

## **Federalism and Gender Equality in Local Governance of Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** The adoption of the federal system through the 2015 Constitution of Nepal marked a pivotal shift in governance, decentralizing power to provincial and local levels. A key objective of this restructuring was to enhance inclusive governance, particularly through constitutional mandates (Article 38) and electoral quotas designed to boost women's political participation. While these provisions have led to a significant increase in the numerical representation of women in local government, achieving substantive and meaningful participation remains a critical challenge.

**Objective:** This study aims to examine the status of women's representation in Nepal's 2022 local elections, using the 2017 elections as a baseline, to assess the impact of federalism on gender equality in local governance.

**Methods:** The research employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, grounded in pragmatist philosophy. It integrated quantitative data from the Election Commission of Nepal on the 2017 and 2022 local elections with a qualitative review of existing literature, policies, and scholarly analyses. The theoretical framework was guided by Feminist Theory, to analyze patriarchal power structures, and Decentralization Theory, to evaluate the devolution of power.

**Findings:** The study confirms that legal quotas have successfully increased women's numerical representation, with women holding over 40% of local government positions in both election cycles. However, a severe disparity persists between numerical presence and substantive

power. Women remain overwhelmingly concentrated in secondary, mandated roles (e.g., Deputy Mayors, Vice-Chairpersons, and ward members), with minimal representation in executive leadership. Only 25 women were elected as Mayors or Chairpersons in 2022 (out of 753 possible positions). Furthermore, intersectional analysis reveals significant disparities among women: while Dalit women constitute 47.4% of female ward members due to specific quotas, their representation in higher offices is minimal, and women from Madhesi and Muslim communities are consistently underrepresented.

**Conclusion:** Federalism and its accompanying quota system have created essential institutional space for women's entry into local politics in Nepal. However, entrenched patriarchal norms, biased intra-party nomination processes, and a lack of institutional support continue to act as formidable barriers to substantive representation and leadership. The study concludes that achieving genuine gender equality requires moving beyond quotas to implement structural reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and a cultural shift to ensure women can exercise meaningful decision-making power across all levels of local governance.

**Implication:** The findings imply that Nepal's federal system must move beyond numerical quotas and implement targeted capacity-building and institutional reforms to ensure women's meaningful participation in local governance. Furthermore, policymakers must adopt intersectional approaches to address the unique barriers faced by women from marginalized communities like Dalits, Madhesis, and Muslims.

**Keywords:** federalism, gender equality, local governance, political practices, institutional reforms.

## **Introduction**

Federalism is a system of governance in which power is constitutionally divided between a central authority and sub-national units such as provinces, states, or regions. In a federal structure, both levels of government are autonomous in their respective spheres and derive authority directly from the constitution, ensuring a balance between unity and regional diversity. Federalism allows for the decentralization of political, administrative, and fiscal responsibilities, which can enhance democratic participation, local accountability, and responsiveness to the needs of diverse populations ([Anderson, 2008](#)).

[Watts \(2008\)](#) defines a political system characterized by a constitutionally guaranteed division of powers between at least two levels of government, each of which has final authority in some areas of policy-making. This means that in a federal system, both the central and sub-national governments (such as provinces or states) operate independently within their constitutionally assigned domains. Each level possesses its own legislative, executive, and fiscal powers that cannot be unilaterally altered by the other. The essence of federalism lies in balancing unity with regional autonomy, allowing diverse groups to coexist within a single political framework while maintaining their distinct identities and decision-making authority. [Elazar \(1987\)](#) also emphasizes the cooperative nature of federalism, noting that it fosters a partnership between different levels of government through shared rule and self-rule. He argues that federalism promotes a sense of shared governance while maintaining the political integrity of diverse

communities. The federalism in Nepal through the 2015 Constitution marked a pivotal restructuring of political power, decentralizing governance into federal, provincial, and local levels. This transition created new opportunities and frameworks for enhancing gender equality, particularly within local governance structures ([Lawoti, 2019](#)).

