

# Gender Imbalance in Leadership Positions in Nepal

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## Abstract

*This article analyzes the ongoing gender disparity in leadership roles within political, local government, corporate, and educational fields in Nepal. Utilizing secondary data from UN Women, government statistics, academic research, and journalistic analyses (2023–2025), the paper outlines present representation trends, pinpoints structural and socio-cultural obstacles including patriarchy, gendered labor distribution, political party gate keeping, tokenism, and examines policy and programmatic solutions. The paper concludes with recommendations based on soft evidence to enhance meaningful female leadership beyond gains driven by quotas. The recent studies reveal advancement in representation at certain levels, yet there is still a predominance of women in deputy/support positions and a lack of representation at executive tiers. The representation trends in Nepal within political, local government, corporate, and educational leadership show a notable underrepresentation of women, underscoring the necessity for a thorough examination of the structural and cultural obstacles that hinder their progress to senior leadership roles. The major obstacles consist of deep-rooted patriarchal values, limited access to resources and networks, and inadequate support for balancing work and personal life, all of which lead to ongoing gender inequalities in leadership positions. To tackle these issues, it is crucial to suggest policy and program initiatives grounded in evidence that focus on attaining significant gender-balanced leadership. The examples of such measures include establishing quotas for female leaders, offering mentorship initiatives, and cultivating inclusive work environments that emphasize gender equality. By focusing on these essential aspects, Nepal can strive to build a more equitable leadership framework that represents the varied voices and experiences of its citizens.*

**Keywords:** Gender imbalance, leadership, Nepal, female political representation, corporate boards, quotas, gender mainstreaming

## Introduction

Leadership gender equality is a question of social justice and a catalyst for inclusive governance and development. Nepal has implemented constitutional measures and policies to enhance women's representation — such as quota regulations for legislative assemblies and local governance — but women continue to be underrepresented in executive and high-level leadership roles. Recent studies indicate that although quotas boosted women's

representation in certain formal roles, they frequently occupy deputy or supporting positions instead of top roles (e.g., mayor/prime minister). This paper compiles recent studies and statistical findings to outline the existing situation, identify ongoing challenges, and suggest policy approaches.

The idea of patriarchy, characterized as a structure in which men control, subjugate, and take advantage of women, presents major obstacles to the advancement of female leadership (Walby, 1990). Studies have shown that long-standing patriarchy has resulted in a significant gender disparity in politics, similar to that found in leadership roles across other sectors (AP1HD, 2022). Although certain aspects of the patriarchal system in Nepal have diminished, it still endures. Discriminatory practices targeting women exist throughout society, both in homes and in the community. Patriarchy operates systematically throughout various political, economic, social, and cultural domains via numerous, overlapping types of discrimination that go beyond gender. Gender and sexuality, for example, interact with caste, indigenous and ethnic identities, and religion to further strengthen the patriarchal system in Nepal.

Nepalese women academic leaders have fought their own struggles employing diverse strategies to reach elevated positions. Recognizing their strategies for navigating leadership obstacles in Nepalese higher education is essential for benefiting future female leaders. The ongoing research identified several key strategies that aided Nepalese women leaders in achieving success in higher education leadership positions. Elements like determination, commitment to their tasks, constructive input to the organization, and high-quality work enabled women to thrive in their positions. In addition to personal dynamics, factors like support from colleagues through networking and their education and knowledge contributed to their ascent into leadership roles.

## **Literature review**

### ***Theoretical Overview***

Nepal's constitution and later laws establish goals and regulations for the proportional inclusion of women and marginalized communities. UN Women and the Nepal Country Gender Equality Profile outline these frameworks and associated initiatives (e.g., gender-sensitive local governance, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion policies). Legal measures have established official routes for women's political involvement, yet encounter challenges in execution. The data present conflicting indications. Certain numerical goals have been met in legislative positions due to reserved quotas; nevertheless, female representation in executive roles and high-ranking political offices, as well as in corporate leadership and board chair positions, continues to be restricted. Journalistic and policy

evaluations emphasize setbacks in certain domains and an ongoing concentration of women in assistant/support positions as exemplified in high proportions of deputy mayors compared to very low proportions of mayors (SSE, 2023).

Regional comparisons for Asia show a low presence of women in board positions and CEO roles; studies from Nepal reinforce these results, revealing minimal numbers of women CEOs and board chairs in both organizations and universities. Efforts by IFC and its partners indicate advancements in workplace policies, yet equality at the leadership level remains unachieved. The researchers have identified patriarchal societal norms, domestic responsibilities and care expectations, political party barriers, gendered recruitment and promotion practices, and tokenism as significant limitations. Even when quotas are in place, women encounter challenges in transforming descriptive representation into meaningful leadership authority (UN Women, 2023).

