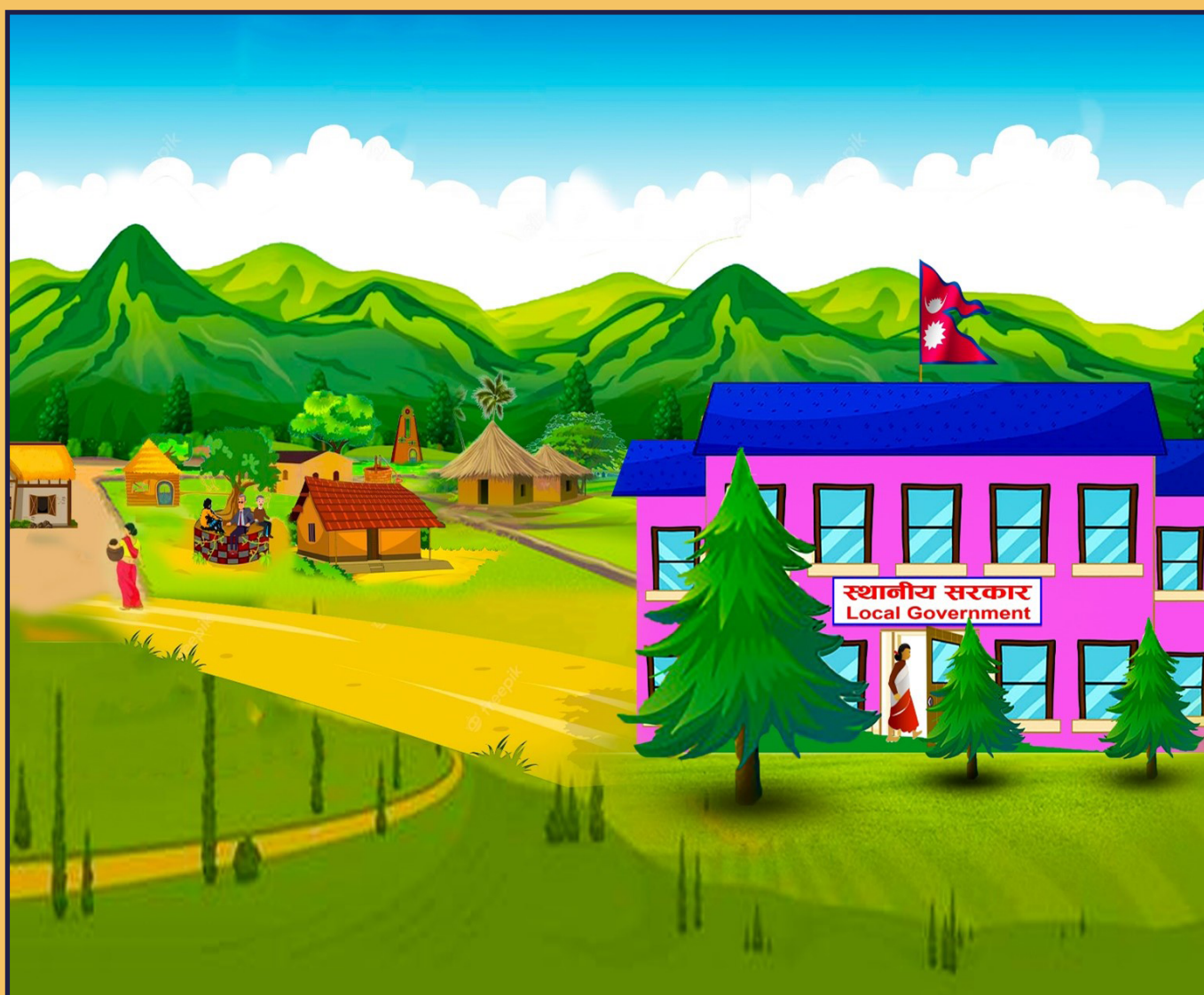


BRIEFING NOTE

GENDER NORMS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: HOW THEY SHAPE ENGAGEMENT FOR WOMEN LEADERS IN NEPAL



By Janaki Women Awareness Society (JWAS)
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About JWAS

Janaki Women Awareness Society (JWAS) is a non-governmental and not-for-profit civil society organisation established in 1993 A.D. (2050 B.S.) in Nepal's Dhanusha District. JWAS was founded and is operated by a group of women social workers. It works to improve the living standards and empowerment of marginalised people, women, Dalits, youth, janjatis, people with disabilities, and those affected by disasters and conflict in Nepal. The vision of JWAS is to create a prosperous society where women can live a dignified life. Its goal is to improve and promote the economic, social, political, health and environmental status of women, girls and marginalised people.

Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank all the interviewees who provided their valuable time, experiences and opinions by participating in our key informant interviews. Without their key insights and responses, this research would not have been possible. Our special thanks go to our researchers, Bijaya Dhakal, Durga Kattel and Rita Kumari Khadka. We would also like to thank Rajan Kumar Nepal, Executive Director of JWAS, for monitoring and supervising the progress of the project. Furthermore, we extend our thanks to Srijana Aryal, Rama Acharya Sanjaya Prasad Paudel, Binay Kumar Jha and Brijmohan Das for their contributions in different capacities to support the successful conduct of this research project - **Nub Raj Bhandari, Principal Researcher.**

Key findings

- Since 2017, Nepal's local government elections have complied with a mandatory Constitutional provision for a quota of seats for women. As a result, more women are able to run as candidates in the local government elections. Without this quota, very few women leaders would have been nominated for – or won – seats, as seen in the local elections in 1992, when women won only one in every 200 local government seats.
- To comply with the mandatory provision of a female candidate for either mayor/ chairperson or deputy mayor/vice chairperson from the same political party, local political leaders in some parts of Nepal's central southern region nominated their own wives and close female relatives as candidates. When these women won, their husbands or male relatives were found to be attending meetings, dealing with issues and influencing decisions.
- From their childhood, men and women in Nepal are socialised to expect women to be homemakers. Women leaders encounter disregard and criticism when they challenge such expectations and often face discriminatory words and behaviour from men leaders.
- Deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs, behaviours and mindsets often compel women to see themselves as 'women', rather than 'women leaders'. As a result of discriminatory gender norms, men leaders doubt and distrust women's leadership qualities and decision making capacity. At the same time, women leaders report that men leaders often claim credit for the good leadership of women leaders.
- This study finds that women's education is the most important element in strengthening the impact of their leadership. Conversely, the intersectional vulnerabilities faced by many women continue to shape their meaningful engagement in local governments.
- The 2022 local election results have maintained the level of women's representation. However, their performance will also be shaped by gender norms. Building on the experiences of previous cohorts of women leaders in local government, it is crucial for today's cohort to address the gender norms that are embedded in political institutional practices, as well as the attitudes and practice of male local government representatives and citizens alike.

