

Nepal's house of cards: are women included or co-opted in politics?

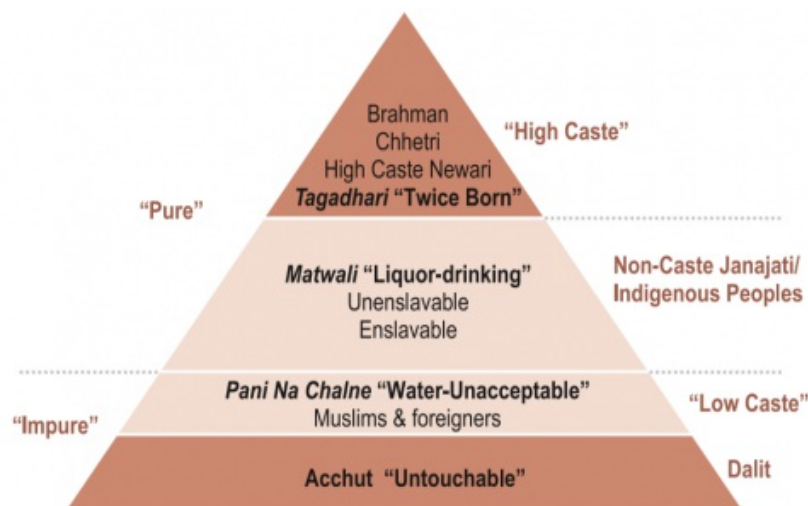


The recently concluded local elections in Nepal resulted in 40.9 per cent of female representation at the local level. [Sangita Thebe Limbu](#) writes about the power dynamics, lived experiences of women, gender quotas and women's political engagement.

The 2017 local elections in Nepal have been hailed as a historic moment for gender equality and political inclusion with 40 per cent of female representation achieved at the local governance level. The principle of proportional inclusion of women enshrined in [the new Constitution of Nepal](#) was operationalised in the form of gender quotas during local elections, which were held for the very first time in almost two decades and in three separate phases between May and September 2017. The [Local Election Act](#) mandates in each ward, which is the smallest administrative unit that collectively forms a municipality or a rural municipality in the case of villages, there will be one chair and four ward members – two of them must be women including one Dalit woman. Additionally, the Act stipulates that political parties must field at least one female candidate for the post of either mayor or deputy mayor of a municipality or for chief or deputy chief in the case of a rural municipality. As a result, [women now constitute 40.9 per cent](#) of the total 35,041 local government representatives elected across 753 local levels, including six metropolitan cities, 11 sub-metropolitan cities, 276 municipalities and 460 rural municipalities.

Inclusion or co-optation?

Women, however, are not a homogenous category as everyday lived experiences are shaped through interactions and interconnectedness of various social identities including gender, race, class, caste, ethnicity, geography, disability, age and sexuality. In multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious country like Nepal with [over 120 different caste/ethnic groups speaking over 120 different languages and practicing over 10 different religions](#) recognising polycentric orientation of social identities and marginalisation becomes highly pertinent.



Nepal's Traditional Caste Pyramid (Source: DFID/World Bank. 2006. [Unequal Citizens](#))

[Bhola Paswan's extensive analysis](#) of the 2017 local election results highlights the sheer diversity within the homogenised category of 'Nepali women'. Although 40.9 per cent of women are now represented in local governments, [disaggregated data shows](#) that out of the total female local representatives, 47.4 per cent are Dalits (referred as 'untouchables' in the Hindu caste system), 23.5 per cent are Khas Aryas (including Brahmins and Chhetris, who [dominate](#) political, social and economic realms in Nepal), 19.9 per cent are Janajatis (indigenous people with traditionally non-Hindu culture, language and religion), 8 per cent Madheshis (non-hill origin people living in the plain region of Nepal sharing cultural similarities with North India), and 1.3 per cent Muslims. Comparatively high percentage of Dalit women can be attributed to Dalit women quotas in the form of reserved seats at ward membership level.

Beyond those quotas, however, Dalit women have negligible presence in other positions such as deputy mayor, which has 91 per cent representation of women primarily from Khas-Arya and Janajati background. In the key decision-making positions as mayor/chief and ward chair, which were non-quota seats, [only 2 percent of women are represented](#). The data further reveals that [the dominance of Khas Arya men](#) remains unchallenged as they record highest representation in key decision-making positions as 48 per cent mayors, 44 per cent chairpersons and also 44 per cent ward chairs despite constituting only 16 per cent of the total population. At the same time, the representation of Dalit men stands at just 2.6 per cent while Dalit women constitute 18.7 per cent of the total representatives, mainly due to Dalit women ward member quotas.

The political representational inequality is a clear manifestation of historical and prevailing power structures and hierarchical social relations. The stark difference between representation of Dalit women and Dalit men also co-relates with findings from [other South Asian](#) and [European countries](#) that show how quotas have increased inclusion of minority group women but that has happened at the cost of minority group men, not majority group men. Thus, political inclusion does not directly translate into reconfiguration of existing power structures, and perhaps it may even signify co-optation and reproduction of marginalisation, as opposed to an inclusive political system.

