



Women's Participation in Local Governments of Nepal: Assessing Local Elections of 2017 and 2022

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ABSTRACT

The Federal Republic of Nepal was established after the second people's movement in 2006. The movement was for more political rights after the 1990 political change in the country. As a result, through the incorporation of inclusive principles into Nepal's constitution, women's representation has been mandated across all sectors of the state, including at the local level. This paper aims to examine the legal provisions and practices concerning gender-balanced seat allocation in key municipal positions, such as chief and deputy chief, chairperson and vice-chairperson, in which at least one occupant must be female. It seeks to understand the reasons behind the political parties nominating women candidates for these positions and whether they are considered reservations for women. Using primary field visits and secondary sources, descriptive analytical and content analysis methods were used to make conclusions about the representation of deputy chief and deputy chairperson in the local elections of 2017 and 2022. The study shows that inclusion is emphasised in Nepal's constitution and other legislation, which require women to be represented in all fields. In the 2017 and 2022 local elections, women held 92% and 74% of the deputy positions, respectively. However, neither politically nor constitutionally, the office of deputy chief is solely reserved for women. The analysis sheds light on the motivations behind political parties nominating women candidates for these positions and explores whether they are perceived as reservations for women.

KEYWORDS: Local government, local election, women representation, deputy positions

INTRODUCTION

Local government is an important component of democracy. It invites people to participate in their daily activities at their doorsteps. People get the opportunity to participate actively and directly in the decisions made for all of society through local government (Sisk, 2001). Within a specific geographic area, like a city, town, or county, local government functions as a public entity and is seen as the principal and most trustworthy organisation. According to Shah and Shah (2006), these entities have been

established through various means, including national constitutions (Brazil, Denmark, France, India, Italy, Japan, and Sweden), state constitutions (Australia, the United States), legislative acts at higher levels of central government (New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and numerous other countries), provincial or state legislation (Canada, Pakistan, etc.), or executive decrees (China). Local governance in modern times is largely concerned with the dependable, faster, and more efficient supply of fundamental commodities and services to its local populations. It also includes the equitable distribution of public services at the local level (Kharel & Tharu, 2019).

Local governments, which are accessible to the public and function within communities, are the cornerstone of democracy. Democracy is defined as a system or style of governance that is of, by, and for the people. This definition is widely accepted and was memorably stated by US President Abraham Lincoln at his Gettysburg Address in 1863 (Haney, 1944). President Lincoln highlights the critical role that the people play in democracy in this statement. The extension and widening of democracy to the local level is one important way that it symbolises its centrality. Local governance is the level of democracy in which citizens have the most effective opportunity to actively and directly participate in decisions made for the benefit of society. A strong and effective local democracy is the foundation for a healthy and strong national-level democracy. Democracy is more than just election and involvement in local governments. However, it is also a question of how minorities are treated, that is of the constitutional provisions in democratic societies (Gellner & Hachhethu, 2008). Democratic local governments play a vital role in promoting democracy at the grassroots level through a variety of strategies, in addition to serving as conduits for the distribution of democratic benefits. They indicate an increasing citizen participation in governance activities, distributing power among relevant stakeholders through participation, defending and advancing the fundamental human rights principles, guaranteeing accountability and transparency, and promoting partnerships and cooperative management of shared interests (Timilsina, 2020).

The history of formal local government in Nepal is not very long. Decentralization policies have been embraced to foster participatory democracy, with decentralization serving as a crucial mechanism for dispersing development benefits to local communities. Although there were initial challenges in transferring power to the local level, Nepal has now become a federal state with the formation of federalism in the nation. The federation, province, and locals are the three primary levels that make up the basic framework of the state as outlined in the Constitution of Nepal (Constitution of Nepal, 2015).

Nestled between the neighbouring giants of India and China, Nepal is a country known for its varied ethnicities, castes, cultures, religions, and languages. It is situated amidst harsh mountains to the north and fertile plains in the Terai to the south. Nepal was subject to the despotic Rana tyranny for more than a century, ending with the British withdrawal from India in 1951 during the South Asian independence era. After that, Nepal went through a period of unsteady democratic experimentation that was characterised by political unrest. Following the dissolution of the Rana autocracy, King Tribhuvan announced an interim government and constitution until the parliamentary elections of 1959, which saw the Nepali Congress Party (NCP) emerging victorious with a two-thirds majority, though with only one female representative. However, King Mahendra assumed total monarchical authority at the beginning of 1959 by dissolving the NCP's elected government and outlawing all political parties, creating a centralised, top-down administration known as the "Panchayat System" (Upreti et al., 2020).

