, this result and discussion section includes the following subsections.

## **The Research Site and the Social Compassion of the Respondents**

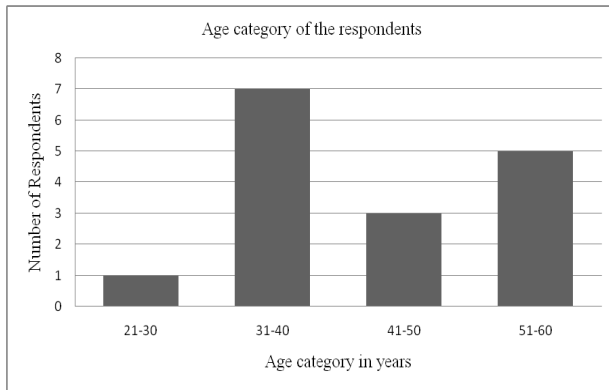
Biratnagar is the provincial capital of Koshi, formerly known as province 1. The total population of the 19 wards of Biratnagar Metropolitan City was 2, 14,663 with 1,08,827 male and 1,05, 836 female with more than 25 distinct castes and ethnic groups, each of them making up more than 1% of the total population in the city (CBS, 2011). However, the household survey conducted by Biratnagar Metropolitan City office in 2019 revealed a total population of 3, 05, 529 with 1, 17,658 males 1, 12,799 females and 77 third-gender individuals. As per this survey, Biratnagar is home to 51650 households and 75,253 families representing 122 caste and ethnic groups (BMC, 2019). In 2001, Biratnagar's population consisted of 1% hill Dalits and 4.5% Terai Dalits with a growth rate of 3.98 per annum in the city by the population census of 2011 (ADB, 2008).

**Table: 1 Community wise representation of the respondents**

Community	% of the Respondents
Paswan	31.58
Pariyar	15.80
Sardar	10.54
Ramtel	5.26
Bishwakarma	5.26
Rishidev	5.26
Harijan	5.26
Das	5.26
Baitha	5.26
Tatma	5.26
Podar	5.26
Total	100

The social composition of the 19 research respondents in this research revealed that there were 11 different communities from among hill and terai Dalits who could represent in the wards from the municipal elections of 2017. Likewise, the elected Dalit women representatives were also divided into different age categories. The following graph describes their age composition.

**Figure: 1** *Age composition of the respondents*



The age category of the respondents was 21-60 years where seven of the 19 respondents were between the ages of 31-40, and three were between the ages 41-50. These two categories were found having higher degrees of motivation behind their political representation. However, five of them—all between the ages 51-60, also expressed their thoughts that their entry into politics was more of a ‘chance’ due to their time off from family responsibilities. However, the participant in the age category 21-30 years, with her enthusiasm, expressed that she was happy that the local party leaders identified her as a potential future leader as she was expecting to join and continue political leadership.

Mohtey (2020) stated that caste discrimination, gender inequality, cultural barriers and poverty have largely deprived Dalit



women from receiving education in Nepal (Level of education was an important aspect related to the respondents' level of confidence in their political participation and communication skills which was highly realized during the research interviews with them.

**Table: 2 Educational Status of the respondents**

Educational Qualification	% of the Respondents
Non formal education /Read and write only	26.32
Primary	52.64
Secondary	15.78
Intermediate	5.26
Total	100

Ten (52.64%) of the 19 respondents had completed primary level schooling up to grade five, compared to five (26.32%) of the respondents who had no formal education but could write their names. Three of the respondents had studied up to the 10th grade and one (5.26%) of the respondents had completed their grade 12 education.

