

Evaluating the Impact of Gender Quotas on Women's Political Participation and Empowerment in Post-Federal Nepal

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Received 28 November 2025 | Accepted 27 December 2025 | Published 20 January 2026

ABSTRACT

The paper analyses how gender quotas affect women political representation and empowerment in post-federal Nepal since 2015, which provides one-third female representation in federal and provincial legislatures and 40 percent in locally based on the Constitution of 2015. Though since the 2017 and 2022 elections, women have become more descriptively represented under these provisions, there is debate over whether they can create the empowerment of women substantively especially in the rural and remote setting where patriarchy influences. Based on Feminist Institutionalism, the study also conceptualizes the political institutions within a gendered space in which it coexists with formal rules like quotas and more informal practices that limit the agency of women. By using an integrated approach of convergent parallel design, the study will be based on quantitative and qualitative data of 120 elected Nepalese women representatives in the three ecological regions of the country through surveys, interviews, focus group discussions and key informant interviews and analyzed through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The results demonstrate that socio-cultural factors and institutional factors (such as not being included on important committees, inadequate training, insufficient party support and bureaucracy) are preventing women to exercise their political agency, and are hindering exercise of agency, nonetheless, further centers on institutional factors prevent women. It implies that this research has found that gender quotas act as the entry mechanism, but substantial empowerment mandates an institutional overhaul and expansion of the socio-cultural transformation.

KEYWORDS

Empowerment of women, and political participation, Gender quotas, Nepal, Socio-cultural barriers.

INTRODUCTION

In Nepal, the Constitution of 2015 was promulgated as one of the significant institutional shifts to ensure that women have been historically excluded in the sphere of political leadership and decision-making. The nation has led the gender-based governance in the region by imposing women representation in the federal and provincial legislature whereby the legislative seats are compulsory to be occupied by women with at least one-third of the seats being occupied by women, and 40 percent representation by women at the local government representation (Shrestha & Phuyel, 2019). With the reforms, the elected women was higher than before, especially following the local elections 2017 and 2022 (Paudel et al., 2022). But the level of this descriptive model made into substantive empowerment is debatable, particularly in the rural and remote areas where social hierarchies and patriarchal values are still ingrained and thus defining the political participation (Sijapati and Mishra, 2023). Although women are now becoming highly visible, most of them go through a range of challenges including lack of control and decision-making power, limited availability of resources, and social-cultural pressures that affect their leadership roles (Goryunova & Madsen, 2024). These issues create important concerns about the real-life implication of gender quotas in the post-federal government of Nepal (Mahato, 2023).

These reforms have to be analyzed thus with reference to the local socio-cultural realities. The combination of male-institutional cultures in municipalities and political parties and little purchasing capacity-building institutions inhibit the agency of women and lead to high numerical party participation but with little substantive party influence (Adhikari, 2025). Simultaneously, there are examples of augmented assurance, society participation, and leadership growth amid a number of women that demonstrate that quotas have empowered women unequally (Upadhyay, 2023). To this end, the paper will explore how gender quotas could improve women political representation and empowerment in post-federal Nepal and refer specifically to the socio-cultural and institutional aspects, by which women agency could be facilitated or hobbled in rural and remote Nepal (Yadav, 2023).

Whereas, the earlier studies of gender quotas in Nepal have concentrated largely on the numerical or descriptive representation gains after the 2017 and 2022 elections (Shrestha & Phuyel, 2019), the current study adds another level of scrutinizing the consideration of women participation in Nepal politics through quantification. It explores political agency, substantive representation and empowerment. Literature warns that quotas may not always break the established spheres of power in political institutions, especially in a situation where the principle of patriarchy, caste structure, and even male dominance runs in the party (Mahato, 2023). Despite the rising incidence of women officially assuming the political office, the local governance research in Nepal suggests that this is frequently accompanied by weak institutions in making decisions and access to institutional resources (Sijapati and Mishra, 2023). Placing the post-quota political participation of women in these socio-cultural and institutional structures, this research proposal presents gender quotas as a necessary yet (initially) incomplete instrument of empowerment, tied to shifting institutional forms and societal transformation at large to allow the successful exercise of political agency.