Federalism in Nepal, introduced by the 2015 Constitution, has played a significant role in promoting women's political participation by decentralizing power and mandating inclusive representation at all levels of government ([Pandey, 2025](#)). Through legal provisions such as gender quotas, especially at the local level, federalism has enabled a substantial increase in the number of women elected to public office, particularly as ward members, vice-chairpersons, and deputy mayors. While these measures have improved women's visibility in governance, challenges remain in achieving substantive participation, especially in executive positions like mayors and chairpersons. Structural barriers such as patriarchal norms, political gatekeeping, and limited access to leadership opportunities still hinder women's full and meaningful engagement. Nonetheless, federalism has laid a foundational framework for advancing gender equality by creating space for local-level empowerment and more inclusive decision-making processes across Nepal's diverse regions ([Guragain, 2024](#)).

Scholars have emphasized that federalism has allowed for broader participation of women in decision-making through constitutionally mandated quotas. Article 38 of the Constitution ensures the right to proportional inclusion of women, and the Local Level Election Act (2017) mandates that each ward must include at least a woman member, and either the chairperson or vice-chairperson must be a woman ([UN Women, 2019](#)). This legal reform has significantly increased women's numerical representation in local governments, with women now holding over 41% of local government positions ([Election Commission Nepal, 2022](#)).

Despite formal inclusion, existing literature highlights persistent challenges in achieving substantive gender equality. Research by [Tamang \(2018\)](#) and [Sharma \(2020\)](#) demonstrates that many women elected to local government bodies often lack meaningful decision-making power and continue to confront entrenched patriarchal norms, insufficient capacity-building opportunities, and symbolic representation. Furthermore, while federalism and the devolution of authority were intended to promote inclusive governance, they have not consistently resulted in genuine empowerment for marginalized groups, particularly Dalit and indigenous women ([ADB, 2020](#)). Civil society and donor-led programs have attempted to bridge this gap through leadership training, legal literacy, and advocacy. Yet, the long-term effectiveness of these interventions remains underexplored ([CARE Nepal, 2021](#)). Overall, while federalism has created institutional space for women in governance, structural and cultural transformations are necessary to achieve genuine gender equality at the local level.

### **Research Objective**

The main objective of this study is to examine women's representation in the 2022 local elections, based on their participation in the 2017 elections after Nepal adopted the 2015 Constitution.

### **Research Gap**

While existing literature offers rich insights into women's political participation in Nepal, several gaps remain. Studies emphasize legal quotas and constitutional provisions ([Dhungana, 2020](#); [UN Women, 2021](#)); however, there is a limited empirical investigation into how informal institutions, such as party culture and social norms, interact with formal structures to shape actual decision-making power. Moreover, although feminist institutionalism provides a strong analytical lens, few studies apply it systematically across Nepal's federal tiers. Intersectional challenges faced by women from marginalized castes and ethnic groups are acknowledged ([Tamang, 2009](#)), but often not thoroughly examined in governance contexts. Lastly, while decentralization theory highlights potential for local empowerment, the absence of gender-sensitive institutional capacity and data on post-quota leadership performance indicates a pressing need for further research on the quality, not just quantity, of women's political engagement.

### **Research Significance**

This research is significant as it explores how Nepal's federal restructuring has impacted gender equality in local governance. By analyzing both formal mechanisms (like legal quotas) and informal barriers, the study reveals the complexities behind women's political participation at the grassroots level. It contributes to understanding the effectiveness of federalism in promoting inclusive governance and highlights the need for gender-sensitive institutional reforms. The findings can inform policymakers, civil society, and development actors seeking to strengthen women's leadership, ensure substantive representation, and build more equitable and democratic local governance structures in federal Nepal.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

This research study was carried out under the following limitations:

1. Nepal's diverse cultures make it hard to generalize how federalism affects gender equality, as local norms vary.
2. Lack of reliable gender-specific data at the local level limits clear analysis and policymaking.
3. Political instability and changing priorities disrupt long-term evaluation of gender-related federal reforms.
4. This study is limited to examining women's political representation in Nepal's local governance under the federal system, using an explanatory sequential research design grounded in pragmatist philosophy.

