



Barriers and Prospects of Women's Participation in Local Governments of Nepal

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Received: 20 March, 2025, Accepted: 15 April, 2025, Published 15 May, 2025



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Abstract

This study explores both the barriers and prospects of women's participation in local governments of Nepal, with a focus on elected women representatives in Gandaki Province. Using a mixed-methods approach, it integrates quantitative analysis of the 2017 and 2022 local election results with qualitative data from 25 semi-structured interviews and case studies. The quantitative data, sourced from the Election Commission of Nepal, show a notable increase in women's representation due to constitutional quotas and reservation policies. However, the qualitative findings reveal that this numerical increase has not translated into meaningful participation or leadership influence. Women, particularly those from Dalit, Janajati, and other marginalized communities, remain largely confined to reserved or symbolic positions. Structural barriers such as caste-based discrimination, patriarchal social norms, political exclusion, and limited access to education and capacity-building opportunities hinder their effectiveness. Furthermore, political parties, while nominating women to fulfill quotas, often lack inclusive strategies, meaningful leadership training, and internal democratic practices that support women's political growth. Party mechanisms frequently treat women as token figures rather than transformative leaders, limiting their engagement in decision-making processes. Despite these challenges, the study identifies emerging prospects. Women's increasing presence in local institutions is gradually shifting traditional gender norms, and some elected representatives are beginning to assert their voices in governance and community development. Guided by an intersectional feminist framework, the study concludes that substantive participation requires not just legal inclusion but structural reforms within political parties, institutional support, and investments in women's leadership development to achieve inclusive and democratic local governance in Nepal.

Keywords: *Women's political participation, Local government, Leadership, Gender inequality, Gandaki Province, Nepal, Dalit women*

Introduction

Women's participation and leadership in political structures, from the local to the national level, continue to remain constraint despite various national and international commitments toward gender equality and inclusive governance. Political empowerment of women is globally acknowledged as a foundation for inclusive democracy and sustainable development (Cantaon, 2021). However, women's representation in political leadership and decision-making positions remains inadequate across different layers of government, including in Nepal. The federal, provincial, and local elections held in 2017 marked a significant milestone in Nepal's democratic transition following the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015. The constitution mandated a minimum of 33% representation of women in all state bodies and adopted affirmative actions such as gender quotas and gender-balanced nominations, particularly at the local level. As a result, the 2017 local elections witnessed the election of 14,352 women representatives, making up 40.9% of the total local representatives (Election Commission Nepal, 2017). Among them, a large number served as ward members, with many elected to meet the mandatory inclusion of at least two women in each ward committee, one of whom must be from the Dalit community, according to the Local Level Election Act of 2017.

Despite this quantitative increase in representation, the qualitative aspect of women's leadership remained weak. Many women elected in 2017 reported having limited influence in political decision-making. They often held subordinate positions such as vice-chairpersons and deputy mayors, with limited authority, access to resources, or decision-making powers (Krook & Norris, 2014). Their participation was frequently tokenistic rather than transformative, constrained by patriarchal political norms, gender-based discrimination, and the burden of fulfilling both domestic and public responsibilities (Tamang, 2014). Furthermore, a lack of prior political experience, limited technical knowledge, and minimal institutional support hindered their ability to assert effective leadership.

The 2022 local elections offered an opportunity to assess progress and continuity in women's political empowerment. While women's overall representation decreased slightly to 41.2%, only 25 women were elected as chiefs (mayors or chairpersons) out of 753 local units, representing a marginal increase from the 18 elected in 2017 (Election Commission Nepal, 2022). The number of women elected to powerful executive positions remained disproportionately low compared to men, indicating persistent structural and cultural barriers. In most cases, male candidates continued to dominate the more influential mayoral and chairperson positions, while

women were frequently nominated as deputies. Local governments are often seen as accessible entry points for women's political engagement due to their proximity to communities and relatively lower levels of competition (Manandhar et al., 2019). However, both the 2017 and 2022 elections reveal that women's formal presence in local governance does not automatically translate into effective leadership or policy influence. In practice, many women still lack the institutional support, resources, and capacity-building opportunities necessary to function as independent and influential leaders.

This situation is not unique to Nepal. Globally, women accounted for only 26.4% of national parliamentarians as of early 2022, despite progress in some countries like Rwanda, where women constitute over 60% of parliamentary members (Canton, 2021). In Nepal, symbolic milestones such as the election of the first female President, Bidhya Devi Bhandari, contrast with the reality of continued marginalization of women in substantive political roles at all levels of government. In conclusion, while constitutional provisions and legal frameworks in Nepal have improved the numerical representation of women in politics, especially through the 2017 and 2022 elections, deep-rooted structural inequalities and sociocultural barriers still limit their access to genuine political power and leadership roles. To ensure that women's political participation moves beyond symbolic representation, there is a need for sustained institutional reforms, capacity development, and cultural transformation toward gender-equitable governance.

