



## Participation and Challenges Faced by The women's Elected in Local Level Government at Bharatpur Metropolitan City, Chitwan, Nepal

Keshab Raj Sapkota\*

rksapkota35@gmail.com

### Abstract

*The study aimed to find out the women's representation at the local governance level. The paper is a qualitative analysis of participation and challenges of women in local Government in Chitwan, Nepal. This study explored the factors that facilitate women's access to political and participation in local level governments. This study was based on Interview methods, focus group discussion and key informant interview. The primary information was collected from the 61 elected women who told the story of their journey to political participation and present status at different local level governments. This study was limited within only one Bharatpur Metropolitan City of Chitwan, Nepal.*

*Majority of women lack resources and knowledge of their rights, have to face corrupt political culture and double burden of family role that restrict their effective participation in political processes. Inclusion Policy is the good practices that help advance women's representation at the local level. The role of family and political parties help in supporting women's engagement in local politics. The factors to women's political participation that they are mainly linked to low levels of female literacy and training, traditional gender roles and stereotypes, low self-esteem. Women are subject to strong discrimination coming from deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes and practices. There is a widespread belief that the public space is not meant for women and that by nature they cannot be good leaders. These perceptions are stronger in local level politics, making it hard for women to contest and take up leadership positions. The women's participation in local level government has been done to reduce or improve barriers and to analyze the political empowerment of women .*

**Keywords:** Nepal, Local Government, Women, Political Participation.

### Introduction

Local governments are the closest unit of the grassroots communities. According to the constitutional provision of Nepal 2072, the three level of government are distinctive, independent and interrelated. The local governments are much closer to the local people. Currently, Nepal is divided into 77 districts, 7 Provinces, and 753 local government units for sharing of power among the governments. In Nepal, local governments were instituted during the Panchayat era in 1960; however, the design of Panchayat system was more centralized approach that put the King at the center and people in the periphery. In 1990, the democracy was reinstated and a more liberal approach was implemented in the political system that created space for

\* Mr. Sapkota is Lecturer in Sociology and Anthropology at Birendra Multiple Campus

local government with deconcentrated power and functions. In 2002, the tenure of the local bodies was run out and these were handed over to central government bureaucrats until 2017 to run the overall administrative and development activities at the grassroots level. Nonetheless, the bureaucrats were hardly able to deliver the local level services such as drinking water, electricity, local infrastructures, agriculture, sanitation, health, education, disaster management, and preservation of the environment [1].

According to the UN- Habitat, most local governments are inherently patriarchal institutions. Their structures and procedures are designed for and by men and they do not take into account women's multiple responsibilities in their homes and communities, or differences of communications and decision-making styles existing between men and women [ 2].

Ian Adams said that “politics refers to the process of decision-making for human associations. But there is a need for some kind of formal organization or constitution which members can recognize. Otherwise, decisions will have no authority” [3]. Talking about political participation, Patrick J. Conge noticed that “Political participation may be defined as individual or collective action at the national or local level that supports or opposes state structures, authorities, and /or decisions regarding allocation of Public good”[4].

According to the Election Commission of Nepal, 2017, the recent local elections were held in three phases: May, June, and September 2017. A total of 35,041 local representatives were elected across 753 local units: 6 metropolises, 11 sub-metropolises, 276 municipalities, and 460 rural municipalities. Of these 35,041 elected representatives, 14,352 or 40.96% were women. These accomplishments are not a standalone effort; it is a continuum in the long history of political struggle and engagement by women's rights/ human rights activists in the past to ensure representation of women and marginalized communities/groups in the political structure of Nepal. For example, according to the data from the Election Commission Nepal, women make up 40.96 per cent of the total 350420 elected representatives of the local government and 93 percent of the Deputy Mayor or Vice Chairperson of 753 local government units (i.e. municipalities) are women. Twenty percent of the elected women are from historically marginalized social groups such as Dalit communities [5]. This women's representation in political sphere is an opportunity for the country's federalization process and engaging elected women and members of marginalized groups in policymaking, development planning and budgeting in local governments.

Many researchers including Randall (1987) , Matland and Taylor, (1997) Rule, (1981) explores various factors hinders women participation in politics such as lack of time for politics due to their domestic obligations, their lack of socialization for politics, their lower social capital and weaker asset base than men owing to discrimination in schools and in the market, their under representation in the jobs that favor political careers, their marginalization within male-dominated parties, their inability to overcome male and incumbent bias in certain types of electoral systems [6] . It was found a strong association between female education and political participation at both the individual and societal level in local government in Nepal.

