

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.3126/ncwaj.v56i1.76201>

Conflict and its Impacts on Women's Political Representation in Nepal

Prema Bista Thapa*

Abstract

Nepal went through immense socio-political transformation in the last three decades since the Maoist armed conflict which has had a significant role in establishing the issues of the marginalized population and women. Socio-cultural barriers and inequalities, violence and the patriarchal nature of society have often hindered women's empowerment. The promulgation of the Constitution in 2015 has ensured women's representation in politics and governance to promote gender equality. Although this is a positive step, more efforts are needed to enhance women's representation in politics at the key decision-making levels. This article explores the intricate relationship between the conflict and women's political representation in Nepal particularly in the context of the decade-long armed conflict (1996-2006) and its aftermath. It further examines the significance of these changes in women's political leadership and how significant barriers remain that must be addressed to ensure sustained participation and representation of women in the country's political landscape.

Keywords: armed conflict, women, political representation, constitution, elections

Introduction

It is estimated that more than 600 million women lived in conflict-affected countries in 2022 (UN Women, 2023). In the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, most Ukrainian women are taking care of the children and elderly as well as balancing household work and careers, while the men are occupied defending their country (IPPF, 2025). United Nations Security Council's Resolution 1325 on Women and Peace officially recognizes the importance of women's inclusion in decision-making in peace and post-conflict processes (Black, 2009). Measures taken after post-conflict situations have resulted in high numbers of women political representatives in countries like Bolivia, Burundi and Rwanda (Tripp, 2012). Despite the normative measures, women are still vulnerable to gender-based and sexual violence in conflict-prone regions and countries around the world. Nevertheless, they have remained steadfast in their quest for rightful political representation in their respective countries.

*Ms. Bista Thapa is a Development Professional and is currently pursuing M.Phil. in Gender Studies from Tribhuvan University.

It is a well-known fact that Nepal has been a patriarchal society with women being subordinated in almost all spheres of life. They faced discrimination and did not have equal opportunities to access all facets of development. Despite these challenges, Nepal has witnessed a great number of women leaders who have been key actors in socio-political changes like Yogmaya Neupane (1806-1941), who began the struggle for women's rights during the Rana Regime (Upreti, Upreti, & Ghale, 2020). Women played a crucial role in overthrowing the 104-year-long Rana oligarchy and establishing a multi-party democracy. After the change in the system, women got various rights such as suffrage, education, equality before the laws and equal wages for equal value of work (Pandey, 2016). More active participation of women in the political movement began with the fall of the autocratic Rana regime in 1951 (Giri, 2024). However, after a decade of the multi-party system, the party-less *Panchayat* regime was imposed by King Mahendra in 1960. The political parties, including women's organizations, were banned (Pandey, 2016).

The Nepali women started being active in various groups against the *Panchayat* system and built momentum supporting the larger cause of democracy all over the country within a decade. Women's participation in the People's Movement in 1990 was very courageous (Pandey, 2016). With the establishment of the parliamentary democracy, Nepali women's political activism gained momentum with the new political freedom. The Constitution of 1990 included the provision of 5% women candidates for the national elections (Pandey, 2016). Despite a reservation in the constitution and the immense contribution of Nepali women, the number of candidates rose to 81, 86 and 143 respectively in three parliamentary elections held in 1991, 1994 and 1999 with only 6, 7 and 12 women elected (Acharya, 2013).

Over the years, the political participation of women has increased tremendously. In the current composition of the Federal Parliament, out of a total of 334 members, there are 114 women members. Of the total 275 members in the House of Representatives, there are 92 (33.05%) women members, and out of the total 59 members in the National Assembly, there are 22 (37.3%) women members (IPU Parline, 2023). The increase in the number of women's political participation is a result of the continuous effort of known and unknown feminists who have relentlessly worked against the patriarchal system to establish a just and equitable society.

Though there has been an effort from various fronts including leaders from various political parties, Civil Society Organizations, intellectuals and common people, the substantial increase in the political participation of women in Nepal can largely be attributed to the Maoist movement, which elevated the women's movement to a new level. While the extent of the Maoist movement's contribution to enhancing the substantive representation of women is debatable, it deserves recognition for its

impact. The promulgation of the Interim Constitution of Nepal in 2007 mandated a 33 percent participation of women in the proposed Constituent Assembly—a national parliament responsible for drafting a new constitution (Giri, 2024). This provision significantly increased opportunities for women aspiring to enter national politics.

The Constitution of Nepal, promulgated in 2015, further reinforced gender inclusion across all three tiers of government. It established legal provisions ensuring at least one-third representation of women in the working committees of political parties, both chambers of the federal parliament, and the provincial assemblies (Ministry of Law Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2016). At the local level, a minimum of 40 percent of ward-level candidates—two out of five—must be women. Additionally, candidates for one of the two key executive positions—either Mayor or Deputy Mayor in urban municipalities, and Chairperson or Vice-Chairperson in rural municipalities—are also required to be women (Giri, 2024). As a result of these mandatory provisions, Nepal has witnessed a remarkable increase in women's representation across all levels of government, particularly at the local level.

