

Barriers to Women's Leadership in Nepalese Politics

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Abstract

This study explores the barriers hindering Nepalese women from taking on political leadership roles and strategies for enhancing women's leadership. The presence of women in executive positions in government and political parties is the basis for women's political leadership. The research used a qualitative method, purposive sampling, in-depth interviews with nine influential leaders of Nepalese mainstream political parties who have significant knowledge about women's political issues, and analysis of existing literature. The data collected was analysed thematically. Although women have gained 33% of the representation in Nepali politics, Women's elevation to top leadership positions is still low. The path to achieving qualitative leadership is still primarily based on an outdated male model that shuts down women's roles. The findings indicate that women face pervasive challenges within the male-dominated political landscape due to deep-rooted patriarchal ideology, social norms, and attitudes that often favour men in leadership roles. Expensive electoral competition and competing against a male counterpart are challenging for female candidates and hinder women's aspirations despite constitutional rights. Implicit biases and discrimination often lead to unequal opportunities for women's advancement. Suggested strategies for enhancing women's leadership by the respondents reveal that women politicians should seek to build larger coalitions to ensure female representation at the executive level, pushing for legal reforms and leadership training. They further suggested that creating distinct constituencies for women to protect women's seats is essential to transforming the proportional election system into a first-past-the-post system. The research reveals that society's unconscious biases have historically privileged men, perpetuating the assumption that leadership is inherently associated with masculinity. Thus, achieving gender-balanced political leadership that sustains democracy requires empowering women through equal opportunities, supportive policies, leadership training, mentorship, legal protections, national campaigns, and media advocacy.

Keywords: leadership barriers, costly elections, cultural norms, patriarchy, women's political leadership

Introduction

As the world grapples with pressing challenges such as climate change, armed conflicts, and economic instability, gender inequality in leadership remains a significant barrier to global progress. The ongoing gender disparities and inequities in political realms are the context for this investigation. Despite comprising half the global population, women are underrepresented in key decision-making roles across all sectors. The discourse on women in leadership highlights progress and ongoing challenges in achieving gender equality across various sectors. The number of female leaders is significantly lower than that of male leaders across parliaments, universities, courts, and social or religious organisations (Hill et al., 2016) due to its evolution within a patriarchal framework (Jalalzai, 2004). In 2024, women occupy only 27% of national parliamentary seats and 35.5% of local government positions. Women's leadership not only achieves gender equality but also impacts women by inspiring capable individuals, influencing policy-making to advance women's rights, and serving as role models (Vijayarasa, 2022). Gender equality and women's political participation are vital indicators of democracy (Mangvwat, 2009; Shvedova, 2005). Democracy is a political institution that fosters representation, participation, and equality among citizens. Women are highly influential in such a system because they fight for their rights and enrich the debate with diverse viewpoints. Globally, women have played a critical role in the struggle for democratic governance to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals; women must have equal access to political power and assume leadership positions (UN Women, 2023).

Historically, women have played a limited role in democracy. However, through the push for gender equality, much has been achieved. Active political engagement among women empowers them and builds a balanced and equitable system to benefit society. The unique insights of women into health care, education, and social justice are key to comprehensive policy-making. Recognising and enhancing women's role in democracy is about fairness, the health, and sustainability of democratic institutions.

Women in Nepal have long experienced high levels of poverty, social exclusion, and marginalisation of their gender. Nepal's historically patriarchal society has positioned men as dominant figures in leadership and decision-making, relegating women to subordinate roles with limited participation in societal affairs. Women in Nepal continue to face systemic socio-economic challenges, including restricted access to credit, land ownership, and economic opportunities, as well as societal expectations that hinder their involvement in decision-making, perpetuating gender disparities (Doundiyal, 2024). During the Rana regime, in (1974 BC) women formed the "women's committee" for the first time and started the struggle against autocratic Rana and for women's rights (Tumbahamphe, 2024). Women actively participated alongside men in the struggle against the Rana autocratic regime, advocating for democracy

(Sapkota, 2024; Upreti et al., 2020). Since the People's Movement II (2006), women have made significant strides in every democratic movement in Nepal and gained a positive place in Nepalese politics. However, this contribution has not translated into an equal representation of overall political position. Their efforts have been primarily unrecognised by political parties and the state.