Oduol [7] found access to education and lack of quality education still remains a barrier for many women. That shows education ill-equips women for leadership. Some of the researcher including Kellerman & Rhode (2007), Kiamba [8] found gender stereotype was one of the important barriers for women leadership. That explained women face a 'double edged sword' ascribed to gender role stereotypes, as there is a long-standing and widespread belief that male traits are consistent with leadership. Kunovich, Paxton and Hughes (2007) explained that cultural ideas about women can affect women's levels of representation throughout the political process, from an individual woman's decision to enter politics, to party selection of candidates, to the decisions made by voters on Election Day.

Access to political power and decision-making process are considered as an index of the overall status of women in society [9]. In spite of constitutional provisions on women's representation their widespread participation in 1990 movement for democracy, and increased awareness, women' have not been able to improve their political representation at various levels, positions of power and decision-making. This study was formulated and narrated some important factors which hinder the women political participation. Ideological factors, political factors, socio-cultural factors, economic factors are very important in this regards.

### **Materials/Data**

The data collection technique for the study was only based on primary sources. The primary source are used a life history approach that was supplemented by documentation. The study used a semi-structured interview, which allowed our respondents to engage in an in-depth narration of their lived experiences in political participation. The role of the researchers was to listen, record and probe further into areas that needed clarification or where more information was required. The life narratives were preceded by some closed-ended questions that probed into the pre-determined background factors that are historically assumed to be main participation and challenges in local government to leadership.

The respondents' socio-demographic information were mentioned in the tables which was kept in the Annex .The analytical procedures were based on textual interpretations and descriptions of the real-life experiences of the respondents. During the data collection process, the interviews were conducted in respondents ease places under the guidance of the researcher. To monitor and control the quality of the text, the researchers crosschecked the filled paper and the transcripts while listening to the tape recordings. In addition, the transcripts were translated into English by the researchers themselves. The data were sorted into different themes and systematically analyzed to identify issues emerging from the discussions and to interpret meanings under various thematic areas.

### **Methods**

This study was a qualitative a study that explored the factors that facilitate women's participation and challenges to political participation in local level governance. This was primarily based on the primary informations collected from the interview and key informants. The 61 elected local level government failed by women in our study were taken from a list of all women members

from the Bharatpur Metropolitan City, Chitwan website. They were asked to analyze the various outcomes on women's in political participation. Information's were manually tabulated. The simple statistical tool was used to analyze different the informations where necessary.

### **Theoretical Concept: Concept of Social Inclusion**

The equality between men and women on issues such as representation in various state structures, access to property and resources, participation in policy making has yet to be achieved. Due to the patriarchal thoughts rooted in our society, women's every activity has been controlled by men. These attitudes have affected woman's advancement and creativity as well. Any group of population or community feels to be included in mainstream of society and state is the social inclusion [10]. The concept of people centered sustainable development seeks maximum participation of people in the decision making process irrespective of their gender, culture, caste, ethnicity, language, religion and inhabitation. Thus, in order to attain sustainability in development it is equally important to have the inclusive involvement of people in all spheres of decision making and development. Patriarchy is here understood as a form of social stratification which creates a set of privileges for men, establishing gendered power relations of super ordination and subordination. Patriarchy ranks women's agency as inferior in a system of male dominance. This system transforms and adapts [10], affecting different women differently at all times.

All the International Women's Conferences, started in 1975 and the latest held in 1995 in Beijing, have stressed the need of women's access to decision making level of the politics. However, the achievements in this regard are not so satisfactory. The Second Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on Women held in 1994 in Jakarta, Indonesia has concluded that women's participation in the decision making levels of the state is very low although some women have gained the leadership positions of the state and the government with help of their family relationships in the Asia Pacific Region [11].

The concept of social inclusion is often defined as socio-economic and political empowerment of the communities who need special attention of the state to enable them to participate in the mainstream of development activities. Therefore, social inclusion is considered as process of promoting equitable access to both economic and social benefits including access to state institutions and administrative structures without any discrimination on the grounds of caste, descent, gender, religion, ethnicity, or other matters. Inclusion for this purpose is aimed at equal participation of the marginalized groups in development activities with proportional representation in decision making processes, while also promoting their access to social and economic opportunities with social justice.

