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Research

Challenges for Women in Political Spaces: Experiences of Former Woman Representatives of Local Government

Rekha Sapkota Dahal & Jiban Mani Poudel

Corresponding Author: ✉ jmpo483@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6383-4983>
RSD <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1028-3871>

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Abstract

In Nepal, the provision of inclusiveness in laws play a significant role to increase the women's participation in local government. In this context, this study explores the challenges to women's engagement in public space, in particular at local government in Nepal. This study is primarily based on indepth interview with 10 Former Women Local Government Representatives (FWLGRs). Findings reveal that women's experiences in local politics in Bagmati Province reflect broader global debates on gender participation in political and public spaces. Unlike to men, women in local politics face numerous challenges, including patriarchal attitudes, family obligations, economic barriers, gender-based violence, and caste-based discrimination which appear as breakers to them to participate in public space. These obstacles often limit their ability to secure significant roles in public space. Legal reforms have created unprecedented opportunities, but without addressing structural inequalities—patriarchy, caste discrimination, economic exclusion, and political violence—the meaningful participation and representation of women in political and public spaces remains general, thin and weak that need to be addressed.

Keywords: public space, gender, local government, structural barriers, representation

Introduction

Local government means local body of the government which deals local level executive, judicial and legislative works. Local Level Election Act 2017 has clearly stated that political parties fielding candidates for both Mayor and Deputy Mayor posts must include a female

candidate in both Municipality and Rural Municipality (GoN 2017a). In addition, among the five members of the ward, two quotas for female representative, one for Dalit community, and another for open. After the promulgation of the constitution in 2015, two local level elections were held in Nepal. In both elections, about 42% women were elected as government representative at local government in which majority were Deputy Mayor/Vice Chairperson and a few women were elected as Mayor/Chairperson, Ward Chair Person and ward member from competition with male (GoN 2017a).

In Nepal, there are 753 local level governments, which includes 460 Rural Municipality, 276 Municipality, 11 Sub-Metropolitan Cities and 6 Metropolitan Cities. Due to the mandatory of the Nepal's Local Level Election Act 2017, 700 women were elected in 2017 and 562 in 2022 as Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017 & 2022). Those figures were themselves historic events in Nepal's political history in terms of political representation of women in local government. However, women's representation in local government has slightly decreased in the second election due to political alliances among the political parties before the election.

Quota law appears as an effective mechanism for increasing women's substantive representation within parties and government (Weeks, 2018). Yadav (2023) notes that political quotas not only accelerate women's representation in politics, but also strengthen their position in society. Although, women in Nepal have been facing socio-cultural and economic barriers due to patriarchal rooted social structure (Agrawal, 1994; Prasain and Dhakal, 2025). Current barriers to women representatives in public space are also rooted in cultural and social norms. It creates numerous challenges for many women to balance household responsibilities with public duties (Manandhar, 2021). It is blamed that women lack confidence for standing in front of public space. Societal and cultural norms and values are responsible for it. Because society treats men and women differently (Bhasin, 2000). From the childhood, it is socialized that politics is a man's world rather than woman (Gidengil et al., 2010). The political gender role socialisation also poses a significant barrier to women to encourage them to participate in public and political spheres in the same way as their male counterparts (Norris and Inglehart, 2001; Fox and Lawless 2011, Bos et al., 2022). Bourdieu (1977) calls it 'habitus'.

In Nepal, women's participation in public and political spheres is a complex phenomenon that intersects with household dynamics and patriarchal guided societal norms, values and institutions (Chhetri, 1999; Poudel, 2013; Uprety et al., 2020; Pokharel and Pradhan, 2020; Sapkota, 2024). Unlike to men, women in local politics face numerous challenges, including patriarchal attitudes, family obligations, economic barriers, gender-based violence, and caste-based discrimination. Moreover, the social position of women is neither the same nor they are homogenous group. They might have faced challenges differently as per their social locations such as caste/ethnic backgrounds, family background, economic status, marital status and so on. These obstacles often limit their ability to secure significant roles and sustain their political engagement as well differently. Despite these obstacles, women's engagement in public space

including politics has been gradually increasing due to legal provision. In this background, this study explores lived experiences of former woman local government representatives (FWLGRs) in public and political spheres. Moreover, this study can contribute to our knowledge of the inequalities and differences experienced by FWLGRs in public spheres - a topic that has been paid a little attention and understudied. Moving beyond the notion of women as a homogenous group, it documents the diverse experiences of FWLGRs in public and political spheres which still remains under-investigated subject.

