



## **From Global Archives to Grassroots Mobilization: The Evolution of Feminist Movements in International and Nepali Contexts**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates how international women's movements have shaped women's political participation in Nepal, analyzing the complex interplay of gender, caste, ethnicity, and class. Spanning from the 1940s democratic movements to the post-2006 constitutional reforms, the research traces the development of feminist consciousness, legal frameworks, and grassroots activism in Nepal. While international instruments like CEDAW (1992) and domestic gender quotas (e.g., 33% representation in the Constituent Assembly) have formalized women's political inclusion, substantive equality remains elusive due to entrenched patriarchal norms, caste-based discrimination, and linguistic barriers. Employing qualitative methods—including archival research and policy analysis—the study demonstrates that despite increased institutional representation, Dalit, Janajati, and Madhesi women continue to face systemic marginalization. The findings highlight a critical disconnect between global feminist paradigms and Nepal's intersectional realities, calling for context-sensitive strategies that address overlapping oppressions. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to strengthen legal enforcement, amplify marginalized voices, and transform symbolic representation into meaningful political empowerment.

**Keywords:** Women's political participation, Nepal, international feminism, intersectionality, CEDAW, gender quotas, Dalit and Janajati women.

### **Introduction**

The late 1980s to the early 1990s marked the first significant period in which various movements became increasingly engaged in global processes through United Nations conference mechanisms (Bracke, 2023). During this phase, a holistic discourse emerged, seeking to address the intersecting challenges in women's lives (Sengupta et al., 2025). This



era also witnessed the conceptualization of sustainable development, broadening the definition of development beyond mere economic growth. The integration of environmental concerns into economic discourse created opportunities for incorporating feminist perspectives into discussions on economics, development, and rights.

The second period, spanning 1992 to 1999, unfolded alongside major UN conferences (Mele & Ongaro, 2014). This phase was characterized by sustained challenges to narrow economic interpretations of development, with a gradual shift toward a more expansive understanding of social justice concerns that ultimately questioned the foundations of sustainable development itself. As debates on gender and development progressed, attention increasingly shifted from purely economic issues to women's rights, health, violence, bodily autonomy, and sexual and reproductive rights.

The third period commenced in 1999, marked by mass protests in Seattle and elsewhere against the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and globalization. This phase saw declining confidence in the UN agenda, with growing skepticism toward the professionalization of women's movements within UN processes, particularly as neoliberal and neoconservative agendas gained dominance.

Globally, women's political participation remains limited in decision-making bodies, with only one in five parliamentary members being female and fewer than 10% of world leaders being women (Women's Political Participation, 2011). Nepal, a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural nation with 92 spoken languages and 101 caste and ethnic groups, faces persistent socio-cultural barriers such as gender discrimination, caste-based hierarchies, and religious norms that perpetuate human rights violations. Gendered roles, shaped by social and economic structures, have entrenched disparities between men and women in public and private spheres. While political representation is crucial for democratizing and engendering local governance, it has proven insufficient in ensuring effective female leadership. Elected women representatives (EWRs) continue to encounter institutional and social obstacles, including weak governance structures, inadequate accountability mechanisms, and resistance to decentralization. Social barriers such as limited education, institutionalized disrespect for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), gender-based violence, and entrenched patriarchal and caste hierarchies further restrict women's political agency. Traditional power structures remain male-dominated, marginalizing women's political engagement. Moreover, even when women participate in governance, their presence does not necessarily translate into advocacy for gender equity or broader social justice issues.

Historically, women's collective activism in Nepal emerged in the late 1940s alongside the pro-democracy movement. Early women's organizations functioned as auxiliary wings of political parties, often established by female relatives of male political leaders. These groups primarily mobilized women to support the democratic struggle against the Rana regime, advocating for a constitutional monarchy. Simultaneously, they campaigned for girls' education, the abolition of child marriage and polygamy, widow remarriage rights, and equal political participation for women. Among the key achievements of pre-1951 women's activism were securing voting



rights for women and the establishment of two girls' schools in Kathmandu—one public and one private (Acharya, 1994).

In the post 1951 period until 1960, as the political movement split into several strands, women's movement also divided in several organizations. Nevertheless, they were able to come together on women's issues and fought together for rights to be included in the political decision making process and be represented in the Advisory Assembly formed by the King in 1954. As a consequence, the Assembly of 113 members had four women representatives (Acharya, 1994).

### **Statement of the Problem**

This period is significant for the expansion of feminist consciousness in Nepal. Prior to 1991, the women's movement was predominantly oriented toward the broader struggle for democracy, with demands for women's liberation occupying a secondary role. While all political factions—ranging from democratic to leftist—advocated for reforms benefiting women, their approaches differed substantially. The democratic stream sought incremental changes within the existing socio-political framework, whereas the leftist factions argued that true women's liberation could only be achieved through a socialist or communist revolution. During this time, feminism as an independent ideological framework was largely dismissed as irrelevant to Nepal's context.