### **Literature Review**

Literature review embraces both theoretical and empirical studies.

#### **Theoretical Review**

Feminist theory serves as one of the most pertinent and comprehensive frameworks for analyzing women's participation in politics. Rooted in a critique of patriarchal power structures, this theoretical approach foregrounds the systemic and structural inequalities that contribute to the marginalization of women within political institutions ([Waylen, 1994](#); [Phillips, 1995](#)). It posits that political domains have historically been male-dominated, and the persistent

underrepresentation of women is a consequence of deeply embedded social, cultural, and institutional barriers. Feminist theory enables scholars to critically examine how gendered norms and expectations shape access to political power and decision-making roles ([Celis et al., 2008](#)). It also draws attention to how institutional arrangements, electoral systems, media portrayals, and socio-political discourses reinforce male privilege and perpetuate gender disparities ([Lovenduski, 2005](#)). Furthermore, feminist analysis underscores the intersectionality of gender with other axes of stratification, such as class, caste, and ethnicity, offering a nuanced understanding of the barriers women face. This theoretical lens is thus essential for advancing inclusive and transformative political reform.

Decentralization theory is equally vital for analyzing gender equality within Nepal's federal system, which is premised on devolving power and resources to local governments. The theory posits that transferring authority closer to citizens can expand democratic participation and responsiveness ([Ribot, 2002](#)). In Nepal, federalism has created opportunities for greater women's engagement at the local level, particularly through mandated positions in ward committees and local councils. However, decentralization does not automatically guarantee empowerment unless supported by gender-sensitive institutional frameworks and capacity-building measures. Persistent disparities in access to information, resources, and political networks can undermine women's effectiveness in decision-making roles ([Manor, 1999](#)). Therefore, decentralization theory, when combined with a gendered analysis, offers valuable insight into both the potential and limitations of federal restructuring for advancing women's political agency.

This study seeks to analyze women's representation in the 2022 local elections through the theoretical lenses of Feminist Theory and Decentralization Theory, with the 2017 elections serving as a reference point following the promulgation of Nepal's 2015 Constitution. Feminist Theory offers a framework for examining how gender norms, structural inequalities, and patriarchal power dynamics have shaped women's political participation and leadership opportunities, while also assessing whether constitutional provisions have effectively addressed these systemic barriers. Complementarily, Decentralization Theory underscores the devolution of power and resources to local governments as a means to promote inclusion and participatory democracy. Integrating these perspectives, the analysis investigates whether federal decentralization has created substantive opportunities for women's agency or merely ensured numerical representation, thereby providing critical insights into both the achievements and ongoing challenges of fostering gender-inclusive governance in Nepal's evolving political context.

### **Empirical Literature Review**

[Shakti \(1995\)](#) conducted one of the earliest empirical studies on the socio-economic and political status of women in Nepal, covering the period between 1981 and 1993. The study, based on a sample of 500 respondents from Kathmandu Valley and surrounding districts, employed a descriptive research design using frequency distribution to analyze women's access to education, employment, and political participation. Findings revealed that less than 20 percent of women had access to formal education and fewer than 10 percent were politically



active, highlighting structural barriers created by patriarchal norms and state neglect. This study provides a foundational baseline for subsequent feminist scholarship in Nepal.

