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Political Leadership of Women in Nepal: A Critical Observation from the Local Elections 2022

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Abstract

Women's representation in political leadership is crucial for liberal democracies. However, the persistent global gender gap in political participation raises important questions. This paper focuses on the state of women's political leadership in Nepal, using the 2022 local elections as a case study. It takes an epistemological critical approach and integrates quantitative and qualitative information from various secondary sources. The study reveals an increase in the number of women in leadership positions after the election, which can be attributed to the constitutional provisions of Nepal that aim to ensure inclusion, representation, and participation. However, these provisions do not guarantee the quality, competence, and empowerment of women in leadership roles, as they still face obstacles such as patriarchal structures, elitist-centric inclusive practices, and a lack of institutional support at the local level. This paper is valuable for those interested in political science, gender studies, or development studies.

Keywords: Feminism, local elections, political leadership, women's participation and representation

Introduction

Political leadership has emerged as an essential topic of study within the field of political science and is progressively being integrated into other areas of social science, including sociology, gender studies, economics, and development studies. Political leadership is typically understood as the involvement of individuals in various political activities to gain, maintain, control, and exert influence.

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However, there is considerable controversy surrounding the conceptualization, definition, and theory of this concept (Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2009). Leadership is a broad concept that can be applied to a variety of areas, whereas political leadership is a particular construct of politics and authority. It is a term used to describe the competition for power with legitimate and sometimes even supranational power that is given for the formation of regimes or the establishment of a system of government within a political system. There have been different interpretations of political leadership, but power has always been central to the discussion (Edinger 2017, Rhodes & Hart 2014). Political leadership, on the other hand, is a controversial term that refers to the actors, networks, and functions of the political system. There is an engaged theoretical debate between different schools of thought, like liberalism, neo-liberalism, and Marxism.

Looking at political leadership from a gender perspective, most scholars agree that it is male-dominated due to its development within a patriarchal social structure. This structure creates a male-dominated sphere of political participation, which is difficult for most women to access. While some female elites can access these domains, political leadership is still predominantly male-dominated (Jalalzai, 2004). Political leadership is often viewed as androcentric, and its ultimate aim is to maintain patriarchal dominance. However, some scholars argue that political leadership in contemporary states is becoming more inclusive and gender-friendly, reflecting the values of fairness and justice that come with neo-liberal democracy. Joshi and Goehrung (2018) note that women's political leadership is increasingly being recognised with top political appointments in world politics today.

Political leadership is an integral part of governance. It involves the use of power and authority to achieve specific objectives that align with the interests of a community or nation. The art of inspiring and encouraging people to work towards a common goal and mission is what defines political leadership. It encompasses a combination of skills, experience, and personal characteristics such as honesty, vision, and courage, which determine the direction and course of a society. In the context of elections, political leadership involves the conduct of political campaigns, electoral victories, and the process of campaigning, winning, and assuming positions of authority within political parties. This entails leading and representing political parties and spearheading political campaigns and movements.

This paper defines political leadership as the use of power and authority to achieve specific objectives and goals that are in line with the interests of a community or nation. It involves inspiring and encouraging people to work together towards a common goal and mission. The direction and course of a society are shaped by a combination of skills, experience, and personal characteristics such as honesty, vision, and courage. Political leadership in the context of elections encompasses the process of campaigning, winning, and assuming positions of authority within political parties. It is about leading and representing political parties, spearheading political campaigns and movements, and achieving electoral victories.

However, this study focuses on the role of women in politics as candidates and elected officials rather than on political leadership on a broader level. Specifically, it aims to

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analyse the nature and trend of the political leadership of women by conducting an empirical case study of the local-level elections in Nepal in 2022.

Theoretical Contestations

Extensive academic research and discussion have focused on women's political participation, resulting in various theories that attempt to explain different dynamics and characteristics of participation. There is no universally accepted model for detailing women's political participation in specific election events. However, it can be discussed in two broader domains: political science as a discipline and feminism as a movement.

Political Science Perspective

Jan W. van Deth conducted a study on political participation and found that it is difficult to define and theorize this concept holistically. He referred to Diani's contextualization of the political participation of women in the rise of new social movements. Deth argued that political participation is a comprehensive political affair and has become a cross-cutting issue in developing the theory of everything in political science. However, he fails to explain how it works in favour of women under the rule of the majority, where the majority is often defined by male numbers. Additionally, Lamprianou (2013) has criticized contemporary research on political participation and suggests that theories should focus on specific contexts. He proposes theoretical suggestions and points out the useful synergy between sociological research and political science analysis.