This study applies Feminist Institutionalism theory that describes the appearance of gendered power relations in political institutions wherein formalized rules like gender quotas co-exist with informal style of male dominance. Feminist Institutionalism confirms the way, in which the politics of gendered power informs political institutions in which the formal rules, like gender quotas, come along with informal practices, which serve to assert the power of the male gender. It emphasizes the fact that norms, the structure of parties, and decision-making limits agency of women and demonstrates why numerical representation cannot necessarily amount to substantive political empowerment.

METHODOLOGY

The study is utilizing a convergent parallel design using mixed-methods data that are combine survey data (N= 120) with qualitative data on interviews, FGDs, and KIIs at three ecological areas. Sampling logic, regional selection and the analytical sequencing have been provided with greater clarity in order to replicate them. Quantitative results define general trends of engagement, whereas qualitative outcome in contextualizing the tendencies depict actual experiences of marginalization, bargaining, and compromised agency. The triangulation is improving the analytical rigor and increase the credibility of the findings. The research design presented in this study is survey design in a pragmatic paradigm that incorporates the quantitative method to allow the capture of both quantifiable trends by women representatives. The research design used in the study involves the simultaneous collection of quantitative data and subsequent combination of the same at a later date to be interpreted holistically as was explained in the methodology section of the attached proposal. The quantitative data are

generated by use of structured questionnaires to the elected women representatives of the three rural municipalities that represent the major ecological zones of Nepal: Sakhuwa Prasauni (Terai), Mahabharat (Hill), and Gosaikanda (Mountain). This enables the study to establish patterns of involvement, degrees of decision-making authority and institutional access. The sampling is conducted in accordance with the multi-stage approach outlined in the proposal and it provides sufficient representation in terms of caste, ethnicity and political positions. The data analysis was performed on the basis of the two-fold strategy suggested in the proposal; the quantitative data was processed with the help of the descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations, and the qualitative data were get analyzed with the help of the thematic analysis and identification of the recurring themes, barriers, and enabling factors influencing the empowerment. This combination was increasing the validity, triangulate the results, and be well in line with the research purpose, which is investigating the socio-cultural and institutional determinants of political empowerment in women.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings and results of the study in tables. Ther first one begins with Table 1 about sociocultural aspects and so on.

Table 1: Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting Women's Political Empowerment in Rural and Remote Regions

| Socio-Cultural Factor | Frequency (N=120) | Percent (%) |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Patriarchal Norms | 72 | 60.0% |
| Limited Literacy/Education | 55 | 45.8% |
| Restrictions on Mobility | 49 | 40.8% |
| Lack of Family Support | 39 | 32.5% |
| Caste/Ethnicity–Based Barriers | 27 | 22.5% |

(Source: Field Work, 2025)

The results show that socio-cultural norms are still a major challenge of political empowerment of women in rural and remote Nepal. According to patriarchal disposition, 60 % of the respondents shared the same, which highlights the culture of traditional gender norm that erodes the confidence and participation of women in society. Minimal literacy (45.8%), mobility constraints (40.8%), also limited the participation especially to geographically isolated areas. Family support (32.5) was a direct cause of women not being able to attend meetings and become leaders, and caste and discrimination by ethnicity (22.5%) were disproportionately impacting Dalit and minority women.

Table 2: Institutional Barriers and Support Influencing Women's Participation After Gender Quotas

| Institutional Factor | Frequency (N=120) | Percent (%) |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Exclusion from Key Committee Decisions | 58 | 48.3% |
| Lack of Training/Capacity Building | 46 | 38.3% |
| Limited Access to Budget Information | 42 | 35.0% |
| Weak Party Support and Guidance | 37 | 30.8% |
| Bureaucratic Delays/Obstructions | 28 | 23.3% |

(Source: Field Work, 2025)

The nature of institutional conditions also plays a major role in whether the representation of women on quota basis will be translated into procedural meaningful participation. Almost half of the respondents (48.3) claimed to be excluded in the major committee meetings, which means that official positions do not necessarily grant a person the power to make decisions. The unavailability of training opportunities (38.3) and also the availability of budget information (35) are also limiting factors to accessibility of women into governance processes (Table 2). The confidence and visibility of women are also low due to weak political party support (30.8%), since the party structures are still dominated by men. There are bureaucratic barriers, which are identified 23.3 percent, that tend to slow down or hitches the women participation in planning and implementation. The results indicate that women empowerment is largely stifled by institutional forces, and hence the need to supplement quota policy with a capacity-building initiative, procedural clarity and sex-friendly institutional policies.

