

Examining Gender Diversity in Local Government Elections in Nepal: A Review

Govinda Prasad Guragain, PhD

Department of Political Science, Padmakanya Multiple Campus

Abstract

In Nepal, women's involvement in politics has historically been constrained by entrenched traditional gender roles. Despite these limitations, several remarkable women have managed to rise above these constraints and become influential leaders within their communities. These instances highlight that simply implementing laws is not enough to ensure women's participation; continuous monitoring is necessary to ensure the effective enforcement of these laws. This study employed a mixed research design, incorporating both liberal and representative political science theories, alongside a descriptive and analytical approach, which proved to be particularly effective under pragmatist philosophy. In 2017 local elections, women represented 40.95 percent of the elected officials. By 2022, this figure had seen a slight increase, with women comprising 41.21 percent of all elected representatives. This progress suggests that the 2022 elections offered a valuable opportunity to enhance women's representation in politics, building on the significant achievements of 2017. This progress not only benefits political parties but also supports social justice. Many women, particularly those who have served in local government over the past four years, are eager to advance their political careers. Increasing female representation in public life is an important step toward achieving gender equality. Despite the Election Commission's efforts to address concerns about women's electoral participation, their actions have been insufficient, and political parties have exploited existing loopholes.

Keywords: exploitation, local election, movement, suffering, women representation

Introduction

Gender diversity in local government elections plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive governance and ensuring that the community's varied perspectives are represented. In Neal, an analysis of gender representation uncovers notable imbalances that influence decision-making and policy development. Research has shown that increasing the involvement of women in local governance not only strengthens democratic legitimacy but also leads to fairer distribution of resources (Krook & Norris, 2014). This review will investigate the current levels of gender diversity in Neal's local elections, pinpointing the obstacles that women face in participating and suggesting ways to create a more inclusive political environment.

The evolution of women's representation in politics is complex and varies widely across different eras and cultures. Historically, women's participation in formal political roles and leadership was largely restricted (Sapkota, 2024, p. 11). In ancient societies, most women were excluded from political and leadership roles, though notable exceptions existed. For instance, Cleopatra of ancient Egypt and female rulers from other regions, such as China and India, demonstrated that some women could attain significant power.

During the medieval and early modern periods, women's involvement in governance and leadership remained limited across much of the world (Sapkota, 2024, p. 11). Nonetheless, there were notable figures like Queen Isabella I of Spain and Queen Elizabeth I of England who defied these general restrictions.

The 19th century marked the rise of feminist movements, especially in Europe and North America, which began advocating for women's rights, including the right to vote and participate in political life. This momentum continued into the early 20th century, leading to significant legal changes (Kanthak & Woon, 2015). For example, women in the United States gained the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, and women in the

United Kingdom saw a similar advancement with the Representation of the People Act in 1918.

Despite these advancements, women have continued to be underrepresented in elected positions. However, the mid-20th century saw notable progress in women's political representation. After World War II, countries began electing women to high office, such as India with Indira Gandhi becoming prime minister in 1949, and Sri Lanka with Sirimavo Bandaranaike becoming the world's first female head of state in 1960.

Women often encounter greater obstacles when competing in elections against male candidates due to various psychological and sociocultural factors. Societal beliefs that devalue women and the inferiority complex imposed on them contribute to these challenges (Kanthak & Woon, 2015). Additionally, research indicates that women are less likely than men to pursue public office.

Women's underrepresentation in leadership roles both at home and within decision-making structures reinforces the perception that they are less capable of effectively leading their communities, whether in rural or urban settings.

From the late 20th century to the present, there has been a gradual increase in women's political representation, though this progress has varied by region. To improve female representation in elected offices, many countries have implemented policies such as reserved seats or quotas. Recent years have seen countries like Germany, Chile, New Zealand, and others elect female heads of state or government (Kanthak & Woon, 2015). Despite these advancements, significant barriers to women's full and equal participation in politics remain, including gender stereotypes, discriminatory practices, and cultural obstacles. Efforts to address these issues through lobbying, legislative reforms, and community engagement are ongoing. However, there is a lack of comprehensive global data on women's roles in local governance. Notable female leaders who have made significant contributions

include Indira Gandhi (India), Margaret Thatcher (Britain), Chandrika Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka), Isabel Perón (Argentina), Golda Meir (Israel), Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia), Angela Merkel (Germany), and U.S. figures like Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, and Kamala Harris, along with Sonia Gandhi (India), Aung San Suu Kyi (Myanmar), Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Begum Khaleda Zia (Bangladesh).