Begum (1991) explores the social and political roles played by women in defending their rights in her book *Tehreek-e-Pakistan aur Khawateen*. Begum looks at the various women's contributions to Pakistan's initial struggles and their continued social and political services to the country. Moreover, Misafi (2014) investigates the causes, means, and effects of pastoral and non-pastoral women's participation in decentralised local governance in Tanzania. Her study is predicated on the realisation that women's involvement in governance has drawn more attention in Tanzania, where the government is putting policies into place to boost the number of women in positions of decision-making in an effort to guarantee the fair advancement of women's issues in these organisations.

In Nepal, the story of women's struggle and contributions to the country's political and social progress is often ignored (Pandey, 2017). While the genesis of the women's movement can be traced back to 1917 with the establishment of the *Nari Samiti* (Women's Committee), it was Yogmaya Neupane from Bhojpur District who initiated the first systematic resistance against injustices and discriminations faced by women during the Rana regime. She was fiercely against corruption, slavery, *sati* (in Hinduism, a widow sacrifices herself by burning herself when her husband dies), caste prejudice, and gender injustice, among other forms of inequality. On November 12, 1938, a planned *yagya* (fire sacrifice) was set to take place, with an estimated 204 men and women ready to give their lives. But the district governor intervened, sending soldiers to stop the gathering and capture the leaders—including Yogmaya—which led to their detention for a few months. On July 14, 1941, less than three years later, Yogmaya and her adherents carried out *Jal Samadhi*, or water sacrifice, in Arun River. Through this action, Yogmaya and her supporters raised awareness of gender inequality and prejudice for the first time. Furthermore, Hutt (2013) explores the background of Nepali women's status throughout history. The *Muluki Ain*, a law code passed in 1854, established a rigid Hindu caste hierarchy, which the Ranas imposed internal policies to sustain at that time. As a solution to social problems, Yogmaya promoted the creation of a *Dharmarajya*, which she envisioned as a society in which people would treat one another with righteousness regardless of their social, religious, political, or gender position. However, there is a dearth of historical documentation regarding Nepali women's struggles for rights. In the years preceding the uprising of 1950–1951, women were active in the anti-Rana movement; many of them were connected to political figures. In an effort to raise women's political and social consciousness, they founded groups like the *Nepal Mahila Sangh* (Nepal Women's Association) in 1948 and the *Adarsha Mahila Samaj* (Ideal Women's Society) in 1947 (Thapa, 2019).

Numerous of these women were connected to prominent figures in politics, and they were crucial in founding groups such as the Ideal Women's Society in 1947 and the Nepal Women's Association in 1948. The goal of these groups was to increase women's political and social consciousness (Thapa, 2019). Prominent individuals including Divya Koirala, LokPriya Devi, Chandrakala Devi, Mangaladevi Singh, and Ambalika Devi made substantial contributions to Nepali politics, art, and literature (Dhungana, 2014). Historically, Queen Rajendra Laxmi played a pivotal role in unifying Nepal, while Lalit Tripura Sundari became the first woman to translate a section of the Mahabharata known as Shanti Parva's Raj Dharma (King's Code) from Sanskrit into Nepali. Similarly, Mrs. Kamala, the wife of warrior Balabhadra Kunwar, participated in the defense of Nalapani Fort during the Anglo-Nepal War from 1814 to 1816.

The evidences suggest that women's dead bodies were found inside the Nalapani Fort, highlighting the active participation of Nepali women in historical resistance efforts against the British Army (Dhungana, 2014). Women have been involved in a number of