Bari (2005) examines the theoretical framework of women's political participation, focusing on the associated issues and challenges. The study highlights how women's physical and functional limitations are shaped by the social and political structures of society. Three main theoretical issues are identified: (a) social and political discourses; (b) political structures and institutions; and (c) socio-cultural and functional constraints. Bari (2005) identifies critical factors influencing women's political participation. These include ideological factors such as patriarchal and hierarchical beliefs, political factors like exclusionary traditional political structures and the public-private dichotomy, socio-cultural factors such as gender roles, the patriarchal system, and household bondage, as well as social capital and political capacities like weak decision-making power, limited access to political skills, economic resources, and information. Additionally, economic factors like the commercial nature of politics and the requirement for financial resources to gain recognition in politics, coupled with women's limited access to and ownership of productive resources, play a significant role.

Childs and Krook (2008) contribute to the discussion of women's political representation by exploring debates and innovations. They argue that political representation is a crucial aspect of political participation that has become a central topic in research on women in politics. One criticism is that political theorists have focused primarily on normative arguments for increasing women's political presence. However, a non-normative approach is also worth considering. Women's exclusion from political decision-making is unjust and undemocratic and deprives society of the potential contributions women could make to the

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political process. To address this issue, several factors are critical, including political and parliamentary contexts, multiple identities and interests, women's specific interests and issues, and policy-making processes. Therefore, future research should aim to connect the two theoretical constructs of women's representation in descriptive and substantive ways.

Schwindt-Bayer (2010) attempts to develop a comprehensive theory of political participation by presenting empirical evidence from the Latin American context. The author first articulates a theory of women's representation and then tests it with primary data. The theoretical framework of political participation in elected bodies provides a multifaceted and integrated model that links formal, descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation. The author then describes how this theory will be tested empirically using data from Latin American legislatures in the remaining chapters of the book.

Feminist Critical Perspective

Feminist movements have different theoretical approaches regarding women's political participation (Bryson, 2013). There are several schools of thought, including liberalism, Marxism, radicalism, socialism, intersectionality, and institutionalism, that offer useful insights in different contexts. Liberal feminists argue that women's political participation is currently male-dominated and should be equal to that of men within the existing political structures. They emphasize legal and institutional reforms to eliminate discriminatory laws and practices that act as barriers to women's participation. On the other hand, intersectionality theory highlights the interconnected nature of social categories such as gender, race, and class. Women's experiences and challenges in politics are influenced by various intersecting factors.

Likewise, institutional theorists study how both formal and informal political institutions impact women's involvement in politics. They examine elements such as electoral systems, party structures, and informal networks. The theory explores how changes in these institutions can either facilitate or hinder women's entry into and success in politics. In addition to the institutional perspective, there is another practical approach to addressing women's issues in politics, which involves implementing quota systems and affirmative action policies to increase the number of women in political positions. These quotas can be either legislative or voluntary and aim to ensure a minimum level of women's representation.

Substantive representation theory goes beyond numerical representation to examine whether elected representatives adequately address women's perspectives, issues, and interests. It raises some critical questions about whether the presence of women in politics results in policies and programmes that properly reflect women's concerns and improve their quality of life.

Methods

In this article, the author takes a critical ontological stance, assuming that reality is objective and constructed and deconstructed through politics and power. It employs secondary data that has been critically evaluated and includes various concepts, ideas, and concerns

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regarding global political leadership and the representation of women in national elections. Both qualitative and quantitative data are used to back up the claims made in this article.

In this paper, it first discusses the conceptual and theoretical debates on the political participation of women. It elaborates on and contextualizes the empirical insights of electoral history and present provisions in Nepal. In the third section, the paper analyses the results of the local elections in 2022, exploring women's candidature, victory, and leadership. In the fourth section, we will delve into some critical questions that go beyond the numeric representational figures. Specifically, the paper explores what local politics and democracy look like at the ground level and why women's political participation is still a contested issue with an elite-centric agenda in terms of electoral processes in Nepal.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Participation of Women in Nepal's Politics

Over the past two decades, Nepal has undergone significant socio-political changes, from a civil war that ended in a negotiated peace to transitioning from a unitary to a federal and monarchical government, and ultimately to the current republican political system. Women have played a prominent role in these transformations (Dahal, 2020; Upreti et al., 2020). There have been several notable contributions by women to different movements and socio-political changes in Nepal. These include Queen Rajendra Laxmi's role in the Unification of Nepal during 1777–1785, Mrs. Kamala Kunwar's contribution during the Nepal-Anglo War of 1814–16, Mrs. Yogmaya Neupane's involvement in the Dharma Rajya Movement (1867–1941), and the All-Nepal Women's Association (1947), among others. Additionally, women have played vital roles in various movements of farmers, students, and political parties during the Panchayat Era (1961–1990), the People's Movement (1990), the Maoist Movement (1996–2006), and other movements of different regions and ethnic groups (the Madhes Movement and Tharuhat Movement in particular). However, despite their significant contributions to social, economic, and political freedoms, Nepali women's contributions have not been well documented, and some of them are less evident (Dhungana, 2014; Mahato et al., 2019; Thapa, 2012).

