

BRIEFING NOTE

NOMINATIONS AND ELECTABILITY: THE ROLE OF GENDER NORMS IN NEPAL'S LOCAL ELECTIONS



By Nepal Institute for Policy Research (NIPoRe)

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Key findings

- Major political parties in Nepal nominate fewer women for competitive seats, despite claims of 'gender blindness' in their candidate selection process. This is the result of a flawed nomination process, as well as selection criteria that are inherently male-favouring.
- Female deputy chief executive candidates received marginally less votes than male counterpart but there was no statistically significant difference when females were the chief executive candidate, defying the myth that female candidates are less electable.
- The biases against female candidates do not end with the nomination process. Even if they win an election, women often face behaviours based on gender norms (such as women not being perceived as chief executives) that affect their performance.

Key terms

Major political parties: the national political parties that have won at least one seat in first-past-the-post and secured 3% of the country's proportional representation votes in federal elections.

Governance structure: Nepal's federal democratic republican system of governance, which includes three levels of government: federal, provincial and local.

Local-level election: two local-level elections (2017 and 2022) held in Nepal after its transition to a federal structure on the adoption of the new Constitution in 2015.

Chief executives: the mayors in metropolitan cities, sub-metropolitan cities and municipalities; and the chairpersons in rural municipalities.

Deputy chief executives: deputy mayors in metropolitan cities, sub-metropolitan cities and municipalities; and the deputy chairpersons in rural municipalities.

Palika(s): all local administrative bodies, including metropolitan cities, sub-metropolitan cities, municipalities and rural municipalities.

Background

Political systems worldwide are dominated by men. The data show that only 26.8% of parliamentarians worldwide (in both the lower and upper chamber) are women (IPU, 2023). Women's candidacies are viewed through a lens of gender stereotypes and the perception that politics is a men's playing field is prevalent across societies.

Various studies have shown that voters are likely to find women candidates less electable. One study in the United States (US) has shown that voters are likely to find women candidates less electable than men (Bateson, 2020). Research also suggests that voters exhibit pragmatic bias. This means that even people who want to vote for women candidates end up not voting for them because of their belief that women are less electable than men (Corbett et al., 2022). Another study that looked at opportunity structures for women's candidacy and electability in the United Kingdom (UK) and the US showed that traditional views of women affected their ability to run and win a race (Welch and Studlar, 1996).

Women also face specific challenges from political parties themselves, including formal and informal barriers to entry, non-transparent nomination processes, violence, and a hyper-masculine culture (Brechenmacher and Hubbard, 2020). Similarly, the prioritisation by political parties of rewards, compensation, hierarchy and control – rather than popularity with voters, competence and qualifications – also serves as a barrier for women (Tamang et al., 2022).

In Nepal, the political system has remained largely male-dominated, despite frequent changes in the political system. While women's political representation in Nepal has improved significantly as a result of legal provisions in the country's Constitution, there is still a long road ahead for equal gender representation.

Since the 2022 federal-level election, 91 (33.1%) of the country's 275 parliamentarians have been women. Of these, only nine women (9.89%) were elected directly, while the rest were elected through the proportional representation system (Election Commission, 2022a).

An increase in the number of women parliamentarians (see figures from 1991 to 2022 in Table 1 below) in Nepal can be attributed to the legal provision that requires 33% of seats to be filled by women (MOWCSC, 2020). Despite the greater numbers of women in parliament, men still hold leadership and decision-making positions and this has proved to be a barrier to women's participation and advancement in politics. This is critical in parliamentary systems, such as Nepal, where political parties approve election candidates.

National political context

The political landscape of Nepal has changed vastly in recent decades. The country has changed its system from an absolute monarchy to a multiparty democracy and the current federal democratic republic system. Throughout these political upheavals and changes, women have always been active participants in bringing about change (Upreti et al., 2020). However, their participation in the formal political system remained limited.

During the 1959 general election, for example, only 6 of the 786 candidates were women and none of them won. In 1990, Nepal's Constitution introduced a provision that 'at least five percent of the total number of candidates contesting an election from any organization or party must be women candidates' (Government of Nepal, 1990). The Interim Constitution of 2007 ensured that one-third of the parliamentarians were females but did away with the provision that 5% candidates must be women (Article 63(5)) (Government of Nepal, 2007). This was ensured through a combination of a

first-past-the-post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR) system of elections. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 reaffirmed the provision. In addition, the Local Level Election Act 2017 requires that if a party nominates candidates for both chief executive and deputy chief executive then at least one candidate has to be female (Article 17(4))(Government of Nepal, 2015).

Table 1 shows the nominations and wins for female candidates in Nepal's general/federal elections since 1990.