Introduction and background

'Do not fear if you are right.'

Woman mayor

Local elections and women's political participation

Nepal's election process dates back to 1947, when those living in the capital city, Kathmandu, were able to vote for their municipal representatives for the first time (Election Commission Nepal, 2017a, p. 151). A few years later, women were able to vote in the local elections of 1953 and Sadhana Devi Pradhan made history as Nepal's first democratically-elected local woman representative in Kathmandu (Election Commission Nepal, 2017a).

Women's participation in formal politics in Nepal remained limited, however. Their representation only began to reach any substantial level – albeit just 19.3%, and only as a result of a mandatory quota system – in the 1997 local elections (Lama et al., 2011; Pradhan, 2004).

Box 1: Sequence of recent local elections in Nepal

1. 1992: There was no quota for seats reserved for women leaders. As a result, very few women leaders were nominated or won seats.
2. 1997: In these local election, some seats were reserved for women leaders. As a result, 19% of women leaders won the local elections.
3. After 1997: No local elections for the next 20 years. In 2015, the new Constitution of Nepal came into force which provided three types of governments: One Central or Federal, seven provincial, and 753 local governments. Reserved seats in local governments were secured for women leaders.
4. 2017: First local elections for local government under New Constitution of Nepal 2015, with quotas for women.
5. 2022: Second election under the New Constitution of Nepal 2015.

Despite the establishment of democracy and the participation of women in the 1990 movement for democracy, women's political representation in the local election of 1992 did not increase, when only one in every 200 elected leaders was a woman (Pande et al., 2022). In addition, the history of past women leaders in Nepal, with regards to their struggle and contribution to politics, were not well documented because, as stated by Dhungana (2014), men were the writers of history.

In the 20 years since the watershed 1997 local election, a new system was introduced by the 2015 Constitution of Nepal and the Local Level Election Act of 2017, with local government (LG) elections held in 753 local units (LUs) including 293 urban municipalities and 460 rural municipalities (Government of Nepal, 2015 and 2017a). Each LU formed its own LG with a provision to reserve at least 33% of its seats for women leaders in general, and 50% of the two senior positions (mayor/ deputy mayor in municipalities; chairperson/vice chairperson in rural municipalities).

By law, political parties are required to nominate at least two female ward members, including one from the Dalit community, and a female candidate for the office of either mayor/chairperson or deputy mayor/vice chairperson (Government of Nepal, 2015 and 2017a).

Local elections held in 2017 resulted in the election of 14,352 women leaders in Nepal's 753 LGs (41% of the total) (Election Commission Nepal, 2017b). In all, 18 women were elected as chief executives (mayors/chairpersons), 700 as deputy chief executives (deputy mayors/vice chairpersons), 61 as ward presidents, 6,567 as Dalit members (from the marginalised community), and 7,006 other women members (Election Commission Nepal, 2017c).

Quantitative representation and gender norms

The difference in results between the 1992 elections where there were no quotas and the results of the 2017 election suggests that the representation of women in LG increased as a result of the mandatory reservation of seats. Without it, according to many of the key informants interviewed for this study, it is unlikely that men political leaders would have trusted and nominated women leaders.

Despite an unfavourable situation for women leaders throughout Nepal's political history, they have managed to establish themselves as key political change makers by securing rights through the Constitution (Upreti et al., 2020). The election of far more women as deputy chief executives rather than as chiefs, however, suggests that it remains difficult for women to graduate from quota-based positions to higher leadership roles that would signal a more gender-balanced representation (Pande et al., 2022).

A study by Samjhauta Nepal and The Asia Foundation in 2018 found that everyone in their study sample, including women, considered men to be natural leaders, regardless of their capacity, knowledge and qualifications (The Asia Foundation, 2018). As a result of such mindsets, winning an elected position is no guarantee that a Nepali woman leader is free to exercise her rights and perform her duties without the interference of men leaders. Bhandari (2019) found that it is not easy to challenge the gender attitudes of men and women, even when they have gained a deeper realisation of gender inequalities.

Schedule 8 of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 sets out the local-level powers of LGs, which include the management of local services, local development plans and programmes, basic and secondary education, basic health care, the distribution of house and land ownership certificates and disaster management, to name a few. The powers and services of LGs relate directly to people's daily lives. The Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) of 2017, further elaborates the roles of LGs and their elected representatives. Similarly, thousands of women leaders, as a result of mandatory quota of seats in LGs, have gotten the opportunity to test their leadership abilities by delivering local-level powers and services to the people.

Despite such steps, the domination of men leaders remains one of the major challenges for gender equality in Nepal. The Asia Foundation (2018) states that elected male representatives in Janakpur, the capital city of Madhes province, questioned the intent and efficacy of the government's policy that led to the election of uneducated Dalit members and of women. In a study by Nepal (2021), a woman deputy mayor reported that it is harder for a woman to convince society that she can work just as hard and as well as a man. Video testimonies by elected local women representatives state their opinions are not heard and respected at the meetings, which is a real disappointment (International IDEA, 2022).

The experience of women leaders could be very different if their opinions were heard by men leaders. Evidence from one peace-related project mentions that goodwill and harmony among disputing parties can be promoted by sitting together in the same room, working together in a group, and interacting face-to-face with each other to solve challenges (Bhandari, 2021).

Research context

The term in office for the leaders elected in the 2017 local elections – the first local elections under the new Constitution of Nepal of 2015 – ended on 19 May, 2022. The second elections under the new Constitution for LGs, held on 13 May, 2022, elected 14,465 women leaders (41% of the total) (Election Commission Nepal, 2022).

