

The Status of Women in Political Participation in Nepal

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Abstract

Nepali women constitute more than half of the country's population. Due to the continuous dominance of the patriarchal value system they remain discriminated and treated as second-class citizens. The current Constitution incorporates specific provisions to provide some political support to women. Despite special measures set by the government for women's political participation, women have not been benefited from such measures. Present paper is an attempt made to analyse status of Nepalese women in various sphere of socio-economic life.

Key words: Patriarchal, constitution, political participation, special measures.

Introduction

Status of women can be defined in the context of their access to knowledge, economic resources, and political power, as well as their personal autonomy in the process of decision-making (UNDP 2004). Across the cultural diversity, the majority of communities in Nepal are patriarchal. Woman's life is strongly influenced by her father and husband as reflected in the practice of patrilocal residence, patriarchal descent, inheritance systems and family relations.

There has been little change in the status of women even after the restoration of democracy in 1990. On paper, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal guarantees various rights to women and so do the International Human Rights Instruments to which Nepal is a member. In practice, however, women do not enjoy equal benefits as men in their civil, political, social and economic advancement. The discrimination is institutionalized by family, society, market and the State.

Legally, Nepalese women have equal political rights to vote and to get elected. Although, women have an equal right to government jobs, child-care and family obligations women make them less desirable to recruit from the institutional point of view. Nepalese women have been empowered in paper. However, they have not been wholly translated into a way of life. Only a few women are in the decision-making capacity, which shows that male domination is continued as usual.

Nepal is a signatory to the international declarations and conventions on equal opportunity and non-discrimination between men and women. However, no substantial improvement is evident in the overall position of women in society. Women's presence in various spheres of public life, particularly in politics, remains very low. This study attempts to analyse present status of women under the economic, social and political aspect of life and suggest measures in improving access for women's political participation.

Methods and Materials

The study is primarily based on the secondary information collected from the various offices, organizations, individuals and their publications. Besides, election result for the National Parliament and Local Bodies collected from the Election Commission office supplemented necessary information to analyze the district wise variation on women's in political participation. Information's were manually tabulated. Simple statistical tool was used to analyse the information where necessary.

Status of Nepalese Women

Social Status

Social status determines a person's place in the intricate system of social relationships. In the Nepalese social system and in Hindu lifestyle, patriarchal values and norms are predominant. Women population in the rural areas of Nepal remain centered on their traditional roles of taking care of most household chores, fetching water, collecting animal fodder, and doing farm works. Their standing in society are mostly contingent on their husbands' and parents' social and economic positions. They have limited access to markets, productive services, and education, health care and local government. Women as well as girls suffer from inadequate nutrition in both quantity and quality of food. They perform excessive labour but they have limited access to health and family planning services (UNDP 2004).

One tangible measure of women's social status is their educational attainment. Although the constitution offers women equal educational opportunities but social, economic, and cultural factors contribute to lower enrolment and higher dropout rates for girls. Illiteracy imposes the greatest hindrance to enhance equal opportunity for women. Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills, self-confidence and necessary to participate fully in the development process. In spite of significant gains in female literacy from a mere 12 percent in 1981 to 43 percent in 2001, women lag far behind than men in literacy and educational attainment (Table 1). However, the difference between the male and female literacy rates in 1981 and 2001 is the same (22 percent). Only girls below 14 years seem to be catching up with boys of the same age group. Girl's enrolment decreases, as they grow older. Therefore, boys predominate in secondary and higher education (Table 1).

Marriage plays an import role in woman's life. Due to the extreme concern on the purity of female's body the event of marriage determines almost all her life options and subsequent livelihood. Therefore, the decrease in girls enrollment in the higher classes is due to early marriage.

Table 1. 6 Years and Above Population by Sex and Educational Attainment, 1981-2001

Level of education	1981		1991		2001	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total number (in 000)	6233	5947	7523	7622	9593	9663
Illiterate (%)	66.0	88.0	45.2	74.4	34.3	56.8
Literate (%)	34.0	12.0	54.1	24.7	65.1	42.5
Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No schooling %	23.9	22.8	22.3	24.0	8.5	9.2
Primary %	46.1	56.4	39.1	45.2	39.3	45.9
Secondary %	22.1	15.9	23.7	20.1	30.8	30.3
SLC %	3.6	2.4	5.6	3.8	9.6	8.1
Intermediate and above %	4.1	2.4	4.6	2.4	10.7	5.3
Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: UNDP, 2004: 173

The nutritional and health condition of Nepalese women and adolescent girls is extremely poor. It is generally manifested in the inadequate intake of calories, protein and poor access to health services. Women's life expectancy has improved significantly from 53.5 in 1991 to 61.5 in 2001, surpassing the life expectancy of 60.5 for men. The sex ratio as an indicator of women's status has also improved slightly in favour of women: from 105:100 in 1981 to 99.8:100 in 2001.