Table 1: Number of female candidates and winners in Nepal's general/federal elections

Election Year	Number of female candidates	% of female candidates	Number of female winners	% of elected female parliamentarians
1991	81	6.02	6	2.92
1994	86	5.96	7	3.41
1999	143	6.34	12	5.85
2008*	326	10.41	30	8.96**
2013*	603	12.03	10	2.99
2017*	146	7.48	6	3.63
2022*	224	9.29	9	5.45

Source: Election Commission, 2017 (for 1991 to 2013); Election Commission, 2018 (for 2017); Election Commission, 2022b (for 2022).

*For FPTP system only.

**2008 was a peculiar year because a large proportion (8.96%) of female candidates won the elections. This was primarily because the Communist Party of Nepal - Maoist (now the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Centre) nominated a large number of female candidates who were former Maoist combatants.

Women's participation is also limited within the political parties. A negligible number of women leaders have reached parties' upper-level leadership positions, and no woman has been President or Vice-President of any major political party so far. It was only after the implementation of the federal system in 2015 that Nepal made remarkable progress in terms of women's representation in politics, and this can be attributed – in large part – to the legal provisions of the country.

Nepal's government is a three-tier system divided into federal, provincial and local levels. The Federal Parliament consists of the National Assembly and House of Representatives and is responsible for policies on national security and defence, currency and monetary affairs, external relations, and matters that are inter-provincial in nature. Article 84 of the Constitution of Nepal states, 'Women should account for at least one-third of the total members elected from each party in the Federal Parliament' (Government of Nepal, 2015).

Local political context

Nepal has a total of 753 local units, which include metropolitan cities, sub-metropolitan cities, municipalities (*nagar palika*), and rural municipalities (*gaun palika*), known collectively as palikas. Since the implementation of federalism, palikas have gained more power to plan and implement services for their localities. This has been an important step in the development of the country, as local governments are more aware of the needs of local residents.

Several laws have been introduced to ensure that local-level governments are inclusive. Section 17(4) of the Local Level Election Act 2017 states that if a political party has nominated candidates for both the chief executive or deputy chief executive, at least one of the nominated candidates must be a

woman. However, a party has no obligation to nominate a woman candidate if it nominates a candidate for only one of these posts (Election Commission, 2017a).

Table 2 shows the nominations of female candidates in the 2017 and 2022 local-level elections for chief executive and deputy chief executive positions. The data show a substantial decrease in the number of female candidates in the 2022 local-level elections in comparison to the 2017 elections.

Table 2: Number of women nominees in local elections

Year	Chief executives (% of total nominees)	Deputy chief executives (% of total nominees)
2017	368 (6.3)	3591 (82.29)
2022	361 (8.1)	3066 (80.7)

Source: Shrestha and Phuyel, 2019 (for 2017); Election Commission, 2022c (for 2022).

Despite the positive strides Nepal has made in terms of the political representation of women, political parties still hesitate to nominate women candidates directly, and are doing only just enough to fulfil the legal provisions mandating women’s participation. They have not taken any additional steps to increase the participation rate beyond the legal requirement. Women have been offered limited candidacies and, as the data show, the majority of women are nominated for deputy positions. Additionally, anecdotal evidence shows that some women candidates for the chief executive posts are nominated for less competitive or ‘hopeless’ constituencies where they have low chances of winning. It is necessary, therefore, to explore the reasons for the fewer opportunities given to women politicians by Nepal’s political parties where they have a good chance of winning the race.

Objectives

This research project has the following objectives.

1. To assess whether women candidates were nominated less than men in competitive constituencies.
2. To assess if women candidates were less ‘electable’ than male candidates in Nepal’s 2022 local elections.
3. To identify the obstacles that women candidates and winners face from their constituencies, local institutions and political parties during the nomination process or while in office.

Methodology

The study has used a mixed methods approach. Quantitative research has tested two hypotheses, while the qualitative research method (key informant interviews) has been used to analyse the challenges faced by potential female candidates in terms of receiving party nominations, contesting elections and performing their duties as chief executives if they win.

Research objective 1: biased nomination

Hypothesis: major parties nominate more female candidates for seats that are 'hopeless/non-competitive'.

This research defines competitive seats as those seats where the gap between the winning candidate and the runner-up (for the chief executive post) is less than 10%. These are in constituencies where the race is relatively open (for the top two parties), and the candidates can expect a 'realistic' chance of winning. We have calculated whether any palika is competitive on the basis of the result of the 2017 local elections, and have tested the hypothesis on the nomination of candidates in the 2022 local elections based on the competitiveness of the palika in 2017.

To test the hypothesis, we have used Ordinary Least Squared (OLS) regression. The regression tests the relation between the competitiveness of the palika and the gender of the candidates, while keeping other factors constant, such as geography and the urban/rural nature of the constituency, the age of the candidates and the gender of the competing candidates.