Table 1 presents comparative information on women elected into office in the local elections in 2017 and 2022. In both elections, the trend shows that the representation of women through free competition is very nominal. Of 6,743 seats, only 264 women in 2017 and 442 in 2022 were voted in as members through free competition. Similarly, out of 6,743 seats, only 61 and 68 women were elected to the positions of ward president in 2017 and 2022 respectively. In terms of chief executive positions: women were elected to just 18 of the 753 positions available in 2017, rising to only 25 in 2022. It is also notable that the number of women elected to deputy positions actually fell by 132 between 2017 and 2022.

Table 1: Women leaders elected through free competition vs. quota in the 2017 and 2022 elections

Elected positions	Local election, 2017	Local election, 2022
Mayor	7	13
Chairperson	11	12
Deputy mayor	276	233
Vice chairperson	424	335
Ward president	61	68
Women members (Dalit quota)	6,567	6,620
Women members (quota)	6,742	6,742
Women members (non-quota)	264	442
Total	14,352	14,465

Source: Election Commission Nepal, 2022; Election Commission Nepal, 2017c.

Data from the Election Commission show that the lower number of women elected to competitive (non-quota or free competition) positions is the result of the lower number of women nominated for these positions by political parties. Members of male-dominated selection committees of political parties in 2017 (with women making up only 8% of committee members), have found it easier to select men for competitive positions than women (Pande et al., 2022). This demonstrates the strength of gender norms within Nepal's male-dominated political parties, which view the contesting of elections as a male domain (Nepal Live Today, 2022).

In this context, this research has investigated the challenges faced by former women leaders at local level, their perspectives on prevailing gender norms and the way in which these norms have shaped their engagements in LG.

Research aims and objectives

This research aims to generate knowledge and learning around the influence of gender norms on the experiences of former elected women leaders in LG, who are no longer serving in an elected position. It further aims to identify challenges related to gender norms that limited the engagement of these women leaders as decision makers. The three research questions were as follows.

- **How have gender norms in local governments shaped women leaders' engagement as decision makers?**
- **What are the gender norms that underpin misogynistic attitudes and practices that influence the engagement of women leaders in local governments?**
- **What actions can be taken by recently elected women leaders to transform the prevailing gender norms in local governments?**

The knowledge and learning generated by this research could help newly elected women leaders contribute to the transformation of gender norms in LG and the creation of safe spaces for themselves, where discriminatory gender norms no longer dominate attitudes.

Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative approach based on the primary collection of data through key informant interviews (KIIs). In all, 77 key informants were interviewed using open-ended questionnaires.¹ The questionnaires were developed on the basis of a review of different written documents, particularly news coverage, op-eds and the publications of LGs. The questionnaires were translated into Nepali and finalised through pilot testing with a woman representative outside the sample in each province.

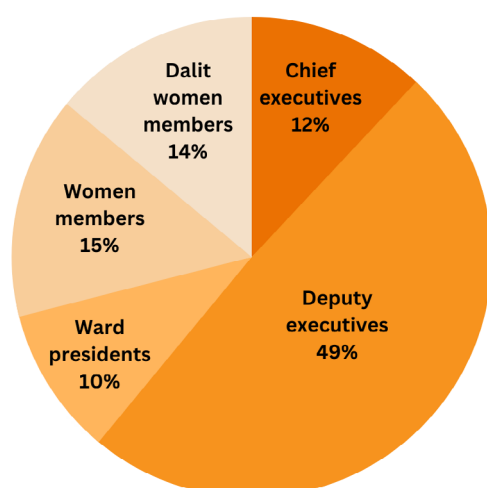
Out of the total population of elected leaders in 2017 (14,352 women and 20,693 men leaders) 49 former elected women leaders (seven from each province), were selected and interviewed (see Figure 1). In addition, 14 former elected men chief executives (mayors and chairpersons) were selected and interviewed (two from each province), as well as 14 other key informants/stakeholders, including journalists and gender activists.

A comprehensive sampling table was developed to ensure the informants represented the intersecting identities and diversities of the elected leaders, including their position, ethnicity, education, geography, age, disability status and their status in terms of marginalisation (see Annex 1 for more on sampling).

The study covered 23 out of 77 districts in Nepal, however, elected women leaders participated from 17 districts, 20 municipalities, and 15 rural municipalities (see Annex 2 for further details).

¹ Three sets of questionnaires were developed: 1. For the former elected women leaders, 2. For the former elected male chief executives, and 3. For other key informants/stakeholders.

Figure 1: Composition of elected women informants



Source: Key informant interviews.

Research ethics

The research team was very careful to use unbiased and respectful language and words in the questionnaires. Throughout the research, there was a focus on the principles of fairness, equity and dignity. A detailed information sheet was prepared to explain the research process to all interviewees, as well as the planned use and protection of the data, the possible risks, and confidentiality to protect the informant's identity. The research team also explained the dissemination plan and offered the informants the chance to ask questions before obtaining a final consent. On average, each virtual or face-to-face interview took 30 to 45 minutes. The collected information and transcriptions were handled confidentially and were given a code so that informants remained unidentifiable.

Limitations

The KIIs were conducted with women and men leaders of LGs, who were elected in the local elections of 2017 and whose term ended in 2022. As a result, the opinions of local leaders elected in 2022 were not included given the complexity of engaging them in the study. Their opinion could have strengthened the research by enabling a comparative analysis of both terms, 2017 and 2022.

Key findings

All the women informants regardless of their position, education or geographical locations, stated that their term from 2017 to 2022 as elected LG leader had been a mix of excitement, opportunity, challenge and struggle. The excitement stemmed from the changes to the LG laws through the LGOA in 2017, which enhanced the responsibilities of LGs to provide services to citizens, leading to people having high expectations of their local authorities. For all the elected leaders, therefore, this presented an exciting opportunity to become even closer to the people in their communities and help them solve their problems.

There were, however, some real difficulties. At the start of 2017 the LGOA was not yet operational, which meant LG leaders had to wait for the preparation of the necessary acts, regulations and operating procedures for their area in order to perform their functions more effectively.