[Tamang \(2009\)](#) provides an insightful analysis of the trajectory of Nepal's women's movement within the shifting socio-political contexts of the armed conflict (1996–2006) and the post-conflict peacebuilding period. The study employed a thematic research design, utilizing qualitative case studies and in-depth interviews with 60 women activists from Kathmandu, Rolpa, and Morang districts. Findings indicate that women's activism played a significant role in bringing gender issues into mainstream political agendas, yet nearly 65 percent of participants highlighted intra-movement tensions arising from class, caste, and ethnicity. These findings emphasize the importance of intersectional perspectives in understanding gender-based struggles and advancing inclusive democratic reforms ([Adhikari, 2023](#)).

[Giri \(2010\)](#) critically examined the structural and socio-cultural barriers that continue to shape women's political participation in Nepal. Employing a mixed-method research design, the study combined survey data from 400 respondents across five districts with key informant interviews, ensuring both breadth and depth of analysis. The findings revealed that although 33 percent of women respondents acknowledged that constitutional and legal quota provisions had enhanced their access to political institutions, more than 70 percent reported restricted influence in decision-making processes due to entrenched party politics and the prevalence of tokenistic practices. This research underscores the persistent gap between progressive constitutional reforms and their inadequate implementation, highlighting the need for structural changes to foster meaningful women's empowerment in politics.

[Dhungana \(2020\)](#) critically evaluated the effectiveness of electoral quotas within Nepal's federal governance framework, employing a comparative research design involving 250 female representatives at both local and provincial levels. The study utilized percentage analysis to assess leadership positions held by women. Results indicated that while 42 percent of women entered political office through quota provisions, only 12 percent attained executive leadership roles, reflecting a significant disparity between representation and decision-making power. The findings demonstrate that numerical inclusion, although a milestone, does not guarantee substantive political participation. Dhungana emphasizes the necessity of deeper structural reforms and systematic capacity-building initiatives to ensure meaningful empowerment and leadership for women in Nepal's evolving democratic system.

[UN Women Nepal \(2021\)](#) carried out a comprehensive nationwide assessment encompassing all seven provinces, with a sample drawn from 753 local units. Utilizing quantitative surveys complemented by policy document analysis, the study applied descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage distribution, to examine women's political participation under the federal governance framework. The findings indicated that women now account for over 40 percent of elected representatives at the local level, yet fewer than 15 percent hold leadership or decision-making positions. This disparity highlights persistent structural and socio-cultural barriers, including entrenched patriarchal norms, inadequate institutional support mechanisms, and weak policy implementation, which continue to restrict substantive gender equality and women's political.

At the policy level, the Government of Nepal ([Budhathoki, 2025](#)) has advanced a comprehensive legal framework to strengthen women's rights and enhance political participation. Key measures include the Domestic Violence (Offense and Punishment) Act (2009), the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act (2014), the Compulsory and Free Education Act (2018), and the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act (2018). These legal provisions collectively address structural barriers while fostering opportunities for gender inclusion in governance. As a result, women's representation has risen to nearly 34 percent in the federal parliament and over 40 percent in local governance, signaling significant progress toward inclusive democracy and creating institutional pathways for meaningful women's political empowerment in Nepal.

### **Policy Review**

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has made significant strides in ensuring women's rights and representation through various provisions, particularly under Article 38, which guarantees fundamental rights for women. This article enshrines gender equality as a constitutional right and provides for women's reproductive health, property, and inheritance rights, and safe motherhood. It further ensures proportional inclusion of women in all state structures and endorses positive discrimination to support women in sectors such as education, health, employment, and social security. Additionally, it guarantees the right to compensation for victims of gender-based violence. To institutionalize these rights, the Constitution mandates reserved quotas for women in state bodies. At least 33% of seats in the federal legislature and provincial assemblies must be held by women, with proportional representation used to meet this threshold if necessary. At the local level, women must comprise approximately 40% of elected representatives, with each ward requiring at least one female member, and either the Mayor or Deputy Mayor (or Chair/Deputy Chair) must be a woman ([Government of Nepal, 2015](#)).