Approximately 70 percent of the women of childbearing age are anemic. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) of Nepali women (539 per 100,000 live births) ranks among the highest in the world. The life expectancy for men is 56 years while for women it is 55 years. The mortality rate of child under 5 years is 125 per 1000 for men and 139 per 1000 women (CBS, 2003). However, male domination is changing slowly and is affecting development slowly in all sectors.

Economic Status

In Nepal, the social disadvantages of women is due to early marriage, high fertility, low access to- health, family planning services, low educational levels and violence against them. This is reinforced by lack of access to and control over productive resources. It has been as one of the main hurdle for women's equal participation in economic activities and the decision-making process.

Women in Nepal, as elsewhere, are responsible for three types of work i.e reproduction, management of the household and employment. However, reproduction and management of the household is not considered as a productive work. Moreover, women in Nepal work for longer hours than men but have much lower opportunity for gainful employment. They possess extremely limited property rights. A woman still requires permission from her husband to go into business or work. Over 70 percent women workers are self-employed, unpaid and

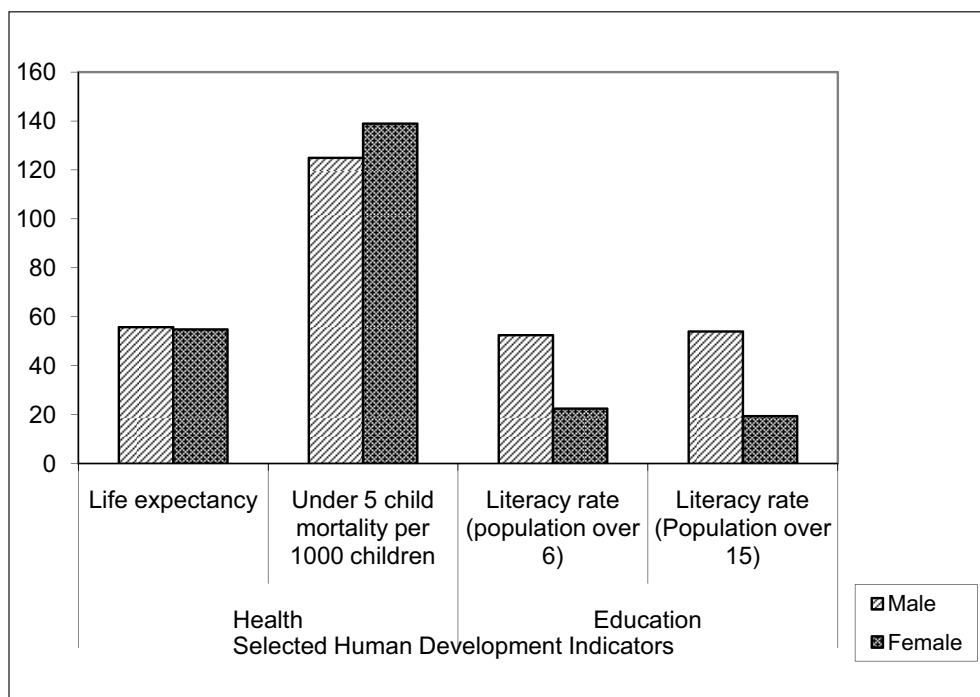


Figure 1. Gender Disparities in Selected Human Development Indicators
Source: CBS, 2002.

confined to low-wage informal sector activities. Between 1991 and 2001, women have moved gradually from agricultural to non-agricultural work. The economic activity rates for women show an increasing trend i.e. 35.2 percent in 1971 to 55.3 percent in 2001 (CBS 2003).

Only 5.5 percent households in Nepal have house in women's name and only 7.2 percent households reported female livestock ownership. In spite of various credit programs, women's access to institutional credit remains marginal, both at individual and household enterprise levels irrespective of ecological regions, urban/rural areas and ethnicity/ caste (Acharya 2003). Only 0.8 percent of the households have all three property- house, land, and livestock in female ownership. Almost 83 percent of the households had no property, whatsoever, under women's legal ownership (CBS 2003a).