In Nepal, during the Panchayat era, women were allocated only three seats in Parliament. Following the Jana Andolan I in 1990, their representation increased to 5%. Despite this progress, women's representation in the cabinet was minimal, and their political presence remained at just 6% until 2007. The 2022 local elections in Nepal presented a crucial opportunity to build upon these gains (Gorkhapatra, September 9, 1953, as cited in “Nepalko Nirvachan Itihas” by Election Commission, Nepal, 2023, p. 157). Although the 2017 elections saw improvements in gender inclusion, women continued to occupy a disproportionate number of lower-ranking political positions compared to men (Gorkhapatra, September 9, 1953, as cited in “Nepalko Nirvachan Itihas” by Election Commission, Nepal, 2017, p. 157). According to Nepal's constitution, political parties are required to nominate at least one woman for the positions of mayor and deputy mayor. However, in practice, most parties nominated men for mayor and women for deputy mayor. As a result, only 18 of the 753 municipalities had a female mayor. Additionally, without quotas, women are significantly underrepresented as ward chairpersons, with only 62 out of 6,473 positions held by women.

Statement of Problem

Many female politicians are eager to seek higher office due to their substantial experience as ward committee members and deputy mayors. In March 2021, our research team found that 46.6% of the 702 deputy mayors interviewed (out of a total of 753 nationwide) expressed their intention to run for mayor in the upcoming local elections.

Additionally, 40% of the deputy mayors were uncertain about their plans, suggesting that the actual number of women interested in running for mayor could be even higher. Female local representatives have earned considerable trust from their constituents. For instance, public confidence in the judicial committee—headed by deputy mayors and responsible for dispute resolution—rose from 73% in 2018 to 80.6% in 2020. In contrast, while public trust in male mayors has remained relatively high, it did not improve between 2018 (81.8%) and 2020 (80.6%).

The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is partly due to the design of the quota system and partly nomination practices. In 2017, only about 6% of candidates for mayor and 3.3% of candidates for ward chair were women. It remains to be seen whether these figures will change in the 2022 elections.

Objectives of the Study

The primary goal of this study is to assess women's representation in local elections. The specific aim is to examine the representation of women across different ethnic communities in the 2022 local elections.

Delimitations of the study

This study focuses solely on analyzing the representation of women from various ethnic communities in the 2022 local elections. It does not connect with or rely on data from the 2017 elections and is exclusively centered on the 2022 local election data.

Methodology

In political science, mixed research methodology combines both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate political phenomena. This integrated approach leverages the strengths of both methods, offering a more comprehensive understanding of complex political issues. This study has utilized liberal and representative political theories along with a descriptive and analytical approach, aligning with pragmatist philosophy and employing a

mixed research design, which is prevalent in political science. The theoretical foundation of the study was established through a literature review, drawing primarily from secondary sources such as data and reports from the Election Commission, along with books, journals, and articles. By employing a mixed research methodology, researchers can address the limitations associated with single-method approaches and gain more detailed, nuanced insights into complex political dynamics. This approach supports evidence-based policymaking and political analysis, enhancing the understanding of the intricate nature of political issues.

Literature Review

Wikander et al. (1995) notes that, in Asia, China granted women the right to vote and stand for office in 1949 following Mao Zedong's rise to power. In contrast, Britain introduced a bill in 1931 to equate women's rights with men's and prevent Sri Lankans from participating in anti-British activities in India. Similarly, Pakistan and Japan extended voting and candidacy rights to women in 1947, South Korea in 1948, India in 1950, Nepal in 1951, and Bhutan and North Korea in 1953. While Pakistan granted equal rights following its separation from India, the Indian Constitution established these rights in 1950 (Kanthak & Woon, 2015). In Nepal, the Interim Government Act of 2007 partially ensured equality for both women and men.

However, these legal advances do not necessarily guarantee women's progress in leadership roles. Historical experience shows that transitioning from quota-based positions to higher leadership roles remains challenging. For instance, although Spain has gender quotas requiring at least 40% of candidates for local elections to be women, research indicates that these quotas have not significantly improved women's chances of winning influential positions such as mayor or party leader in subsequent elections (Bagues & Campa).