Literature Review

The political underrepresentation of women has been extensively studied within sociological and political science disciplines, often through theoretical frameworks such as structural functionalism, feminist theory, and intersectionality. Feminist scholars argue that institutional patriarchy and deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms continue to shape political structures that marginalize women's voices and limit their leadership opportunities (Connell, 1987; Walby, 1990). Although many countries, including Nepal, have introduced constitutional mandates and gender quotas aimed at increasing women's political representation, the political arena frequently remains male-dominated and exclusionary. Anne Phillips (1995) underscores the distinction between "descriptive representation," the mere numerical presence of women in political offices, and "substantive representation," which entails the real exercise of power and influence over policy decisions. According to Phillips, increasing the number of women in political roles is necessary but insufficient unless accompanied by actual decision-making authority and political capital. In Nepal's context, Paudel and Karki (2020) highlight that many women elected through quota systems do not possess equal access to political networks and resources compared to

their male counterparts, which often results in marginalization even within their political parties.

A vital lens to understand the multifaceted nature of women's political marginalization is the theory of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Intersectionality emphasizes how overlapping social identities, including gender, caste, class, and ethnicity, interact to create unique and compounded forms of discrimination. This framework is particularly relevant in the Nepali political context, where women's underrepresentation is not only a matter of numbers but also reflects limited leadership effectiveness, especially for marginalized groups like Dalit women who face distinct and layered challenges compared to their higher-caste or urban counterparts (Khatri & Devkota, 2020). At the individual level, women often confront patriarchal family expectations and limited political experience that hinder their participation. Structurally, they face exclusion within male-dominated party politics and are often relegated to figurative or tokenistic roles without substantive decision-making power or institutional backing (Tamang, 2009; Bennett et al., 2008). Despite constitutional mandates for gender inclusion, the absence of real authority and support mechanisms restricts women's ability to exercise effective leadership. Intersectionality thus highlights the importance of addressing these multiple, interconnected forms of exclusion to foster substantive political participation and leadership for all women in Nepal's local governance (Crenshaw, 1989).

Marginalized groups, particularly Dalit women in Nepal, face compounded challenges rooted in both caste-based exclusion and gendered subordination. Research indicates that these intersecting forms of discrimination significantly hinder Dalit women's capacity to lead effectively in political offices (Tamang, 2009; Bennett et al., 2008). A study by Upreti et al. (2020) found that although constitutional mandates have increased women's presence in local government roles, their actual participation in agenda-setting and budget allocation remains minimal. This indicates that the presence of women in political offices does not automatically translate into meaningful involvement in critical decision-making areas. Similarly, Manandhar et al. (2019) argue that women in local governments are often confined to 'soft' policy domains such as education, health, and social welfare, while 'hard' policy areas like infrastructure, finance, and security continue to be dominated by men. This gendered division of political labor limits women's scope of influence and perpetuates existing patriarchal norms within governance institutions.

The literature also reveals a close relationship between women's political empowerment and broader socio-economic development. UN Women (2019) asserts that meaningful participation of women in governance leads to more inclusive policies, enhanced service delivery, and greater community responsiveness. However, the realization of this potential depends on systematically addressing barriers such as

lack of education, limited financial resources, and inadequate institutional support (Krook & Norris, 2014). Without targeted interventions to overcome these structural and social constraints, women's political empowerment remains limited to symbolic representation. In conclusion, while Nepal has made commendable strides in ensuring the descriptive representation of women in political institutions, numerous barriers continue to impede their effective leadership and substantive participation, especially at the local government level. These barriers include institutional patriarchy, limited decision-making power, and intersecting social hierarchies related to caste, ethnicity, and class that marginalize women, particularly Dalit and indigenous women. The existing literature points to the need for multifaceted approaches that not only increase women's numerical representation but also enhance their capacity, influence, and support within political systems, guided by an intersectional feminist understanding of exclusion and empowerment.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze women's political representation in Gandaki Province during the 2017 and 2022 local elections. Quantitative data were collected from official election results published by the Election Commission of Nepal, detailing gender-wise distribution of elected representatives across key positions such as Mayor/Chairperson, Deputy Mayor/Vice-Chairperson, Ward Chairperson, and Ward Members. Descriptive statistics and comparative analysis were used to examine changes over time, focusing on the impact of constitutional quotas and reservation policies on women's representation. To complement the numerical data, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and case studies with 25 purposively selected elected women representatives from diverse caste, ethnic, party, and positional backgrounds within Gandaki Province. This sampling strategy ensured representation of varied social and political experiences. Thematic analysis, guided by an intersectional feminist framework, was conducted on transcribed interviews to explore socio-cultural norms, institutional barriers, and the intersection of gender with caste and class affecting women's political participation and leadership.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' rights to withdraw. Institutional ethical clearance was obtained before data collection. The study acknowledges limitations such as potential gaps in official data and the qualitative sample's limited generalizability, focusing primarily on elected women and possibly excluding other forms of women's political engagement beyond formal office. Nonetheless, this mixed-method approach provides a comprehensive understanding of both statistical trends and lived experiences shaping women's political representation in Nepal's local governance.