Political Status

The basic feature of the dominant Indo-Aryan culture is the patrilineal inheritance system and extreme concern over the purity of the female body. It discourages women and hinders those (women) for political participation. Democratic system of governance, the political changes of 1990 brought difference to women's political participation and access to positions of power, over the long haul. In short term perspective, however, no change has been visible in that regard (Acharya 1994).

The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing in 1995, and very much focus was given on women's participation in all the decision-making levels around the world. However, in Nepal, women's representation in all three organs of the state i.e. legislative, judiciary and executive is negligible. Due to the women's low representation in all the decision making bodies of the government, women's social, political, economic and legal rights are more likely to be overlooked in policy, planning and implementation. It has thus become difficult for women to break from the vicious circle of poverty and disempowerment.

Nepalese women have participated in many political processes, but they have remained only as vote bank. The introduction of the multiparty democracy in 1990 created great expectations. The new constitution and popularly elected representative meant the potential to reform women's social and legal status, and to forge for a new role for women in policy-making arena. The democratic system of governance has made a difference to women's political participation and access to positions of power in a long-term perspective. In the short term, however, no change on the score is visible. Even today, women's are excluded from major decision-making, at all levels of governmental activities.

Special Measures for Women's Political Participation

As mentioned earlier, the current Constitution of Nepal recognizes the socio-economic disadvantage faced by women, and incorporates specific provisions to provide some political support to women. The Constitution specifies that all political parties must have at least 5 percent female candidates in the election of the House of Representatives, the Lower House, and at least three women in the Upper House.

The system of development administration is decentralized to the Village Development Committee (VDC) and municipality levels, which comprise several wards. VDCs consist of nine wards, while the number of wards in the municipalities ranges from 9 to 34. The political structure of district and village development committee is formed (Fig.3). Each DDC also must have at least one woman nominated to it. Ensuring women's participation at the grassroots level alone is not adequate to representing 50 percent of the population. It is mandatory to nominate at least one woman to VDCs and DDCs, but representation by nomination is unlikely to bring appropriate people to these bodies, because party interest or nepotism is likely to be an over-riding factor in such nominations.

Political Participation of Women's

Access to political power and decision-making process are considered as an index of the overall status of women in society (Shrestha 2001). In spite of constitutional provisions on women's representation their widespread participation in 1990 movement for democracy, and increased awareness, women' have not been able to improve their political representation at various levels, positions of power and decision-making.