However, the restoration of democracy in 1991 marked a shift in this discourse. Although many women leaders, including those within leftist circles, still refrain from identifying as feminists, they have increasingly adopted feminist agendas—most notably in the demand for equal property rights. This raises the question: what has fundamentally changed?

The governments between 1991 and 2005 adopted more progressive policies compared to the Panchayat era. Notably, Nepal ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1992 without reservations. Successive five-year plans introduced various development programs targeting women, emphasizing gender equality, empowerment, and gender mainstreaming in sectors such as agriculture, local development, rural infrastructure, and drinking water. However, beyond literacy campaigns, primary education enrollment drives, and microcredit initiatives for poverty alleviation, substantive progress toward gender equality remained largely rhetorical.

In contrast, the non-governmental sector witnessed dynamic activism. Gender researchers, NGOs, academic institutions, media professionals, and women's organizations affiliated with both leftist and liberal political parties sustained the struggle for gender equality through diverse initiatives. While politically aligned women's organizations continued mobilizing women in service of their respective ideological agendas, their focus increasingly incorporated demands for structural reforms benefiting women. The proliferation of political parties led to a corresponding expansion of their affiliated women's wings, broadening their grassroots reach. With support from NGOs and the international women's movement, women within these organizations began engaging more critically with broader discourses on women's rights and gender equality, signaling an evolving feminist consciousness even in the absence of explicit feminist identification.



## **Objective**

The objective of the study is to find out the international women movement and its impact in Nepalese woman particular participant in the study area.

## **Review of Previous study**

Feminist theory posits that women's oppression is systemic, rooted in patriarchal structures that grant men disproportionate economic, social, and cultural power (Bryson, 2003). This power imbalance manifests in political exclusion, where women face barriers such as limited party support, financial constraints, and restrictive electoral systems (Shvedova, 2007). Gender, as a socially constructed hierarchy, reinforces these disparities by naturalizing divisions of labor and legitimizing male dominance (Connell, 2002; Acker, 2006). Radical feminists argue that patriarchy pervades all institutions, necessitating its dismantling (Lloyd, 2005), while liberal feminists seek equality within existing systems (Wincler, 2004).

In Nepal, marginalized groups, including women, Dalits, and indigenous communities, have mobilized against systemic exclusion (Tamang, 2007). Despite state co-optation of women's development agendas (Tamang, 2002), movements like the Maoist-affiliated ANWA-R challenged gendered practices, though their efforts were often subordinated to class struggle (Thapa, 2003). Feminist standpoint theory underscores how marginalized perspectives reveal intersections of power, knowledge, and inequality (Arora, 2024). Thus, addressing gender oppression requires structural transformation alongside localized resistance.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze the impact of international women's movements on Nepalese women's political participation, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches. Primary data is collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with elected women representatives (EWRs), activists, and members of women's organizations across diverse social groups (Dalit, Janajati, Madhesi, Muslim). Secondary data is drawn from archival records, policy documents, UN reports, and scholarly literature on feminist movements and Nepalese gender politics. Thematic analysis is applied to assess evolving discourses in women's rights advocacy. An intersectional lens is used to examine how caste, ethnicity, and regional identities intersect with gender to shape political engagement. Legal and policy frameworks, including Nepal's constitutional provisions and CEDAW compliance, are analyzed through content analysis to evaluate institutional commitments to gender equality.

## **Historical Foundations of the International Women's Movement**

The international women's movement has deep historical roots, exemplified by the International Archives for the Women's Movement (IAV), founded in 1935 in Amsterdam by Dutch feminists Rosa Manus, Johanna Naber, and Willemijn Posthumus-van der Goot. Manus, a key figure in global feminist networks, contributed materials from activist Aletta Jacobs, while Naber documented women's history and Posthumus-van der Goot focused on labor issues. The archive flourished until World War II, when Nazi forces seized its collections in 1940, partly due to Manus' Jewish identity and feminist-pacifist activism. After the war, the



IAV remained dormant until the 1970s, when second-wave feminism revived interest in women's history, leading to renewed archival efforts supported by the Dutch government.

In Nepal, women's activism began in the 1940s as part of the broader democratic movement against the Rana regime. Early organizations, often linked to political parties, fought for girls' education, voting rights, and an end to child marriage. The post 1951 democratic period saw milestones like Nepal's first girls' schools, women in the Advisory Assembly (1954), and the first female minister (1959). However, during the Panchayat era (1960-1990), the state co-opted women's issues into national development programs, suppressing independent feminist organizing while promoting a homogenized vision of the "Nepali woman" as a subject of modernization.