In Nepal, during the Panchayat era, only three parliamentary seats were allocated to women. After Jana Andolan I in 1990, this allocation was increased to 5%. Despite this, women remained severely underrepresented in the cabinet, and their overall political presence was only 6% until 2007 (Lotter, 2017, pp. 97-115). Haug, Aasland, and Dahal (2009) point out that even after the restoration of democracy and progress toward a more inclusive state post-1990, women still faced significant barriers, such as being denied the right to pass citizenship to their children (pp. 105-136).

Two years after the fall of the Rana dynasty, Sadhanadevi Nepal became the first democratically elected local representative in Nepal in 1953 (Gorkhapatra, September 9, 1953, as cited in “Nepalko Nirvachan Itihas” by Election Commission, Nepal, 2017, p. 157). Since then, progress for women in Nepali politics has been limited. In 1992, women made up only 1 out of every 200 elected representatives. Significant improvements were noted in 1997 when women secured 21% of local seats. By 2017, women held nearly 41% of local (municipal and ward-level) positions in Nepal's elections under the new federal constitution, largely due to reserved seats. This increased representation aims to enhance the role of regional women-led organizations in national humanitarian decision-making and foster collaboration with local government leaders (CARE, USA, 2024).

The Local Elections Act 2073 mandates that at least two of the four members elected from each ward must be women, which implies a total of 6,743 female members should be elected.

However, evidence suggests that Dalit women are underrepresented in certain wards. Despite 6,620 Dalit women being elected in the most recent elections, only 1.02% of ward chairs were female (Sapkota, 2024, p. 11). The 2079 local elections revealed an interesting shift from traditional support bases of major political parties, showing increased backing for independent candidates and newly formed parties that focused on anti-corruption,

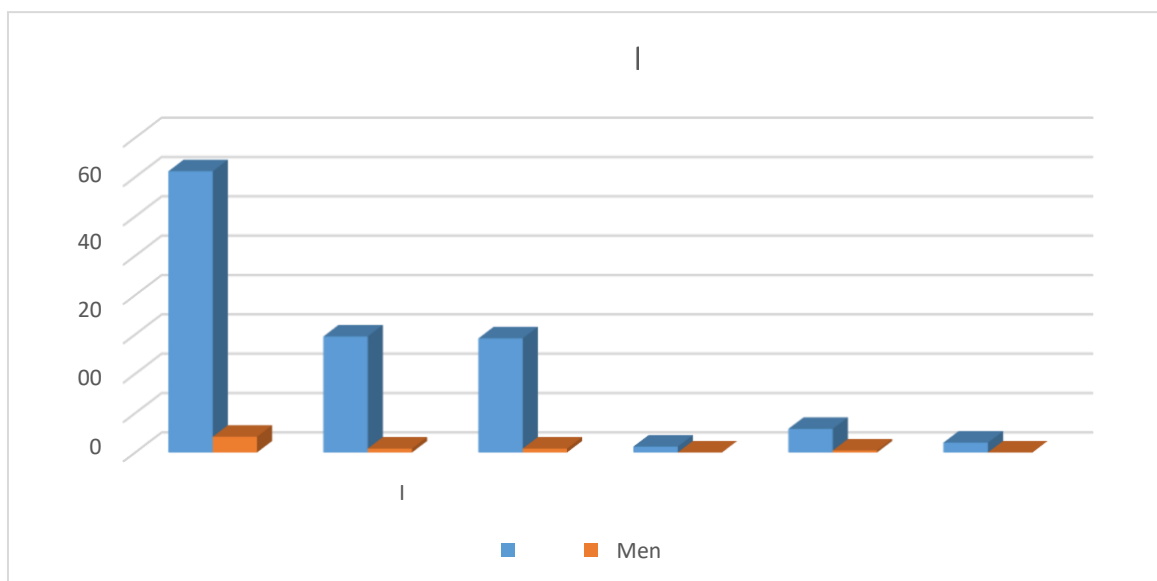
development, and service delivery. Independent candidates, despite not being affiliated with any political party or institution, made a notable impact, securing 385 seats, including 13 mayors/chairs, 232 ward members, 136 ward chairs, and 4 deputy mayors/chairs. According to the 2022 Election Commission report, independent candidates garnered 312,645 votes, representing 2.71% of the total votes cast (ibid).