### ***Empirical Review***

Indira Devi Prasain (2025) examined the gender disparity in the political arena of Nepal. For her, the persistent gender inequalities and imbalances in political spheres provide the backdrop for this study. Even though they make up half of the world's population, women hold a minority of crucial decision-making positions in various sectors. The discussion regarding women in leadership underscores advancements and persistent obstacles in reaching gender equality in different areas. The quantity of female leaders is markedly inferior to that of male leaders in parliaments, universities, courts, and social or religious bodies (Hill et al., 2016), stemming from its development in a patriarchal context (Jalalzai, 2004). In 2024, women hold merely 27% of seats in national parliaments and 35.5% of roles in local governments. Women's leadership fosters gender equality while also motivating competent individuals, shaping policy to promote women's rights, and acting as role models (Vijayarasa, 2022). Women's political involvement and gender equality are essential measures of democracy (Mangvwat, 2009).

Democracy is a political system that promotes representation, involvement, and fairness among individuals. Women play a crucial role in this system as they advocate for their rights and add varied perspectives to the discussion. Around the world, women have been essential in the fight for democratic governance to reach the Sustainable Development Goals; they need equal opportunities in political power and leadership roles (UN Women, 2023).

The involvement of women in leadership roles within government and political parties is fundamental to women's political influence. The study employed a qualitative approach, purposive sampling, in-depth interviews with nine prominent leaders of Nepalese

mainstream political parties knowledgeable about women's political concerns, and a review of existing literature. The gathered data was examined thematically.

Despite women holding 33% of the representation in Nepali politics, their rise to senior leadership roles remains limited. The route to attaining effective leadership continues to rely mainly on an antiquated male framework that sidelines women's contributions. The results show that women encounter widespread obstacles in the male-dominated political arena because of entrenched patriarchal beliefs, societal norms, and perspectives that typically favor men in positions of power. The high cost of electoral competition and rivalry with male counterparts pose significant challenges for female candidates, impeding women's ambitions despite their constitutional rights. Unconscious biases and discrimination frequently result in inequitable chances for women's progress. Respondents propose that women politicians should aim to create broader coalitions to guarantee female presence in executive roles, advocating for legal changes and leadership development.

Women still endure harsh conditions in multiple areas of life, with only a limited number achieving notable roles and authority. Although some chances for political representation have surfaced, women continue to face challenges in attaining significant and qualitative representation in decision-making positions. Ongoing obstacles impede their progress in politics, mirrored in the themes drawn from the leaders' viewpoints in the transcriptions, which investigate the challenges that inhibit women from attaining top positions in political leadership and improving leadership strategy (Prasain, 2025, pp. 75—76). Cultural factors encompass various elements that shape societies, communities, and individuals. These components include traditions, customs, beliefs, values, languages, norms, rituals, arts, and social institutions that a particular group holds. A significant cultural impact is the prevalent presence of gender stereotypes, often depicting women as nurturers rather than leaders.

The research indicates that socio-cultural perceptions obstruct women in political roles, placing greater burdens on them compared to men. Although socio-cultural values greatly influence individuals' lives, in Nepal, our cultural and social environment appears to have ingrained in us the belief that politics is for men, while women are tasked with home responsibilities. Nepalese women encounter difficulties in reconciling traditional gender roles with attaining political leadership because of their emphasis on family and children alongside feudalistic mindsets.

Although there were competent women, it had been proposed that men were selected for higher positions through unjust practices. Numerous instances were provided by the participants as they contemplated this injustice. One significant instance was when a woman

was chosen as vice-chancellor for three months, only to be downgraded back to a rector role while a man was named the vice-chancellor. Multiple participants referred to this story as proof of the biases that are present in Nepalese higher education. Social norms have established roles for men and women based on their typical activities and societal expectations, known as gender-based roles (Zhao & Jones, 2017).

The outcome aligns with Sobehart's (2009, p. 53) who has asserted that men's unfavorable perceptions of female leadership stem from social role theory especially that men are raised to think women are incapable of leading them. Islam and Nasira (2016, p. 112) also indicated that, "[The] perspective on women is rooted in the overall societal perception of gender roles. A male-centric economy and social framework frequently favor males as perceived leaders in crucial situations. Thus, social role theory and role congruity theory offer an explanation for biases against women, resulting in greater challenges for women in advancing their careers and attaining leadership roles.