History of Elections in Nepal

Nepal's electoral history is relatively short when it comes to parliamentary and local-level elections. The first general election took place in 1959, followed by several others held in different forms and regimes. National Panchayats under the Panchayat regime saw general elections held in 1971, 1981, and 1986. After the reinstatement of parliamentary democracy in 1990, three general elections were held: the first in 1991, the second in 1994, and the third in 1999. Similarly, after the People's Movement in 2006, which ended the Maoist insurgency, two elections for Constituent Assemblies were held in 2008 and 2013 to generate people's mandates for constitution writing (EC, 2078BS).

In addition, Nepal's elections for the Upper House, also known as the National Assembly in Nepal's constitutional history, are equally historic and have occurred in many consecutive periods. The Upper House was not provisioned in the partyless panchayat system. The

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elections include the 1959 Senate election and the National Assembly elections held in 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2018, 2020, and 2022. On the other hand, it is also clear that a referendum on the government system was held on May 2, 1980, during the regime of the panchayat (reformist partyless Panchayat vs. multiparty system). Table 1 briefly summarizes the history of general and constituency elections in Nepal, along with the elected constituencies. (For more details, see EC, 2076 BS, 2078 BS, and 2022.).

Table 1

History of General and Constituency Elections in Nepal

<i>Year</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Elected members</i>	<i>Nominated members</i>	<i>Constituencies</i>
1959 GE*	18 February 1959	109	0	109
1971 GE	1971	109	16	109
1981 GE	9 May 1981	112	28	112
1986 GE	12 May 1986	112	28	112
1991 GE	12 May 1991	205	0	205
1994 GE	15 November 1994	205	0	205
1999 GE	3 & 17 May 1999	205	0	205
2008 CAE**	10 April 2008	575	26	240
2013 CAE	19 November 2013	575	26	240
2017 GE	26 November and 7 December 2017	275	0	165
2017 GE	20 November 2022	275	0	165

Note: *GE: General Election; **CAE: Constituent Assembly Election

Nepal adopted a new constitution in 2015 and became an asymmetric federal system with three-tiered governments: federal, provincial, and local (Article 56). The Constitution also established a constitutional body called an election commission, responsible for conducting elections for any of the governments or legislatures (Part 24, Article 245-247). Following the enactment of electoral laws as per the Constitution, the first general election was held in 2017 and the second in 2022. As per Nepal's Constitution (Article 85, Part 8), the lower House is made up of 275 members, out of which 165 are elected through the single-member electoral system. The remaining 110 members are elected through a proportional electoral system, where voters vote for political parties and the whole country acts as a single-election constituency (Constitution of Nepal, 2015).

Local Elections

Local elections have a long history in Nepal, dating back to the late 1940s, when they were initiated alongside the district administrative system by the Rana regime. The first local election was held on June 11, 1947 (BS 2004, Jestha 29, by Rana PM Padma Shamsher) in

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the Kathmandu municipality. At that time, voting rights were not granted to all citizens, and only male voters over the age of 25 were eligible. Similar elections were also held in Bhaktapur and Lalitpur. Subsequent local elections were held in various municipalities, including Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Birgunj, Bhadrapur, Tansen, and Biratnagar, in BS 2014 (i.e., 1957). With the rise of the Panchayat regime on December 15, 1960, the Gaun Panchayat Act 2018 BS and the Constitution of Nepal 1959 (2019 BS) established a system of local levels consisting of Jllaa Panchayat, Nagar Panchayat, and Gaun Panchayat.

Subsequent local-level elections have taken place after this, including elections for Gaun Panchayats and assemblies (BS 2018 and BS 2020); elections for Nagar Panchayats and assemblies (BS 2019, which was held in 14 Nagar Panchayat); elections for village and municipal panchayats (BS 2032-2035); elections for village and municipal panchayats 1983 (BS 2039); and the elections for village and municipal panchayats 1987 (BS 2043-12-7 and BS 2043-12-10). The local elections that took place after the political change in the 1990s included the 1992 local elections (28 and 31 May 1992); the 1997 local elections (17 and 26 May 1997); and the 2006 municipal elections (8 February 2006).