Methods and Materials

Fieldwork was carried out by Rekha, the principal author (PA), at five local governments, including three municipalities and two rural municipalities of three districts (Sindhupalchok, Kavrepalanchok and Kathmandu) of Bagmati Province which were selected purposively. While selecting the municipalities, caste/ethnic backgrounds, women's representation and geographical location were considered. This study was based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data were collected through different published and unpublished sources like journals, books, and government and non-government reports.

PA used in-depth interview, observation and case study to collect primary information. However, this study was based on intensive interview with 10 informants including four deputy mayor and vice-chairperson, and six were ward members. Out of six ward members, two were Dalits. By political party, three were from Nepali Congress (NC), six from Nepal Communist Party (UML) and one from Nepal Communist Party (Maoist). Similarly, four informants were from Bahun, three were Janajati, two were Dalits and one was Chhetri.

PA did interview with the informants in Nepali language and recorded them in recorder with their permission. After collection of the data, data were interpreted in a qualitative manner. Before presenting the data, PA noted down the interview with taking consent with information. Both noted information and recorded information were transcribed in later. The transcribed data were categorized thematically into different headings and sub-headings as per the research objectives. Then, they presented in the text and the data were descriptively presented. After presenting the data, they were interpreted logically.

Women's Representation in Local Government in Nepal: An Overview

In 1997, very few women were elected to local institution executive positions in Nepal. There were only 289 female ward chairpersons elected (Pradhan, 2009). None of a woman elected as mayor, deputy-mayor, chairperson and vice-chairperson or District Development Committee (DDC) chairperson. Only one woman was elected as vice-chairperson of DDC. Among 26 women contested for DDC membership, only 8 were elected. This indicates that beside grassroots level, there has been only marginal improvement in women's representation in elected institutions (Election Commission 2001, cited in Pradhan, 2009).

Nepal declared the republic state in 2008. The Constitutional Assembly Election of 2008 was a milestone for women's representation in public and political life. The first local government

election was held in 2017 for 753 local bodies, including 460 Rural Municipalities (Gaupalikas), 276 Municipalities (Nagarpalika), 11 sub-metropolitan cities and 6 metropolitan cities as well as their 6,742 constituent wards. A total of 35,043 locally elected representative entered in local government from different parties. Of these, 293 were women Mayor/ Deputy Mayors in municipalities, 460 were women chairperson/vice-chairperson in rural municipalities and 13,310 were women ward committee members, including Dalit women (on in each ward) throughout the country (Election Commission of Nepal, 2017; Pokharel and Pradhan, 2020). Most political parties gave ticket to males for Mayor/Chairperson positions, relegating female candidates to the Deputy Mayor/Vice-chairperson contest. By law, at the least one of the two candidates had to be female. As a result, 92 percent of vice-chairperson and 94 percent of Deputy mayor were elected from women, less than one percent of ward chairperson were women. By caste and ethnic composition, over 44 percent women come from the Hill Brahmin or hill Chhetri groups (Pokharel and Pradhan, 2020). In Nepal, the second local election held in 2022, in which 74.4 percent women were elected as deputy mayor or vice-chairperson and 3.3 percent as mayor or chair-person of palika.

If we look at the figures of elected women in different positions at local government in two different times (see Table 1), we can see a positive sign in women's leadership development and leadership transformation in Nepali politics. For instance, in the 2017 election, 18 women were elected to the position of mayors/vice-chairpersons but the number was 25 in 2022. Similarly, 700 women were elected to the position of deputy mayors/vice-chairpersons in 2017, whereas only 562 were elected as vice chairperson in 2022. Similarly, in 2017, 61 people were elected as ward chairperson, and the number increased to 69 in 2022. The women elected figures in two local elections reflect that the number of woman mayor, chairperson and ward-chairperson has slightly increased, but the representation of women in the positions of deputy mayor and vice-chairperson has declined significantly. This decline is largely the results of political alliances formed during the elections, in which one party was allocated the candidacy for mayor or chairperson, while the other allocated deputy mayor or vice-chairperson. The political parties misused the loophole of the law, as a result of which women became victims of the political alliances. This reflects the persistence of a patriarchy value system that resists recognizing woman in primary leadership roles in the public sphere, including the local government.