Furthermore, leadership roles are also made gender-inclusive. In both federal and provincial legislatures, either the Speaker or the Deputy Speaker must be female, and the Constitution mandates that the President and Vice-President be from different genders or communities, ensuring diversity at the highest levels of state leadership. To support these rights structurally, Articles 252 to 255 establish the National Women's Commission as a constitutional body. This commission is empowered to recommend gender-focused policies, monitor the implementation of women's rights laws and international commitments, and promote women's participation in state organs. It is also responsible for researching gender equality legal provisions, representing Nepal in international treaty reporting, and advocating for justice in cases of gender-based violence. Together, these provisions create a robust constitutional foundation for advancing gender equality and women's active participation in Nepal's political and social spheres ([Government of Nepal, 2015](#)).

### **Research Materials and Methods**

This study was grounded in Nepal's federal political system. Following the establishment of the republic, two rounds of local elections were held in Nepal. Within this context, the study reviews the first local election of 2017 and examined the status of women's representation in

various positions during the second local election held in 2022. The research adopted an explanatory sequential research design. Although both qualitative and quantitative data were utilized. This mixed-methods approach combines the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative techniques to offer a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of complex political phenomena. The study employed feminist and decentralization theories, along with a descriptive approach, which has proven more effective within the framework of pragmatism and the mixed-methods research design commonly used in political science. A review of relevant literature formed the theoretical foundation of this study. Key sources of information include data and reports from the two local elections conducted by the Election Commission of Nepal, as well as books, journals, and articles authored by various scholars. Given the intricacies of Nepal's political landscape, only a detailed, multidisciplinary analysis can yield a nuanced understanding. Such an approach contributes to evidence-based policymaking and political analysis, while also facilitating a deeper comprehension of the complex dimensions of politics. The discrete method is a systematic approach that analyzes data.

#### **Data Analysis and Presentation**

The adoption of the 2015 Constitution of Nepal marked a transformative moment for gender inclusion in politics, particularly at the local level. Article 38 of the Constitution ensures women's right to participation in all levels of the state, mandating proportional representation and inclusive governance structures ([Government of Nepal, 2015](#)). Following this constitutional shift, the 2017 local elections held after a 20-year gap witnessed a significant increase in women's participation, facilitated by mandatory electoral quotas. Under the Local Level Election Act 2017, political parties were required to field at least a woman candidate for mayor or deputy mayor, and for ward chair or member in each ward, ensuring women's entry into local governance ([Election Commission Nepal, 2017](#)). As a result, over 41% of elected local representatives in 2017 were women, many of them holding positions as ward members and deputy mayors ([UN Women, 2018](#)).

However, several studies highlight that despite numerical gains, women often remain in secondary roles, with limited decision-making power. [Paudel \(2019\)](#) observes that patriarchal norms, lack of political experience, and limited access to resources continue to hinder meaningful participation. Similarly, [Lama and Gurung \(2020\)](#) argue that many women leaders are token representatives, and their voices are frequently marginalized within party structures. The 2022 local elections sustained similar levels of female representation but revealed persistent challenges in promoting leadership roles such as mayors and chairpersons. Research by [The Asia Foundation \(2022\)](#) emphasizes the need for capacity-building, institutional support, and reform of intra-party mechanisms to ensure substantive, not just symbolic, participation.

#### **Major Executive Positions of Local Government**

The positions of Mayor and Chairperson within Nepal's local governance framework serve as central pillars of leadership in the country's federal system. Elected through democratic processes, these officials function as chief executives in municipalities and rural municipalities, respectively, with mandates that extend across administrative, developmental, and policy



domains. Their core responsibilities include local planning, budgeting, implementation of policies, oversight of service delivery, and fostering coordination with provincial and federal levels of government. These roles are instrumental in institutionalizing grassroots democracy and promoting inclusive governance by enabling participatory decision-making and ensuring community representation ([Shrestha, 2019](#)). However, the effectiveness of these offices is closely tied to institutional capacity, resource availability, and intergovernmental coordination ([Pandey, 2021](#)). To fully realize their transformative potential, sustained investment is required in capacity-building initiatives, leadership development, and structural reforms that enhance local autonomy and accountability ([Election Commission, 2022](#)).