Research objective 2: electability of female candidates

Hypothesis: women candidates are less electable than male candidates in competitive seats.

We have defined the electability of candidates by the number of votes a candidate receives in the election in comparison to the candidates' counterpart from the same party in the same constituency.

As stated earlier, if a party nominates candidates for chief executive and deputy in one constituency, then at least one of the candidates has to be female. The same voters from the constituency vote, independently, for the chief executive and deputy. The Chief executive and deputy from the same party often run on a similar, if not common, policy platform. Therefore, we would reasonably expect the pair to receive similar vote count. Any difference in votes received by the pair will be the result of personal attributes, including gender.

This research has, therefore, conducted a paired T-test of the votes received by candidates of different genders (but from the same party) in a constituency to see if there has been any statistically significant difference in the votes received by the male and female candidates. The research has limited the test to competitive seats to neutralise the possible bias in the electability of female candidates because of potential nominations in non-competitive seats.

Research objective 3: challenges faced by female candidates/winners

A total of 27 key informant interviews (KII) were conducted (see Table 3) to analyse the challenges faced by female candidates during the nomination, campaign or the performance of their duties (if elected). The findings were then analysed qualitatively to identify the obstacles faced by female candidates.

The KIIs participants represented nominees across provinces, geography, caste, religion and party and included nominees and the representatives of the 'selection committees' of the five national parties that competed in the 2017 and 2022 local elections: the Communist Party of Nepal, Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML); Nepali Congress (NC); Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist Centre (CPN-MC); Janata Samajwadi Party (JSP) and the Loktantrit Samajwadi Party (LSP). They also included an independent candidate and stakeholders from other relevant institutions such as the media, the Election Commission, and rights activists, among others.

Qualitative content analysis was carried out after transcribing the KIIs to provide explanations for the results in objectives 1 and 2 and to shine some light on objective 3.

Table 3: Participants in key informant interviews (KIIs)

Category	Number of KIIs
Party leaders from Selection Committee	5
Women candidates: winners re-nominated	5
Women candidates: winners not re-nominated	4
Women candidates: unelected and then re-nominated [2017 unelected, 2022 nominees]	2
Women candidates: unelected and then not re-nominated	2
Independent women candidate	1
Election Commission	2
Women's rights activists	2
Legal Expert	2
Media/Journalist	2

Source: Authors notes.

Limitations

The KIIs were conducted with women nominees only, so the study misses the viewpoints of women who were not selected during the nomination process itself. Female candidates who were nominated at least once were the ones who were able to break the 'glass ceiling' to a certain extent. This could mean that the challenges faced by other potential female candidates are more deeply entrenched than the report suggests.

The study also views voter perceptions through the lenses of political parties, nominees or elected officials. Voters themselves were not interviewed, although interviews with legal experts and journalists signalled the realities on the ground. A voter survey would complement the findings of this research.

The study for the second hypothesis compares votes for chief and deputy chief positions, where deputies are usually women. Candidates and political parties believe that voters perceive women to be better placed for deputy chief positions. Therefore, a comparison of the votes for male and female candidates could have some errors. To minimise this risk, the research compares the electability of female candidates when the chief executive candidate is male and female separately.

Findings

Nomination

The political parties are responsible for nominating candidates at the local level under Nepal's parliamentary system. Political parties have their own internal processes and criteria for their nominations. **The research found that the nomination of female candidates in 2022 local election for competitive seats was significantly lower than for male candidates** (see Table 4).

Table 4: Women nominees in competitive and non-competitive 2022 local elections

Category	Competitive seats	Non-competitive seats
Total seats	280 (37.2%)	472 (62.8%)
Total women nominated	15 (4.1%)*	346 (95.8%)**
Total women winners	7 (46.6%)	7 (2%)

Source: Election Commission, 2022.

*Includes women candidates who secured top-two positions in competitive constituencies.

** Does not include independent candidates for chief executive posts.

Of the total of 361 women nominated for either type of seat, barely 4.1% were nominated for competitive seats in the 2022 local-level elections, while 95.8% were nominated for non-competitive seats. Meanwhile, the percentage of male nominees for competitive and non-competitive seats stood at 95.9% and 4.2%, respectively. This suggests that there is a bias that places fewer women in seats that are more competitive for the party where candidate (including women) could have a greater chance of winning.