The 1990s marked a turning point for Nepal's women's movement, as the return of democracy allowed feminist ideas to gain traction. Nepal ratified CEDAW in 1991 without reservations, and government policies began incorporating gender mainstreaming rhetoric. However, progress was uneven—while activists pushed for equal property rights and political representation, many leaders distanced themselves from the feminist label, particularly within leftist groups that prioritized class struggle over gender liberation. Despite institutional commitments, women's empowerment often remained confined to limited areas like microfinance and literacy, failing to address deeper structural inequalities.

Globally, feminist movements have evolved through distinct waves, from suffrage campaigns to intersectional activism. The IAV's history reflects this trajectory—founded during the interwar feminist wave, suppressed under fascism, and revitalized by second-wave feminism's focus on working-class women's histories. Similarly, Nepal's movement shifted from elite-led advocacy to broader grassroots mobilization, particularly after the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006), which brought rural women into political struggle. Yet, both contexts reveal tensions between top-down policy reforms and the need for transformative social change, highlighting the persistent gap between legal equality and lived realities.

Today, feminist movements worldwide continue confronting patriarchy, neoliberalism, and authoritarian backlash. The IAV's recovery of its looted archives in 2003 symbolizes resilience, while Nepal's post-war constitution (2015) enshrines gender quotas and progressive laws. Yet, challenges remain—global crises like climate change and rising conservatism disproportionately impact women, requiring transnational solidarity. The legacies of early activists like Manus and Nepal's feminist pioneers remind us that progress is neither linear nor guaranteed, demanding sustained advocacy to dismantle intersecting systems of oppression.

### **Representation of Women in Political, Civil, and Security Institutions in Nepal**

#### **Political Parties and Legislative Representation**

Women's participation in Nepal's political parties has seen gradual improvement, with their representation in central committees rising from 8% in 2003 to 14% in subsequent years. Major parties—UCPN (Maoist), CPN-UML, and Nepali Congress—have pledged to enhance women's leadership, though implementation remains inconsistent. More significantly,





women's representation in the Constituent Assembly (CA)/Parliament surged from 6% in 2006 to 33%, a result of sustained feminist advocacy for constitutional quotas. This increase also reflects greater intersectional inclusion, with Dalit (24), Adivasi Janajati (70), Madhesi (36), and Muslim (5) women securing seats alongside dominant caste groups.

### **Executive and Constitutional Bodies**

Post-2006 political changes led to modest gains in executive representation. The 2009 cabinet included five women (11%), with some holding key portfolios like defense and foreign affairs, alongside a female Deputy Prime Minister—an unprecedented achievement. However, this still fell short of the 33% quota. Similarly, constitutional bodies and the National Planning Commission (NPC) began incorporating at least one woman member, signaling progress yet underscoring the need for stricter enforcement of gender quotas.

### **Organizational Expansion and Intersectional Advocacy**

The women's movement has diversified, with new Dalit, Janajati, Madhesi, and Muslim organizations advancing both identity-specific and feminist agendas. These groups operate alongside party-aligned women's wings and traditional NGOs, creating a broader but fragmented coalition. Key networks like the Women's Democratic Network (WDN) focus on capacity-building for women in politics, while Dalit women's organizations (e.g., FEDO, NDWUC, DFON) demand 50% representation, equal citizenship, and anti-caste discrimination measures. Similarly, the National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF) advocates for Janajati women's rights, though tensions with broader indigenous movements persist.

### **Challenges in the Constitution-Making Process**

Despite formal gains, Dalit, Janajati, Madhesi, and Muslim women in the CA expressed dissatisfaction with tokenistic inclusion and the lack of unity among women legislators. Dalit representatives highlighted persistent caste-based discrimination, even within progressive parties, and criticized the women's caucus for neglecting intersectional issues. Janajati women noted their mobilization without proportional leadership opportunities, while broader concerns centered on the gap between constitutional quotas (33%) and actual implementation, particularly in directly elected seats and party structures.

### **Affirmative Action and Future Demands**

While the 33% quota in the CA was achieved via proportional representation, women activists demand constitutional guarantees for equal participation in all state organs, including 50% reservations and proportional inclusion of marginalized groups. Key unresolved issues include:

- Enforcement of inheritance rights (equal property for daughters)
- Mandatory 33% representation in party committees
- Systematic preparation of women for technical and leadership roles
- Stronger mechanisms to combat caste and gender discrimination

The movement's central slogan—"proportional and inclusive representation"—reflects its dual focus on gender parity and intersectional justice, though patriarchal resistance and institutional inertia remain formidable barriers.