In contrast, some countries like South Africa, Rwanda, Cuba, and Nordic nations have acknowledged the importance of gender representation, achieving over 50% representation in their parliaments (IPU, 2020; ILO, 2018). Women's access and representation in Nepalese politics were limited only; the new constitution of 2015 created a great space for women in politics (Kanel, 2014; Constitution of Nepal, 2015). The new constitution in 2015 provided a 33% reservation for women to ensure women's political representation in Parliament (Nepal Law Commission, 2015). Though women's representation in parliament increased to 33%, up from 5% (Prasain, 2018), this figure is still significantly lower than the 51% share of the national female population (National Statistics Office Nepal, 2022). Considering the population of Nepali women, it seems necessary to have a 50/50 representation of women and men in parliament. According to recent elections, some countries, such as Mexico and Rwanda, have achieved 50-50 percent representation of women and men in parliament (UN Women, 2024). It is evident that several countries, such as South Africa, Rwanda, Cuba, and some other countries, have recognised the importance of women's representation in their parliaments, providing over 50% of women's representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020; International Labour Organization, 2018).

The first election in 2017 since Nepal became a federal democratic republic and inclusive state was a historic moment for Nepali women in politics, creating a watershed moment where 14,653 (40.2%) women won three-tier elections (AP1HD, 2022). Women's representation in the central parliament has increased due to quotas and a mixed election system. However, their representation must be higher to meet the women's quota. Female leadership is low across all three tiers of government (Adhikari, 2020). Only 16% of women will serve in the federal cabinet by 2024 (Government of Nepal, Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, n.d.). Despite significant reservation policies, Nepal's proportion of women succeeding in direct elections is notably low. In the First and Second Constituent Assembly elections, women secured 12.5% and 4.2%, respectively, in direct elections. In the Nepalese Federal Parliament elections of 2017 and 2022, only 3.6% and 5.5% of female candidates, respectively, won direct elections in the House of Representatives (Bashyal, 2022). Nepal once achieved a significant milestone: three women assuming the highest positions: the President as the head of the state, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Supreme Court Chief Justice. However, such a convergence of female leadership at the highest echelons remains exceptional and underscores the ongoing struggle for gender equality in public office. Globally, only 17 countries had a female head of state, and 19 countries had a

female head of government (out of 193 countries) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Despite the provision that one woman is the head or deputy head at the local level, very few women have reached the head position, and women have faced exclusion from political authority at the local bodies. Only 2% of females won the election as mayors and chairpersons in local government in 2017 and 3.3% in 2022. Local bodies comprised 91% of female deputy mayors or deputy chairpersons in 2017, which decreased to 75% in 2022 (Gyawali, 2022).

Statement of the Problems

The problem addressed in the study "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions in Nepal" investigates the challenges that prevent women from advancing into leadership roles. This issue examines the various factors contributing to gender inequality within organisational structures, highlighting the systemic, societal, and institutional obstacles that limit women's career progression. Nepal, women's quotas have enlarged the component of women's status in political developments. Its new constitution has taken some positive steps to address significant gaps in women's electoral representation, which has positively contributed to achieving gender equality to a greater extent. These are very positive efforts but not sufficient. Women in Nepal continue to face a serious barrier to qualitative and meaningful political representation in politics and leadership. The representation of women in leadership positions within political parties and government remains limited and requires significant improvement. The Political Party Act 2017 mandates that at least one-third of party members in Nepal must be women, leading to increased representation in the party central committee but not leadership roles (Nepal, 2022). The reservation for women in Nepal stands at 33 percent, significantly lower than the female population's share of 53.91 percent. The representation of women according to population is essential. Similarly, efforts to ensure one-third representation of women in leadership roles still need to be made. There must be a higher female presence in executive and leadership positions across all government levels and mainstream political parties, which is extremely low. What obstacles prevent women from reaching political leadership positions? What strategies can be adopted to help women achieve leadership positions?