In addition, regression analysis was performed to assess the relationship between the competitive palikas (municipalities), and the male mayoral candidates while keeping other variables constant. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Ordinary Least Squared (OLS) regression on gender and competitiveness

Independent variables	2022 mayoral candidates (male)
Competitive palikas	2.468*** (0.312)
Urban / rural (urban = 1)	0.381 (0.324)
Constant	3.518*** (0.329)
Observations	606
R-squared	0.129

Standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

The result of the regression indicates that the competitiveness of palikas has a major influence on the number of women mayoral/chairperson candidates, with **competitive palikas having 2.5 times more candidates that are male, compared to non-competitive palikas, and that the gap is significant (at 99% confidence interval)**. It means that a palika is 2.5 times more likely to have a male mayoral candidate if it is a competitive palika compared to a non-competitive palika. The correlation is very strong for this to be a statistical anomaly. This is a strong demonstration of a gender bias in the allotment of candidates by the major political parties in Nepal, with female candidates at a significant disadvantage. As a result, women are nominated less than men for chief executive posts, and even when they are nominated, they are more likely to be nominated in non-competitive seats. And this discrepancy exists even though political parties and nominees claim that there is no gender bias in the candidate selection process.

Electability

The nomination of a female candidate for the position of chief executive often comes as a surprise. More so, their electability is also doubted, which is evident by the lower number of female candidates in competitive seats (as shown in Table 4).

A paired T-test was carried out to see if there was any mean difference between the votes received by the male and female candidates in the 2022 local elections in Nepal in competitive seats. Table 6 (below) summarizes the results. Pair 1 are those palikas where the chief executive and deputy chief executive nominee were male and female candidates respectively. Conversely, the constituencies in Pair 2 had female candidate as the executive chief and male candidate as the deputy executive. The number of total pairs for Pair 1 and Pair 2 were 358 and 14 respectively.

The results show that the male chief executive nominees received almost 200 more votes, on average, compared to their corresponding female deputy nominees, and that such difference is not by happenstance. The difference was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Hence, female deputy candidates were less electable than their male executive chief candidates.

This should, however, be seen in context. First, the average mayoral winning candidates received 6,950 votes, while the average winning deputy chief executive candidate received 6,419 votes. Second, the difference between the votes received by winning candidates and runners-up and for both chief and deputy chief executive was around 1,500 votes (1,457 for chief executive and 1,472 for deputy chief executive). Therefore, the difference between the male and female candidates' 200 votes would not have made a significant difference in most constituencies.

In addition, there were 14 pairs of nominees where a party nominated a female candidate for executive chief and a male candidate for corresponding deputy executive. Here too, male nominees received 335 more votes than their female counterparts, on average. However, the difference was not statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval. The sample size was small in this case, however.

The difference in means is largely the result of one 'outlier' in Birendranagar municipality, where the male candidate for deputy-mayor received at least 4,000 votes more than the female mayoral candidate. Therefore, the paired-T test does not show statistically significant difference in the average number of votes received by female chief executive candidates and male deputy chief executive candidates.

In summary, female candidates were marginally less electable when nominated for deputy chief executive positions, but not for chief executive positions. Parties, therefore, could encourage the nomination of female candidates for the chief executive positions with a male deputy. Data suggests that doing so would not compromise their party's electability.

Table 6: Paired T-test of gender and votes received by nominees of the same party

				Significance	
		N	Correlation	One-sided p	Two-sided p
Pair 1	Executive chief (male)-deputy executive chief (female)	358	0.98	<.001	<.001
Pair 2	Executive chief (female)- deputy executive chief (male)	14	0.972	<.001	<.001

		Paired differences							Significance	
					95% Confidence interval of the difference					
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	One-sided p	Two-sided p
Pair 1	Executive chief (male)- deputy executive chief (female)	199.402	783.401	41.404	117.976	280.829	4.816	357	<.001	<.001
Pair 2	Executive chief (female)- deputy executive chief (male)	-334.643	1297.17	346.683	-1083.607	414.321	-0.965	13	0.176	0.352

Source: Authors' calculations

Results and interpretation

Analysis of gender bias in the nomination process

Despite the clear bias in the existing data, the major political parties claim that they are indifferent to the gender of candidates when nominating them. One of the interviewees from the party selection committee (KII, 5) said:

'When choosing a candidate to nominate, we don't take into account a candidate's gender. We only take into consideration a candidate's likelihood of winning.'

The female candidates also agreed that their gender was not the reason for their non-nominations. A mayoral candidate in the 2017 local election (KII18) said:

'If gender played a role, I would not have been nominated for such a competitive position. I was nominated because of my early involvement in the party, my prior experiences, and my ability to influence people.'

Only 2 out of the 14 women candidates interviewed reported that they had difficulty being nominated as a result of their gender.

The clear discrepancy between what is being claimed by political parties/candidates and the existing data prevails because of the existing structural biases in the nomination process. The process political parties follow and the criteria they employ when nominating candidates contradict their own claims, as both the process and the criteria favour male candidates overwhelmingly.

To nominate candidates for local-level elections, some political parties form booth committees (candidate selection committees composed of local party leaders) at the local level, while others leverage the local committees that already exist. Almost all of the major political parties interviewed claim to have made their booth committees and party committees inclusive of women, complying with the legal requirements.