Table 1: *Elected women in local government in 2017 & 2022*

Position	Number in 2017		Number 2022		Differences
	No	%	No	%	
Mayor	7	2.4	13	4.4	+6
Deputy Mayor	276	94.2	227	77.4	-49
Chairperson	11	2.4	12	2.60	+1
Vice-chairperson	424	92.2	335	72.8	-89
Ward Members	61	0.9	69	1.02	+8
Ward members (open)	264	2.0	440	3.2	+178

Source: Nepal Election Commission, 2017 & 2022

Challenges faced by Women in Local Politics in Nepal

Household's Responsibility

In Nepali society, women and men have different roles and responsibilities at household. Women are more responsible towards the family members that hinder them to actively participate in the politics. J. Parajuli, a FGWR, shared her experiences like this;

I wanted to become a Mayor and even claimed the position, but the party did not give me the ticket for Mayor in the 2022 election. After the 2017 election, I got married and gave birth to my daughter. The birth of the daughter added more broaden upon me. My responsibility towards the family has also increased. Thereafter, I could not actively participate in politics.

Another FGWR, P. Pande, also had the same experience. According to her:

I was elected as ward member in 2017. I wanted to be a candidate for deputy mayor in 2022. I was also deserved for the position too due to my long involvement in party politics and my good relation with the citizens. However, in the 2022 local election year, my daughter-in-law became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. The birth of my grand-daughter added household responsibilities for me, as I had to take care of her. Therefore, I did not show interest in being a candidate in the election. If I had been given the candidacy and elected, I would not have been able to take proper care of my granddaughter.

These narratives clearly state that many FWLGRs gave up the public space for the happiness of their families. Therefore, women had only one choice either to choose the public space or household happiness. Most of them chose the second one instead of the first one. For instance, S. Karki also had a different experience. She said,

I have mother age of 92. When I was elected as the government representative, my husband would care her. However, my husband passed away at the end of my tenure. At that time, I had six members in my family such as my mother, son, daughter-in-law, two grandchildren and me. Both my son and daughter-in-law worked at office. They did not give time to look over the family, especially my old mother. At the family, a member was needed to take care of my old mother and small grandchildren. My mother doesn't stay without me an hour.

When I (PA) was doing informal conversation, her mother called her in mobile phone and said to her to come soon at home. She also invited me (PA) to visit her home by saying "*Tapai panimeroxorisangiaaunushammrogharmakhajakhayarjanuhola*". (You also come with my daughter to our home for snacks).

This is not a general conversation between mother and daughter, but a reality about the roles and responsibilities of rural woman. Indeed, women in rural society of Nepal respect senior and take care children in family. She wanted to be ward chairperson again but she suppressed her desire over the family's responsibilities, especially caring of old and children which are the main responsibilities of women in Nepali society.

When I (PA) was talking with the FGWR, some of the informants told me (PA) that marital life also affected them to continue the public life. After beginning the marital life, some of the FWLGRs were unable to continue to utilize their social space. L. Poudel shared how marriage increased her household responsibilities and confined her within the household. According to her:

I was unmarried when I was elected. In that time, I stayed at quarter nearby rural municipality office. I did not have to manage and care household responsibilities. Everything was done by my parents. I fully gave my time to social and official works. I got marriage after two years from election. After marriage, my daily routines changed a lot. I left quarter. I began to live in husband's house in Kathmandu. I had fulfilled all my household works. I woke up early in the morning and do all household works before going to the office. I also became pregnant and gave a birth of a son. It also added more responsibilities and duties. At the end of my tenure, I gave the birth of second son too. When, I claimed for Mayor, my party did not give me a ticket for the position. I thought I was married and mother of two small kids and could not give times to citizens and my party too.