While research on women's issues and political participation exists, studies on barriers to women's political leadership are limited. This study seeks to provide qualitative insights from national political leaders, highlighting challenges women face in accessing leadership and strategies to enhance their representation. The study aims to explore women's challenges in accessing political leadership in Nepal, identifying key barriers and exploring potential strategies to improve their representation based on qualitative insights from national political leaders.

Literature review

This section outlines the conceptual and theoretical perspective of leadership and the barriers hindering women's leadership roles. Leadership is a broad concept applicable to

various fields, while political leadership relates explicitly to politics and authority. It involves the competition for power, often legitimised or supranational, to form regimes or establish governance systems. Though interpretations of political leadership vary, power remains a central focus (Edinger, 2017). Leadership involves a mutual commitment between a leader and a group of followers to pursue a collective goal (Gupta et al., 2004). A leader means to lead the organisation in a public-private, big or small way. Hence, a leader is a person who guides others towards a common goal or vision, inspiring and motivating them to foster collaboration and innovation. They possess personal attributes like integrity, empathy, and resilience, allowing them to connect with team members sincerely. Political leaders possess institutionalised political authority and can exert significant influence over a wide range of people's group values, goals, behaviours, and domains compared to many other forms of social leadership (Friedrich, 1961).

Women in political leadership refers to the active participation and representation of women in positions of power within government and political structures. This includes roles such as elected officials, appointed leaders, and individuals with significant political influence. (....)

Feminist theory has shaped how society views women, especially when they are in leadership positions. However, much has been accomplished to ensure equality between both genders, yet women's underrepresentation in key leadership decision-making continues to abound, hindered by deep-rooted structural and cultural obstacles. This framework explores the issues with these obstacles as a basis for systemic transformation in women's access to leadership. Intersectional feminism adds richness to this understanding by unpacking how interlocking identities, such as race, class, and ethnicity, worsen the circumstances of women, especially in political leadership. Women of colour face different ways of marginalisation that have to be addressed by inclusive measures to ensure that they get fair representation. Multiple feminist movements enrich the debate on the participation of women in politics. Liberal feminists focus on reforms in the existing political structures, seeking equal opportunities through legal and institutional changes. Marxist feminism, on the other hand, ties women's leadership to the broader efforts of dismantling capitalist systems, where the economic roots of gender inequality are addressed to achieve social and economic equity. Social role theory complements these perspectives by focusing on the impact of societal expectations and gender norms on women's leadership. According to Eagly (1987), societal norms assign agentic traits like assertiveness and independence to men, while communal qualities such as empathy and kindness are attributed to women. Many of these biases undermine female leaders in male-dominated settings, where they are criticised for being too ambitious or empathetic. Feminist theory brings together these perspectives to understand the multifaceted nature of barriers to women's leadership and advocates for structural reform and cultural shifts to bring about a more inclusive and equitable landscape in leadership.

Research Materials and Methods

This study focuses on the political barriers faced by women in Nepal's political landscape. Despite constitutional provisions of one-third of women's political representation, there is a lack of women in leadership positions in political parties and the government. This study employs a qualitative method, used purposive sampling to select respondents of both sexes, and conducted in-depth interviews with nine influential leaders of Nepalese mainstream political parties: the Nepali Congress, Nepal communist party (UML), Maoist Centre, and Madhesi Janadhikar Forum with significant knowledge, concentration, and interest in women's political issues. Three interviews were conducted directly and six via telephone. Among the respondents, three were males, and six were females. In terms of caste and ethnic groups, four respondents were Brahmins, three were Madhesi, and one each was Chhetri and Janajati. Their ages range between 46 and 72 years, and their education levels range from intermediate level to PhD, with one being a medical doctor. The data collected was analysed thematically, and essential points expressed by the interviewees were used as quotes.

The study's limitations are that it employs only qualitative methods and in-depth interviews with nine political leaders of mainstream political parties in Nepal. Purposive sampling is used for respondent selection because their insightful knowledge is valuable to the study. This study only examines women's hindrances to political leadership.