Political parties must have 33% women on every committee at all levels, a commitment that they generally fulfil. But to do so, they sometimes reduce or downsize the size of the committee itself if there are fewer women in the area. This further restricts women's political opportunities, limiting their avenues for active political participation. One of the interviewees from the party selection committee (KII 1) said:

'We strongly fulfil the legal requirements: 33% of committee seats at all levels are designated for women in our party. If there are fewer women in a particular area, the committee's size is downsized, but women's seats are not given to men.'

In addition, the female politicians on such committees complain about their voices not being heard while taking major decisions. They have little say in decision-making processes or candidate selection as they are often confined to member-only positions. Men, however, hold influential roles such as Chief and Secretary, directing the nomination process and overall decision-making. One of the female interviewees from the party selection committee (KII 4), said:

'Our party was one of the first in the country to advocate the principle of inclusiveness, but true inclusiveness or meaningful participation of women inside the party hasn't been implemented.' She added, 'We are rarely given the opportunity to speak, and when we do, our opinions are not valued as highly as those of our male counterparts.'

Men who hold influential roles contribute substantially the low nomination rate of women in local elections because having stronger ties to senior party leaders is also deemed essential for a nomination. One of the interviewees (KII 1) said:

'Candidates with favourable connections with senior party leaders at the top have advantage in the nomination process, and women tend to have fewer of these connections as the majority of senior party leaders are males.'

In addition, female candidates who were not re-nominated also highlighted how they could have won elections if they had been nominated. Their nominations had been influenced by factors such as coalition and changed preferences of candidates of the political party. For example, 368 women were nominated for the position of chief executive in 2017, falling to 361 in 2022. Likewise, for deputy chief executive, the number fell from 3,593 in 2017 to 3,066 in 2022. This suggests that political parties, if not mandated by the law, will continue to put forward male candidates, particularly when they are in an election coalition. This has happened because of an existing loophole in Section 17(5) of the Local Level Election Act 2017. It states that while political parties are required to file female candidates for either mayor/chairperson and deputy mayor/deputy chairperson positions, the mandate will not be applicable if the political party is putting forward only one candidate for either of the positions.

Election financing and assets

According to the responses from the KIIs with the members of selection committees, the key attributes that the selection committee looks for when nominating the candidate are winnability, party loyalty, popularity in society and an understanding of voters' concerns. Among these, **winnability is the main criterion**, as highlighted by one of our interviewees from the party selection committee (KII 5):

'Political parties' only agenda during an election is to win the election, anyway.'

The political parties **determine winnability primarily by candidates' ability to finance elections** or how much a candidate can spend during the election. A perception commonly echoed during interviews was that elections are becoming more expensive, and that the costs of campaigning in recent elections in Nepal have increased, placing a financial burden on all potential candidates, men and women. It implies candidates with stable financial resources or greater fundraising ability have a better chance of winning elections. This, in turn, has a greater negative impact on female candidates because they are less likely to own family fortunes and have less access to economic resources.

According to the 2021 census, 23.8% of families in Nepal have their land and home in women's names. However, even if they own property, it is still questionable whether or not they have control over decisions. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), in its 2016 study *Barriers to Women's Land and Property Access and Ownership in Nepal*, noted that:

'It was consistently observed that women do not necessarily have control over the property they own, and the decisions related to any kind of transaction of such property is taken by the men of the family – father, husband or son' (Adhikari, 2016).

Traditional gender roles and patriarchal beliefs continue to restrict women's ability to work outside the household and obtain an income. According to World Bank data, Nepal's female labour force participation rate in 2020 was 43.6%, while male labour force participation was 81.1% (World Bank, 2020). This implies women have less access to economic resources and opportunities than men. Such economic disparities make it difficult for women to gather funds for any kind of activity, much less political participation.

It has also been found that women encounter a significant disadvantage when it comes to collecting funds from outside for campaigning. This disadvantage stems from the fact that women have fewer ties to funding networks, business owners and affluent individuals, most of whom are male. In addition, these funding networks are less likely to help women run for office because they think it's hard to connect with women in leadership positions. A mayoral candidate in the 2017 local-level election (KII 18) stated:

'I did not win the 2017 election because influential, mostly men, members of my community lobbied against me since they believed it would be difficult to develop connections and cooperate with a female leader.'

Gender norms and social networking

One striking way in which gender norms affect female candidates can be marriage (as noted by KII 6 and KII 12) and the expectation that society puts on women to shift to their husband's home, which tends to be in a different location. This makes it more difficult for them to aspire to political participation and to receive nominations for elections. It adds to their disadvantage, as people are not likely to support and vote for a candidate who they see as an outsider.

This means that women who want to be politically engaged must put in extra effort to gain experience and support when competing against a male candidate who was born within the locality.