Women and Armed Conflict

The Maoist insurgency in Nepal, which began in 1996 and lasted for ten years, was characterized by widespread violence and upheaval. As per the data of the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction, 17,886 persons were killed, 1,530 disappeared, 79,571 were displaced, 3,142 were abducted, 8,935 were disabled, 9,000 women became widows, 620 children became orphans and property of 17,484 people were damaged, causing the country multi-billion in economic losses (Upreti, Adhikari, Shivakoti, & Kolas, 2018).

Women played a crucial role in the insurgency, both as combatants and as supporters, challenging existing traditional gender roles. The conflict provided a platform for women to engage in political activism. Women participated actively in the insurgency which not only challenged the traditional gender roles but was a matter of surprise to many. Hisila Yami, in her book *Hisila from Revolutionary to First Lady*, writes how brave and enthusiastic women commanders were and that women generally did much better than men in keeping party secrets and not surrendering when caught by security forces (Yami, 2021). She also mentions that the participation of women in the “People’s War” was different from other movements as a policy was made to ensure the compulsory participation of women in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the United Revolutionary People’s Council. More than 3,000 women died during the period (Yami, 2021).

It is also believed that the decision of the then Royal Nepalese Army to recruit women in 2003 was influenced by the participation of women in the PLA. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) had claimed that there was 30-50 percent participation of women in the war, and the pictures of young gun-holding women in combat figures were rampant then. As per the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN), women made up only 19 percent of the registered combatants compared to the CPN (M) claim that a third of combatants in the PLA were women (Tamang, 2009). While the numbers of female combatants have been exaggerated, the CPN (M) from the outset had stated that gender transformation is part and parcel of their larger agenda of the transformation of Nepali society.

Evidence has indicated that conflict affects women, men, girls and boys differently in their experiences of violence, health impacts, economic activity, and political and civic inclusion. Conflict can result in short-term changes in traditional gender roles, though long-term changes may be more elusive (Strachan & Haider, 2015). Though a decade-long armed conflict has had various negative implications in the context of Nepal, it was a triggering factor in establishing political representation in the post-conflict period.

Post-Conflict Legislative Changes and its Impact on Women in Politics

As per Domingo et al. (2013), conflict can create opportunities for women to play an increased role in political decision-making. Longer, larger-scale wars that contest the political system and/or change the composition of government have produced the best outcomes for women to gain parliamentary representation (Hughes, 2009).

The post-conflict era witnessed significant legislative changes aimed at enhancing women's political representation in Nepal. The Interim Constitution of 2007 guaranteed a minimum of 33% representation for women in all levels of government. This was a landmark achievement that opened doors for women's participation in national politics. Article 63(5) of the Interim Constitution mandated that at least one-third of the Constituent Assembly members be women. This marked the first time women were guaranteed a major role in drafting the country's constitution. Before this, women had been compelled to protest for inclusion in the constitution drafting committees, despite their active involvement in the preceding political movements (Giri, 2024).

The foundation of the Constitution promulgated in 2015 is deeply rooted in the 2007 Interim Constitution. Therefore, the Constitution has solidified women's representation as a key pillar of governance and has been instrumental in advancing gender equality in the country's political landscape. Apart from 33 percent

reservation in the Federal Parliament and 40% at the local level, the Constitution also has provisions to include at least one woman in the two leadership position system, among the highest positions of the nation (e.g. President or Vice-President, Speaker or Deputy Speaker, Chair or Vice Chair of the National Assembly must be women), and at least 33 percent representation of women in the State structure, as well as one representative position for women as the head and deputy head of local governments (Upreti et al., 2018).

Numerical Representation of Women in the Last Two Elections

Nepal has completed two cycles of election elections in 2017 and 2022 since the promulgation of the Constitution as highlighted in the table below.

Table 1: Women’s participation in the last two elections across all levels

	Level	Male	Female	Total
2017	Local Level	20,688	14,353	35,041
	Provincial Level	361	189	550
	House of Representatives	185	90	275
	National Assembly	37	22	59
2022	Local Level	20,631	14,466	35,097
	Provincial Level	350	250	550
	House of Representatives	184	91	275
	National Assembly	37	22	59

Source: Election Commission of Nepal

If we analyze the election data, we can see that in both cycles, women’s participation is just at par with the quota as women’s representation is mostly dependent on Proportional Representation (PR).