This study is significant as it provides valuable insight into the systemic inequalities and societal biases that hinder women's leadership in Nepali politics and the workplace, emphasising the importance of increasing women's participation in leadership roles. By understanding these barriers, the study advocates for promoting inclusivity, gender equality, and diversity, which are vital for enhancing democratic processes, improving organisational outcomes, and fostering progressive social change. Strengthening women's leadership in Nepal is crucial for challenging patriarchal norms, ensuring fair representation, and advancing policies addressing critical issues such as education, healthcare, and women's rights, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society. In the broader context, this study contributes to the ongoing conversation about gender equality and encourages meaningful change in the political environment in Nepal.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the research findings, focusing on the barriers that hinder women's leadership in Nepal. It also outlines key strategies to address these challenges and promote female leadership.

Barriers to women's political leadership

Women continue to face miserable conditions across various aspects of life, with only a few attaining positions of prominence and influence. While some opportunities for political representation have emerged, women still struggle to achieve meaningful and qualitative

representation at decision-making levels. Persistent barriers hinder their advancement in politics, as reflected in the themes derived from the leader's perspectives in the transcribed data, which explore the obstacles preventing women from reaching the highest levels of political leadership and enhancing leadership strategy.

Patriarchal mindset

The research reveals that the most considerable challenge women face in Nepalese politics is the entrenched patriarchal mindset predominant in Nepali society. Women often face societal skepticism and resistance when they enter the political ground. Nepal upholds deep-rooted patriarchal ideology as a hurdle to women's access to leadership roles. The patriarchal mindset is thought to believe that women cannot become credible and natural leaders; male leaders do not want to recognise, respect, and believe in female leaders. Men believe that women lack leadership skills and confidence and have less ability to manage large ministries and the political sphere. The leaders' views are identical to versions from another source. It has created a significant gender gap at the political leadership level (C. Yadav, personal communication, November 9, 2022; A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022). Further, women often receive token roles at the political executive level. Men only access high-profile and influential ministries (A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022; D. Sangraula, personal communication, December 3, 2022; S. Koirala, personal communication, November 2, 2022; G. Thapa, personal communication, November 2, 2022; K. Panta, personal communication, November 2, 2022). Under the prevailing male-dominated societal norms, the prospect of a woman ascending to the top executive position, i.e. Prime Minister in Nepal, is beyond consideration.

One of the respondents reveals that under the prevailing patriarchal and male-dominated societal norms, the prospect of a woman ascending to the position of Prime Minister in Nepal is deemed implausible and beyond consideration. Women are often relegated to token roles, such as the Ministry of Women and Children, while high-profile and influential ministries, including Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs, and Finance, remain out of reach for women" (A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022).

Bimala Rai Paudyal is a rare example of a woman in leadership who served as Nepal's Minister of Foreign Affairs for only 42 days due to the country's unstable political situation. However, the journey to achieving strong leadership is still influenced by an old male-dominated model that limits women's roles. Women's leadership is not acknowledged in our society since men have held leadership positions for so long.

Social and Cultural Norms and Triple Responsibilities

Cultural factors encompass various elements that shape societies, communities, and individuals. These factors include traditions, customs, beliefs, values, languages, norms, rituals, arts, and social institutions a particular group share. One such cultural influence is the prevalence of gendered stereotypes, which often position women as caregivers rather than

leaders. The study reveals that socio-cultural attitudes hinder women in political leadership, imposing more responsibilities on them than men. While socio-cultural values significantly impact people's lives, in Nepal, too, our cultural and social context seems to have instilled in us the idea that politics is for men and women responsible for the home. Nepalese women face challenges balancing traditional gender roles and achieving political leadership due to their focus on family and children and feudalistic attitudes (A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022).

Less Opportunity in a Competitive Election

The most important process for making democracy democratic and presenting individuals as leaders is elections. Election systems are crucial for creating strong women's leadership. Women face limited opportunities in elections, hindering their ability to become leaders. The study reveals that Nepal's electoral system, combining first-past-the-post and proportional representation, limits women's opportunities in direct elections, hindering their leadership potential. Parties' proportional representation of women's quotas results in temporary political involvement and insufficient leadership development, with dedicated female politicians often missing candidacy opportunities due to financial resources (A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022; R. Yadav, personal communication, December 27, 2022; C. Yadav, personal communication, November 13, 2022). Although giving women the opportunity to compete in direct elections will develop political leadership, ensure accountability, and express political views, political parties give their candidacies in areas where they do not win (A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022; R. Yadav, personal communication, December 27, 2022; C. Yadav, personal communication, November 13, 2022).