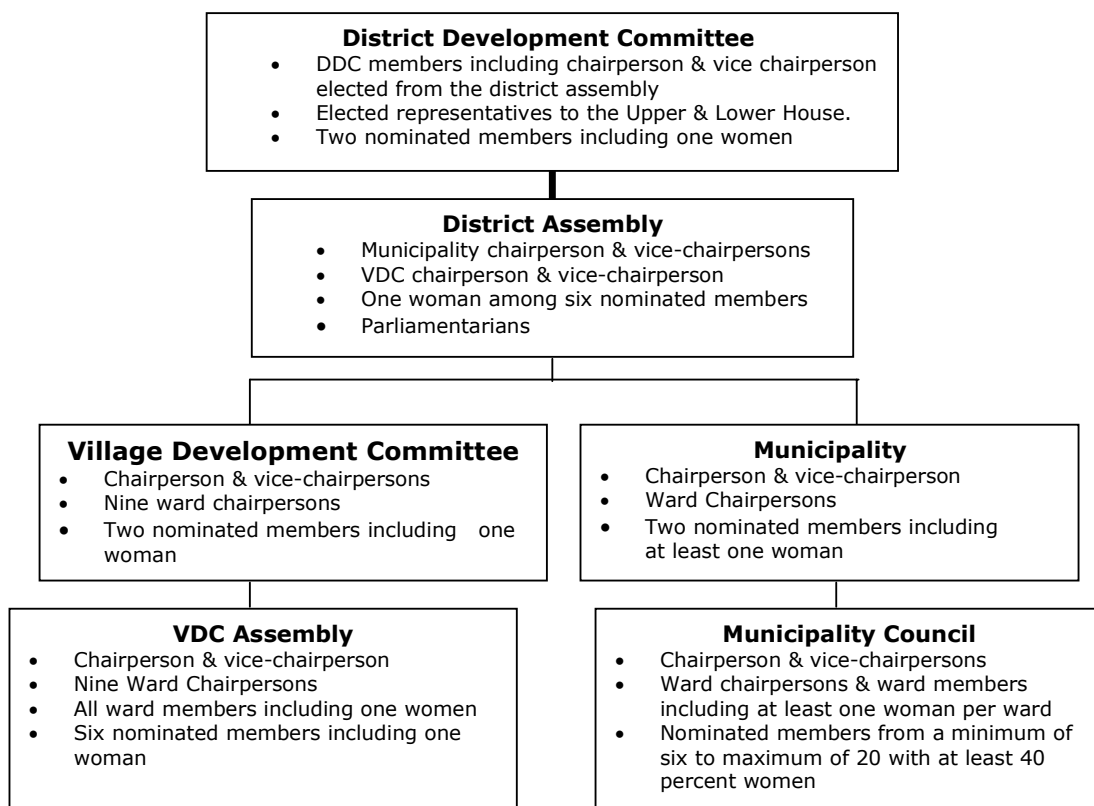


Figure 2. Political Participation Structure in District Development Committee

Source: Election Commission, 1999.

Nepalese women participated widely in the political movements of 1951, throughout the underground struggle for democracy during the Panchayat era (1960—1990) and in the mass movement of 1990. But, after the restoration of multi party system and formation of the constitution, the bargaining of various male dominated interest groups centering on ethnic, religious, and other issues, began to down women's voices. Constitutionally, the provision of equality applies only partially to women. They also face discrimination in citizenship right. Women's participation as voters and their awareness about rights have increased in general. Their willingness to participate in the political process has increased in the last decade. Rural women aware about women's organizations increased from 4.7 percent in 1978 to 15 percent in 1992. It is notably higher in urban women (Table 2).

Table 2. Selected Indicators of Political Awareness

Indicators	Rural	Urban
	Percentage	Percentage
	1992	1992
Knows a women's organization	14.9	32.4
Participates in a women's Organization	0.7	6.8
Awareness about the new Constitution	20.4	41.2
Awareness about constitutional discrimination against women	6.2	13.2
Awareness about Divorce Rights (Knows at least one cause on the basis of which she can have divorce)	58.6	68.0
Awareness of Fundamental Rights	8.9	23.2
Willingness to Participate as Local Representative	17.6	29.2
Women Voting:	1986/87	1991/92
Regularly	21.5	84.6
Once or twice	52.9	0.9

Source: Shtrii Shakti, 1995.

Despite constitutional provisions and the participation of women in the 1990 movement for democracy, they have not been able to increase their political representation at various levels. Neither they have been able to increase their access to positions of power and decision making. The proportion of women in Parliament in 1996 was actually smaller than in the 1989 Panchayat Parliament. Similarly, the representation of women at VDC and district levels had not changed much until 1996. There are no women Mayors or DDC chairpersons even now. Only recently the situation has changed substantially at the grassroots level. The Act on Local Election 1997 required all political parties to file candidature of at least one female candidate at the ward level. Representation of women is also mandatory at VDC and DDC levels. Among the nominees there must be at least one woman. As a consequence of this Act, more than 100,000 women participated in VDC level elections as candidates and more than 36,000 have been elected to the village assembly. The main issue now is to sensitize these women and their political counterparts on women's agenda. Without addressing woman's agenda the discriminated gender situation may not improve as expected.

Very few women have been elected to executive positions of local institutions in 1997. Only 289 women have been elected as ward chairpersons. Out of the total elected 7826 chairpersons and vice-chairpersons, only 26 are women. Their proportion declines progressively as one move to higher decision-making positions (Figure 2). There are no women mayors, vice-mayors or DDC chairpersons. Only one woman has been elected to the position of vice-chairperson of DDC. Among 26 women contested for DDC membership, only 8 have been elected. This indicates that beside grassroots level, there has been only marginal improvement in women's representation in elected institutions (Election Commission 2001).

The number of women parliamentarians slowly increased in last 10 years, but the overall representation is still not large enough to make a significant impact in the Parliament. Inadequate representation of women in the national legislature has negatively affected the enactment of gender sensitive legislations like the Women's Property Right Bill.

Out of the total 205 seats in House of Representative in 1999, only 12 women were elected. In the National Assembly or the Upper House the total number of seats is 60 and women's representation was 8 percent in 1995, 7 percent in 1997 & 1999, and only 5 percent in other years. During local elections of 1997 women's political participation was 19.4 percent from the rural areas and 18.1 percent from urban areas. In the case of geographical region women's political participation is higher in mountain and hill than that of Tarai (Table 3). By development regions, the Western Development Region has occupied 20.3 percent women's political participation and the lowest participation (18.61%) was from Far Western and Mid Western Development Regions (19%) respectively (Table 3).