L Poudel's narrative clearly states that marriage is not only a social tie between man and women in Nepali society, but it also adds more social responsibilities, especially household responsibilities to women. In fact, women are not free from household responsibilities. They are strongly tied with household responsibilities. They compelled themselves to limit in private space. As a result, they can't allocate their time to outside household activities including party politics, and not fully utilized public spaces.

Poor Network with the High Command

In 2022 election, five political parties decided to make alliance for the local election. The alliance might be good for the political parties for the securing the seats in the local governmental, but for the women, including FWLGR were not benefited. In the regard R. Baidher said,

I wanted to be chairperson in the ward. I requested my leaders for my candidacy for the position but they did not listen my words. They gave me a ticket for ward woman member. The ward-chairperson was allocated to another party.

I listened the same experiences that another informed faced. According to her,

I wanted to be a candidate of a ward member. Both carders and local citizen supported me but my neighbour, who was male, did not support me. He himself wanted to be a candidate for the position. Some neighbours also supported him. Then I did not claim for the position anymore."

In 2022 election, five political parties decided to make alliance for the local election. Several women became the victim of the party alliance for winning the seat. The alliance might be good for the political parties for the securing the seats in the local government, but for the women, including FWLGRs were not benefited. In party alliance in the local election, one party secure Mayor/Chairperson and another party claimed for Deputy Mayor/Vice Chairperson. In this case

both parties gave ticket to the male because the Local Government Operation Act 2017 clearly mentioned that one post is mandatory for women if a party wants to be engaged in the election process for both positions. In the informal conversation with informants, it was informed me that several FWLGR didn't get ticket due to party collision among parties. According to Election Commission Report, men were elected in 166 palika (local government) for the position of mayor/chairperson and deputy-mayor/vice-president which is 22.58%. This figure clearly indicates the victimization of woman by the political alliance among different parties.

Bias and Discrimination

Dalit FWLGRs had different experiences than other caste and ethnic groups. They were discriminated as being woman as well as Dalits. That means, both patriarchy and social structure to see Dalits had different in a society, including political sphere. In this regard, I. Bogati shared her experience like this,

I was a Dalit woman member as well as an executive member. While choosing candidates, women participated in the committee discussions. The party leader selected another Dalit woman as the candidate for the women's quota. I raised my hand to compete for the open women's quota. Some argued that Dalit women shouldn't be given opportunities in the open women's category. Five women, including me, competed for this quota. I stood firm and did not back down from my position.

The discussion went on for a long time, but I stayed resolute. I drew strength from my experience in social work as a member of the party committee. Unlike others, I actively participated in addressing people's problems. I managed household chores early in the morning and attended political events without my family knowing. Eventually, the party gave me the ticket for the open women's quota. However, I failed to win. Despite my loss, our party held a majority at the local level, I was given the opportunity to serve as an executive member. In 2022, I wanted to become a ward member, but the party did not give me a ticket. It might be my dual social backgrounds i.e., Dalit woman."

Some of the Dalit women also felt biased after the elected as the government representatives. Sunita, a Dalit FWLGR shared experience as follows;

I was just passed class six before elected as government representative. My parents did not send me to school in my early age. I joined school at the age of 10 years. I would work in wage labour for purchasing copies and pens. When I was in grade six, I got marriage. Then, I could not continue my school education. After election one ward member ignored me, "You are like a buffalo. You are Dalit and uneducated." Then I joined class six again and studying at class 12.

The quota system included in the law has positive outcome to Dalit women. They are able to participate in public space through participation in election. However, the public space is not the same for all. They felt discriminated by high caste people as being Dalits. This reflects the dual discrimination i.e., as being woman and as being Dalits.

Financial Constraint

In Nepal, women do not have access to resources as men (Agrawal, 1994). They cannot control upon their parental property, although the Civil Code Act 2017 law has made provision of equal rights for son and daughter upon parental property (GoN, 2017). Lack of access to resources or control over property as hindering women to participate in public space, particularly politics. Moreover, the economic status of candidates plays a significant role in determining the outcome of an election. This indicates that local election is very difficult for the poor people to participate in the election because it is really costly in Nepal. In 2017, one of my informants spent about 1.5 million Nepali rupees during the election, and one million in 2022. She was able to spend that money by selling out her land that she got from her parent inherently being the single child. Some informants told me that they donated money to their parties to get candidacy ticket. One of the informants told, "I donated four hundred thousand to party to get a ticket for candidacy." This indicates that Nepal's election is not access to the penniless person.