According to the Constitution of Nepal 2015, there have been two local elections in the federal system. Elected local governments have a tenure of 5 years (Dahal, 2020), and the first local election was held in two phases on May 14, June 28, and September 18, 2017. It has already completed its full tenure, while the second local election was held on May 13, 2022, and it has just completed its first year. When viewed historically, the local elections held in 1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2006, 2017, and 2022 can be considered complete and full-fledged elections in terms of electoral principles.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions for Local Elections

In the past two decades, the issue of women's participation in politics has become a top priority in Nepal. Discussions surrounding inclusive democracy, women's empowerment, and equal participation have taken place, and some of them have even been endorsed in the constitution and other laws, rules, and regulations. The constitution and laws now guarantee women's participation. With the introduction of the new constitution in 2015, a three-tier governance system was implemented, consisting of national, provincial, and local levels (Part 5, Art. 56). There are currently 7 provinces and 753 local levels in Nepal, comprising 6 metropolitan cities, 11 sub-metropolitan cities, 276 municipalities, and 460 rural municipalities, including 6,743 wards. Table 2 provides a clear distribution of the different types of local levels in each of the seven provinces, along with their total number of local levels.

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Table 2

Seven Provinces and Distribution of Local Levels in Nepal, 2017

Province	Metro	Sub-metro	M	RM	Wards	Local levels
Koshi	1	2	46	88	1157	137
Madhes	1	3	73	59	1271	136
Bagmati	3	1	41	74	1121	119
Gandaki	1	-	26	58	759	85
Lumbini	-	4	32	73	1121	109
Karnali	-	-	25	54	718	79
Sudurpacchim	-	1	33	54	734	88
Nepal	6	11	276	460	6743	753

Source: Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Affairs, Government of Nepal

Nepal implemented a new constitution in 2015, which introduced an asymmetric federal system consisting of three tiers of government: federal, provincial, and local (Article 56). The constitution also established an election commission to conduct elections for any level of government or legislature (Part 24, Article 245-247). The first general election took place in 2017, and was followed by a second election in 2022, after the implementation of electoral laws as mandated by the constitution. The lower house of Nepal's government is comprised of 275 members as per Article 85, Part 8 of the constitution. Out of these, 165 are elected from single-member constituencies using first-past-the-post voting, while the remaining 110 are elected through a proportional electoral system where voters cast their vote for political parties. The entire country constitutes a single election constituency as per the Constitution of Nepal 2015.

The legal frameworks governing local-level elections in Nepal include the Constitution of Nepal, the Election Commission Act of 2017, the Electoral Roll Act of 2017, the Election (Offence and Punishment) Act of 2017, the Political Party Registration Act of 2016, the Local Level Election Act of 2017, and other rules and directives. Part 17 of the Constitution, which includes Articles 215 and 216, outlines the criteria for individuals who wish to run for various elected positions at the local level. To be eligible, one must be a Nepali citizen, at least 21 years old, registered on the voter list at the local level, and not disqualified by any federal law.

The local government in Nepal comprises three levels: rural municipalities, municipalities, and district coordination committees. An elected chair for rural municipalities and a mayor for municipalities head each local body. A deputy mayor for municipalities and a deputy chair for rural municipalities support them. The local government is further divided into wards, each of which has a ward chairperson and four members. Among these members, two must be women, and one must belong to the marginalized caste group called Dalit. The Chairperson/Mayor and the Deputy Chairperson/Deputy Mayor are selected through a first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system. Chairpersons and all the ward members are chosen

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through a single non-transferable vote under the FPTP (Part 17 of the Constitution and Local Level Election Act 2017).

Despite legal requirements for gender equality in public affairs, women are still hesitant to entrust major responsibilities to other women. The representation of women at the local level is merely a product of legal compulsion rather than voluntary participation by parties. Article 38 (4) of the Constitution is critical to ensuring proportional representation of women in state agencies, regardless of gender. The Local Level Election Act, 2017 Art. 17(4) and 6(2) further enforce this mandatory representative system. Criticalism is an approach to social science that emphasizes the role of power and ideology in shaping social reality. The ontology of the critical theory paradigm is dialectical, the epistemology is critical, and the axiology is emancipatory. The methodology of criticalism is critical, using methods such as critical discourse analysis and critical policy analysis.

The Constitution guarantees the participation of women at every level at 33 percent. However, the Local Election Act of 2073 has gone a step further by ensuring 36.71 percent female participation at the local level. This Act has not only ensured the inclusive representation of women but also Dalits and minorities in local government. To ensure the representation of women at the local level, the nomination papers must include 50 percent female candidates for the positions of president and vice president, chief and deputy chief, and chief and deputy chief of the district coordination committee, as stipulated in Section 17(4) of the Local Elections Act of 2073. The ward level must have two female members, as per Section 6(2) of the same Act. Additionally, female candidates receive a 50 percent discount on the security deposit, as provided in Section 62(2).