Costly Election

Mostly, when money dominates politics, women lose out. Women have insistently lower incomes due to numerous reasons, for instance, disproportionate unpaid family care, gender gap in pay, occupational segregation, frequent unwillingness to face the social consequences of pushing for higher salaries or promotions, and with social and business interaction proceeding heavily along gendered lines, women are far less likely than men to be in the social networks that pour money into political campaigns. The expensive electoral system created obstacles for women to reach the qualitative position. Women in Nepal face lower incomes, gender pay gaps, and limited access to social and business networks due to money-dominated politics. Increased public funding and the mafia marginalise women, further affecting their leadership (C. Yadav, personal communication, November 13, 2022).

Violence and Discrimination

Female politicians face gender-based violence and discrimination, hindering their leadership progress within and outside political parties. Obstacles like sexual harassment, a hostile work environment, subtle biases, and societal scrutiny discourage women from entering

politics. Even today, our society questions women when they leave the house in the evening and morning. When women leave the house to work in politics, society has raised questions about them. Despite some progress, psychological barriers and societal norms limit women's participation, with only a tiny percentage venturing into politics (S. Koirala, personal communication, November 2, 2022; D. Sangraula, personal communication, December 3, 2022). Many capable and educated women are reluctant to enter politics due to the psychological violence that women in politics have to endure. Unless society's thinking changes, women in politics will have to endure mental violence for many more years.

The Legal Provision

Women in Nepal have historically faced legal and constitutional marginalisation. Although the constitution mandates one-third representation for women in all state bodies, including parliament and political parties, actual leadership positions for women still need to be available. Outdated male-centric leadership models hinder women's advancement, requiring political parties to faithfully implement constitutional provisions to ensure meaningful inclusion of women in leadership roles (A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022; D. Sangraula, personal communication, December 3, 2022; R. Yadav, personal communication, December 27, 2022; C. Yadav, personal communication, November 13, 2022). Masculine thinking hinders and devalues the exercise of women's constitutional rights.

Strategies for Enhancing Female Leadership

Some important strategies to enhance women's political leadership in the Nepalese context have been developed in this section.

Patriarchal Mindset

Interventions are needed in many domains to bring women to political leadership positions in male-dominated politics. Society's deeply rooted belief that politics is a field only for men and that women are incapable of participating needs to be significantly shifted (D. Sangraula, personal communication, December 3, 2022; A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022; R. Yadav, personal communication, December 27, 2022; C. Yadav, personal communication, November 13, 2022).

Women's Solidarity Movement

Nepalese women's political representation is substantial, but strong inter-party movements can unite factions and political polarisation, enabling them to effectively advance their political leadership (A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022; D. Sangraula, personal communication, December 3, 2022). Strong women's organisations are crucial for political success. Quota and proportional electoral systems for a few more years ensure women's representation and promote leadership with ideas and principles (G. Thapa, personal communication, November 2, 2022).

Women in Nepalese politics have secured significant rights, but enhanced their capabilities and fostered robust networks is crucial for their leadership development and

protection. Women leaders need to elevate their quality and capacity. Reliance on proportional representation inhibits leadership development (P. Bhusal, personal communication, December 22, 2022; L. Pandit, personal communication, December 18, 2022). Women must undergo personal transformation and self-reflection to achieve top leadership positions and effectively exercise their political rights.

Social and Cultural Norms and Triple Responsibilities

Enhancing women's leadership and creating awareness for addressing cultural and societal barriers through public discussions, media campaigns, and educational initiatives may be potent weapons for promoting gender equality in society, challenging preconceptions and highlighting the importance of women. National campaigns should challenge traditional gender norms and emphasise the importance of female participation in political leadership to overcome socio-cultural barriers against women (K. Panta, personal communication, November 2, 2022).