### **The Perspectives on Caste Discrimination**

Nepal's Dalit study doesn't appear to be neutral without relating it to the caste-based hierarchy and to the social structure. As, Dhaulakoti (2021 Oct 25) found that Dalit women encountered double discrimination. When they endure gender violence at home, they become untouchables outside of their homes due to their caste. Caste-based discrimination experiences in the community and/or workplace serve as justification for democratic and inclusive

representation. Therefore, the curiosity about the social attitude towards Dalit people's representatives arrived naturally. The respondents in the current research, more or less, concurred that the context and the circumstances have changed considerably. They expressed that, in general, the Dalits were a socially discriminated group. 1. But it feels incredibly different compared to before. In numerous settings, there was a difference regarding the local community responses towards the Dalit women before and after they served as the people's representatives. A hill origin Dalit woman representative (DWR) expressed during an interview:

*“When I wasn't a people's representative, people in my neighbourhood used to detest us as Dalit, but that is no longer the case.”*

The caste-based compartmentalization of the society was a core concern throughout the research interviews. Political acceptance and social mobility helped reduce the caste-based discrimination against the water tight (*nep.pani nachalne*) and untouchable (*nep. acchut*) caste. The following narrative from 38 years old DWR from the Madhesi community explained this fact:

*“Although few people don't harbour hatred for Dalit's nowadays, it is nevertheless common. A Marik (Dom) serves tea in our office that everyone enjoys together. The “pahade” people used to have some sort of discrimination against the Dalits and some Madeshi people also did the same. But this is gradually declining.”*

### **Social Mobility and Political Representation**

The potential social mobility and future political opportunities were crucial to discuss during the research interviews. One of the respondents from a Madhesi Dalit community said in an interview that in her community, a female who interacted with other males was marked as a shameless woman. One had to wear

a veil while in front of the men. If she argued on it, people would call her ‘chhuchchi’ to mean a racy or an impolite lady. But such remarks were not directed at her once she was elected as people’s representative. However, two of the nineteen respondents claimed to this researcher that they had never experienced any discrimination even when they lived an ordinary citizen’s life, without any political affiliation.

A next respondent from the same community expressed her feelings while she shared her experience:

*“People have started gossiping; just look at how well ‘falano’s (a pronoun for a name) wife is doing these days. We could all go.”*

The female peers had also requested her to inform them if there would be any more upcoming opportunities or any such event(s) they might be able to attend and if she could help them find employment opportunities for which, they would be grateful. And she was pleased to share that she could manage to secure a job for a couple of them in the nearby local factories.

The respondents representing the Madheshi Dalit community shared that talking to men was forbidden for women folk and used to have restrictions even on speaking with one’s husband’s uncle or his elder brother. This ultimately kept them limited in social interaction and social mobility. However, such circumstances were reported as gradually changing.

*“Let’s say, as if the sky and the abyss were two separate entities.”*

A 38 years old representative among the respondents said as above. Literally it was realised that initially they were uncomfortable while interacting with the opposite gender.

*“Before, we had no idea on how to communicate in a setting with so many people. We now know what and when to speak and what and when to refrain. We acquired where-what -to-*

*say knowledge while working. Now, we can even discuss political issues with people like you.”*

As a lively woman, this respondent drew this researcher into her conversation. Interestingly, more or less, all the Dalit women representatives in the study area spoke in the same line that they could learn from the work they did or were expected to do.

### **Socio-Political Leadership**

All the respondents were new in political leadership. Acquiring political leadership skills was a gradual process for all of them. It took a considerable period of time for them to understand what was going on politically. But they articulated that the circumstances provided them with a radically distinct experience and learning opportunity. For example, the Covid 19 situation posed a big challenge for all of them. More or less, they agreed with the viewpoint expressed by a young respondent, who said:

*“I had limited knowledge of politics and political leadership. The lockdown due to Covid 19 presented a challenge for us. Many of our planned projects were periodically halted.”*

However, political participation was viewed as an avenue for women empowerment. Responding to a follow-up query, seventeen of them admitted that they had no prior knowledge about politics. They formerly thought of themselves as mean people. They used to toil away all day outside their homes to make a living and would return home in the evening with little idea of what had transpired throughout the day. Thus, they were delighted to express that politics taught them a lot. They realised that politics brought about lots of changes. In particular, they achieved the ability and skill to speak. A 40-year-old research respondent was more confident while she was telling her following tale:

*“How and when could one speak like this before? I am speaking to you directly in person right now. How could*

*it be so before! Furthermore, it used to be exceedingly challenging to converse with any male. Now that everything is becoming obvious.”*

### **Empowerment through Socio-Political Mobilization**

The respondents from the Madheshi Dalit community demonstrated their Nepali language proficiency while explaining the components of their socio-political mobilisation. A 34 years old respondent spoke easily in Nepali language during an interview with her:

*“My native tongue is the Tharu language. I was unable to communicate in Nepali. But over the last five years, I have learnt Nepali so well that I can easily speak to anyone now.”*

Similarly, a 55-year-old respondent from the Paswan community who spoke Nepali confidently revealed that she had been actively participating in local politics for more than 20 years and became an active member since she joined a political party in 2001. Mrs. Paswan was very excited and eager to share her thoughts and ideas:

*“My party and the electorates trusted in my work and I got elected locally. I have very good support from my family and the people of my community. This is always crucial for every woman who aspires to enter politics.”*

More intriguingly, a 40- year- old respondent, born as a Madhesi and married to a hill Dalit, perceived that political participation and leadership is something that enables women for social work. Thus, the local women should get wider opportunities to get involved in politics. She was found appealing while she commented:

*“We have to give a chance to the new ones, right? If only we keep getting the opportunity, what and when will the*

*others discover? Other ladies also need to advance. I would not have known or spoken before I was elected as a ward member. I learnt by joining politics. Now we have to give others a chance.”*

### **Challenges and Opportunities for the Women Representatives in Service Delivery**

Things were not easy for the women representatives in general and there were numerous difficulties while working. Particularly the economically unsound and marginalised communities anticipated increased assistance from the local representatives. Those wards where a large number of impoverished and landless people reside in the river banks required extra assistance from the local government during the Covid 19 pandemic, floods and other disaster events. Then the women reps had the greater responsibility of paying frequent visits to those families afflicted. Every time there was a flood, they had to walk to provide the victims with response, relief and basic supplies. And the hardest hit part in relief distribution was handled by them. A respondent from among those who had to work hard during the most recent flood scenario in Biratnagar remarked fluently:

*“The two ladies among us took the details on the required relief. The men didn’t work to reach the doors of the people as hard as we ladies. The men didn’t exert as much effort as we women to reach the doors of the people. The men generally performed their important work in the office and at the municipality.”*

However, in 52.63 percent of nineteen wards, all five elected members were reported to be working as a team maintaining equal concerns about matters within their jurisdiction. 26.31 percent of the respondents were found highly satisfied with their working relationship with the respective ward chairpersons, among the colleagues and the office employees.

## The Motivational Factors

In every ward of the study area, the DWRs had, more or less, good working spirit with their other female colleagues who were elected in the open category. For instance, during the 2017 floods in the city, the women representatives in a ward had to knock on homes and gather the information on what went wrong with the flood victims, what property was damaged, and how much was the total value of it. Within 24 hours, they, along with two staff members, were required to prepare the identities of the flood victims, extent of property damage and details of the number of fatalities in the ward. However, in some circumstances, the age factors and their level of education created limitations and posed challenges in performance of the allotted tasks timely and effectively without external assistance.

Politics was not financially an attraction for the respondents but valued social identity and recognition. A 38-year-old respondent shared her experience:

*“Earlier, I used to work as a machine operator in a garment factory. My monthly income was between Rs.25000 to Rs. 30,000 a month. And when my party people demanded that I have to quit my regular job, I even declined my candidacy. But they pulled me in and I won the election. However, I did not quit my job for a year and a half, since I needed money for my family and I had very less to work as a ward committee member, beyond attending a few meetings per month.”*

But she was obliged to leave her job in the second year of her being elected. On quitting the job, she lost the money but she was pleased that she could earn social respect and dignity. She related her personal experience of being ignored in the past. She consequently understood that respect was more valuable than money. She was entirely at liberty to share her happiness. For this respondent, the most important thing was to get recognition for her work. She could potentially learn a lot of things in the ward. The

ward chairman listened to her and to other ward members including her female colleague. All of them were happy when the ward chair assigned each of them with distinct work responsibilities. Another respondent, 55 years old, expressed her excitement when she stated:

*“Now people recognize me. I know many of them. They come to me to discuss a variety of local development-related issues. And to me, there is no distinction between the Dalits and others. All are our people. We shall collaborate.”*

Dalit women’s awareness on politics and political engagement at the grassroots level was a primary concern of this research. A respondent, who was quite popular as an active people’s representative during this research interview, was forthright enough to narrate her political background and leadership motivation quality while saying,

*“I did not know about politics even though my husband was a member of the party.”*

According to her, the men folk only acknowledged her as someone’s wife. When they needed a Dalit woman candidate, they approached her. One day, coincidentally, she returned home from work at 4 o’clock in the evening. She was asked to become a candidate in the election, and the following morning she signed a blank piece of paper and left. Later she received the election ticket and started canvassing the neighborhoods asking for votes with other candidates of her panel.

### **Community Impacts**

Women’s representation from the Dalit community did have several positive impacts. On a question, regarding what changes were experienced in the previous five years, a 41-year-old respondent replied,

*“I had the opportunity to be close to the people. Both the floods and the Corona virus were occasionally terrifying. But if not for it without that, we might not be attempting*



*to contact the population. The children of Marik Tole attend boarding schools these days. In the past, they used to dabble with nasty words on the road, but not anymore.”*

One more similar response from a next respondent was,

*“I could work enough while I was in the ward. I initiated and to conduct training for women in tailoring and doll-making. We also worked on making roads and drains, installing electric lights, and that was what the inhabitants of each ward required.”*

In an additional question on the prospects for their representation in future, nearly every respondent including the elected Dalit women representatives of 2017 municipal election expressed great confidence. A 40-year-old respondent stated:

*“We now understand politics. We know what needs to be done and how to execute it. Therefore, we will be re-elected.”*

However, five of the nineteen representatives in the study area were aware that there could be a stiff rivalry and competition for getting a candidacy in the Dalit category too. Earlier, the parties had to struggle finding a candidate in the Dalit woman category and they had to request someone to become a candidate representing their party. By that time, in some wards, up to three candidates from the same party had started demanding to become candidates in the same category. And in response to a follow-up question, two of the respondents expressed their limitations while they said,

*“Everything is subject to the party member’s decision. Additionally, elections also cost money and we did not make any money for the upcoming elections.”*

## **Conclusion**

This paper concludes that political representation enables to enhance the aptitude of Dalit women at the local level and can

support, to some extent, their empowerment and growth of the community they represent. However, there are certain elements that govern their substantive and meaningful representation. In most contexts their representation was simply to attain the constitutional and legal requirements and it was not an ordinary course of events. The kind of political leadership opportunity the Dalit women got or accepted was largely motivated by tokenism. In several contexts, the representation of the Dalit women was purely symbolic. However, there were people who were not in politics, and faced many challenges in their day-to-day lives. They were socially discarded, the majority of whom were ignorant of politics and political representation, thus were lacking previous experience of representation. They had never experienced any political representation or they had never served the government at any level. However, they were inspired by the leadership of other political representatives including the ward chair, the mayor and the deputy-mayor. Additionally, their representation was not likely to have significantly measurable socio-economic impact on them and their community. The community response they achieved was typical. However, they felt that they had gained some leadership quality and had access to the local political network. It marginally benefited the individual Dalit woman representative and the community they represented. Prior to becoming political leaders, they were not political rivals and were elected by the ordinary citizens. Higher levels of political indoctrination and leadership training for the Dalit women representatives would increase their meaningful participation and goal-oriented achievement for the community they represented. However, during the five years of their representation, they had grown more certain that, provided a second chance or more opportunities to represent, they would be able to lead their community better. Finally, this article is believed to help readers

understand the contextual background and the current state of Dalit women's political representation at the local level, and opens up new avenues for academic and political discussion.

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