movements in Nepal's history. Women such as Mangaladebi Singh, Divya Koirala, Sahana Pradhan, and Sadhana Pradhan, for example, were actively involved in the 1951 movement. Shailaja Acharya demonstrated against King Mahendra's conduct in 1961 by carrying a black flag through the streets. In the 1990 political movement, women were actively involved, with Sahana Pradhan leading the Left Front. Furthermore, women made up a notable portion of the 2006 movement. After the second people's movement in 2006, which marked a turning point, making women's participation, empowerment, and inclusion as a topic of widespread discussion in Nepal, the conversation surrounding campaigns on gender equality received a great deal of steam. In response to demand from women leaders and rights activists, the Interim Parliament issued a resolution on May 30, 2006 requiring at least 33% of women to be represented in all governmental entities. In addition, 50% of chiefs and deputy chiefs of villages and municipalities, as well as the chief and deputy chief of district coordination committees, are required to be women, as per sub-section 4 of section 17 of the Local Level Election Act 2017. However, despite constitutional guarantees, the political parties in Nepal appear to have predominantly assigned women to the secondary position. It appears that most village or municipal levels only have the secondary ranks. In this provision, one of the chairpersons/chiefs or vice-chairpersons/deputy chiefs of villages/municipalities should be a woman.

Due to the lobbying efforts of women leaders and rights activists, the Interim Parliament, on May 30, 2006, enacted a resolution guaranteeing a minimum of 33% representation for women in all governmental entities. Additionally, according to the sub-section 4 of the section 17 of the Local Level Election Act 2017, it is mandated that 50% of the chairpersons/chief, vice-chairpersons, or deputy chiefs of villages/municipalities, as well as the chief and deputy chief of district coordination committees, must be women (Local Level Election Act 2017). Thus, even in the posts guaranteed by the constitution, the political parties seem to have limited women to the second positions. The provision that one of the chairpersons/chiefs or vice-chairpersons/deputy chiefs of a village/municipality must be a woman seems to be limited to the second rank in most of the village or municipal levels. Thus, this paper aims to examine the representation of women in local government and their governance jurisdictions in the federal democratic republic era of Nepal.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs both the primary and secondary source of data collection. Primary data were collected through the field visit in three local level bodies of Kaski District: Pokhara Metropolitan City, Phedikhola Rural Municipality, and Annapurna Rural Municipality. One-to-one interview was done with deputy chiefs of municipalities, deputy chairs of rural municipalities, academics, and subject matter experts. Discussion was focused on the concept of local governments using a variety of theoretical frameworks, with an emphasis on the appointment of deputy chiefs and deputy chairpersons. Similarly, secondary data were collected from the varied sources of government publications, reviewing literatures, election commission websites, brochures available at the visited municipalities and rural municipalities. The data collected from the secondary sources were verified during the field trip and the other way around for data validation. The results have been analysed using descriptive analytical and content analysis methods to draw conclusions about the women representation as deputy chief and deputy chairperson in the local elections of 2017 and 2022.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

Through the ratification of international treaties and the implementation of laws and regulations, Nepal has made a tremendous progress in promoting gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) (Upreti et al., 2020). Underscoring the government's commitment to tackling these concerns, the constitution and election legislation ensure equal treatment and forbid discrimination based on gender, caste, and origin. The election system in Nepal, which is run by elected officials, is a major factor in deciding how inclusive and GESI-friendly the government is. An analysis of the 2022 local elections' performance in terms of GESI is warranted, especially in light of the representation of marginalised communities and women (Upreti et al., 2020).

The significance of women's participation in public life and decision-making processes is emphasised by international accords like the Beijing Platform of Action (PFA) and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (UN, 1995). The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and other international organisations define gender equality and women's empowerment as fundamental elements of development goals. With the local government being the most democratic form, Nepal's three-tier federal system places a strong emphasis on inclusivity and proportional representation. Women's participation in local elections in 2017 reached record high because of the Local Level Election Act 2017, which sets the quotas for their representation (Upreti et al., 2020). Notwithstanding these successes, obstacles still exist, as seen by the political parties' unwillingness to propose women for the senior leadership roles. However, after the 2006 people's movement, constitutional and legal amendments have helped to raise the number of women participating in electoral politics (Upreti et al., 2020).

Constitutional and Legal Provisions of Women Representation

Through a number of measures, the Nepali Constitution of 2015 has greatly increased the representation of women in the governmental structure. Maintaining a minimum of 30 percent of women in the houses of parliament and provincial assemblies, in addition to almost 40 percent locally, is indicative of a real rise in gender diversity (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Article 38, which ensures women's participation in all state entities and highlights, the country's commitment to gender equality, emphasises the ideal of equality by outlawing discrimination based on a variety of grounds. The president and vice-president must be members of different sexes or communities in order to promote diversity at the highest levels of administration, according to constitutional mandates (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Furthermore, Article 76(9) promotes an inclusion in the Council of Ministers by permitting the appointment of up to 25 ministers, selected through an inclusive process from among the members of the federal parliament. According to Article 84(2), the proportional representation in the house of representatives guarantees the representation for a range of demographic groups, such as women, Dalits, indigenous people, and others, depending on their respective populations.