Postmodernism has been criticized for being too relativistic and ignoring the importance of objective knowledge (Aldawod & Day, 2017). Additionally, some scholars argue that postmodernism can be too unconvinced and distrustful, ignoring the potential for social change and improvement (Atkinson, 2002), and ignoring the traditional apprehension of philosophy (Nath, 2014).

Table 3

Total Voters in Nepal and their Female Proportion in Seven Provinces, 2022

<i>Provinces</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>Women(n)</i>	<i>Women (%)</i>
<i>Koshi</i>	<i>3347384</i>	<i>1647561</i>	<i>9.29</i>
<i>Madhes</i>	<i>3331170</i>	<i>1533158</i>	<i>8.64</i>
<i>Bagmati</i>	<i>3412869</i>	<i>1707942</i>	<i>9.63</i>
<i>Gandaki</i>	<i>1789411</i>	<i>924948</i>	<i>5.21</i>
<i>Lumbini</i>	<i>3219457</i>	<i>1601352</i>	<i>9.62</i>
<i>Karnali</i>	<i>1001282</i>	<i>495099</i>	<i>2.79</i>
<i>Sudurpacchim</i>	<i>1632150</i>	<i>831470</i>	<i>4.68</i>
<i>Nepal</i>	<i>17733723</i>	<i>8741530</i>	<i>49.29</i>

Source: Compiled from Election Results, 2022

Under Article 6 of the Local Level Election Act of 2017, an individual eligible to vote must be a Nepali citizen, at least 18 years old, and a permanent resident of the respective ward.

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Those who turned 18 on Baishakh 30, 2079 B.S., were granted eligibility to cast their votes. The election commission provided 10,756 polling stations and 21,955 polling booths for the election, which filled 35,221 local legislative and executive seats. 145,010 candidates contested the election. The National Election Commission recorded a voter turnout of 70.96%, indicating significant participation in the election by the people (EC, 2022).

Even though the Constitution guarantees equal representation, the number of female candidates for the 2022 local elections falls short in practice. According to the Election Commission, out of 8,291 party-wise nominations for chief/deputy chief and chairman/vice chairman, only 3,420 are female candidates, which amounts to just 41 percent. In all 753 local levels, 152455 positions have been given candidacy by both men and women. Of these, women alone nominated 57705 candidacies, which is only about 38 percent of the total candidacy. Additionally, there are only 375 female candidates (12 percent) out of 3,200 candidates in independent candidature. Although the alliance has increased the participation of women in the chief/deputy chief and president/vice president positions by 50 percent, the total number of female candidates is still around 39 percent, which is the same as the candidates in the 2074 local elections. Table 4 summarizes the candidate nominations, with special reference to women for different positions in the 2022 local elections.

Table 4

Candidate Nomination in the Local Elections 2022

Positions	Total	Women (N)	Women (%)
Mayor	3494	266	7.61
Chair	3387	198	5.84
Deputy mayor	2156	1549	71.84
Vice-chair	2401	1788	74.46
Ward chair	35255	1050	2.97
Women member	26448	26448	100
Dalit women member	23843	23843	100
Ward member	55471	2563	4.62
Nepal	152455	57705	37.85

Source: Compiled from Election Results, 2022

According to Section 17(4) of the Local Elections Act, at least 50% of the head or deputy head, chairman, or vice chairman positions of a party should be filled by women. However, this provision is not applicable in cases where only one candidate is nominated by the party, resulting in a decrease in the representation of women. This indicates that the parties have failed to uphold the constitutional spirit of women's reservation and have instead relied on legal provisions to promote women's participation.

According to the official record provided by the Election Commission (EC) in 2022, 79 political parties were registered and approved to participate in the local election. However, only 65 of those parties participated. The major political parties participated in their respective alliances, with the largest one being led by five ruling parties in the government. Table 5 summarizes the performance of each party, with the Nepali Congress winning the

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most seats, including 329 mayors, 301 deputy mayors, 2,658 chairpersons, and 10,442 ward members. The party received 3,956,193 votes, which is 34.25 percent of the casting vote. The Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist-UML) came in second with 206 mayors, 240 deputy mayors, 2,132 ward chairpersons, and 9,312 ward members. They received 3,811,602 votes, which is 33.03 percent of the casting vote. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) came in third with 1.5 million votes, which is 13.03 percent of the casting vote.