Less Opportunity in a Competitive Election

The impact of the electoral system on female quota representation in Nepal is a topic of debate. Some advocate that a fully proportional system or a straightforward election can enhance female leadership (K. Panta, personal communication, November 2, 2022). Some respondents believe that proportionate elections foster less leadership than direct elections. Concerns arise regarding biases in quota systems and limited opportunities for women's political engagement. Effective leadership emerges from direct election competition, where women engage deeply with party principles and public issues (S. Koirala, personal communication, November 2, 2022). Evidence also supports that a nominated leader cannot gain more power and has less chance of being re-elected (Krook, 2013; Maaitah et al., 2012). Direct election competition is effective, and women should engage in politics based on qualifications and contributions rather than relying on quotas (R. Yadav, personal communication, December 27, 2022). Nepal's women's leadership development is hindered by limited participation in party leadership, necessitating their role as gatekeepers to establish robust leadership with political party support (S. Koirala, personal communication, November 2, 2022).

Costly Election

Reconsidering the Nepalese election system is crucial for democratisation, as it currently hinders women and honest candidates. The state or political parties should provide financial support for women's election campaigns to mitigate the misuse of huge funds during elections due to increasing election costs, which has led to corruption (A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022). Reserved electoral constituencies for women are essential to safeguard them from financial, physical, and criminal influences (C. Yadav, personal communication, November 13, 2022). Elections should be free and fair from mafia politics because it increases corruption and criminal activity.

Violence and Discrimination

Reducing harassment and violence may require several years to create a conducive environment for women in Nepali politics (S. Koirala, personal communication, November 2, 2022). It is also crucial to strengthen laws that protect women politicians from harassment, violence, and intimidation during campaigns and while in office. Dedicated support systems and hotlines should be established to assist women facing political violence or harassment.

The Legal Provision

It is necessary to codify these provisions to properly guarantee women's political rights. Traditional leadership's reluctance to cede power necessitates quotas for women's representation. While the constitution mandates 33% female participation in parliament and critical leadership positions, ambiguities exist, like the absence of clear provisions for female state Chief Ministers. Explicit constitutional clauses are vital to empower women in leadership roles (A. Shakya, personal communication, December 3, 2022). States and political parties can effectively promote women to leadership by merely adhering to existing legal provisions, making the process relatively straightforward.

Discussion

This study reveals that women face numerous multi-layer barriers to reaching leadership positions in Nepal and highlighted its strategies. Among the barriers associated with women's leadership, the first and foremost obstacle related to women is the patriarchal mindset deeply ingrained in Nepali society that believes that women cannot assume the highest ranks of leadership. Such an opinion within society tends to generate skepticism among their male counterparts and the rest of society at large. Therefore, it is challenging for women to gain a foothold in the political domain. The concept of patriarchy, defined as a system where men dominate, oppress, and exploit women, poses significant barriers to female leadership development (Walby, 1990). Previous studies also indicate that centuries-old patriarchy has created a considerable gender gap in the political arena, like in other sectors' leadership levels (APIHD, 2022). Even though some areas of the patriarchal system in Nepal were weakened, the system remains alive. There are discriminatory practices against women across society, both within and outside households. Patriarchy works systematically across all political, economic, social, and cultural spheres through multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination that transcend gender. Gender and sexuality, for instance, intersect with caste, indigenous and ethnic identities, and religion to further reinforce the patriarchal structure in Nepal. Dismantling these deeply-rooted systems developed over thousands of years is a multi-generation, long-term process (Upreti et al., 2020). The main obstacles to preventing women from participating in political leadership include stereotypes, attitudes, biases, and socio-cultural norms against women, resulting in a gender gap at the highest levels of politics (Upreti et al., 2018; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Adhiambo-Oduol, 2003). This study explores the need to increase the number of women in political leadership positions

qualitatively. It also highlights the need to change societal attitudes towards women by challenging the patriarchal belief that politics is a male domain. Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives should emphasise the capability of women leaders to promote equality in political participation. Previous studies also indicate similar findings that women's leadership representation can rise through cultural, policy, and practice changes in various sectors (Hill et al., 2016), breaking discriminatory norms and masculinist thinking. Additionally, engaging men as allies in this process will help break down patriarchal structures and create a more inclusive political environment. A robust feminist voice is crucial to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. Transformative change requires building broad alliances that acknowledge interconnected injustices, embrace egalitarian power-sharing, and advocate for marginalised voices (Harvey & Safier, 2021).