Discussion and Finding

Historically, women's involvement in politics in Nepal has been constrained by deeply ingrained traditional gender roles. Nevertheless, some remarkable women have overcome these barriers to become influential figures in their communities (CARE, USA, 2024). There is a pressing need to enhance women's representation to fulfill the nation's commitment to authentic democracy, liberty, and equality. Research shows that female legislators are more inclined than their male counterparts to address women's concerns, ensuring that women's voices are heard and their issues addressed fairly. Representation in government extends beyond shaping policies; it is also a crucial tool for social empowerment (Sapkota, 2024, p. 11). Women's unique perspectives and life experiences influence their approach to issues, policies, and leadership styles. Increasing the inclusion of women's viewpoints in policymaking can invigorate and diversify the process. While women's leadership styles are not inherently superior to men's, certain groups may resonate more with the distinctive priorities and perspectives women bring to the discussion. The current lack of female representation not only hampers progress within communities but also denies future generations of women leaders and role models (Sapkota, 2024, p. 11). Studies indicate that “the presence of highly visible female politicians” inspires young girls and women to engage in politics and aspire to leadership roles. Additionally, having more female candidates encourages greater male participation in the political arena (ibid).

In 2017, political parties were criticized for only nominating women for vice chairman and deputy chairman positions. This criticism was reiterated in 2022 when parties faced backlash for forming coalitions that restricted candidacies to men. Dalit women representatives, in particular, have faced criticism for being sought out by parties only during election periods (Sapkota, 2024, p. 11). Despite public and activist pressure, political parties have a crucial role in fostering women's political involvement from the grassroots level and in adhering to, and even exceeding, constitutionally mandated provisions. Without proactive efforts from political parties, women will continue to be underrepresented in politics, and their participation will remain marginal (ibid). The constitution of Nepal has managed better provision for the participation of the women in the election but it has become as hard as Adhikari et al (2020) have discussed about the condition of the global politics and it has turned out as complex as Adhikari et al (2022) have analyzed the condition of the global political situation and it has been realized as serious as Adhikari (2020) has explained about the global condition generated by the coronavirus.

Mayor



Election Commission 2022

In total, there were 151 participants, including 143 men and 8 women, all of whom belonged to the Khas ethnic group. The Indigenous group had 61 participants, with 59 men and 2 women. In the Madhesi group, there were 50 men and 2 women. The Dalit group had 3 men and no women. The Tharu group consisted of 13 individuals, comprising 12 men and 1 woman. Lastly, the Muslim group had 5 participants, all of whom were men, with no women represented.