An interesting trend in this local election was that there was a little bit of deviation from the conventional vote banks of major political parties. Instead, an indication of attraction for the independent candidates and newly emerged parties who have raised pro-people agendas of development, service delivery, and anti-corruption. The independent candidates, who were not affiliated with or linked with any political party or bureaucratic organization, also showed a remarkable presence in the election. In the local election of 2079, independent politicians won 385 seats, including 13 Mayor/Chair, 4 Deputy Mayor/Chair, 136 Ward Chairs, and 232 Ward Members. They gathered 312,645 votes, which accounts for 2.71% of the total votes cast, as per the EC report of 2022. The following table shows the performance of political parties.

Table 5

Performance of the Political Parties and Independents in the Local Elections 2022

<i>Parties</i>	<i>Mayor/Chair</i>	<i>Deputy mayor/chair</i>	<i>Ward chair</i>	<i>Ward members</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Nepali Congress</i>	329	300	2,668	10,476	13,773
<i>CPN (UML)</i>	206	241	2,137	9,345	11,929
<i>CPN (Maoist Center)</i>	121	128	1,053	3,743	5,045
<i>People's Socialist Party, Nepal</i>	30	31	295	1,193	1,548
<i>CPN (United Socialists)</i>	20	23	190	754	987
<i>Other political parties</i>	20	16	165	685	886
<i>Independents</i>	13	4	137	232	385
<i>Total</i>	753	753	6,743	26,848	35,095

Source: Compiled from Election Results, 2022

Declining Trend of Women's Leadership

Despite the constitutional provision for proportional representation, the number of female leaders elected in the 2022 local elections is disappointing. The Election Commission reported that only 14466 (39.39%) of the representatives elected were women, including ward-level members. However, this number is inflated due to the mandatory rule of having two female (one Dalit) members in each ward. In addition, political parties running for chairman and vice chairman of the rural municipality and head and deputy head of the

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municipality are required to nominate a female candidate for one of the two positions. Nevertheless, there is still a low probability of women being elected through the open seats.

In the recently held local level election in Nepal, only 25 women out of a total of 753 local levels have been elected as leaders, which accounts for only 3.32 percent of the total leadership positions (EC, 2022). This is a slight increase of nearly 1 percent compared to the previous local elections held in 2017, where only 18 women were elected as leaders. Out of the 25 women leaders, 6 are from Koshi, 6 from Bagmati, 4 from Madhes, 3 from Gandaki, and 2 each from Lumbini, Karnali, and Sudurpacchim.

Leadership roles at the local level continue to be dominated by men, with a notable decrease in the number of women holding posts such as deputy mayor and vice chair. In 2022, only 226 women were elected as deputy mayors, compared to 276 in 2017. Similarly, in rural municipalities, the number of women elected as vice chairs decreased from 424 in 2017 to 335 in 2022. Table 6 provides a summary of the proportion of women in leadership positions across the country during both elections (EC 2022).

Table 6

Comparative Victory of Leadership Positions by Women in Local Elections 2017 and 2022

<i>Designation</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2022</i>
<i>Mayor/ Chair</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Deputy mayor/Vice-chair</i>	<i>700</i>	<i>568</i>
<i>Ward-chair</i>	<i>61</i>	<i>69</i>

Source: Compiled from Election Results, 2017 and 2022

As presented in Table 7, the results of the 2022 election reveal that 25 women have been elected as leaders at the local level. Out of these women, 10 are from UML, nine are from Congress, and four are from Maoist, and one each from the CPN (United Socialist) and Loktantrik Samajwadi Party. This is a significant increase from the previous 2017 elections, where only seven women became mayors and 13 won in their respective municipalities. In rural municipalities, 11 women held chairs in 2017, while the number increased to 12 in 2022. These numbers indicate a positive trend towards greater gender diversity in leadership positions.

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Table 7

Victory of Women Leadership from Different Political Parties in the Local Election 2022

Political parties	Metro	Sub-metro	Municipality	RM
CPN Maoist	1	-	-	3
CPN United Socialist	-	1	-	-
CPN UML	-	-	6	4
Nepali Congress	-	-	4	5
LoSaPa	-	-	1	-

Source: Compiled from Election Results, 2022

Dominance of Deputy Heads in the Leadership

In Nepal, there are 753 local levels, and in the recent election, women were elected as deputy heads and vice presidents at 568 of these. This is a decrease from 2017, when a total of 700 women had been elected to these positions. Despite there being seven more mayors and eight more ward chairs elected in 2022 than in 2017, the representation of women has gone down. Interestingly, women made up 93% of the candidates for the positions of deputy and vice chairpersons across all 753 local levels, but after the election, only 75% of these positions were occupied by them. However, this is not necessarily discouraging, as they will be responsible for executing judicial functions as head of the local judicial committee in their role as deputy. As stipulated by the Constitution (Part 17; Article 217).