Being a women leader was, in itself, a major challenge. One deputy mayor commented that she was excited when first elected, but experienced unexpected discrimination from men leaders in the first six months, which weakened her ability to perform her roles with full confidence. Men leaders, particularly the mayor, ignored her presence and her opinions, and did not treat her as the deputy chief executive of the municipality. Most of the interviewed women leaders who were in these deputy roles gave similar responses.

Women leaders faced social, political, educational, economical, ethnical and other constraints that shaped their voices, their performance, and the fulfilment of their rights because of their gender. Most of the chief administrative officers (CAO) were men and were more comfortable dealing with other male leaders. Some women leaders interviewed, however, stated that not all men leaders demonstrated such attitudes. There were some men leaders who had always been supportive and who worked with women leaders in a highly positive way.

There were a number of discriminatory gender norms and other factors identified by this study that shaped the engagement of women leaders, outlined below.

Patriarchal norms about political leadership

Patriarchy, in the context of Nepal, is a social practice of male supremacy that places male members in a privileged position as the 'carrier' of a family's name, legacy and heritage (Dahal et al., 2021; Dahal et al., 2022). The term 'patriarchy' was often used by informants during KIIs. They reported that patriarchy is deeply ingrained in people's minds and is well-established as a social principle that has restricted the ability of elected women leaders to work freely in local government. Regardless of the position of women, decision-making roles in patriarchal societies are supposed to be carried out by men only – a norm that not only hinders women, but also demotivates them. One woman mayor said:

'During the election campaign, while I was reaching out to people for votes as a mayoral candidate, people would consider me a candidate for deputy mayor. The mind-set of the people is that men are the mayor and women can be the deputy only.'

Women informants shared their opinion that, even though the constitutional mandate requires at least 33% of LG representatives to be women, very few women would have been elected without the reservation system, as they are not yet perceived as leaders. This belief is embedded in local phrases and sayings that belittle a woman's ability to lead. A woman vice chairperson stated:

'There are languages and proverbs coming from generations to generations, which portray women negatively.'

Such language and proverbs signal that Nepali culture only accepts men as leaders and decision makers, and does not yet trust women with public decisions. These proverbs, in turn, sustain and promote patriarchal views, which note that *'we are, as men, leaders, decision makers and superior'*.

One female stakeholder responded that men leaders were generally hesitant in regarding women as leaders. When women leaders achieved any success, she said, men leaders would use the Nepali word '*cheli*' in appreciation, which means '*female student*'. Though the word itself is not negative, men leaders use it to present themselves as teachers or final decision makers, and the women leaders as students or as people who are only worthy of minimal appreciation.

Perhaps this is one reason why women leaders and their contributions are often obscured by the decisions and actions of male leaders. One woman deputy mayor reported that she had started a programme, '*Municipality with pregnant women*': but when this programme became popular and successful, the man leader received all the credit for its success and over-shadowed her contribution.

Women informants felt that the perceptions of men leaders are shaped by their doubts about the leadership qualities of women, with the men revealing their misogynistic attitudes explicitly and implicitly in many contexts. Many women informants witnessed ward presidents, chief administrative officers and other men leaders excluding women leaders from their discussions, and showed a misconception about women leaders only talking about women's issues. If women leaders asked question or expressed disagreement, men leaders would interpret this as women trying to dominate men, as illustrated by the comment of one male mayor:

'I was aware of women's rights as well as the mandate given by our constitution to the deputy mayors. Therefore, I did not interfere in her work. Slowly she started dominating me. However, I respected her and talked to her husband to solve the issues.'

In this example, when there was a misunderstanding between a man mayor and a woman deputy mayor around budget distribution, he did not talk with her to resolve the dispute. Rather, he talked to her husband, as it is common for men leaders to direct their comments to the male relatives of elected women leaders rather than to the women themselves. He was certain that he had respected the woman leader and had not acted with any gender discrimination. This illustrates that gender discrimination is so ingrained that the men who practice it do not even know they are doing so.

This particular example is also linked to decisions about LG budgets, which are typically in the hands of the chief executives, who are mostly men. Men leaders want women leaders to be submissive and quiet when it comes to budgetary decisions which is in keeping with the attitude among many men that women are inferior and less competent than them.

People in wider society also hold discriminatory attitudes towards women leaders. During public events, people assume that men leaders should be given more respect and that they are better speakers than women leaders, as illustrated by a statement from one woman parliamentarian:

'The misogynistic attitude is not only with men leaders. This attitude is a stigma of Nepali society that gives priority to the perspectives of men. In a public programme, often the priority is given to the opinion of men. Where both men and women leaders having the same portfolio attend any meeting, often the chair of the chief guest is given to men.'

These attitudes demotivate women, and can affect their ability to perform effectively. Even when the physical presence of women is clearly visible, her capacity and leadership skills are always over-shadowed. Women informants, especially mayors/deputy mayors and chairpersons/vice

chairpersons, demanded that the reservation system, which sees women's political participation in terms of numbers and percentage only, is not enough: perceptions, attitudes and practices around women leaders also need to change.

According to one male stakeholder, the plans, programmes and budget of the LG could not be passed without the support of women leaders. He added that women leaders could pressure men leaders to listen to their voices. However, all the levers of power remain in the hands of men and the decisions that are made by male leaders and by the male relatives of women leaders impose limits on what women can do. As a result, women leaders often act in the ways expected of them and give their consent to the decisions made by men leaders.

Education and leadership abilities

Women leaders always faced questions about their education and ability. Some women leaders also accepted that they faced difficulties in engaging effectively because of their lack of technical knowledge about politics and relevant laws. One male mayor commented on the political knowledge of Nepal's women leaders as follows:

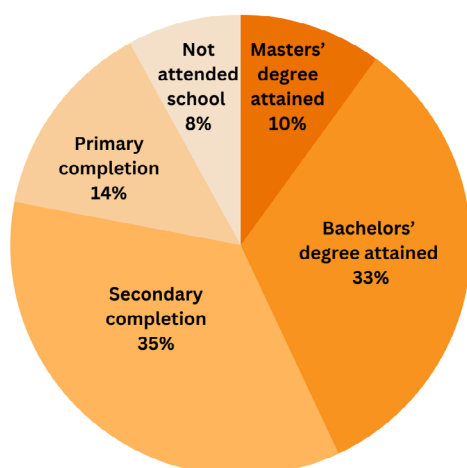
'The current trend shows that three types of people are coming into political leadership: people having a long-term engagement in politics as well as leaders of social movements, highly educated and professionally renowned, and rich people. However, some women have also come into politics as a result of the quota system. These women leaders often lack political leadership knowledge. They are surrounded by men leaders who influence their every decision.'