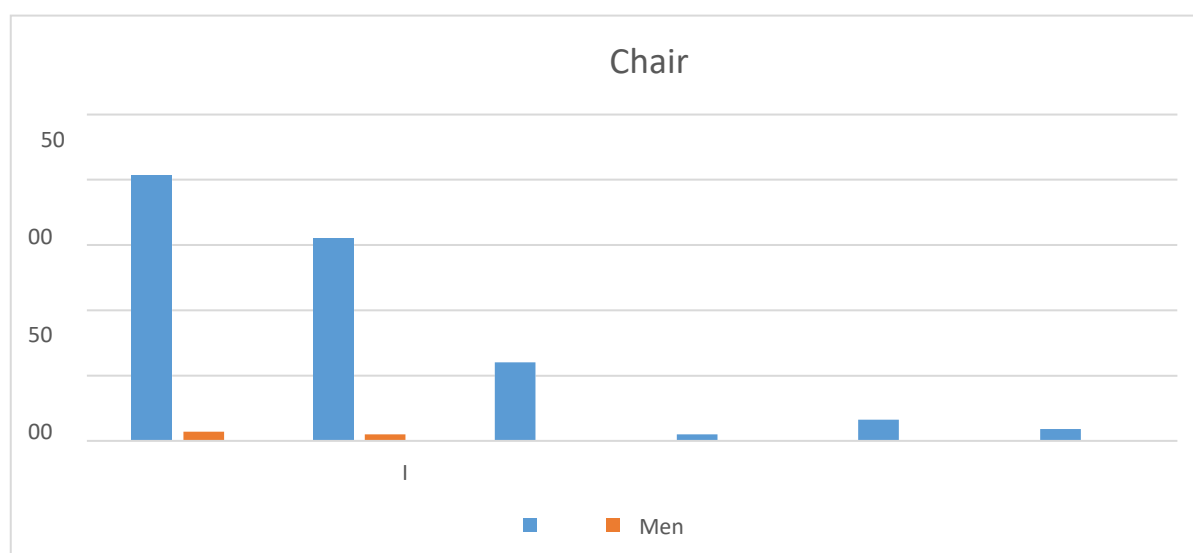
Deputy Mayor

	Men	Women	Total
Khas	37	102	139
Indigenous	10	48	58
Madhesi	6	44	50
Dalit	2	5	7
Tharu	2	26	28
Muslim	3	8	11
Total	60	233	293

Election Commission 2022

The table presents the distribution of deputy mayors by gender and ethnicity within a specific region. Out of a total of 293 deputy mayors, 60 are men and 233 are women. Among these, the Khas ethnic group is the largest, with 37 men and 102 women, totaling 139 deputy mayors. The Indigenous group has 10 men and 48 women, amounting to 58 deputy mayors. The Madhesi group includes 6 men and 44 women. The Dalit group is comprised of 2 men and 5 women, totaling 7 deputy mayors. The Tharu group consists of 2 men and 26 women. Finally, the Muslim group includes 3 men and 8 women.

Chair Person



Election Commission 2022

The table provides a breakdown of chairpersons by gender and ethnic group in scientific research papers. Out of 460 chairpersons, there are 448 men and 12 women. The distribution by ethnic group shows that the Khas ethnic group has the largest representation, with 203 men and 7 women, totaling 210 chairpersons. The Indigenous group follows with 155 men and 5 women, making up 160 chairpersons. The Madhesi group contributes 60 male chairpersons. The Dalit group has 5 male chairpersons, while the Tharu group has 16 male chairpersons. Additionally, the Muslim group has 9 male chairpersons.

Vice - Chair Person

	Men	Women	Total
Khas	66	145	211
Indigenous	58	101	159
Madhesi	1	59	60
Dalit	0	6	6
Tharu	0	17	17
Muslim	0	7	7
Total	125	335	460

Election Commission 2022

The table illustrates the distribution of Vice Chairpersons by gender and ethnicity. Out of a total of 460 Vice Chairpersons, there are 125 men and 335 women. The table also

details the ethnic breakdown of these Vice Chairpersons. Specifically, 211 are from the Khas ethnic group, 159 belong to the Indigenous group, 60 are from the Madhesi group, 6 are from the Dalit group, and 17 come from the Tharu group. Additionally, the Muslim group is represented by 7 Vice -chairpersons.

Findings

The capacity and expertise of elected female representatives to tackle issues vary significantly. Although there is a noticeable enthusiasm and hope among these women regarding their role in Nepal's evolving political landscape, it is crucial to balance this optimism with a realistic evaluation of the challenges they face. Establishing the right infrastructure and creating supportive conditions are essential for women to succeed in leadership roles within Nepal's federal system. However, women generally encounter numerous obstacles, making it vital to foster a supportive, gender-neutral environment that enables their effective and meaningful participation in governance and other sectors (The Asia Foundation, 2018). For liberal democracies to thrive, it is essential to have women represented in political leadership positions. Despite this, a significant gender gap in political participation persists globally. Political leadership is often viewed as the involvement of individuals in various political activities aimed at acquiring, maintaining, and exercising power.

The data provides insights into the representation of different genders and ethnic groups in leadership roles across the region. It reveals that women hold more deputy mayor positions compared to men, with the Khas and Indigenous groups being the most represented ethnic groups. This information can be used to assess the inclusivity and diversity of leadership roles in the area and to identify any existing gender or ethnic disparities. Overall, there is a significant gender imbalance, with men greatly outnumbering women. To foster more equitable representation in leadership roles and gain a deeper understanding of the

factors affecting the distribution of deputy mayors, further research is needed. The table also highlights a substantial gender gap among chairpersons, where men dominate across all ethnic groups. This data emphasizes the need for further examination and intervention to address gender imbalances in leadership positions within scientific research. Additionally, the table indicates a gender disparity among Vice Chairpersons, with a higher proportion of women compared to men. The data also points out the underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups, such as Muslims and Dalits, in leadership roles. This underscores the importance of policies and initiatives aimed at promoting more balanced and inclusive representation.