### **Results**

Two separate FGDs were carried out with elected women representatives to understand and identify the underlying issues as an elected representative, socio-cultural context, challenges faced and their needs to effectively function as a local government representatives. Key

Informant Interviews were conducted with a select group of representatives (Ward Chairperson, Deputy Mayor/Ward Members) that responses from a woman key informants sheds some light into the reason why many women representatives are unable to contribute as much as they could.

### **Challenges Faced by the Elected Women in Local Level Government in Chitwan**

Women are underrepresented in local government in Nepal. However, recent years have witnessed an increasing awareness of women's productive roles, mobility, and their contribution to development. Ever since the first world conference on Women in Mexico 1975, gender issues have increasingly become a predominant theme of the worldwide development issues.

#### **A) Family**

The respondents told that "by custom, a patriarchal social system exists in Nepal. The life of women in Nepal is therefore dominated by this social system. Such a system upholds a rigid division of labor that controls women's mobility, roles and responsibility, and sexuality". Likewise, another participant stated: Women have the primary responsibility to look after children and seniors in the family. Therefore, women who have young children without family support find it difficult to travel and stay long hours. *I am lucky that my children are grown up and married. However, my parents are old enough, and I am the prime caregiver. When I am away, I depend on other people to look after them (Interview).*

Similarly, a participant said: *If the family or partner does not provide support that is quite a problem for women. Otherwise, women have children from their first marriage.* It is seen that partners or husbands of women are criticized negatively from people; that puts pressure on relationships. A successful woman needs to find a partner who is happy to do all house issues. Traditionally, a woman in Nepal derives her status from her family. Her role includes the maintenance of her family as a social institution and as an economic entity. Most importantly, through child bearing and child rearing, she ensures the existence of succeeding generations. Increasingly, however, women's roles, responsibility and mobility are changing due to persistent poverty and the gradual erosion of the familial umbrella of support.

#### **B) Patriarchy**

The society of Nepal is based on class and gender divisions. The division of social space and the difference in behavioral norms between men and women are rigidly maintained. The family, which constitutes the basic unit of social control, sets the norm for male and female roles. Within this system, the father or in his absence, the next male kin is the head of the household.

As a result, both decision making powers and economic control are vested in hands of men. Furthermore, the family operates through a clearly defined to inherit their fathers property in favor of brothers or in the event of inheriting property, pass control to their husbands or sons. In both cases, the man gives protection to the woman in return for control over her property, thus directly reinforcing a patriarchal tradition.

### **C) Gender discrimination**

The Mayor and Deputy Mayor are women in this metropolis. The encouragement of family is an important factor for women who want to join politics. The balance of work and family commitment is very difficult; in the society many women see the juggle of having a family and entering local government as too complex and give up the idea of entering politics (FGD 2). One participant also talked about the demands of maintaining a work/family balance: *Politics is a continuous job; you have to make time for the people important in your life. I do not have any child. However, I try to manage time for my partner.* In the society many families end with divorce because of lack of time for family (Interview).

Another participant noted the lack of childcare facilities: Women, especially young women do not join politics due to lack of support from family and lack of adequate childcare facilities. I had a child, daughter at home and the role of childcare and a supportive mother. Many women lack access to these facilities. Lack of childcare facilities is a big issue for women that keep them outside the job market and politics (FGD 2).

Some key informant interview respondents made it clear that there is a prevalent attitude among men representatives that their elected women peers are treated as “quota leaders,” A key informant from Bharatpur Metropolis in Chitwan stated: “Women leaders are motivated and should engage in competition, without reservation (quota).” It is unclear if the key informant was expressing personal beliefs or was quoting what the wider public thought of the issue. Another woman stated: “There is a strong way of saying men are better in making decisions and women are better in household works”. These key informant interviews gave opinion that patriarchy continues to be a powerful force against women participation in politics.

### **Participation in Local Level Governments by the Elected women Representative**

Participants were asked about their motivation for becoming a political candidate. The main reason given by the elected women representatives in our country was involvement with student politics and/or community activism for the betterment of the society in general. Among the 61 local representatives in Bharatpur Metropolitan City, out of 61 elected women in local level government, twenty were involved in student and union politics, and fifteen were engaged in community activities. On the other hand at the local level in Bharatpur, fifteen women became involved in politics as a result of being motivated with their social activities, and another fifteen were engaged social justice in community activities. Others inspired the political unions of eleven women participants (Table 5).