In my discussion with informants, it was informed me that those who invest a huge amount of money in election campaign have a higher chance of winning. This is called the commercialization of the electoral system, which is not compatible with the socio-cultural and economic status of women in Nepali society (Sapkota, 2024). 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. According to one informant,

The sole focus of political parties during elections is victory. A party's main criterion for evaluating whether a candidate is capable of winning is the amount of money they can spend. All parties assume that those with substantial financial resources, or the ability to mobilize funds, are more likely to succeed. Before the financial status, politically conscious woman and long-standing engagement in party activities remain in shadow.

In fact, political parties also trust to those who have sufficient money to spend in the election. Regarding it, an informant shared her experiences about her dialogue with party committee before the selection a candidate.

I was just 23 years in 2017 election. During that time, I would work in a non-government organization in my rural municipality. I knew the problems of citizens of my municipality. When the election was coming, I was also interested to be a candidate of vice-chairperson and talked with party committee. The party committee asked me about the fund that I could spend in the election. I replied them 'Yes'. But in a reality, I have only fifty thousand Nepali rupees. My party trusted me and gave the ticket for the position. I contacted with my friends who were living in abroad. They were ready to support me. My mother gave one lakh rupees. My friends also supported me. Later I elected for the position. (S. Tamang, former vice-chairperson)

All FWLGRs reported that they had to spend money during local elections, although the amount varied across individuals. However, the increasing demand of money for winning the local election is not compatible with the socio-cultural and economic status of women in

Nepali society. Such money-centric nature of politics, rich or money-holder candidates have an advantage in Nepali politics.

Health and Stress

In my conversations with the informants, they told me health is the most important factor to continue the politics for them. If they did not have good health, they would not provide good service to the citizen. Some informants are no more interested to continue the politics due to their bad health. For instance, I met S. Tamang, who shared how her bad health did not support to continue her politics. According to her,

I did not want to candidate at the local government anymore due to my bad health. I worked hard when I was elected as vice-chairperson in 2017. I was busy from morning to evening, even at night. I did not get time to eat or rest when the landslide occurred at Lidi on Jun 3, 2019. The landslide engulfed 35 houses. Many people were buried. I stayed there more than one month to provide the services to the citizen. I was in a great tension. I could not sleep tonight at all. I did not like to eat anymore. I got depression due to not eating and sleeping on time. Then, I became unwell. I went to hospital for check-up and a doctor told me that I had T.B. By showing her stain her neck, look at this! How unwell I am. My health cannot support me to work in public sphere anymore. When I was taking interview, I saw her eyes with full of tears.

The narrative highlights on how the demanding nature of political leadership can impact women's health. The stress, lack of rest, and irregular routines led to severe health problems, including depression and tuberculosis for S. Tamang. Health issues and the immense pressure of public roles can discourage women from further involvement in politics.

Gender – based violence

Physical, Sexual or psychological harm or suffering and directed against a woman in political life (Valverde,2011).When PA began to talk aboutgender-based violence among the informants, they felt hesitate to share it with PA in the beginning.Hesitation to speak itself a sign of gender-based violence is existed in a society. When PA promised them to hide their identity, then they were ready to share it with her. Some of FWLGRswere victimized at both household and public space. An informant shared how she was victimized by her husband after elected as a government representative like this;

My husband was drunkard. I did not ask him while being a candidate at local government election, but I asked my children. I won election. Being a local government representative, sometimes I had to attend meetingsin ward office and party. Sometimes the meeting would be held in the early morning and sometime till late night. My husband did not like it at all. He would beat me by accusing me of being close to another boy.

Some FWLGRsfaced gender-based violence at public places from individuals and media. An unmarried FWLGRhad different experiences from the married FWLGR. She shared her experience like this,

When I was elected as government representative, I was unmarried. I did not face any kind of sexual violence at my house, but I suffered a lot when I entered in the public space. Many young unmarried boys would come in my office and teased me. They frequently said, “Oh! you are so beautiful. You have a good personality. I want to stay at your office for a long time. I like you. I love you so much.