#### **Mayor of Municipality**

Nepal comprises 6 metropolitan cities, 11 sub-metropolitan cities, and 276 municipalities. In administrative terms, these 293 units are collectively referred to as municipalities. An analysis of women's political representation at the executive level of local governance during the 2022 local elections reveals notable developments. Among the six metropolitan cities, Renu Kumari Dahal was re-elected for a second term in Bharatpur Metropolitan City, Chitwan district. Among the 11 sub-metropolitan cities, Mina Kumari Lama secured victory in Hetauda Sub-Metropolitan City of Makwanpur district, having received her party's nomination. However, women faced significant barriers in securing party nominations in other metropolitan and sub-metropolitan cities. Among the remaining 276 municipalities, only seven women were elected as mayors. In the 2017 local elections, apart from Bharatpur Metropolitan City, no female candidates won mayoral positions in any other metropolitan or sub-metropolitan cities (Election Commission, 2017, 2022).

#### **Chairperson of Rural Municipal**

Among Nepal's 460 Rural Municipalities, only 12 women secured the position of chief executive. In the 2017 local elections, merely 18 women were elected chairpersons, a figure that increased to 25 in 2022. Although the growth remains modest, this upward trend reflects a gradual yet significant step toward achieving gender equality in political leadership. Such progress underscores the impact of constitutional and policy measures aimed at promoting women's representation, while also highlighting the persistent structural and sociocultural barriers that continue to limit women's access to decision-making roles ([Election Commission, 2017, 2022](#)).

#### **Deputy Mayors and Vice-Chairpersons**

In Nepal's local government structure, the Deputy Mayor (in municipalities) and the Vice-Chairperson (in rural municipalities) serve as the second-highest elected officials. They support the Mayor or Chairperson in administrative responsibilities and often lead key bodies, including the Judicial Committee. These positions play a vital role in promoting accountability, ensuring gender inclusion, particularly since they are frequently reserved for women, and enhancing the effectiveness of local service delivery. Deputy Mayors and Vice-Chairpersons also contribute to policy formulation, local development planning, and coordination with stakeholders across different levels of government ([Election Commission, 2017, 2022](#)).

### **Situation of Deputy Mayors**

According to [Nepal's 2022 local election data](#), 233 women were elected as Deputy Mayors across 293 municipalities, reflecting significant female representation in local governance. Among these elected representatives, 102 were from the Khas Arya community, 48 from Indigenous nationalities, 44 from Madhesi castes, 26 from the Tharu group, 8 from the Muslim community, and only 5 from the Dalit community. This composition highlights both the progress in women's political inclusion and the persisting social disparities, as historically dominant groups continue to hold a higher share of leadership roles compared to marginalized communities, underscoring the need for sustained efforts toward equitable representation.

### **Vice-chairperson of Rural Municipal**

In Nepal's 460 rural municipalities, 335 women were elected as Vice-Chairpersons, marking notable female participation in local governance. Of these, 145 belonged to the Khas Arya community, 101 to Indigenous nationalities, 59 to Madhesi castes, 17 to the Tharu group, 7 to the Muslim community, and only 6 to the Dalit community. This distribution reflects ethnic and cultural diversity among elected women representatives while revealing disparities, as women from historically marginalized groups remain underrepresented. These findings underscore the importance of inclusive political participation and equitable representation in strengthening local governance and advancing gender-sensitive democratic practices ([Election Commission, 2017, 2022](#)).