Ten participants identified gender discrimination and bullying in Nepalese politics as an impediment to women’s participation in politics. One participant remarked: Conservative attitudes, sexism, flirting is still in practice among the political parties and act faced by the women. There is a male politician of the opposition who in the public forums often gives attacking and harassing remarks against me. So now, whenever, I have any programme with him, my office makes sure that he speaks before me so that he cannot then criticize my speech (FGD1).

The main problems for the women representative in discharging their duties while in office. 19 women (31%) had said that lack of education is the major barriers for less number of participation of women in local government. Education is the strongest factor influencing women's control of their own destiny. Women are furthermore poor in a scene because of lower educational achievements and the prevalence of social norms that severely restrict their freedom of movement in the public place. Therefore they do not show interest in participating in local government activities. 15 women respondents (24.5%) reported that patriarchy system of Nepal was one of the major factors.

The ideology and practice impacts in different ways on the lives of women wherever they are. These types of attitudes become so embedded that they are taken as normal. Even where there is supposed equality, these attitudes tend to prevail in the society. The society enforces rules and laws in such way that affect the self confidence of women, limit their access on resources and information and thus keep them in a lower status compared to men. Although women have equal political rights to participate as voters and representatives, in reality they can be actively discouraged to do so (Interview).

All FGD participants, including the elected men representatives, were quick to identify mass communication training, skill development training, leadership development training, administrative training, planning and budgeting training, and legal training as ways to improve their understanding and performance on such issues. The participants mentioned capacity and skills constraints as the primary obstacles to effective empowerment of elected women representatives. There was also a general understanding that it is important to bring more women into mainstream politics and their views and opinions need to be accounted for in the decision-making process.

All the participants mentioned the intimidating nature of politics as a serious impediment to the participation of women in politics. According to a participant: *Politics is aggressive. The aggressive character of the work, the look of Parliament on our nightly news is like a bear pit, and many women do not want to work in such an environment* (FGD 2).

A Ward member also made a similar observation: Politics is an area of confrontation, and it is an aggressive place. Women do not like aggressiveness and avoid it. A Party interviewee listed the "brutal" nature of politics alongside factors identified as collectively making politics a "man's game." According to her: *Politics is still a man's game and quite hard for women.* Politics is time-consuming, brutal, demanding, needs sacrificing the family life that many women cannot afford (FGD 2).

The Focus Group Discussion participants had expressed similar sentiments about not being able to leave housework, being forced to wear veils to cover their heads, and not being able to participate in community decision making as factors that hindered women participation in local level politics. Therefore, the key informants concluded that Nepali women in some

communities have more difficulty breaking the shackles. Women elected members from such communities need more assistance and help in carrying out their duties as elected officials.

## Discussion

Walsh 2010, Waylen 2007, have found that gender scholars in comparative politics looking across an array of cases find that woman's participation, and resistance to it, ebbs and flows over time. In this research, the factors that most affect women's participation are regime type, type of electoral institutions, the strength of the women's movement, and masculinity norms in institutional bodies like legislatures, trade unions, and social movements [12]. This study suggests that resistance to women political participation is a normal aspect of politics that diminishes in intensity as women become routine participants; the research also suggests that while resistance may diminish within each cycle over time, it can reemerge with renewed intensity at the beginning of a new cycle.

As Krook 2010, found that Women's presence in formal politics is often secured through quotas, not only in South Asia but also in many regions across the globe. More than 100 countries have adopted quotas, dramatically increasing the number of women in national legislatures [13]. As women's presence in formal politics has increased over the past 20 years, organizations and scholars are beginning to investigate violence against women in politics. Similar to this finding, the nine respondents of the study of the local government participants also recognized the aggressive nature of politics as a deterrent to the political participation of women. One member said: *Women have the overall attitude that politics is a men's game*. Politics is very antagonistic to what women are afraid of. Because it is so competitive and combative, it does not suit a lot of women (Interview).

While quotas improve women's presence in politics and sometimes have positive spillover effects, they do not secure women's effective exercise of political power. For example, in Bangladesh, Panday (2008) has described a situation of "representation without participation" in which women are guaranteed presence at both the national and local levels of government while their ability to seriously participate in government is severely constrained [14]. This study also found that Women's equal participation in local governments and decision-making processes is critical for creating and promoting gender policies. Unfortunately, women are not well represented in local governments in Chitwan, Nepal Women faced a number of barriers that range from cultural exclusion to the resistance of key political institutions and machineries to creating gender balanced local administrations. For instance, in communities where women's roles as politicians and decision-makers are not well accepted, women face strong cultural barriers entering local governments. Furthermore, women in local governments may have to overcome institutional barriers. In many cases, male-dominated political parties are not willing to involve women in their local branches and, subsequently, in local politics.