This indicates that leadership continues to be measured against the traditional notion of leadership that views men as superior and all-knowing. This mindset leads to the underestimation of women's abilities, fostering a negative perception of women that fuels gender discrimination. Gender stereotypes seem to be another significant factor contributing to the scarcity of female leaders, and they have been examined as an obstacle to women's advancement. Burton and Weiner (2016) have asserted that organizations that evaluate leadership skills against conventional leadership characteristics continue to possess strong gender stereotypes that are challenging to change.

## **Methodology**

This paper constitutes a review of literature and an analysis of policy based on secondary data. The sources have been chosen from government reports, publications by UN and multilateral agencies, peer-reviewed journals, institutional documents, and credible news analyses from 2020 to 2025. The latest national and international datasets and reports (UN Women, government statistical publications, IFC/IFC partners, and national commissions) have been used to gather figures and trends for presenting the status of gender imbalance in leadership. The limitation of the study has been its reliance on available secondary sources that have overlooked the latest local developments, and certain sector-specific data including private company executive compositions which may offer inconsistent results.

## **Results**

Major findings of the study can be termed as representation in politics (national and provincial) that constitutional and electoral regulations need the inclusion of women as

stipulated minimum percentages in federal and provincial legislatures. However, the data from 2024 to 2025 highlight both advancements and difficulties. Although quotas have guaranteed women's representation in legislatures, appointments at the executive level such as cabinet ministers and party leaders have either decreased or continue to be predominantly male. Multiple analyses in 2024 observed a decline in the representation of women in Cabinet and other executive positions.

A 2024 analysis estimated that women occupied roughly 27% of national parliamentary roles and approximately 35.5% of local government positions (variations exist among sources, but they highlight a lack of representation in high-ranking positions). Local-level data indicate that women are often found in deputy positions (e.g., deputy mayor, vice-chairperson) in much higher quantities than in top executive roles (mayor/chairperson). One study noted that women held a significant percentage of deputy mayor/vice-chair positions (e.g., approximately 75% in certain metrics) while occupying only around 3.3% of mayor/chairperson roles — highlighting a "support-role clustering" trend.

Sectoral analyses and regional documents indicate that women in Nepal lack representation in positions such as board chairs, CEOs, and senior executive roles. For instance, university and corporate boards are still predominantly male; sector surveys indicate that over 70% of board roles are occupied by men, while women make up only single-digit percentages of CEOs and board chairs. IFC-backed initiatives have enhanced Human Resource (HR) policies and training in certain firms, yet executive equality is still far off.

The second finding highlights regional comparison of representation. In Asia, the averages suggest that women occupy around 16% of board positions and even smaller percentages of CEO roles — a regional backdrop that clarifies Nepal's gradual advancement.

Fundamental obstacles have been recognized throughout various sectors. Gendered expectations impose unequal care and domestic duties on women, limiting their time and mobility for leadership positions.

Besides, political parties might assign women to designated roles but fail to endorse them for high-stakes competitive positions. Recruitment and promotional practices favor men, while networks and mentorships continue to be biased in corporate organizations. Security, harassment, and societal resistance hinder women's promotion and development in Nepal as well. Female politicians and leaders express worries about safety and social backlash hindering their ability to participate effectively. Women belonging to lower castes,

ethnic minorities, and rural regions encounter layered obstacles which corner them to the margin in almost every sector of Nepalese society.

## Discussion

The article examines the obstacles that hinder women from progressing into leadership positions. This article explores the different elements that lead to gender inequality in organizational frameworks, emphasizing the systemic, social, and institutional barriers that hinder women's advancement in their careers. In Nepal, female quotas have increased the role of women's status in political processes. The new constitution has made some beneficial advancement in tackling major deficiencies in women's electoral representation, which has significantly aided in advancing gender equality. These are quite commendable efforts but inadequate. Women in Nepal still encounter a significant obstacle to obtaining qualitative and impactful political representation in leadership and governance. The presence of women in leadership roles in political parties and government is still restricted and needs considerable enhancement. The Political Party Act 2017 needs that at least one-third of party members in Nepal be women, resulting in greater representation in the central committee but not in leadership positions (Nepal, 2022). In Nepal, the reservation for women is set at 33 percent, which is much less than the female population's proportion of 53.91 percent. The portrayal of women based on demographics is vital. In the same way, initiatives to secure one-third representation of women in leadership positions remain necessary. A greater representation of women is necessary in executive and leadership roles at all levels of government and within mainstream political parties, where it currently remains limited.

The situation in Nepal reflects worldwide trends: quotas and legal actions enhance descriptive representation, yet effective leadership—true authority, executive positions, and decision-making power—remains behind. The high number of women in deputy/support roles is especially significant: despite the increasing figures, the influence linked to these positions does not grow. Converting representation into influence demands focused actions that tackle political party behaviors, workplace environments, care systems, and societal standards. Approaches that integrate legal requirements with capacity enhancement, financial backing, campaign assistance, mentorship, and initiatives for changing public norms are essential.