A look at the provincial representation level: Koshi Province has elected 42 deputy chiefs, 59 vice presidents, and 5 female ward presidents. In the Madhes province, 68 deputy chiefs, 59 vice presidents, and 12 women have been elected as ward presidents. Women have also been elected as vice presidents in 40 rural municipalities, deputy heads in 29 municipalities, and 12 ward presidents in Bagmati province. In addition, 14 women have been elected as ward presidents in Gandaki province, along with 41 vice presidents and 21 deputy chiefs. Lumbini province has held elections for 30 deputy chiefs, 59 vice presidents, and 14 female ward presidents. In Karnali province, 18 deputy chiefs, 35 vice presidents, and 6 ward presidents have been elected as women. Similarly, there have been six women elected as ward presidents, 42 vice presidents, and 25 deputy chiefs in other provinces. Lastly, Far West has chosen 25 deputy chiefs, 42 vice presidents, and 6 female ward presidents in their recent election (EC, 2022).

Representation of Ward Levels

According to the Local Elections Act 2073, at least two women must be elected among the four members elected from each ward. This means that 6,743 female members should be elected in total. Unfortunately, there is evidence that Dalit women are not being represented in some wards. In the recent election, 6,620 Dalit women members were elected, but only 1.02% of ward chairs were women. In 2017, only 61 women won ward chairs, leaving 123 seats reserved for Dalit women members empty. One seat reserved for female members also

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remained vacant. Out of the 13,486 open ward member seats, only 442 women were elected. The Election Commission stated that 58 women in Koshi, 91 in Madhes, 64 in Bagmati, 54 in Gandaki, 60 in Lumbini, 67 in Karnali, and 48 in Sudurpaschim won open member slots. More needs to be done to ensure equal representation of women and Dalit women in local government.

Gender Construction in Representation

According to the National Housing and Population Report 2021, the total population of Nepal is 29,164,578, of which 14,291,311 are males (48.9%) and 14,901,169 are females (51.1%). Likewise, the sex ratio reflects that 95.95 males are born per 100 females (CBS, 2023). Despite this demographic dominance of women, the socio-cultural and economic power structure is favourable for men. Male dominance is structured and built up along with the patriarchal system of society. In consequence, they dominate political parties and always want to stake their claim when it comes to power positions. As discussed earlier, due to the coalition, the representation has been even lower where the political parties did not follow the constitutional provision of gender-even nomination in the local elections. Indeed, when the number of female candidates was low, the representation going down was normal. Moreover, political parties used a loophole in the constitutional provision that is not clear about the inclusive criteria for the nomination of candidates by the allied parties. This seems to be one of the areas for constitutional amendment in the days to come. Either way, the Election Act could also address this issue, though political will is the most important factor in this reform.

It is heartening to see an increase in the number of female leaders in local governments. However, this is just a preliminary reflection and is not yet structurally ingrained in the political economy of society at large. Although many women elected as deputy candidates have the necessary experience and commitment to assume leadership roles as chairs and mayors of local governments, it is evident that not many women put their names forward for leadership positions during the election. The reason behind this is that women have different obligations to their families and the mother party. Political parties and their mainstream leadership have not given women enough space in influential party positions or leadership electoral posts, which is unfortunate. Additionally, the alliance between the Nepali Congress, Maoist Centre, CPN-Unified Socialist, JSPN, and Rashtriya Janamorcha has prevented many women from contesting the election.

It is important to acknowledge that women are just as capable as men in terms of abilities and performance. Through the first tenure of the previous local election (2017–2022), it became clear that women's leadership could play a vital role in the development of society. The historic role played by women as deputy heads of the judiciary committee is commendable, but it's crucial to provide them with specific training and skill development in this regard. Unfortunately, in most of the palikas, the discourse has been created that the deputy chair position is created only for women, and the women who sit in these chairs are just mere 'supporters and assistants' of the heads of the local levels, who are mostly male. This is a gender construction of social and political leadership that needs to be addressed. It is important to note that women also hold a distinct place and importance in our Hindu

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society. Hindu scriptures provide several instances of gods and goddesses using their divine authority to defeat demons for the benefit of the gods and the entire human race during the Vedic period and post-Vedic era too. (Bose, 2010; Goswami, 2021).

Gender studies and feminist research are crucial in recognizing women's contributions to society. Garfield et al. (2019) argue that women have played significant leadership roles in-group decision-making, owned property, and serving as chiefs when they were more qualified than the available male candidates. Similarly, Hessami and da Fonseca (2020) note that female political representation has come a long way through the appointment of female leaders who are more likely to understand and address the issues affecting women and therefore more likely to win elections. Furthermore, Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala (2022) conducted a comparative study of women leaders in politics and business, evaluating their achievements and real-life impact. They confirmed that political leadership remains supreme, as demonstrated by the power wielded by female leaders.