Over time, however, some leaders had acquired knowledge, been trained by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), taken part in exposure visits and exchanged experiences with other leaders. In principle, both men and women – but mostly women – have training opportunities from NGOs. Some LGs had also allocated budgets for training and for exposure visits. Similarly, women leaders had also participated in thematic workshops or training provided by, for example, the National Women Commission.

Interviewees also stated that not all men leaders were educated or capable. Many men leaders had a level of education and leadership ability that were similar to women leaders, yet it was the women leaders who were more likely to be criticised for being uneducated and incapable. This was the case, even though a large share of the women leaders interviewed were educated. Figure 2 shows that, of the 49 women leaders interviewed, only 8% had not attended school. In all, 78% of them had at least a secondary level of education. On the importance of education, one male mayor stated:

'To transform the gender norms, women leaders should focus on education. Education does not mean the degree certificate only, but also leadership skills, political knowledge, constitutional knowledge, knowledge about their roles and rights, geographical knowledge of their respective local government and so on. Women leaders should empower themselves.'

Figure 2: Education level of elected women informants



Source: Key informant interviews.

All of the interviewees talked about the importance of education and leadership capacity. In fact, educated women leaders who had knowledge of politics and laws related to local government were less likely to experience the impact of discriminatory gender norms.

Some interviewees also mentioned examples of successful women leadership at national level at the level of president, chief justice and speaker of the house of representatives. All of these have proved their capacity for political leadership, and continue to inspire women leaders at local level.

Women as wives and homemakers

Women interviewees were of the opinion that men and other community members see women as homemakers, even when they have been elected to leadership positions. In a traditional society such as Nepal's, women are regarded as both homemakers and the caregivers for a family. Women are taught to be very loyal to their families, do all the household work and follow every rule and regulation, not only within the house, but also in wider society (Bishwakarma, 2020). Women leaders do not tend to receive much encouragement and support for their involvement in politics and public life because it breaches these traditional gender norms. With some exceptions, women leaders mentioned a lack of support from their families and community members.

Researchers received two opposite responses regarding men's involvement and interference in women's political participation. Some women leaders, especially in Madhes province, stated their husbands and senior political leaders supported their work. However, this support sometimes saw men becoming directly involved and interfering in women's leadership roles. Such direct male influence often side-lined women leaders.

Others, however, responded that they worked freely, without any interference from their family members. Amongst these women leaders, some did not notice the interference of men leaders because they considered men's involvement as natural. Many women leaders were totally unaware of the role played by men in their leadership or ability to govern, even sometimes when men leaders were speaking, influencing decisions and giving instructions to the women leaders. The Asia Foundation (2018) also stated that Nepali women seem to accept men's superiority as a matter of fact and consider their men counterparts as natural, competent leaders.

For example, when asked *'what challenges were there to limit your engagements as a local elected leader?'*, one woman member responded:

'There were many challenges for me but my husband and the senior men leaders always helped me to resolve them.'

She stated that when she was asked to sign some documents, she would only sign after receiving some sort of consent, either from her husband or from a senior leader. Such responses were more commonplace in Madhes province, where women have low levels of literacy (55% against 69% nationwide) and where the prevalence of gender-based violence is the highest in the country (34% against 22% nationwide) (Government of Nepal, 2021; Ministry of Health et al., 2017).

According to interviewees in Madhes Province, husbands attended meetings, dealt with issues and made decisions in the place of some elected women leaders. Even though husbands were interfering in the work of their wives, there were still rumours about incompetent women leaders. Responses to this study's questions show that men were working on behalf of women leaders and letting people criticise women's leadership in public. Men leaders of LGs and other members of society accepted such behaviour by the husbands of women leaders. However, this kind of direct interference was not evident in other provinces.

Key informant interviews in Madhes province, in particular, highlighted that, as a result of misogynistic mind-sets, men political leaders tended to select their own wives or other close female relatives as candidates for election. The men leaders wanted to hold on to power and achieved this by putting forward women candidates who they felt were under their control. They do not trust other women leaders: putting them forward would be like handing power to someone else. Once the women selected by men leaders get elected, the men leaders step in and take over, as one male mayor noted:

'The husband of a deputy mayor was supposed to receive an election ticket, but due to the mandatory provisions of a constitution, he did not. Then he forwarded his wife as a candidate and the party leadership agreed on it. She was not educated and did not have the knowledge of politics as well. She was elected on the name of her husband.'

Such statements were repeated by many informants, especially men mayors/chairpersons. As a result, men leaders dismissed and ignored the voices, opinions and ideas of women leaders who had been elected in the name of their husband and some were disregarded when they attempted to speak. People would give more respect to the husband of a women leader than to her. Some women leaders also faced scepticism and lacked the confidence to share their thoughts in public events and meetings.

Some men (husbands and fathers) did not interfere in the work of women leaders in LG and let them work freely, but still expected them to continue with their domestic and caregiving roles. Women informants noted that it was very challenging to manage time for the office and for the home. Ultimately, such family expectations curtailed their time to engage in their functions as leaders. Those prevailing practices and attitudes limited the effective engagement of women leaders as decision makers in LG. In addition, informants felt that capable women are not entering politics because of such attitudes. If this does not change, they do not believe that any quota – even if it rose to 50% – would be effective.

Political institutional practices and norms

The responses of women interviewees focused explicitly on the direct gender-based domination they had faced from men leaders, with the domination of male voices in public events and spaces a common experience. Women leaders, especially those who were single, faced many sexist comments.