Policy measures must be aware of the dangers of tokenism and backlash; thus, focus should be on creating supportive environments such as childcare, flexible employment, anti-harassment enforcement, leadership pathways (training, mentorship), and incentives for organizations to elevate women into senior positions (gender quotas for executive roles,

clear promotion criteria). Due to their lower involvement in politics compared to men, women face disadvantages in terms of selection and promotion. Furthermore, preferential treatment has placed more men in influential roles: most of the important political offices in Nepal are held by men. While 33% of seats in the Nepalese parliament are designated for women, critics contend that women are selected solely to fill the quota, rather than being chosen based on their ability to contribute to governance (Rai, 2019). The participation of Nepalese women in political parties is merely symbolic and asserted that male counterparts disregard women's discussions and debates. The influence of women in decision-making and constitution-building processes has been determined to be restricted.

The constitution building process is enabled by men in influential roles (Rai, 2019), which ultimately advantages men in various areas, including positions in the Nepalese higher education system. Politics and power are perceived as dominant within the Asian context, thereby influencing the higher education sector as well. Men's attitudes towards female leadership have been found to be a barrier for women in higher education in Nepal, with participants indicating they face criticism regarding their leadership roles. Several reasons account for this outcome. Initially, it was asserted that males in Nepali higher education institutions do not favor women as leaders.

This matter is connected to the prior section, since the alignment between gender and leadership positions fosters a masculine culture and unfavorable views towards female leadership, leading to gender discrimination in the workplace, which frequently makes it difficult for women to be selected, promoted, and succeed. The results of this study showed that women in Nepal are experiencing gender-based discrimination within higher education institutions.

Even though some participants asserted they had not encountered this issue themselves, they believed that gender discrimination is widespread in Nepal's higher education sector. Different situations that highlight gender discrimination, including preferential hiring based on gender, boys' clubs leading to social homogeneity, and gender-related obstacles, which ultimately manifest in the proportion of women to men in leadership roles.

The leadership notion in Nepalese higher education supports men due to the belief that "[the] male knows everything, male[s] are powerful they can manage – administrative and academic tasks. Regarding organizational barriers, while certain issues noted in Nepal mirror those found globally—like workplace discrimination, negative perceptions of women and women's leadership, and organizational politics—participants also highlighted challenges unique to the Nepali context. The findings of the research have indicated that political interference in Nepalese higher education has significantly affected women's

advancement in Nepalese higher education. Key political roles are held by men, and because positions at predominantly governmental universities rely on political appointments, women face significant disadvantages in selection and advancement. Likewise, discrimination against women and unfavorable perceptions of female leaders primarily stem from the social belief that men are dominant figures in society, with a clear societal message conveying that women should not take leadership roles over male family members. The results indicate a taboo; specifically, that men prefer not to be directed by women, while on an individual level, the findings reveal that women face challenges in managing both work and family life because of their dual obligations. The duty of caring for in-laws is seen as a woman's main concern before employment; thus, women are finding it challenging to balance their professional and family lives.

## Conclusion

The research has explored that political parties ought to implement clear criteria for selecting candidates, offer financial support and training for female candidates, and establish mentorship or sponsorship initiatives to promote women to high-profile candidacies instead of merely reserving positions. When possible, enhance numerical quotas by adding incentives or targets for executive positions (e.g., gender targets at the cabinet level; targets for municipal executives). Companies and public organizations ought to establish gender goals for executive and board roles; along with leadership training and succession planning that prepares women to become qualified top contenders. Collaborations with the private sector demonstrate encouraging advancements in HR policies that have the potential for expansion.

Investment in public childcare and eldercare services, alongside flexible work arrangements, alleviates the domestic responsibilities that primarily restrict women's participation in leadership roles. Community-based initiatives aim at changing perceptions of women's leadership and increasing visibility of role models can help diminish stigma and resistance. Enhance data gathering and oversight to monitor advancement by gender, caste/ethnicity and geography, allowing focused initiatives for the most marginalized groups. Nepal has achieved significant legal and policy progress to increase women's numerical presence in official politics and employment, yet a lasting gender disparity in meaningful leadership persists.

The trend of women being found primarily in deputy/support roles while being absent from senior executive positions highlights the shortcomings of approaches that rely solely on quotas. A unified approach that tackles systemic obstacles including institutional behaviors, business pathways, cultural standards, and care giving duties—supported by

strong oversight—is crucial to transform descriptive representation into significant, enduring advancements in leadership equality.

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