The study shows that Quotas not only increase the number of women in politics, they also may have positive spillover effects in other sectors. The elected women started to come out from their household chores to different public spheres. The quota for women in local government



in Nepal that not only improved women's participation in income generation and social and political activities, but also increased their mobility and financial output absent any evidence of strong resistance. Contrary to findings in Rwanda, however, the Afghani quota generated no alterations in entrenched female roles or in attitudes toward women's role in society [15]. The evidence indicated that the route by which the women entered positions of power tended to determine their degree of political influence. For example, the study also found that women who entered in local government through election to a constituency had greater opportunity to influence their communities than those who entered through special seats. The gender intensive preferential stereotypical social attitudes towards women have discouraged participation of women in local level elections. Lack of financial resources is another major impediment to political participation of women. There is climate of political discourages women participation in local level politics in our society.

This Research suggests that women politicians might be able to counter some of the problems. However, the research also indicates that an infusion of a large number of women into the legislature at one time (*e.g.*, via a quota) antagonizes the majority group by threatening its dominance while also creating cooperation challenges for women participation, will remain uncertain for some time. A study conducted by Kandusi and Waiganjo (2015) examined how socio-cultural factors affect women's participation among the Maasai communities in Tanzania. The results indicate that a belief in male supremacy and dominance has made it difficult for both women and men to accept women as political leaders. It has also tended to create the perception that women are not capable of assuming formal political leadership positions. When women internalize these attitudes, they tend not to see that taking a leadership position has benefits, even when they are in leadership roles. Thus, by implication, the features that determine the careers women choose are largely influenced by their husband and parents and surrounding communities. However, while the social construction of gender is learned, it can also be deconstructed. This study shows that undergoing formal education has the potential to deconstruct gender roles and provide an enabling environment for women to participate in local level politics in our country.

## **Conclusion**

Society needs to deconstruct the stereotype of women as limited to household activities only. It is important for all institutions (state, family and community) to respond to women's specific needs such as bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labor and addressing biased beliefs and attitudes. Lack of access, control, ownership of resources, power, information, social network etc, are the most common features of majority of women positions in local LG. This also shows an overall subordinate political status of women restricting their possible participation in political processes. Women's have the sole responsibility for household maintenance and child care activities. To empower women, focus should be given on economic opportunity of income generation, household chores should be the concern of every member of the family regardless of sex.

Similarly, awareness about genders rights and duties is necessary for women. Similarly, women

should work collectively for freedom and common issues without joining political alliances, and greater political participation, transparency, and availability of information should be fostered. The study respondents agreed that the path ways for women to political leadership is like climbing a hill through thorn bushes. All the respondents admitted that the context remains many more challenge, and that social and cultural norms and beliefs continue to create societal obstacles that limit women's access to the political sphere. Nevertheless, the equal participation of women in political leadership is crucial to realizing women's democratic rights in Nepal in the days to come.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Respondents Caste/Ethnicity**

Caste/Ethnicity	Respondents	Percent
Brahmin/Chhetri	20	32.5
Janajati	11	18.0
Dalit	30	49.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Field Survey, 2018*

**Table 2: Respondents by Age Groups**

Age Group	Respondents	Percent
26-35	8	13.0
36-45	23	37.5
46-55	19	31.0
56-65	11	18.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Field Survey, 2018*

**Table 3: Respondents by Level of Education**

Educational Level	Respondents	Percent
Lower Secondary	43	70.5
SLC	14	23.0
IA/ Bachelor	4	6.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Field Survey, 2018*

**Table 4: Respondents by Martial Status**

Status	Respondents	Percent
Married	56	92.0
Unmarried	2	3.0
Single	3	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Field Survey, 2018*

**Table 5: Respondents by Reasons for Entering Politics**

Reasons	Respondents	Percent
Involved with student politics, community works and had political discussions at family since childhood	15	24.5
Involved with student politics and union movements	20	33.0
Involved with social justice issues	15	24.5
Worked for unions, used to work for many politicians in campaign	11	18.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Field Survey, 2018*

**Table 6: Respondents by the Barriers in Politics**

Responses	Respondents	Percent
Lack of education	19	31.0
Patriarchy	15	24.5
Lack of awareness about women's right	27	44.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Field Survey, 2018*