Stakeholders stated that prevailing political practices and social norms did not provide a favourable working environment for women leaders, with women supposed to be at home in the morning, in the evening and at night. It is difficult for communities where traditional gender norms are prevalent to accept that a woman, especially a woman who is married, will be away from her home until late at night. A women vice chairperson commented on this, saying:

'Nepali society expects every woman to work in the kitchen and look after children. An inherited feeling of manhood does not let men do these jobs. Men leaders often applied this as a tool to keep me away from decision-making processes. They would schedule important meetings either in the morning, in the evening or at night: the times when I was supposed to perform household roles.'

During the women leaders' time in office, men leaders had used different tricks to keep them out of the decision-making process, and women often did not realise this exclusion was happening. For example, men leaders would extend the time of important meetings until the evening, and sometimes until late at night, which would force women leaders to leave such meetings voluntarily. Men leaders would drink alcohol to make the situation uncomfortable for the women. In addition, the louder voices of men leaders, coupled with language that is demeaning to women, would also force women leaders to leave some important meetings.

Men leaders were also found to be engaging women leaders on domestic matters, such as solving household quarrels, in order to distract them from more important political and leadership agendas, exploiting the generally held view that '*Nepali women are emotional by nature*'.

Deputy mayors/vice chairpersons are the coordinators of the judicial committees in LGs and have a legal mandate to resolve certain cases within their territory (Government of Nepal, 2017b). Men leaders often undermine the judgements and solutions given by women leaders, however, by questioning their decisions and asking for justifications. As one woman deputy mayor said:

'In the beginning, people were not ready to accept a woman as a chief of the judicial committee. Therefore men would reach out to the mayors, ward chairpersons, and other men leaders. I was also totally unaware about the working modality of this committee. Then I recruited a lawyer as an advisor. It made my job somehow easier but the influence of senior leaders was always there.'

Where mayors/chairpersons were men and deputy mayors/chairpersons were women, men leaders in many LGs used the budget in their own way, without consulting with their deputies. Where women were mayors/chairpersons, however, men leaders still tried to wield influence over the budget. Informants also stated that women leaders had to use fewer resources, such as vehicles, than men.

Women reported being side-lined in public activities too. One deputy mayor noted that a man leader would not allow a large-sized photo of women leaders on the front page of a publication and in development projects, such as construction, men leaders wanted to have their name first on the nameplates at inaugural ceremonies. In one municipality, a stone plaque to mark the completion of a building mentioned the name of the male mayor, ward chairperson and other male LG members but not the name of the woman deputy mayor (Anmol, 2021).

Men leaders would exploit every small perceived weakness of a woman's leadership for propaganda purposes. For example, one woman leader interviewed wanted to allocate a budget to promote a health post in a hospital. She could not execute her plan in the first year because of strong opposition from men leaders. According to her, their only aim was to stop her from achieving something that would be popular so that she could not rise in politics. However, she persisted and was finally allocated a budget. Men leaders were very unhappy about this. Unfortunately, there was an incident where medicine was given by a nurse from the hospital to a pregnant woman who wanted an abortion which resulted in the woman bleeding heavily on the hospital floor. Men leaders tried to use this incident to destroy the political career of the woman leader. They blamed her and bombarded the public with negative propaganda against her. Despite such abuse, she continued her good work and finally prevailed.

There is also evidence of a dominant masculine culture pervading the structures and practices of political parties (Dhakal, 2015). Women leaders stated that the leadership of their own political party excluded them from being nominated in the 2022 elections. The LGOA 2017, article 17(5) states that at least one of the nominated candidates of the political party for the position of chief executive or deputy chief executive should be a woman. However, if the party nominates a candidate for only one of these positions, they have no obligation to nominate a woman candidate (Government of Nepal, 2017a). In the name of coalition, political parties have used this loophole to exclude women as candidates for either of the top two positions. One woman interviewee highlighted this as an example of gender-based discrimination.

Most of the women interviewed had grown up being submissive to or accepting of such attitudes and this, coupled with discriminatory political practices, often continued to shape and demotivate their leadership engagement. Some women leaders tried to overcome these challenges and to make their voices heard by working hard to gain respect and support from community members.

Social class and caste

This study also revealed that different intersectional identities and systems of exclusion, particularly caste and class, have shaped the meaningful engagement of women leaders. Women leaders who were from marginalised groups, who were uneducated and single faced more gender-based discrimination, reflecting prevailing norms about political leadership and womanhood in general.

According to interviewees, most of the women elected as part of the Dalit quota in 2017 were uneducated and from poor families and were not, initially, fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. One such woman member in Madhes province stated that she only signed the minutes of meetings and attendance sheets where other leaders asked her to sign. In return for each signature, men leaders would give her a minimal allowance.

After a few years, however, the Dalit women leaders became more sensitised and were determined to raise the issues facing their communities. Yet their voices remained, for the most part, unheard. They commented that the discrimination they faced in LG was similar to the social discrimination Dalits had been facing for many generations. Dalit women leaders experienced more negative

comments, criticism about their social identity and their marginalised status from both men and women leaders. A Dalit woman vice chairperson said:

'I was a daughter-in-law in one Dalit family. While the chairperson was absent in my rural municipality, I worked as acting chairperson and used a car for official work. Then people of my own society started to make negative narrations, sexist comments, and harassment against me. A Dalit and a poor woman riding in a government car was intolerable for the so-called other groups of people.'

Such intersectional caste- and gender-based discrimination was very challenging for the women leaders, limiting their ability to participate and perform in LG with full confidence. They also faced limited access to resources such as budgets, training and networking opportunities which could have improved their political leadership.

Challenging and reshaping unequal gender norms

Some women leaders in different provinces tried to challenge and reshape gender norms through their own leadership and initiatives. Programmes such as *'Women with deputy mayor'*, *'Nutrition for the pregnant women'*, and *'Municipality with pregnant women'* are some examples.

Another positive example was a woman leader in one municipality who challenged the practice of distributing parental property only to sons, even though sons and daughters are equal under the law. When she came into power, she initiated a system of equal property distribution for both sons and daughters, starting with her own family as a way to inspire others. She faced many obstacles but succeeded in challenging stereotypical thinking on this issue, namely that only sons have the rights to parental property. She considers a gender-equitable system of distributing parental property to be a major step towards the creation of a more gender equal society, giving daughters the confidence to be more independent.