The insights provided here are crucial for understanding the current state of diversity and representation in leadership roles, and they highlight the importance of inclusivity and equality in decision-making processes. This data allows for an examination of the representation of various ethnic groups within the population, helping to identify any discrepancies or emerging trends. The 2022 elections present a significant opportunity to enhance women's representation in politics, building on the achievements of 2017. This advancement is not only favorable for social justice but also advantageous for political parties in their electoral campaigns (Kanthak & Woon, 2015). Many women, particularly those with experience in local government over the past four years, are eager to advance their political careers. Their increasing trust from constituents suggests a strong potential to attract a broad voter base. Political parties that stay attuned to these critical trends are likely to be more successful in the upcoming elections.

Women in Nepal have overcome social norms to become influential figures in local government, contributing significantly to women's empowerment at the grassroots level (Sapkota, 2024, p. 11). Their diverse backgrounds and experiences have also advanced gender-sensitive disaster management and humanitarian relief efforts (CARE, USA, 2024). Political parties play a crucial role in enhancing female representation in the forthcoming

local elections. It is essential for parties to foster an environment that supports the nomination of women for mayor and ward chair positions. In 2017, the inclusion of women on the nomination list for these roles was notably limited. To make genuine progress toward gender inclusion, parties must address and eliminate the barriers that female candidates face during the nomination process, thereby increasing the number of women selected for these leadership roles.

Conclusion

Increasing female representation in public life is a crucial step toward achieving gender equality. Critics of the involvement of Nepali women in politics need to recognize that reaching true gender equality requires dismantling long-standing patriarchal structures and overcoming historical barriers that have excluded Nepali women from public roles. This process is gradual, and female representatives in Nepal will need time to effectively leverage their political influence. Despite a record number of women being elected in the most recent local elections, the goal of achieving 50% female representation in the legislature remains unmet in both elections.

In 2017, political parties nominated a substantial number of women for deputy positions to meet legal requirements. However, in 2022, due to coalition formations, some parties fielded only one candidate for both mayor and deputy positions, regardless of gender. This resulted in fewer female candidates and a higher number of male candidates being selected. Election Commission data shows a decline in female nominations, with 3,077 women nominated as deputy chiefs in 2022, compared to 3,593 in 2017. Additionally, despite a requirement for one Dalit woman per ward, only 176 Wards in 2017 and 123 wards in 2022 nominated Dalit women candidates.

Women's rights activists and legal experts have raised concerns about political parties exploiting legal loopholes to deny women nominations and positions. Some female leaders

have criticized their parties for not supporting women candidates. The data from the 2017 local elections highlights the critical role of internal party selection processes in determining local representation in Nepal. To improve inclusivity, it is essential to reform these processes, including enhancing the acceptance of female nominees and restructuring committees to ensure greater female representation.

Moreover, political parties must ensure that women's voices are adequately represented in the composition and structure of selection committees. The predominance of male candidates for mayor and ward chair positions in 2017 may be attributed to the low percentage of women on selection committees, where women constituted only 8% of members on average. Although the Political Party Act of 2017 mandates that at least one-third of committee members be female, it is crucial to ensure that women's voices are not merely symbolic but influential. High-ranking party officials, often men, are typically the final decision-makers, potentially sidelining female perspectives. Therefore, reforms should focus on empowering women within these committees to ensure their voices are genuinely heard and acted upon.

This review highlights the pressing need for enhanced gender diversity in local government elections in Nepal. The findings indicate that despite existing barriers, such as systemic biases and limited support networks, there are viable strategies that can promote greater female participation. By implementing policies such as gender quotas and mentorship programs, Nepal can work toward a more equitable political landscape. Ultimately, increasing women's representation not only enriches local governance but also ensures that diverse voices are heard in decision-making processes, leading to more comprehensive and inclusive policy outcomes. Continued research and proactive measures have to be essential to address these disparities and foster a robust democratic environment.

Recommendation

Gender balance has to be maintained through the election system by the inclusion of women and men for the advancement of the nation. The internal selection committees of political parties play a crucial role in determining whether women receive candidate tickets. The likelihood of women being selected increases significantly if they are actively involved in these internal selection processes. This means women need to be nominated for positions on committees responsible for candidate selection, especially for prominent roles.

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