Further, **female politicians have stated that socialising, which typically involves drinking and partying, is a common way to make social connections, even in politics. However, societal norms, family restrictions and gender expectations quite often hold back women's participation in such activities.** A female mayor who was not re-nominated in 2022 (KII 8) said that:

'Women are not allowed to be out of the house after 8 pm. The same also applies to female candidates during elections, which hampers their campaigns.'

Friendship between individuals of different genders or between men and women may not be seen as acceptable and is looked down upon in society. According to one of our respondents (KII 3):

'If a female leader is seen with men, particularly at night, rumours of an unusual affair are said to be shared around.'

Likewise, the political parties believe that as a result of domestic responsibilities and societal norms, female candidates have limited time for socialising, which has a negative impact on the

party's presence. Consequently, male candidates have an advantage when it comes to establishing closer relationships with voters. These harmful social norms restrict women's ability to cultivate relationships with influential party leaders, diminishing their chances of being nominated.

Experience

Even after winning an election, women still experience behaviours derived from gender norms that overlook their capabilities as local leaders. People mistake women for deputies even when they have been nominated/elected to the position of chief executive. One of the winners from the 2022 elections in Parasi (KII 16) said:

'Unknown people address me directly as the Deputy Mayor. [The] Law says that either of the positions has to be a woman but the understanding of people is such that they directly assume women as the deputy.'

As a result, elected women have had to repeatedly correct people to reaffirm their position in their local government. This means that people are still not used to women chief executives and most assume that they have a deputy role.

In terms of the work they prioritise, elected women in local government have strongly emphasised the social development of their communities. In addition to the infrastructural and bureaucratic setups that had to be worked on by all the local units after the 2017 elections, elected women have prioritised the agendas of women, children, education and health significantly.

Examples include the construction of safe houses, the establishment of birthing centres and abortion clinics, and the creation of easier bureaucratic services for the elderly and those with disabilities. One of the winners of the 2017 elections (but who was not re-nominated in the 2022 elections) in Rukum had built a women's shelter where women facing violence could live and seek support. This was the first of safe house built by any local government.

There are also instances of elected women not receiving support when they raise women-specific issues. An activist in Butwal (KII 23) stated that:

'Women politicians do not get support when they raise women-specific issues, even other politicians do not support female politicians when they bring up women's rights issues. There is a fear of voters feeling alienated when these issues are brought up, so there is hesitation and inadequate support.'

This holds them back from pursuing and prioritising the issues faced by women in their locality.

Similarly, unelected candidates face disparities in their treatment. There is a difference between the way in which female and male candidates who have lost elections are treated in public. Female candidates who lose elections are typically subjected to more severe criticism and judgement by

society than their male counterparts, who are given more respect in similar social situations. One unelected female candidate from Sindhuli (KII 17) said that:

'If a male mayoral candidate had lost in my place, the treatment he would receive in social spaces would be different and better.'

Female candidates who were winners in 2017 but who were not re-nominated in 2022 remain determined to continue their political careers through direct nominations, even if in federal elections. One of the interviewees (KII 17) said:

'I will run elections again. I have never been interested in being nominated through proportional representation (PR). I have the confidence to win elections and will walk with the aim of direct nomination in the next election.'

Despite the existing challenges often shaped by gender norms, female candidates remain confident about their potential and ability to win an election. They hope that their potential is also recognised by political parties and other stakeholders. An elected woman mayor in the 2017 local elections said:

'If women receive opportunities and rights, women can do equally great work as men or even greater.'

Conclusion

Women candidates made up a small fraction of chief executive nominations in the 2022 local elections in Nepal, with just 361 female nominations (compared to 3,097 male nominations). It means there was about one female nominee for chief executive for every two palikas, compared to four male nominees per palika. Of these women, only 15 were nominated for competitive seats – just 4.15% of the total percentage of women nominees from political parties. None of the major political parties fared particularly well in terms of nominating female candidates (see Table 8 in the Annex 2).

All parties claim that their selection criteria are gender-neutral, and female nominees tend to claim that gender was not a factor in their nomination. However, the data present a different picture. In the 2022 local elections, political parties nominated women for chief executive posts in non-competitive seats 2.5 times more than in competitive seats.

The limited nomination of female candidates by political parties reflects their concern over electability, which implicitly assumes that women are less electable than men. While this research finds that the parties have some basis for the claim, the difference in votes received by female candidates when nominated for deputy chief executive is marginal, and not statistically significant at all when the female candidate is nominated for the chief executive. The perceived difference is exaggerated by party leaders, signalling the predisposition of parties against female candidates rather than their actual 'electability', as measured by a candidate's ability to garner votes. It could be the result of the sub-consciously patriarchal views of political leaders (who are mostly male).