Another FWLGRs shared her experience,

Social media harassed me. Some people sent me inappropriate messages in chats. A party leader once told me that if I became close to him, he would ensure a good position for me in the party. However, I ignored him, and now he refuses to speak to me.

These different experiences of FWLGRs faced highlighted that women faced gender-based violence differently in public space as well as private space as per their social backgrounds. Married and unmarried woman representatives have the victim of different kind of violence. This is not just a gender-based violence, but a reflection of how society perceive women either they have occupied public space. Women are still treated as object rather than subject. Thus, many women do not continue their political life.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight both the opportunities and the constraints that characterize women’s participation in local politics in Nepal. The significant increase in women’s representation following the constitutional provisions of 2015 demonstrates the transformative power of institutional reforms in broadening political inclusivity including the presence of women’s in public space. However, scholars argue, descriptive or numerical representation does not necessarily translate into substantive representation or gender-equitable outcomes (Chhetri 1999; Mansbridge, 1999; Poudel 2013). Women elected through quotas often remain confined to symbolic or secondary positions such as deputy mayors and ward members, while key executive roles such as mayors and chairpersons are still dominated by men (Pokharel & Pradhan, 2020; Sapkota, 2024). This reflects what Fraser (1997) calls the “politics of recognition without redistribution,” where visibility is granted but structural inequalities remain intact.

The experiences of FWLGRs reveal that the patriarchal order continues to exert a powerful influence over women’s political trajectories. Household responsibilities, marriage, and caregiving duties compelled many women to withdraw from political engagement, even when they had political aspirations and community support. The narratives underscore that for many women, private obligations outweighed public ambitions, reflecting the persistent relegation of women to the domestic sphere.

Another structural barrier identified in this study is the commercialization of electoral politics. Candidates with financial resources had greater chances of winning, while economically disadvantaged women—who often lack property ownership and independent wealth—were marginalized. This reflects the ‘capitalization of election’ in which money is more dominant than other capitals: social, political and cultural. This is shrinking the access of women in

public space which also aligns with Agarwal's (1994) argument that women's limited access to resources and land rights significantly constrains their participation in public life.

The mainstream gender analysis is to conceptualize women everywhere as a homogenous, subjugated group – 'the poorest of the poor' – irrespective of their location, their social classes or caste, their ages, their degrees of education or access to resources, their embeddedness in social networks, the numbers of dependents they support and so forth (Demetriades and Esplen, 2009). However, women are not homogenous group. Hence, narrative 'women in general' or a 'homogenous group' is not adequate to women's marginalization in public space, including their representation in local government. Dalits government representations are more marginalized as compared to non-Dalits women. Similarly, economically poor women are deprived than economically sound women. Women with small kids have more constraints to participate in public space than other women's whose children have already grown up. Married and unmarried women have also different social position within local government. This reflects that Crenshaw's (1991) framework of intersectionality is particularly useful here, as it reveals how structural inequalities operate simultaneously, marginalizing women in multiple ways.

Concluding Remarks

Women's experiences in local politics in Bagmati Province reflect broader global debates on gender and political representation. Unlike to men, women in local politics face numerous challenges, including patriarchal attitudes, family obligations, economic barriers, gender-based violence, and caste-based discrimination. These obstacles often limit them to participate in publicspace, including politics.

Women's engagement in public and political spaces shift their roles and responsibilities from the domestic domain to public domain. This is one of the milestones of transforming women's position in a society, although everyday practices in public and political spaces expresses that the patriarchal value system is still unwilling to see this transformation. Rather than hooking them up, it wants to keep them in the inferior position which is a characteristic of patriarchal value system. This is subjugated in the distribution of ticket for men and women of whichwomen are limited in inferior or assistant positions such as deputy mayor or vice-chairperson woman member and Dalit women member rather than mayor, chairperson and ward chairperson. Hence, legal reforms can create unprecedented opportunities to marginalized groups including women, but without addressing structural inequalities—patriarchy, caste discrimination, economic exclusion, and political violence—the meaningful participation and representation of women in political and public spaces remains fragile.

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