### **Ward Chairpersons**

The research provides an insightful examination of the role and representation of women, particularly as Ward Chairpersons, within Nepal's local governance structure. It effectively outlines the responsibilities of a Ward Chairperson, emphasizing their significance in grassroots democracy, local development, and community representation. By contextualizing the ward within the broader framework of municipalities and rural municipalities, the article highlights the importance of this position in ensuring inclusive governance and effective service delivery. The discussion on administrative roles, budget management, dispute resolution, and coordination with municipal councils clearly demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the position.

In the 2022 local elections in Nepal, only 69 women were elected as ward chairpersons, accounting for just 1.02% of the total positions, a figure that reflects minimal progress since 2017, when 61 women held the same post. Although disaggregated caste or ethnic data for these chairpersons is unavailable, the overall composition of elected female ward members indicates notable diversity: 47% Dalit, 23% Khas-Arya, 20% Janajati, 8% Madhesi, and 1% Muslim. Additionally, 12 Dalit women were elected as rural municipality chairpersons, marking a step forward in leadership roles for marginalized communities. However, the continued underrepresentation of women in key executive positions and the lack of detailed caste-specific data at the ward chair level highlight persistent barriers to inclusive and equitable political participation ([Election Commission, 2017, 2022](#)).

### **Women Ward Members**

Among all female representatives elected at the ward women member level in Nepal's 2022 local elections, the caste and ethnic composition reflects notable disparities in political inclusion. Dalit women accounted for the largest proportion at 47.4%, followed by Khas-Arya women at 23.5%. Janajati women comprised 19.9% of the total, while Madhesi women represented 8%. Muslim women were the least represented, making up only 1.3% of elected female ward members. These figures highlight both the progress and the persistent gaps in inclusive political participation across caste and ethnic lines. While the reservation policy has facilitated greater Dalit representation, the underrepresentation of certain groups, such as Muslims and Madhesis, underscores the need for more targeted inclusion efforts in Nepal's local governance structures ([Election Commission, 2017, 2022](#)).

### **Dalit Women Ward Members**

Dalit women have emerged as a significant group within Nepal's local government structure, primarily due to the constitutional and legal provisions mandating their inclusion. The Local Level Election Act, 2017, requires that each ward elect four members, including at least two women, one of whom must be a Dalit. As a result, Dalit women's representation at the ward level increased substantially in both the 2017 and 2022 local elections. In 2017, around 6,567 Dalit women were elected as ward members out of approximately 13,600 total women ward members, accounting for nearly 48 percent of female ward representation. A similar pattern continued in 2022, with about 6,313 Dalit women elected under the same provision. While this quota system has been effective in enhancing numerical representation, most Dalit women remain confined to ward-level positions with limited influence over policy-making or executive decisions. Their presence in higher-level posts such as deputy mayors or chairpersons remains minimal, reflecting persistent barriers related to caste-based discrimination, socio-economic marginalization, and limited access to political networks. Although the quota has ensured visibility for Dalit women in local governance, their ability to exercise real power and engage meaningfully in leadership remains a critical challenge for achieving substantive inclusion ([Election Commission, 2017, 2022](#)).

### **Result Analysis**

The outcomes of Nepal's 2017 and 2022 local elections offer a complex picture of both progress and persistent challenges in the realm of women's political representation at the subnational level. The promulgation of the 2015 Constitution marked a critical turning point, introducing constitutional provisions for proportional representation and gender quotas aimed at fostering inclusive governance. As a result, women's numerical representation increased significantly, with women constituting over 41 percent of elected local officials in both electoral cycles. This notable achievement underscores the instrumental role of legal frameworks and affirmative action in enhancing gender inclusion within democratic institutions. Despite this quantitative success, deeper analysis reveals a continued disparity in the quality and level of representation afforded to women. Most female representatives remain concentrated in secondary positions, such as deputy mayors, vice-chairpersons, and ward members. In contrast, their presence in higher executive roles, specifically mayoral and chairperson posts, remains disproportionately

low. For instance, the 2022 local elections resulted in the election of only 25 women as mayors or chairpersons out of a total of 753 such positions across the country. This persistent underrepresentation reflects structural impediments, including entrenched patriarchal attitudes, gender-biased party nomination practices, and insufficient institutional support for female political aspirants, as emphasized in the works of [Paudel \(2019\)](#) and [Giri \(2010\)](#).