Table 3: Women's Political Participation Levels After Implementation of Gender Quotas

| Participation Level | Frequency (N=120) | Percent (%) |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| High Participation | 44 | 36.7% |
| Moderate Participation | 47 | 39.2% |
| Low Participation | 29 | 24.1% |

(Source: Field Work, 2025)

According to the participation levels, women have been offered a chance to participate thanks to the gender quotas however, there is an imbalance in participation. Practicing high attendance, being proactive people participating in meetings and discussions on local development, 36.7% of respondents claimed high participation. A bigger percentage, 39.2%, were moderately active as they attended the meetings but have limited role in decision making because of lack of experience or confidence. Poor attendance (24.1%) was attributed to socio-cultural, information,

and male dominance in the political arenas (Table 3). Women who were based in remote municipalities were particularly hit by the problem of mobility and family obligations. These findings indicate that quotas augment representation and may not necessarily imply active participation. Mostly where women are trained, supported by their families and included in institutional settings, participation is best.

DISCUSSION

This discussion using Feminist Institutionalism interprets the results by considering the political institutions as gendered towards which the formal mechanisms, including gender quotas, co-exist with the informal mechanisms of maintaining the men of authority. This theoretical prism assists in understanding the reasons why the numerical inclusion may not necessarily result in political agency, because the power still functions based on institutional norms, party hierarchies, as well as decision making procedures. This is the state of affairs, as the results of the present research outline that the use of gender quotas has resulted in more women being present in local government systems, yet none has been empowered to act with full agency with regard to politics due to the continued presence of socio-cultural and institutional components. Based on the socio-cultural results, the patriarchal culture, illiteracy, and lack of mobility remain the determinants of the extent of women participation in the political sphere, particularly in rural and isolated communities (Drechselová, 2020). With strong ties to the community thinking and family demands, these cultural restraints are slow and imbalanced to be empowered (Meena, 2024). Despite the fact that women are given a chance to hold political office, as a result of quota, a large number of them struggle to use functional power because socio-cultural resistance lowers their levels of confidence, visibility as well as decision making authority. The role of institutional barriers is also important to determine the outcomes of empowerment (Ullah et al., 2023). Women cannot have a chance to impact policy, act as a leader, as they are not invited to important meetings of committees, they do not get the information on the budget as well as men do, there is no opportunity to get any training, and they work in the male him/her party structure (Sain, 2024). Here, representation alone would not change the hierarchies of the decision-making processes which is at the same time exercised through informal institution practices like gate keeping, funnelling of information, and partisan dominance. Such processes have a systematic way of limiting how women can turn formal political posts into having a substantive influence. These results concur with the current literature that indicates that quotas do not have the capacity to eliminate establish power unfairness unless institutions embrace inclusive practices by training, exposing, and modifying the structure. However, in spite of these challenges, new opportunities can be observed in the dynamics of participation (Upadhyay, 2023). The percentage of moderate and high rates of involvement was relatively large among women, which means that the gender quotas have opened up new political spaces that women are slowly bargaining over. The level of political participation between women was greater when they had stronger family backing, previous interaction in communities or had been exposed to capacity building programs. Overall, as the discussion has shown, empowerment is feasible, when the positive socio-cultural environment along with inclusive institutional procedures enhance the voices of women; it is weak, when the institutional systems still reproduce exclusion and domination.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion reached in this paper is that gender quotas introduced in post-federal Nepal have been effective in ensuring that women are better represented in the local politics, but actual

empowerment is unbalanced. The results in all the tables show that women involvement in politics is not only influenced by the socio-cultural norms but also institutional forces that are still limiting their successful performance in the elective position. The lack of literacy, continuous patriarchy and caste-based discriminations and mobility are still factors that weaken women in the leadership of the country, especially in the rural and geographically isolated regions. The institutional arrangements, such as fewer training opportunities and access to information, as well as inaccurate representation in the decision-making committees, further strengthen these socio-cultural constraints. Nevertheless, most women representatives are still actively involved in community problems and are slowly becoming confident in their leadership positions despite the challenges. The results are that women are more empowered in the circumstances when they are supported with the help of training programs, political parties and family or community support. Therefore, even though gender quotas act as a valuable entry point into political office, institutional change (willing or not) based on gender, gender-based governance processes and wider social cultural transformation is needed in the long run to break the norms. The reinforcement of women resource accessibility and reinforcement of capacity building efforts are thus critical towards transforming descriptive representation into substantive and long-term political empowerment.

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