Some educated women leaders raised their voices against the attitude of men leaders when the latter wanted them to sign papers or minutes that they had not read. Some women leaders also reported the gender-related misbehaviour of men leaders to senior members of their respective political parties. Such complaints, however, did not have any positive results because most of the decision makers in politics are powerful men (Dhakal, 2015). Some women leaders simply tried to ignore the criticism, comments and bad behaviour of men leaders and continued their work, as one woman mayor explained:

'My main challenge was to handle the attitude of men towards women, especially their habit of ignoring women's voices and decisions. But I continued handling things in my own way.'

Women leaders stated that people do not care about the failures of men leaders. But when it comes to the women leaders, people expect 100% success. Any failure or small mistake by one woman leader is often generalised as being typical of all woman leaders. Those who had already led some political positions were familiar with such attitudes. Similarly, women leaders who have had a long experience of politics, who are educated, and who are familiar with the needs of their respective LGs are found to be more confident that they can deliver better results.

Suggestions for women leaders of the 2022 cohort

The interviewees in this study were sure that discriminatory gender norms will continue to have an impact on the engagement of women leaders who were elected in 2022. They suggested that these newly elected women leaders should not shy away from sharing their opinions and agendas in LG meetings and in public events. They felt that maintaining integrity instils confidence to speak in front of people. Women informants suggested that there are two major aspects of integrity: the first is maintaining transparency in every financial matter and the second is being accountable for the roles and responsibilities of each elected position.

One woman mayor quoted the Nepali proverbs '*Nabiraunu Nadaraunu*', which literally means '*do not fear if you are right*'. She applied this tool while she was an elected LG leader and was committed to her roles and responsibilities. She suggested that this could be a good guide for all women leaders in LG. Being true to one's commitments and attracting community attention via exemplary work can change mind-sets. This can inspire other leaders to offer women space in meetings and public events where they can share their success.

Discriminatory gender norms not only have a negative impact on the performance of women in LG, it also demotivates them at home and in wider society. One woman mayor stated, '*if a person is not free from the family, he or she cannot progress*' – an issue that applies mostly to women leaders. Therefore, the women who participated in this study suggested campaigns on gender issues to raise awareness at family level and across society.

The interviewees also felt that women leaders in LG should be very attentive about the updated plans and policies of the government in relation to their communities. According to one stakeholder, many elected women leaders do not care enough about improving their knowledge and do not read. As a result, some women leaders were forced to stay silent in a meeting when asked a question such as '*what have you understood?*'. If they are more confident in their knowledge, they can take a well-informed stand that men leaders will find harder to challenge.

Conclusion

This study found that women leaders elected in the 2017 local government elections in Nepal have faced social, political, educational, economical, ethnical and emotional discrimination that is influenced by prevailing gender norms. This has shaped the extent to which they are able to exercise their voices, performance and rights. Equally, a public preference for men's voices, combined with fewer opportunities for women's representation in public events and their greater household responsibilities, are shaping the effective political engagement of women leaders. In addition, political and institutional practices and norms are particularly challenging for women with intersectional vulnerabilities such as poverty and marginalisation, while single women leaders faced more gender-based discrimination. Women leaders who have less education face more challenges linked to gender norms. Equally, education is identified as crucial to strengthen the effective leadership of women.

Discriminatory gender norms that perpetuate certain beliefs – such as women as homemakers, women always needing to be at home at night, men being the leaders of families, men leaders having precedence in public spaces – are all demotivating factors that limit the roles of women leaders. These norms are underpinned by gendered attitudes (discrimination against women based on patriarchal perceptions, doubt about and distrust of women's leadership abilities) and practices

(such as the prioritisation of men's opinion, masculine use of language and the frequent use of traditional proverbs) are factors that influence the effective engagement of women leaders in LG.

Similarly, men leaders' reluctance to allocate budgets to programmes proposed by women leaders, the lack of opportunities for women to improve their leadership skills, the favouring of relatives by senior political leaders, and the dismissal of women's opinions, limit the performance of women leaders. Women leaders do not feel free or safe to raise their voices strongly, perform effectively or enjoy their rights.

While the 2022 election results have maintained the level of women's representation and new LG rules and procedures are in place, gender norms continue to have a negative impact on women's political representation. The interviewees in this study feel sure that the performance of elected women leaders in the 2022 cohort will also be shaped by discriminatory gender norms, and that it is very difficult to change the mind-sets, attitudes and behaviour of people, especially men leaders.

Women leaders should be supported and empowered to challenge and contribute to reshaping the attitude of men leaders. Building on the experiences of the 2017 cohort of LG women leaders, it is crucial for today's cohort to address the norms that are embedded in political institutional practices, as well as the attitudes and practice of male LG representatives and citizens alike.

Recommendations

Training and mentorship

- Training and mentorship can help women leaders to develop their political knowledge, leadership skills and confidence. In the past, women's demands for training have been ignored by men leaders. To strengthen their efforts, women leaders should recruit mentors or advisors among senior journalists, lawyers, professors of political science and civil society leaders. Such mentors can help women leaders to identify their knowledge gaps and find relevant training institutions as well as resources to fill those gaps. Civil society leaders and journalists may be easier to recruit as mentors for women leaders who are poor, Dalits and/or marginalised.
- Women leaders in LGs should work with NGOs to implement training recommended by informants from this study, such as gender-sensitive training, gender-sensitive communication, and strategies for both women and men leaders. Women leaders and NGOs should urge men leaders of LGs and other leaders of political parties to attend training. Training can also help men leaders to improve their attitudes to women in leadership, which would, ultimately, help to shift gender norms in LGs. NGOs can also help LGs by facilitating the inclusion of capacity building activities in their annual plans and programmes.
- Interviewees in this study pointed out that Nepal does not have a leadership institute. If any leader, woman or man, wants to improve their leadership skills, they must rely on the short-term courses provided by NGOs and other private training institutes. It is recommended, therefore, that the federal and provincial government should consider the establishment of a leadership institute through the formulation of a law, backed by allocation of resources.

Sensitising men leaders and communities

NGOs can work with women leaders to sensitise men leaders to improve the working environment in LGs. NGOs can also collaborate to promote education and greater awareness of gender issues at social level. LGs should also implement plans and programmes such as awareness campaigns, training and workshops to educate the wider public on gender issues.