## **Findings on the Evolution of Nepal's Women's Movement**

The women's movement in Nepal has evolved through five distinct phases, shaped by the country's political upheavals: the pre-1951 democratic struggle, the 1951–1960 multiparty period, the authoritarian Panchayat era (1961–1990), the post-1990 democratic revival, and the post-2006 republican phase (Acharya, 1994). The 1990s marked a turning point, as the movement expanded its mass base and deepened its agenda, integrating demands for gender justice into broader political struggles. During this period, seminal research like *The Status of Women in Nepal* (1981–1982) empirically documented women's contributions to the household economy, laying the groundwork for gender-sensitive development policies.

The 2006 People's Movement (Jana Andolan II) radically disrupted Nepal's political and social hierarchies, with women, Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesi, and Muslims mobilizing for structural change. Women's participation in the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) further transformed the movement, as the CPN (Maoist) promised gender equality, property rights, and an end to discrimination. However, the movement's leadership remained dominated by educated, upper-caste women, often marginalizing Dalit, indigenous, and rural voices. Despite this, the period saw a proliferation of politically affiliated women's organizations, which—supported by NGOs and transnational feminism—began advocating for systemic reforms.

Intersectional disparities persisted within the movement. Dalit women, for instance, remained largely voiceless, while Janajati women highlighted language barriers in education and government employment, advocating for mother-tongue instruction and scholarships. Madhesi women debated the feasibility of equal inheritance rights, given the financial burden of dowry practices, with some calling for its abolition. Muslim women were divided between supporting a uniform civil code and preserving Islamic family law. These tensions underscored the challenge of uniting diverse groups under a shared feminist agenda, even as the movement gained institutional traction through mechanisms like the Constituent Assembly (CA).

The Maoist insurgency and post-2006 transition brought new actors into the fold, including the All Nepal Women's Association (Revolutionary) (ANWA-R), which mobilized rural women against patriarchal practices. Post-conflict, women's representation in the CA reached 33%, with quotas ensuring participation from marginalized communities. Yet, implementation gaps persisted, particularly in property rights and political leadership. The International People's Women's Association (IPWA), comprising women from 15 parties, emerged as a cross-party coalition, though its effectiveness was hampered by partisan divides and elite dominance.

Despite progress, the movement continues to grapple with structural inequities. While legal frameworks now mandate gender quotas and equality, patriarchal resistance and uneven implementation hinder transformative change. The demand for "proportional and inclusive representation" reflects an ongoing struggle to center marginalized voices—particularly Dalit, Janajati, and Madhesi women—in policy and leadership. Future efforts must address these intersectional exclusions while strengthening enforcement mechanisms to ensure that constitutional gains translate into tangible empowerment.



## **Discussion**

The People's Movement and subsequent Maoist insurgency fundamentally transformed Nepal's political landscape, mobilizing historically marginalized groups—including women, Dalits, and Janajatis—through promises of structural reform and social justice (Tamang, 2017). While the Maoist platform articulated radical commitments, such as gender-equal property rights and the dismantling of caste-based discrimination, substantive outcomes have remained inconsistent. Although women's political representation expanded institutionally—evidenced by cross-party collaboration in forums like the Inter-Party Women's Alliance (IPWA) and constitutional quotas—persistent gaps in accountability and intersectional inclusion reveal the limitations of nominal participation. The movement's rhetoric of emancipation often clashed with entrenched patriarchal hierarchies, resulting in uneven implementation of progressive policies.

Cultural and structural barriers continue to impede equitable participation, particularly for Janajati and Madhesi women. Linguistic marginalization restricts Janajati women's access to education and civil service, necessitating mother-tongue instruction and targeted scholarships. Similarly, Madhesi women's ambivalence toward equal inheritance laws—rooted in the financial burdens of dowry practices—exemplifies the tension between legal reforms and sociocultural norms (Yadav, 2024). Divisions among Muslim women over personal law further illustrate the complexities of harmonizing gender justice with pluralistic legal traditions. These challenges underscore the need for an intersectional approach that moves beyond symbolic representation to address systemic exclusion. Future efforts must prioritize grassroots mobilization, legal empowerment, and institutional mechanisms that confront the root causes of marginalization, ensuring substantive rather than performative progress.

## **Conclusion**

Nepal's women's movement has made significant strides in advancing gender equality through political participation and legal reforms, particularly following the 2006 democratic movement which institutionalized women's representation in governance. However, the movement continues to face challenges of intersectional exclusion, with Dalit, Janajati, Madhesi, and Muslim women often marginalized within broader feminist agendas. While constitutional quotas and progressive policies have created important frameworks for empowerment, their implementation remains inconsistent due to persistent patriarchal norms and structural barriers. The movement's future success depends on its ability to bridge these divides, ensuring that marginalized voices are centered in leadership and decision-making, while simultaneously addressing systemic inequalities through stronger enforcement mechanisms and grassroots mobilization for transformative social change.





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