The Constitution of Nepal, 2015 contains the specific provisions for the selection of speakers, deputy speakers, and other officials from varied backgrounds, demonstrating the advancement of gender representation in leadership roles. In order to advance gender equality in local governance, the political parties are required by the Local Level Election Act, 2017 to propose the female candidates for important roles in village municipalities, district coordination committees, and municipalities. In a similar vein, the Article 222(3) seat reservation for women in ward committees increases their participation in regional decision-making. Furthermore, the Local Level Election Act,

2017 has provisions forcing the political parties to nominate Dalit women candidates for particular positions, demonstrating steps to address intersectional discrimination. Article 42 of the constitution highlights the country's commitment to achieving equity and representation at all levels of governance by emphasising the inclusive representation of varied marginalised groups in the state bodies.

Gender-wise Candidates of Local Level Elections 2017

During the local level election of 2017 there were a total of 148,362 candidates vying for positions. Of these, 90,516 (61.01%) were male, 57,844 (38.99%) were female, and just two candidates identified as third gender.

Table 1

Candidates-Based on Gender of Local Level Elections 2017

Post	Total	Man	Man %	Woman	Woman %	Third Gender	TG%
Chief	2,951	2,735	92.68	215	7.29	1	0.03
Deputy Chief	2,106	427	20.28	1,679	79.72	0	0.00
President of RM	2,886	2,733	94.70	153	5.30	0	0.00
Vice President of RM	2,258	344	15.23	1,914	84.77	0	0.00
Ward Chairperson	32,267	31,209	96.72	1,057	3.28	1	0.00
Member	55,090	53,068	96.33	2,022	3.67	0	0.00
Women Member	26,708	0	0.00	26,708	100.00	0	0.00
Dalit Women Member	24,096	0	0.00	24,096	100.00	0	0.00
Grand Total	148,362	90,516	61.01	57,844	38.99	2	0.00

Note: Election Commission, 2017

Table 1 above shows that 2,951 candidates were running for municipal chief in the 2017 election, with 2,735 (92.68 percent) of them being male and 215 (7.29%) of them being female. It was discovered that 1679 persons, or 79.72 percent were female candidates, while 20.28 percent of the candidates were male. Among the 2,886 candidates, 2,733 (94.70%) and 153 (5.30%) of the female candidates were running for the chairmanship of the rural municipality; among the 2,258 candidates for vice president, 344 (15.23%) and 1,914 (84.77%) of the male candidates were running. It was discovered to be female applicants. Thirty-one, or 96.72 percent, of the 32,267 candidates running for ward president were men, and 1057, or 3.28 percent were women. Among the total 55,090 member candidates, there are 53,068 or 96.33 percent male candidates and 2,022 or 3.67 percent female candidates. This figure seems to dominate the patriarchal thinking that women are still not allowed to lead in Nepal.

Table 2

Number of Seats by Post Won by Women Candidates of Major Parties in 2022 Local Level Election

Parties	Chief	Chairperson	Deputy Chief	Vice-Chairperson	Ward Chairperson	Member
Congress	4	5	88	139	25	150
UML	6	4	104	113	22	163

Maoist	1	3	15	48	12	64
JSP	0	0	10	17	0	21
CPN-S	1	0	7	4	2	28
LSP	1	0	4	7	3	4
RPP	0	0	2	2	0	4
Total	13	12	229	333	64	434

Note: Election Commission, 2022

Elected Candidates

In total, 35,041 candidates were able to secure positions at all local level elections. According to the breakdown of candidates, 40.96 percent of those elected were women and 59.04 percent of men. The data reveal a significant gender gap in local chief positions, with men making up 96.61% of elected chiefs. In particular, 11 women were elected as vice-presidents and seven women were elected as the chief (Election Commission, 2017).