Coalition building

Women leaders stated that a shift in gender norms needs collaboration. Therefore, women leaders should work in coalition with women leaders from other LGs, as well as with gender advocates and NGOs. Through their collaborative efforts, women leaders must come together to create strong advocacy for training opportunities, as well as for exposure visits from their respective LGs and the line ministries of both provincial and federal governments.

Changes in political institutional practices

Women leaders should set up gender-related grievance redress mechanisms in their LGs and within their political parties. These mechanisms can promote safe and inclusive working spaces for women leaders so they can participate in decision-making processes without fear of discrimination and criticism. It is very important, however, that men leaders also support women leaders in addressing gender-related grievances. Women leaders can work with mentors and NGOs to encourage men leaders to support such mechanisms.

Political parties also need gender quotas. Senior leaders of political parties can help to ensure space for the presence and voices of women leaders by providing gender quotas (reserved seats for women) in political leadership positions.

Lead by example

Women leaders should lead by making by example: providing their worth through effective plans and programmes. Rather than doing what a male leader expects her to do, a woman leader can try to use her position to promote the issues she cares about. If successful, she will also increase public faith in her capacity to lead. When people start to believe in her, she can go on to lead other programmes and bring other people along with her to change mind-sets.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Sampling

The research applied purposive sampling to select 49 former elected women leaders, 14 former men chief executives, and 14 other key informants/stakeholders. In the first stage, a list of all the elected women leaders in the local election of 2017 was accessed through the website of the Election Commission of Nepal.² The team of researchers sampled and selected the name of 49 elected women leaders, seven from each province. After completing the first round of selection, the research team reached out to the selected informants via phone calls to ensure their participation in the KII.

Table 2 presents the disaggregation information about the women informants, based on their geography, religion, ethnicity and age group.

Table 2: Disaggregated information on women informants

Disaggregation		Sample size
Geography (urban and rural)	Women leaders from urban area	30
	Women leaders from rural area	19
Age group	Between 20 and 29 years of age	1
	Between 30 and 39 years of age	8
	Between 40 and 49 years of age	20
	Between 50 and 59 years of age	18
	Between 60 and 69 years of age	2
Religious orientations	Hindus	42
	Buddhists	2
	Christians	2
	Kirats	3
Ethnicity	Brahmin/ chettri	31
	Dalits	9
	Indigenous	5
	Other backwarded community	4
Other key disaggregations	Person with disabilities	1
	Single women	4

Source: Key informer interviews.

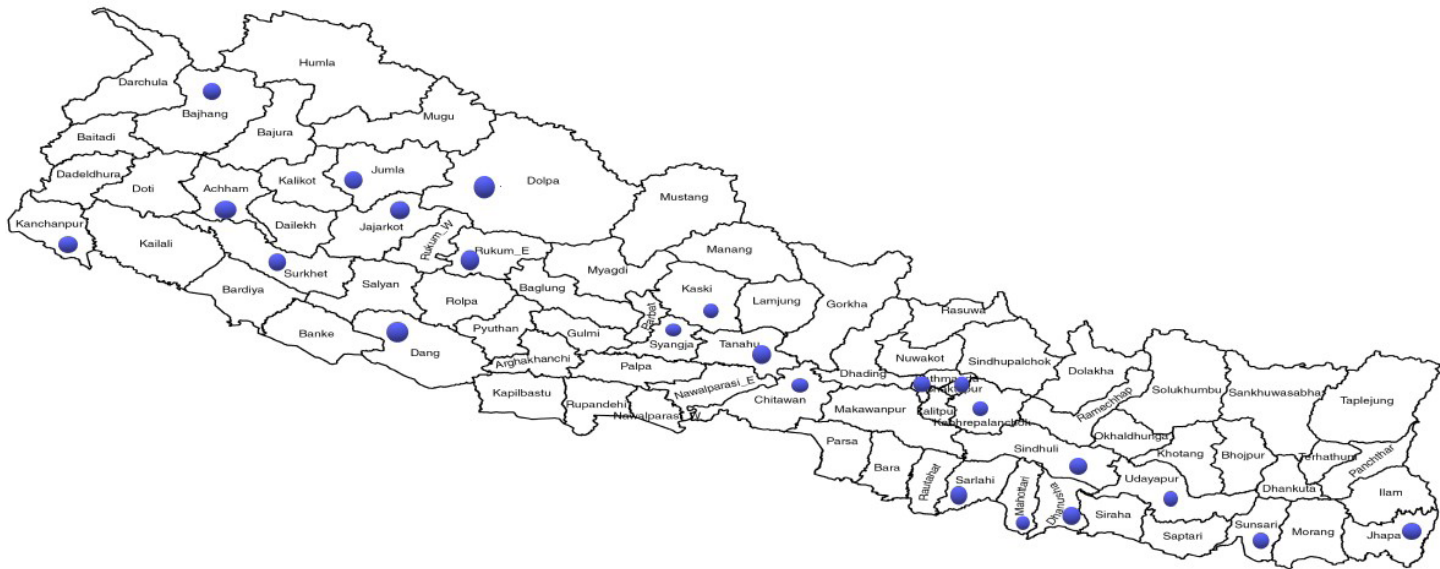
In the second stage, 14 men chief executives (mayors/chairpersons), two from each province, and another 14 key informants/stakeholders (seven men/seven women) were selected from federal and provincial parliamentarians, political experts, government officials (federal/provincial) who work closely with LGs, journalists, gender advocates and representatives of women rights organisations.

² <https://election.gov.np>.

Annex 2: Information collection

In all, four researchers, including the principal researchers, were deployed to conduct physical and online KIIs with 49 women informants. After completing the first stage of KIIs, the research team made some modifications to the questionnaires to obtain men's perspectives about the engagements of women leaders, and conducted the second stage of KII with 28 informants. Both physical and online KIIs were also conducted at this time. Figure 3 shows the districts covered by KIIs.

Figure 3: Districts covered by key informant interviews (see dots)



Source: Key informant interviews.

About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

About this research

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Cover image

Illustration of the local government which is near to a hilly village in Nepal. © Namaste Press Pvt. Ltd.

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