Challenges to Women’s Political Representation

There has been a growing debate about the effectiveness of quotas for women’s representation in solidifying and advancing political gains for women after conflict (Strachan & Haider, 2015). The concern remains the same in Nepal. Although the PR system has increased the number of women in the political sphere, it has failed to increase women’s role at the decision-making level. Greater political participation of women does not, however, necessarily translate into greater decision-making powers, nor does it lead to an increase in gender-sensitive policies (Domingo et al.,

2013) Women from political parties have been vocal about their marginalization within the party. The unwillingness of political party men to take women seriously as political players is demonstrated by the practice of putting female candidates in areas that the party knows it will lose (Tamang, 2009). The problem lies deeply engrained in the patriarchal values and the mindset of the politicians.

While conflict has produced changes in gender roles, discriminatory structures and social norms tend to reassert themselves afterward (Domingo et al., 2013). With women taking on increased responsibilities, research indicates that gender identities, institutions and ideologies often remain the same. Increased responsibility of women, for example, is often viewed in line with prior expectations of their role – providing what the family needs. To make greater headway towards gender equality, women need power alongside responsibility and the role of men also needs to be re-envisioned (El Bushra & Sahl, 2005). Despite the progress made, women in Nepal continue to face numerous challenges that have hindered their political representation.

Conclusion

The impact of armed conflict on women's political representation in Nepal is complex and multifaceted. While the post-conflict period has provided opportunities for women to engage in politics, significant challenges remain. To ensure sustained progress towards gender equality in political representation, it is essential to address the socio-cultural barriers, violence and systemic inequalities that hinder women's participation. Continued advocacy, support from civil society, and commitment from political leaders are crucial in fostering an inclusive political environment where women's voices are heard and valued. Women candidates have been elected in the parliament simply to fulfill the quota of women representatives. There is a need to challenge the socio-cultural barriers that are deeply entrenched in the patriarchal norms and tradition which has limited women's access to the political power and decision-making process. Merely relying on the PR system will keep women politicians drowned in the vicious cycle of tokenism which will always hinder their political leadership qualities. Women leaders should demand to be represented through the First-Past-the-Post System (FPTP) to ensure their equal and rightful place in the country's politics.

References

- Acharya, I. (2013). Challenges of Nepalese Women in Parliamentary Elections. *TU Journal*, 81-83.
- Black, R. (2009). Mainstreaming Resolution 1325? Evaluating the Impact on Security Council Resolution 1325 on Country-Specific UN Resolutions. *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 1-30.

- Domingo, P., Holmes, R., Menocal, A. R. & Jones, N. (2013). Assessment of the Evidence of Links between Gender Equality, Peacebuilding and State Building: Literature Review. Retrieved from <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-Nassets/publications-opinion-files/8767.pdf>
- El-Bushra, J. & Sahl, I. (2005). Cycles of Violence: Gender Relations and Armed Conflict. Retrieved from <http://www.acordinternational.org/silo/files/cycles-of-violence-gender-relations-and-armed-conflict.pdf>
- Giri, A. (2024). *Women's Political Participation in Federal Nepal*. Lalitpur: Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN).
- Hughes, M. M. (2009). Armed Conflict, International Linkages, and Women's Parliamentary Representation in Developing Nations. *Social Problems*, 174-204.
- IPPF. (2025, February 24). *Featured Perspective*. Retrieved from IPPF: <https://www.ippf.org/featured-perspective/three-years-under-fire-how-russo-ukrainian-war-continues-affect-women>
- IPU Parline. (2023, January). Global Data on National Parliaments. Retrieved from <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/NP/NP-UC01/>.
- Ministry of Law Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. (2016). *The Constitution of Nepal*. Kathmandu.
- Pandey, B. (2016). Feminist Movement in Nepal: Historical Foot-steps Towards Gender Equality. *Ministry of Population and Environment (MOPE): Population and Development Journal*.
- Strachan, A. L., & Haider, H. (2015). *Gender and Conflict Topic Guide*. Retrieved from https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/gender_conflict.pdf.
- Tamang, S. (2009). The Politics of Conflict & Difference or the difference of conflict in politics: The Women's Movement in Nepal. *Palgrave Macmillan Journals*, 61-80.
- Tripp, A. M. (2012). *Women's Political Empowerment in Statebuilding and Peacebuilding: A Baseline Study*. London: UK Department of International Development.
- UN Women. (2023, October). *UN Women Report*. Retrieved from UN Women: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/10/women-are-increasingly-at-risk-in-conflict-underrepresented-in-peace-processes-according-to-un-secretary-general-report>
- Upreti, B. R., Adhikari, D. P., Shivakoti, S., & Kolas, A. (2018). *Nepalko Rajnitima Mahila: Dwanda Byabasthapan Dekhi Sambidhan Karyanyan Samma*. Kathmandu: Bhrikuti Academic Publication.
- Upreti, B. R., Upreti, D., & Ghale, Y. (2020). Nepali Women in Politics: Success and Challenges. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 2. Retrieved from <https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2245&context=jiws>.
- Yami, H. (2021). *Hisila From Revolutionary to First Lady*. Gurugram: Penguin Books.