The elected posts of chief of municipalities and president of rural municipalities were predominantly held by men. According to the data presented, 449 men and only 11 women were appointed to rural municipalities across the country, which consisted of 460 altogether. On the other hand, women made up the majority of those elected to the positions of vice president of rural municipalities and deputy chief of municipalities. Specifically, 424 women and 36 men were elected to these positions from among the same 460 rural municipalities. Political parties that primarily nominated female candidates for these positions were to blame for this tendency. The country's 753 local levels saw the election of 778 women to executive posts, including chiefs, deputy chiefs, and ward chairpersons, according to the election commission. In addition, 262 women were elected alongside men in a public competition. According to the election commission, 6,424 Dalit women and 6,664 women members were elected. A total of 175 out of 6,743 wards in the country were left empty since there were no Dalit women running for the office. There were 265 other members of the ward; 920 rural executive members were chosen from among the women ward members; and 879 municipal executive members were chosen from among the women ward members as well.

Table 3

Post-wise Elected Candidates

Post	Total	Man	Man%	Woman	Woman %
Chief	293	286	97.61	7	2.39
Deputy Chief	293	17	5.80	276	94.20
President of Rural Municipal	460	449	97.61	11	2.39
Vice-President of Rural Municipal	460	36	7.83	424	92.17
Ward Chairperson	6742	6680	99.08	62	0.92
Member	13484	13220	98.04	264	1.96
Women Member	6742	0.0	00	6742	100.00
Dalit Member	6567	0.0	00	6567	100.00
Grand Total	35041	20688	59.04	14353	40.96

Note: Election Commission, 2017

As per Table 2 and 3, Nepal had 13 women chiefs, 227 women deputy chiefs, 12 women chairpersons, and 335 women vice-chairpersons making a total of 587 in the top two positions in the local election of 2022. While these numbers are an important milestone, there still is a long way to go to break the barriers for women to reach the top.

As the constitution has ensured 33 percent reservation, 41 percent of women have been represented at the local level, house of representatives, state assembly and national assembly elections. Apart from the nominated executive members at the local level, only 14,652 women have been elected in 2017, and 14379 women have been elected in 2022 at various levels since the official results were announced. Although it is mandatory to have one woman as the chief or deputy chief at the local level, only 18 women out of 753 in 2017 and 25 in 2022 were supposed to be elected as local level chiefs. At all other local levels, women have been made vice-chiefs. According to Manju Devi Gurung, Deputy Chief of Pokhara Metropolitan City, women have got the opportunity to play a good role as deputy chiefs for leadership development. According to Chandrakala Adhikari, Vice-Chairperson of Annapurna Rural Municipality, the chairperson tried to interfere in the rights of the vice-chairperson as she was a woman and access to resources also rests with the chairperson. According to Jamuna Thapa, Vice-Chairperson of Gharapjhong Rural Municipality, coming to the post of vice-president is also an achievement as women are traditionally busy only with household chores.

To sum up, since the society is male dominated, the findings of the study demonstrated that women are still not represented in the mainstream politics of Nepal as envisioned by the constitution. The political party as well as the public is also an assumption that women know what they are. According to Deu Kumari Gurung, Vice-Chairperson of Phedikhola Rural Municipality, women do not even dare to claim for President or Chief due to a lack of self-confidence. She said, "We don't have resources even though we have a position." As women are victims of the patriarchal society, they are not even trusted by the political party.

CONCLUSION

Women's engagement in electoral politics has expanded dramatically in Nepal as a result of the introduction of women's reservation policy; this was especially noticeable in the local elections of 2017 and 2022. The Local Level Election Act of 2017 and the Constitution of 2015, which both contain provisions pertaining to local elections, require the political parties to designate women for a range of local posts, such as chief and vice-chief, as well as reserve seats in ward committees. There is still a gender imbalance in leadership roles despite legal restrictions, with women being nominated as deputy chiefs more frequently than males. Nonetheless, there has been growth in female representation as seen by the historic participation of women holding executive posts at the local level.

Nepal is proud to have women holding important positions like president, chief justice, and speaker of parliament. Building trust, giving opportunities to women representatives can be pivotal in achieving tangible outcomes in addressing community development goals that are all critical to empowering women representatives. This entails enhancing women's capacities, creating supportive conditions in families and society, and promoting proactive involvement in the local government decision-making processes. More inclusion of historically marginalised women into national development initiatives can be facilitated by collaboration among women leaders across governmental levels. The key to attaining gender equality and women's empowerment in Nepal is to challenge patriarchal norms and empower women through awareness, education, and self-assurance.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

I declare that this manuscript is originally produced by me.

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