Table 3. Women's Participation in Local Election of 1997

Regions	Women's participation in Local Elections 1997 (%)
Nepal	19.3
Rural	19.4
Urban	18.1
Geographical Regions	
Mountains	19.8
Hills	19.9
Terai	18.6
Development Regions	
Eastern Development Region	19.2
Central Development Region	19.2
Western Development Region	20.3
Mid Western Development Region	19.0
Far Western Development Region	18.6

Source: INSEC, 2002.

Political Process and Other Issues of Exclusion

Nepal is a country of multi-ethnic society with different culture, tradition and language. In this country more than 50 languages are spoken, but Nepali is the mother tongue of 60 percent of the population. Many organizations have been formed focusing on language, culture and religion. It is argued that in spite of the multi-ethnic nature of the society, the political and administrative powers are monopolized by the predominant castes such as Brahmins, *Chhetris* and *Newars*. The political parties have failed to ensure fair representation of varied socio-cultural groups at different levels of their hierarchies. Despite high voter turnout, leading to the contradictions the

democratic process continues to exclude the representation of the disadvantaged groups. Out of the total seats in Central Committee of the major political CPN, UML and Nepali congress party.

Table 4. Representation in Central Committees of Major Political Parties by Socio-Economic Groups

Central Committee	Nepali Congress*	CPN (UML)	RPP
Total Seats (number)	29	46	41
Representation by Socio-Eco Groups			
Brahmin (%)	62.1	65.2	19.5
Chhetri (%)	10.3	10.9	31.7
Newar (%)	3.4	13.0	4.9
Hill ethnic group	13.8	6.5	26.8
Tarai communities (%)	10.3	4.3	17.1
Total (%)	100	100	100

Source: UNDP. 2004. UML= United Marxist Leninist, RPP= Rrastriya Prajantra Party.

*Represents the situation before the split of the Nepali Congress.

Ethnicity is underrepresented in House of Representative and most of the elected members are from the higher classes. Therefore, emphasis must be laid down for equal representation from all the ethnic groups (Table 5).

Table 5. Representation by Caste/Ethnicity in the House of Representatives (1994)

Region/Caste/ Ethnic	Caste/Ethnic Representation		Region/Caste Ethnic	Caste/Ethnic Representation	
	No.	Percent		No.	Percent
Mountain/Hill	164	80.0	Terai	41	20.0
<i>Caste</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>61.5</i>	<i>Caste</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>11.7</i>
Bahun	86	42.0	Brahmin	6	2.9
Chettri	19	14.1	Rajput	3	1.5
Thakuri	11	5.4	Kayastha	5	2.4
Damai	0	0	Yadav	8	3.9
<i>Ethnic Groups</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>18.5</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>0.5</i>
Gurung	5	2.4	<i>Ethnic</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>6.3</i>
Limbu	4	2.0	Tharu	13	6.3
Magar	5	2.4	Others		
Newar	13	6.3	<i>Others</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2.0</i>
Rai	5	2.4	Muslim	4	2.0
Sherpa	1	0.5	Total	205	100.0
Tamang	4	2.0	Source: Gurung, 1998.		
Thakali	1	0.5			
Bhote	0	0			

The participation of the caste/ethnicity in the various forms of government shows Newars are highest (48%) representation, followed by Brahmin/Chhetri (38%), Madhesi (7%), Hill Janajatis (6%), Hill Dalit (1%) respectively (Table 6).

Table 6. Participation in Governance by Caste/Ethnicity 1999

Governance	High Level Officials						Total
	Brahmin/ Chhetri	Hill Janajatis	Madhise	Hill Dalit	Newar	Others	
Judiciary	190	3	9	0	33	0	235
Constitutional bodies & commissions	181	4	18	0	32	0	235
Council of ministries	14	2	3	0	6	0	25
Public administration	20	4	5	0	3	0	32
Legislature	159	36	46	4	20	0	265
Political party leaders	97	25	26	0	18	0	166
Local government	106	23	31	0	30	0	190
Industry % trade	7	0	15	0	20	0	42
Education sector	75	2	7	1	11	1	97
Cultural organizations	85	6	0	0	22	0	113
Science & Technology	36	2	6	0	18	0	62
Civil society	41	1	4	0	18	0	64
Total	1011	108	170	5	231	1	1526
Percent	66.36	7.104	11.124	0.261	15.18	0	100
% Nepal's population	31.6	22.2	30.9	8.7	5.6	0.1	99.1
Proportional difference index	2.1	0.32	0.36	0.03	2.71	0	5.52

Source: Nepal Institutional Manpower Directory, 1999.