Second, obstacles to enhancing women's leadership in Nepal are socio-cultural norms and values; expectations essentially put family responsibilities on women over career advancement, reinforcing the perception that they are less committed or capable of assuming leadership roles. The stereotype has remained that their roles are caregiving rather than public leadership. It has limited the political participation of women and restricted their career advancement. As a result, women are often scrutinised for their ability to balance work and family obligations, which can further hinder their professional development. Studies found that extremely unpleasant social norms, political exclusion, and economic lopsidedness dictate the voice of women in public life (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015). Harmful cultural norms and gender-based violence impede women's political rights, while media stereotypes reinforce the notion that women are less legitimate and competent leaders compared to men (UNwomen, 2024). Unpaid care work is one of the primary reasons that women cannot enter politics (Tadros, 2014). African Women have four times more unpaid care work than men. Women in the Asia-Pacific region have less time to participate in political and economic activities (International Labour Organization, 2018; Jalalzai, 2004). Similarly, Politics has been historically male-dominated; society views women primarily as second-class citizens and is limited to domestic spaces like child care, elder care, emotional labour, and social reproduction (Eagly & Carli, 2007). People view women's leadership wins as tokenism, implying they are less qualified than men and merely fill a quota (Adhikari, 2020). The current approach to qualitative leadership is an outdated male model, which hinders women's leadership development due to their long-term positions and unwillingness to transfer their leadership (AAUW, 2016). This study emphasises that strengthening women's solidarity through political organisations and intra-party support networks would enable women to support one another's political ambitions, facilitating their collective advancement in leadership roles. Previous studies indicate that the increased representation of women in politics results from sustained women's movements, awareness-raising initiatives, and the development of a gender-sensitive political culture sensitive to gender issues (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020).

The third serious obstacle is Nepal's electoral system; women's political participation might face significant hurdles in electoral processes and party structures, mixed first-past-the-post and proportional representation. Women are primarily included in parliament through the proportional representation system to meet gender quotas rather than being elected directly by the public, which hinders women's long-term leadership development. Candidates are offered to women in areas where they are bound to lose, and they compete with the mighty men. The political parties sometimes fail to provide women with opportunities for leadership roles, from local offices to national positions. Previous studies also indicated that women usually do not receive tickets in the direct election system. When they do, they are typically assigned to areas where they are unlikely to win. Women face more challenges in winning elections when competing against men. This is due to several factors, including psychological influences, such as the belief that women are inferior and socio-cultural beliefs that women are less capable than men. A study claims that women with political positions belonged to a higher class or caste, were close relatives of male politicians, and were mainly subordinate to male leaders (Kanel, 2014). So, it is challenging for the general public and women, especially those with limited finances, to enter politics, posing a significant obstacle to women's candidacy (Johnson-Myers & Campbell, 2024). Women may be less interested in running for office than men (Kanthak & Woon, 2015). Additionally, women often have less authority in household decisions and hold lower leadership positions, which has led to the belief that they are not fit to lead their communities, especially in rural and municipal areas. This research explores the fact that the electoral system must be reformed to enhance women's leadership and provide more equitable opportunities for women in competitive elections. The electoral system of Nepal should be reformed to either a fully proportional representation system with 50 percent women's representation or a fully direct election (first-past-the-post) system, with a reserved mechanism ensuring 33 percent women's reserved constituencies to assure women leadership. Various studies indicate that females have weaker networks than their male counterparts. So, good networking is essential for better opportunities and winning an election (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hewlett et al., 2010). Media outlets should also play a supportive role by highlighting the work and perspectives of female political leaders, ensuring that their voices are visible in public discourse. Evidence supports that the party's gatekeeper can impact voting, campaign promotion, and fundraising to help a female candidate win (Cheng & Tavits, 2011). Brazil's women's mayorship has significantly improved living standards, with the government funding women's centres, promoting gender equality, and fostering women's autonomy (Funk, 2020). The fourth obstacle is that Nepalese women face structural discrimination in various ways.