The results show that two strands to the misperceptions of political parties. First, they misperceive that their party's nomination criteria are gender-neutral when there is, in reality, strong, though implicit, gender bias. Second, they misperceive that women candidates are less electable as executive chiefs, when the data does not support the claim.

Political parties disagreed that the difference in nominations across genders was rooted in discrimination against female candidates. Party leaders we spoke to across the board stated that gender was not a criterion in their nomination. Instead, the process was based primarily on winnability, closeness with party leaders and popularity among voters. They defined winnability mainly by the candidate's ability to raise funds for their election and the party.

Female candidates are, however, disadvantaged by each of these seemingly neutral criteria. Women, in general, control fewer economic resources and have less influence in economic decisions (such as selling assets). They have more limited opportunities to socialise with party leadership and members (who are overwhelmingly male). Gendered norms and stereotypes limit when and how they can engage with voters and party leadership.

In addition, there is a vicious cycle whereby parties nominate women mostly for deputy positions. It would mean more women are elected for deputy chief executive posts. Inadvertently, parties interpret that as voters 'perceiving' women as candidates for deputy posts, and continue to nominate women for these posts. This perpetuates the cycle, making it difficult for aspiring women leaders to get nominated for chief posts. Though women chief executives have faced some gender biases from the general public, voters have shown inclination to vote for women candidates for chief posts if they are nominated in the first place. Therefore, the onus for change lies primarily on political parties.

As for the women candidates, gender discrimination does not end with their nomination. They are criticised more harshly if they fail to win elections. Even if they win, they receive less support from their colleagues when they raise women-specific issues. Some stakeholders still treat them as if they are deputies. Therefore, being nominated or winning an election against all the odds does not mean the end of gender-based discrimination against female candidates.

Nepal has come a long way in improving gender representation at all political levels, but a long and sustained fight awaits to bring about qualitative change.

Recommendations

The findings clearly indicate that the primary onus for the limited participation of women in local politics, especially executive positions, lies with the political parties. However, other stakeholders could also play a critical role in creating a more favourable political space for women and ensuring the equitable representation of women in electoral politics.

1. An adapted reservation system for women

The current reservation system has helped women's representation, but mostly at the deputy executive level in practice. In addition, parties have found a loophole to avoid the legal requirement to have a female on the ticket if they contest the election as a part of a coalition. To close that loophole, one-third of the constituencies should be reserved for women-only contests for executive posts in an election cycle. Such constituencies could be determined on a rotational basis in each election cycle. This will help ensure that a new norm (of women being deputies) does not establish itself and women break the glass ceiling at the highest level too.

2. Political parties

- Major political parties need to have a representative committee at each level. While there is now a quantitative representation of women in the general composition of the party, women are mostly relegated as members. To ensure qualitative representation, they need to ensure that at least one of the executive posts in the committee (chairman, secretary or treasurer) is occupied by a woman.
- Political parties and their members have to move beyond the misperception that voters equate executive chiefs with men and deputies with women. Ironically, voters have progressed but the political parties have lagged behind. Therefore, each party needs to organise gender awareness training for its members/cadres.
- Political parties should change their seemingly 'gender blind' nomination criteria to criteria that are 'gender conscious'. The structural barriers and biases against women will self-perpetuate unless parties make active efforts to encourage women candidates. This could involve providing some financial assistance via the party to first-time women nominees, and organising party meetings and campaigns at an appropriate time when female participation is easier.
- Political parties could encourage a provision that, if women party officials migrate because of marriage, they will be prioritised to fill any vacancy of a similar level within the party committee at the destination.

3. Civil society organisations (CSOs)

Civil society organisations (CSOs) should collaborate with political parties to spread awareness about women's participation in politics and the ways to do so. They can also partner to identify and develop the leadership potential of women through training from an early age. One example is a training program called 'She Leads' that was launched in 2021 by International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in partnership with the Center for Dalit Women Nepal (CDWN). The training empowers elected women representatives in local government with the skills and knowledge they need to execute their responsibilities while strengthening their leadership ability (IFES, 2023). CSOs, in collaboration with the political parties and relevant government agencies (such as the Women's Commission and Election Commission), as well as relevant ministries, should fight the notions that women are suited only to be deputies or that women's quantitative representation alone is enough to bring about qualitative change in the political process.

Areas for further research

1. Further research is needed to analyse whether female chief executives are on a par with, better or worse at their respective jobs in comparison to their male counterparts, and how their priorities compare to male counterparts' during the election or after winning. This would help compare the capacity of male and female chiefs, and identify areas for intervention to improve governance.
2. A detailed survey on voters' perceptions is needed to ensure that parties are not lagging behind voters, and that parties lead the progressive agenda. Currently, the perception of voters among political parties does not match the actual voting records.