In political decision making process *Dalit* and disadvantaged *Janajati* populations are highly excluded. *Dalit* and *Janajatis* are those communities who are most backward in the social, economic, educational, political and religious spheres and are deprived of human dignity and social justice.

One *Dalit* to the Lower House of Parliament had been elected in 1991. In the Upper House only four *Dalits* represented the political parties and kings' nomination. Various political parties in Nepal have consistently emphasized on *Dalit* welfare as one of the main agenda in their party manifestos. However, *Dalit* candidates constituted only 3.7 percent of those who candidated in the 1999 general election. Presently, no *Dalits* are members of the central committees of the major three political parties, nor do *Dalits* hold positions in the judiciary or the constitutional bodies (Table 7).

Table 7 Representation in Parliament by Ethnicity 1999

	Brahmin/ Chettri			Mangol			Kirat			Madhies			Dalit			Newar			Total
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	
Lower House	98	7	105	44	1	45	11	0	11	21	3	24	0	0	0	19	1	20	205
Upper House	43	2	45	10	1	11	3	1	4	12	0	12	4	0	4	8	1	9	60
Total	141	9	150	54	2	56	14	1	15	33	3	36	4	0	4	27	2	29	265

Source: Election Commission, 1999

Note: M= Male, F= Female

The participation of different caste and ethnic groups in parliament election of 1999 does not match with population by caste and ethnic group. High caste Brahmans and Chetris have more than twice the level of participation in Parliament in relation to their proportion in the population. There is non in Lower House and only 4 Dalit members are in the upper house. The number of hill Janajatis and Newars is very small (Table 8).

Table 8. Candidates and Elected Members' of Parliament by Gender and Dalits, 1999

Political Party	Candidates Contested				Winner Candidates			
	Total	Dalit	Women	Others	Total	Dalit	Women	Others
UML	195 (8.7)	2 (2.4)	12 (8.4)	181 (9.0)	71 (34.6)	-	6 (50.0)	65 (33.7)
NC	205 (9.2)	-	14 (9.8)	191 (9.5)	111 (54.2)	-	5 (41.7)	106 (54.9)
RPP	195 (8.7)	2 (2.4)	14 (9.8)	179 (8.9)	11 (5.4)	-	1 (8.3)	10 (5.2)
Others	1643 (73.4)	78 (95.2)	103 (72.0)	1462 (72.6)	12 (5.8)	-	-	12 (6.2)
Total	2238 (100)	82 (100)	143 (100)	2013 (100)	100 (9.16)	-	12 (100)	193 (100)

Source: UNDP, 2004.

UML=United Marxist Leninist, NC= Nepali Congress,

RPP= Rrastriya Prajantra Party.

Figures within parenthesis indicate percentage.

Out of the total (2238) contested candidates in parliamentary election of 1999 only Nepali Congress had candidates in all 205 constituency and united Marxists and Leninists (UML) and Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) contested only for 195 seats. During this election among the contests Dalit represented 1 percent each from UML and RPP whereas women candidates were 7.8 percent from RPP followed by 6.8 percent NC and 6.2 percent from UML respectively (Table 8).

Of the total seats (205) of the parliament the winners were the highest (54.2%) of NC followed by 34.2 percent of UML and 5.4 percent of RPP. Other party share 5.9 percent winners where as they represented more than 73 percent of the total candidature. None of the Dalit own the election. The winners' candidates were 6, 5, and 1 from UML, NC and RPP respectively (Table 8).

Conclusion

Few women are elected to executive positions in the National Parliament or in local institutions. The political participation of women in rural areas is less than that of towns and cities. The level of participation is even less in the mountain and Tarai- especially in the far western and mid-western regions.

Equal participation of women in diverse development activities of the country is essential for country's balance development, in a short time. To keep half of the population in isolation is not justified both in terms of human right and social justice. Apart from this, there is a general tendency to give more attention to sons rather than daughters. Such a prejudice from infancy and childhood creates psychological depression among females.

Women's have the sole responsibility for household maintenance and child care activities. They face political nepotism that favours men. To empower women -focus should be given on economic opportunity of income generation, household chores should be the concern of every member of the family, and should be borne collectively regardless of sex. Similarly awareness about rights and duties is necessary for women. Similarly, women should work collectively for free, and bilingual schooling up to high school for all and common issues without joining political alliances, and greater political participation, transparency, and availability of information should be fostered. creating an environment of family support.

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