Disaggregated data on caste and ethnic composition reveal additional dimensions of exclusion within the broader landscape of women's political participation in Nepal. While Dalit women have notably benefited from reserved quotas, constituting approximately 47 percent of female ward members, other historically marginalized groups, such as Madhesi and Muslim women, continue to face systemic underrepresentation, especially in leadership roles. This disparity indicates that while affirmative action policies have been effective in achieving numerical gains, they have been less successful in ensuring substantive representation, where women wield genuine decision-making power and influence policy outcomes. The persistent concentration of women in subordinate, non-executive positions, coupled with the low presence of women from marginalized communities in key leadership posts, raises critical concerns about the depth and inclusiveness of the current political framework. Addressing these inequities necessitates a multidimensional approach involving structural, institutional, and normative reforms ([Adhikari, 2023](#)). Key strategies include reforming intra-party candidate selection processes to prioritize merit and diversity, enhancing institutional accountability mechanisms to monitor gender inclusion, and investing in sustained capacity-building and leadership development programs targeted toward women from all social groups. While the slight increase in the number of women elected to executive positions between 2017 and 2022 reflects a positive trend, it remains insufficient to drive transformative change. Achieving genuine gender parity in political leadership demands not only sustained policy interventions but also a broader cultural shift aimed at dismantling entrenched patriarchal norms ([Pokahrel, 2024](#)). Creating a political environment where women, irrespective of caste, ethnicity, or region, can access, exercise, and sustain meaningful authority is critical to realizing the ideals of inclusive, participatory, and democratic governance envisioned within Nepal's federal system.

## **Conclusion**

The data from Nepal's 2017 and 2022 local elections illustrate both remarkable progress and persistent challenges regarding women's political representation at the local level. The constitutional provisions and electoral quota system have enabled significant numerical gains, with women constituting over 41% of elected local representatives in 2017 and maintaining similar levels in 2022. However, these advances are primarily concentrated in deputy and member positions, with women often excluded from key executive roles such as mayors and chairpersons. The underrepresentation of women, especially in leadership positions, reflects enduring structural and sociocultural barriers, including patriarchal norms, intra-party biases, and a lack of institutional support. The data also show that while diversity among women representatives has improved, certain groups, notably Muslims and Madhesis, remain marginalized, signaling the need for more comprehensive inclusion strategies.

Moving forward, ensuring substantive participation of women in local governance requires more than just numerical inclusion; it demands creating an enabling environment where women can exercise real power and influence policy decisions. This includes investing in leadership training, reforming party nomination practices, and strengthening institutional mechanisms to support women leaders. The gradual increase in the number of women elected to mayor and chairperson positions between 2017 and 2022, though modest, indicates a positive trend toward gender equality in political leadership. Nevertheless, achieving genuine inclusive governance in Nepal will depend on sustained policy efforts to dismantle structural barriers and to foster a culture of equality and representation at all levels of local government.

### **Recommendations**

Based on this study, the following recommendations can be made to enhance women's participation at all levels of politics in the coming days:

1. Political parties in Nepal often prioritize male candidates under the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, and women's representation rarely exceeds 33 percent under proportional representation (PR), highlighting the need for systemic electoral reforms.
2. Opportunities for political participation are frequently limited to women with close access to party leaders, marginalizing those without such networks. Merit-based selection processes should ensure inclusivity and reflect the diversity of women across caste, class, and regional lines.
3. Civil society organizations and international development partners should invest in capacity-building initiatives for female candidates, including pre- and post-election training, mentorship, and advisory programs, to enhance leadership skills, political efficacy, and sustained engagement in governance.

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