Issues and Challenges

The patriarchal mindset is evident in the way different committees of political parties and their allied factions are structured. Even though women's participation in politics is increasing and becoming more daring in Nepali society, mainstream leadership tends to reserve positions of power and authority for men. This has a significant impact on women's candidature and chances of winning elections. These challenges are multifaceted, encompassing social, cultural, psychological, economic, and political factors that are deeply rooted in social norms. In particular, these factors can be analyzed across four dimensions.

The Gender Factor Is Critical in Leadership

It has been argued that women face more difficulties in winning elections when competing against male candidates. This is due to various reasons, including psychological factors, such as the inferiority complex that society attributes to women, and sociocultural factors, such as the belief that women are not capable of doing things that men can do. Some experts also suggest that women are not as interested in running for elections as men (Kanthak & Woon, 2015). Women have less representation in household leadership roles and a lower power hierarchy in major decisions. This has led to a belief that they cannot lead their community or ward, which extends to rural and municipal regions.

Economic Class of the Leadership

The monetary value and income status of the candidates play a significant role in determining the outcome of an election. Those who invest heavily in various activities and campaign for the election have a higher chance of winning. The candidate who has more money and property is typically seen as the winner of the election. However, the commercialization of the electoral system is not compatible with the socio-cultural and economic status of women in Nepali society. The electoral campaign requires many expenses and commodities, which can be a challenge for many people. Due to the money-centric nature of politics, male candidates often have an advantage as they have more access to, control over property rights, and are more likely to invest money.

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Elite Circulation and Domination

One of the challenges faced by women in leadership positions is elitist hegemony (Acharya et al., 2022). According to the elite theory, elites benefit in various ways based on their power structures and ruling regimes. In Nepali society, the elite status is determined by various factors such as one's personality, sexual orientation, caste or ethnic hierarchy, level of education, speech patterns, technical expertise, economic status, and public behavior. As it is a patriarchal society, the majority of elites are men, which means that the elite cycle is largely dominated by themselves or their relatives in some cases. Even though a few female elites may have access to the established elite circle of society, they tend to dominate the representation of other common women. Additionally, a woman's age, beauty, glamour, marital status, and educational qualifications can also influence her chances of success in elections.

Misappropriation of the Proportional Representation

Critics argue that party leaders and elites who misappropriate the reservations have sidetracked the objective of inclusivity in Nepali politics and proportional representation system intended for underprivileged groups, such as women. These measures were implemented to ensure that marginalized groups could actively participate in the political process, but some view them as a means to secure political power without any competition. As a result, political parties and powerful leaders have misused the reservation system, leading to its exploitation. The system needs to be re-evaluated to ensure that it serves its intended purpose of promoting inclusivity rather than being used as a means of securing power and influence.

Having electoral representation is crucial for women to achieve political leadership. It is important to connect the concept of women's political leadership with electoral representation. It is believed that a candidate's gender plays a role in voting behaviour based on gender affinity. This is applicable in both partisan and nonpartisan contexts. The election of women and youth has been a significant advancement in modern politics. However, in a culture where an androcentric view of the world guides most people, gender bias can be observed.

The outcome of the election implies that implementing the constitutional provision regarding equitable representation of women in all state agencies will be challenging. The Constitution emphasizes the importance of having more women in leadership and power. However, due to the long-standing history of centralized power in state systems, ensuring that the system is inclusive can be a tough task. In this scenario, women's leadership at the grassroots level in Nepal could prove to be advantageous. For effective outcomes, it must be paired with social justice, institutional support, policy reform, and capacity building.

Conclusion

Electoral representation is a prerequisite for the political leadership of women. It is theoretically important to link these two constructions. It is contended that a candidate's sex acts as a representational cue in voting behaviour based on gender affinity. It truly implies

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both partisan and nonpartisan settings. The emergence of women's leadership and youth leadership has been a critical departure in contemporary electoral politics. However, in a patriarchal society, most of the voters tend to utilize an androcentric worldview as a cue, and gender affinity effects could be visible.

According to the election's results, it appears that it will be challenging to carry out the constitutional provision that guarantees women the opportunity to participate in all state agencies based on proportionate inclusion. The constitutional framework makes it clear that political leadership is committed to promoting women's leadership and empowerment. Yet, the social structure, which has a long history and tradition of centralised authority in the state systems, may have found it challenging to put the constitutional system into the spirit of representation and inclusion. With this backdrop, women's leadership at the local level in Nepal could be a boon if it is coupled with social justice, capability development, institutional promotion, and policy reforms.

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