Beyond numeric representation

Taking the macro level data analysis as both reference and departure point, my recent research aimed to explore the power dynamics that unfolds at micro level by focusing on how women electoral candidates representing myriad of interests, affiliations and identities were engaged in political processes during local elections. I conducted my fieldwork in the city of [Rajbiraj](#), located near the Nepal-India border, that holds great political significance due to its contribution in past democratic movements and most recently in Madheshi identity movement, during local election period. This involved 35 semi-structured qualitative interviews primarily with women candidates and party workers, to understand specifically about the actors who constituted those new political spaces created by quotas. Here are some of the preliminary findings from my research:

Getting access and motivations behind

All the interviewed women candidates come from families with a political background, and some of them were also involved in party politics although primarily concentrated at membership level rather than holding leadership positions. The search for female candidates to fulfil the quota requirement was rampant. Rather than selecting candidates from within their own parties, the party leadership was scouting for external candidates, and for that they usually relied on political/personal connections, as a result those women who were situated in close proximity to the men with political power benefited the most. This was particularly in the case of decision making positions like deputy mayor whereby the parties were seeking external candidates with influential political and/or educational background, rather than promoting women party workers who were largely restricted at ward membership level.



The new political spaces created by gender quotas has attracted diverse range of actors. Many women candidates do not have any previous background in social work or activism, and it is their first exposure in formal political space. Image credit: Flickr/[Jana Reifegerste](#)/CC BY-SA 2.0

As for the motivations that drive candidates to engage in politics, they are anything but uniform. There is a constellation of interests informed by livelihood negotiations, experiences of socio-economic exclusion, and complex power dynamics within families and political parties. With that said, joining politics as a form of livelihood strategy does feature prominently in most of the participants' narratives. Lack of economic opportunities that confine their horizon to domestic chores and familial relations had given rise to commonly held perceptions of gender quotas as an opportunity to break free from the drudgery of daily domestic routine and do something different for a change.

The new political spaces created by gender quotas has attracted diverse range of actors. Many women candidates do not have any previous background in social work or activism, and it is their first exposure in formal political space. At the same time, there are also those candidates who are well-educated, politically informed, socially active and attempting to maintain a delicate balance between cultural preservation and fighting against negative cultural practices. In the contemporary Nepali political context characterised by patronage and clientelism, there is no doubt that for women in particular, political connections at personal level play a decisive role in getting access to and ensuring longevity of their political journeys. However, my research shows that the privilege conferred by proximity to those in power, does not guarantee any protection against gender and caste-based discrimination that women continue to face within their political parties, and in society at large.

Navigating “closed spaces”, clientelism and gendered subjectivity

The interviewed participants' narratives collectively highlight how in a clientelist political culture, the *real* politics of building connections, forging alliances, devising political strategies, formulating election manifestos and garnering party loyalty take place in informal and “closed spaces”, which are built upon and perpetuate gendered power structures. Standing up for elections is not only about pleasing voters with material incentives but also garnering support and loyalty from party workers primarily using money and alcohol. One informant who holds a senior position in finance sector in Rajbiraj, speculated mayoral candidates were spending above Rs 1 crore (\$ 100, 000) in their election campaigns. It was widely reported that during candidate selection process, those with economic asset and resources to fund political campaigns were prioritised, in fact, external people including business contractors were paying political parties to buy an electoral ticket. Caste/religion was also a determining factor during candidate selection to leverage pervasive caste/religion based ‘vote bank’ politics.

Hence, lack of economic resources and family support, and politics of 'money and muscle' that unfold on the ground certainly act as deterrent for women candidates to enter and progress in politics. Beyond that, gendered subject formation also plays a key role in shaping their political outlook and the kind of presence they can project in a political space. Many participants use family and "good guardian" as references when explaining their understanding of governance. The common narrative is if there is a good guardian, then the family flourishes and if not, it won't. In the given context however, the predominant family structure is a heteronormative arrangement with male as the guardian of the family, which legitimatises male authority not only at family level, but it also extends in the wider political space where we come to accept male leadership as the norm.

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There emerges an essentialist view around women and leadership whereby women are considered to be more considerate, egalitarian, cooperative, less prone to corruption and good with management skills given their care responsibilities within the household. Although those seemingly positive attributes could well align with consensus-oriented democracy, they are contentious nonetheless, as they are derived from a gendered context that privileges male authority. This is also fitting in the context of why so many women have been concentrated at deputy mayor positions. Although there are financial constraints and paternalistic party leadership, there is also some truth in the fact that many able female candidates did not actively seek mayoral positions as being a deputy mayor fits well within the 'second-in-charge' narrative of the family and so to say, it does not ruffle any feathers.

Hence, understanding the power dynamics prevalent in political spaces requires an exploration of how other social, cultural and economic spaces co-exist together and how people negotiate and navigate across them on an everyday basis. Those "everyday navigations" and formations of gendered subjectivities become particularly important if we want to address not just political representational inequalities but also potential for substantive and meaningful representation.

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This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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