3. Further research is needed to analyse the political party, geographical, caste/ethnic and urban/rural discrepancies in women's participation in elections. Desegregation of women's participation is important to see how women of different social background have been helped or left behind by the current system.
4. Most of the female nominees we talked to had a close family member (father or husband) who was a senior leader in their respective parties. Further research on the personal and professional background of women nominees would illuminate the profile of women who have entered politics and identify areas of intervention for the promotion of more female candidates.
5. Further research on the personal and professional profile of candidates recommended by the 'local committee' and eventually nominated by the party would help to shed light on the kind of candidates parties consider and select. Such a profile should include personal attributes, family background, socio-economic status, previous professional experiences and party engagement, among other factors.

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Annex 1

Table 7 Details of the 27 KIIs Conducted for the Study

Interview Number	Category	Name of Interview	Affiliation/position	Location
1	Party leaders from Selection Committee	Chitralkha Yadav	Central Committee Member, Nepali Congress	Siraha
2	Party leaders from Selection Committee	Govinda Bahadur Nepali	Member of the Parliament-Gandaki Province Central Committee Member, CPN-UML	Parbat
3	Party leaders from Selection Committee	Manish Suman	Member of the Parliament-Madhesh Province Spokesperson, JSP	Saptari
4	Party leaders from Selection Committee	Anjana Bishanke	Central Committee Member, CPN-MC Former member of the Parliament	Chandragiri, Kathmandu
5	Party leaders from Selection Committee	Keshav Jha	Chief Executive Member, LSP	Kathmandu
6	Women candidates: winners renominated	Laxmi Pandey (re-elected in 2022)	Chairperson	Nawalpur
7	Women candidates: winners renominated	Gita Kumari Gurung	Former Chairperson	Chitwan
8	Women candidates: winners renominated	Thamsaru Pun	Former Chairperson	Myagdi
9	Women candidates: winners renominated	Sima Kumari Chetri	Former Mayor	Syangja
10	Women candidates: winners renominated	Rina Kumari Sah (re-elected in 2022)	Mayor	Rautahat
11	Women candidates: winners not re-nominated (did not wish to run in 2079)	Menuka Kafle	Chairperson	Jhapa
12	Women candidates: winners not re-nominated	Kumari Baral (Gautam)	Former Chairperson	Rukum
13	Women candidates: winners not re-nominated	Dilmaya Buda Magar	Former Chairperson	Salyan
14	Women candidates: winners not re-nominated	Kantika Sejwal	Former Mayor, Member of House of Representatives in 2022 election	Jumla
15	Women candidates: unelected and re-nominated	Kaushila Devi Singh (elected in 2022)	Mayor	Rautahat
16	Women candidates: unelected and re-nominated	Bimala Aryal (elected in 2022)	Mayor	Parasi
17	Women candidates: unelected and not re-nominated	Ganga Dahal	Candidate	Sindhuli

18	Women candidates: unelected and not re-nominated	Bimala Ghimire	Candidate in 2017 election, Member of National Assembly in 2022 election	Kapilvastu
19	Independent candidate	Kalawati Chaudhari	Independent Candidate	Kailali
20	Election Commission	Bhoj Raj Pokharel	Former Chief Election Commissioner	Kathmandu
21	Election Commission	Janaki Kumari Tuladhar	Election Commissioner	Kathmandu
22	Women's rights activist	Kunjani Pariyar Pyasi	Advocate	Pokhara
23	Women's rights activist	Indira Acharya	-	Butwal
24	Journalist	Sarala Subedi	Journalist	Kohalpur
25	Journalist	Binod Pariyar	Journalist	Nepalgunj
26	Expert	Raksha Ram Harijan	Documentation & Litigation Coordinator	Kapilvastu
27	Expert	Radhika Regmi	IFES	Kathmandu

Annex 2

Table 8: Nomination of political parties in competitive seats and non-competitive seats in 2022 local elections for chief executives*

	Political party	Competitive seats		Non-competitive Seats	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
1	Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)	148	6 (3.90%)	480	36 (6.98%)
2	Nepali Congress	163	5 (2.98%)	420	20 (4.55%)
3	Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre)	46	1 (2.13%)	249	9 (3.49%)
4	People's Socialist Party, Nepal	121	4 (3.20%)	3	0 (0%)
5	Rastriya Prajatantra Party	144	11 (7.10%)	7	1 (12.50%)
6	Independents	64	1 (1.54%)	2	0 (0%)
7	Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist)	103	3 (2.83%)	5	0 (0%)
8	Others	153	5 (3.16%)	6	1 (14.29%)

Source: Election Commission.

*Only counting the top three candidates of each constituency

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Cover photo

Bimala Ghimire, elected Mayor of Sunwal Municipality, in her office in Parasi district. © NIPoRe

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