Women's financial constraints further exacerbate the situation, as usually, women may not have relevant resources, networks, or business connections for financing election campaigns. Such an economic disadvantage blocks a prominent scope of gaining competition in the political arena. Studies found that Structural discrimination against women is evident in the

disproportionate allocation of their time to unpaid family and housework responsibilities, which lack financial recognition, limiting their opportunities for economic empowerment and access to financial resources while also hindering their visibility and representation in networking and media coverage (Saluja & Minz, 2023). Economic and financial constraints are significant barriers to women's advancement in enhancing their skills, education, and training and for active participation in political life (AI Maaitah et al., 2012). This study emphasises that financial assistance for women candidates is essential to overcoming their economic barriers. Government or party-backed funding initiatives help alleviate the financial burden and ensure women access campaign resources equally. A study found that Empowering women by enhancing their economic independence will enable them to develop, thrive, and advance in their careers. Women can create women-oriented policies and programs encouraging women's economic independence and leadership (AI Maaitah et al., 2012).

The fifth obstacle is that Nepali women have also faced psychological discrimination and violence in politics, including sexual harassment and a hostile work environment, which not only impacts their mental health but also discourages many from entering or staying in politics. The study found that psychological violence was the most prevalent type of harassment (UN Women, 2024); a member of the Delhi Legislative Assembly shared a similar experience, expressing the pain she felt when her male colleague accused her character while working late at night to serve the people (Rajya Sabha TV, 2018). It is necessary to change the mindset toward women politicians and reduce violence and discrimination against women in politics. Finally, the study reveals that legal protection for women in politics must be strengthened to protect them from harassment, discrimination, and violence. Dedicated support systems, such as legal aid and hotlines, would help women navigate their challenges and empower them to pursue their political aspirations without fear of retribution or harm. Studies found that Political and legal support and women's empowerment are crucial strategies for advancing into political and leadership roles (Maaitah et al., 2012). Government, political parties, civil society, media, and NGOs can play an important role in removing obstacles hindering women from participating in qualitative politics.

Women in Nepal encounter a range of challenges in achieving leadership positions, including entrenched patriarchy, cultural expectations, systemic discrimination, financial limitations, and psychological barriers. The way forward for all these barriers calls for a pronged approach that will span generations and require reforms in social attitudes, electoral systems, and legal frameworks. Empowerment through education, economic independence, and robust support networks is essential. Transformative change can occur when the political space becomes more inclusive for women by penetrating the patriarchal system, and men are actively involved as allies. Gender equality in leadership positions in Nepal is only possible when collective action and commitment happen together.

Conclusion

Examining barriers to women's advancement in leadership positions reveals multifaceted challenges rooted in systemic biases and societal norms. Despite progress, gender disparities persist, limiting women's representation in leadership roles across various sectors. Cultural perceptions often lead to leadership as masculine, posing a significant issue for women aspiring to high-level positions. Nepal's constitution promotes women's political participation through quotas; however, this measure alone is inadequate to address the deeply rooted challenges women face in a patriarchal society. The traditional state system and entrenched gender stereotypes continue to limit women's inclusion in political leadership. Unequal opportunities pose a significant barrier to women's progression into leadership roles. The prevailing political framework fails to challenge traditional power dynamics, reinforcing the perception that women are unsuited for competitive politics and limiting their access to qualitative leadership opportunities. Similarly, Expensive electoral competition and competing against a male counterpart are challenging for female candidates. None of the parties involve women in high-level decision-making meetings during government operations. Women are not included even in the high-level committees to investigate major corruption scandals. Inherent masculinist thinking does not transform inclusive politics.

A fundamental shift in patriarchal attitudes, prevailing culture, policies, and practices is essential to ensure equitable representation of women in leadership positions. Political leaders and parties must acknowledge and respect women's contributions and implement inclusive constitutional provisions. Political parties should provide leadership opportunities for women in local elections and party structures. Women must work with greater collaboration to achieve their rights in a full-fledged way. Intensive training programs are essential for enhancing women's capability. Women should have their transformation and self-reflection for their top leadership and exercise political rights. Similarly, the international community, like the UN, should advocate for mandatory gender parity laws across all sectors, ensuring equal representation in meaningful decision-making roles. Rwanda's success in implementing gender parity laws demonstrates that such measures are achievable and practical.

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