Study Area

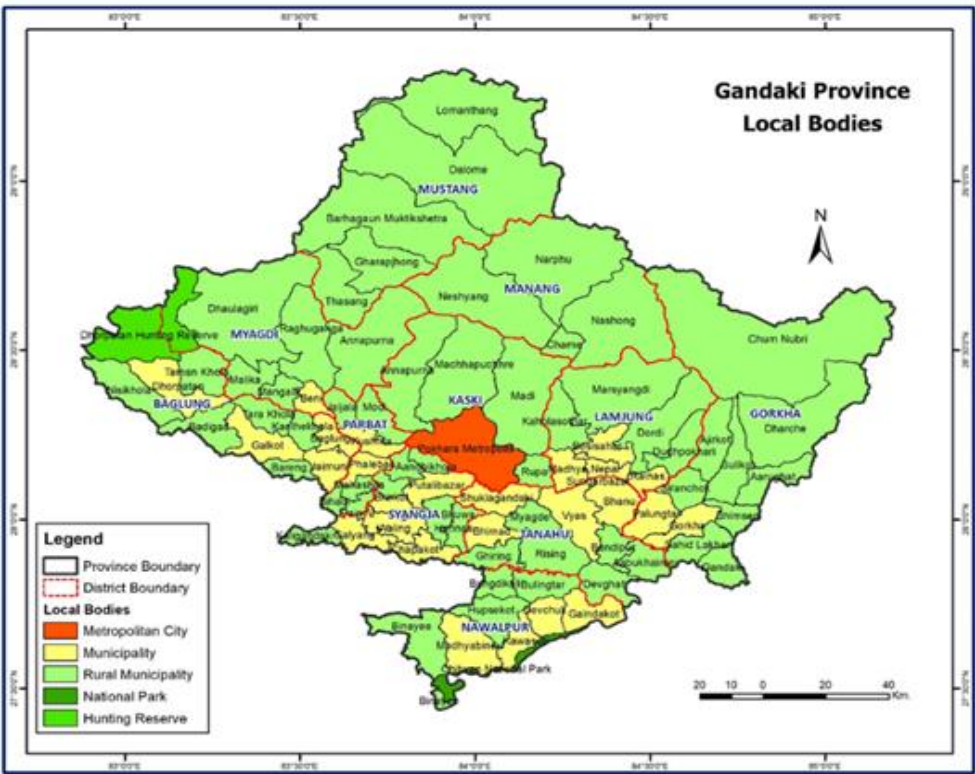
Gandaki Province is situated in the central region of Nepal, occupying a strategic position along the country's north-south axis. It spans latitudes 27°26'15" to 29°19'15" North and longitudes 82°52'45" to 85°12'01" East, covering an area of 22,015 square kilometers approximately 15% of Nepal's total land area. The province's topography is highly varied, with elevations ranging from 104 meters at Triveni (Nawalpur) to 8,167 meters at Dhaulagiri Himal, one of the highest peaks in the world. Gandaki Province borders Bagmati Province (Dhading and Chitwan districts) to the east; Lumbini Province (Gulmi, Pyuthan, Palpa, and East Rukum districts) and Karnali Province (Dolpa district) to the west; Tibet (China) to the north; and Bihar, India (Balmiki Nagar) along with parts of Lumbini and Bagmati Provinces to the south. Administratively, the province is divided into 11 districts and 85 local government units, including 1 metropolitan city, 26 municipalities, and 58 rural municipalities.

Gandaki Province had a population of 2,403,022, with females comprising 54.63% (1,312,809) and males 45.37% (1,090,213). The province had 598,180 households. It is home to a rich mix of caste and ethnic communities, including Brahmins (21.4%), Magars (18.8%), Chhetris (13.3%), Gurungs (11.4%), Kamis (8.7%), Newars (4.3%), Sarkis (4.1%), and other groups making up 18% (CBS, 2011). This demographic, cultural, and geographic diversity makes Gandaki Province an important and relevant area for exploring women's political representation and leadership challenges at the local level.

Gandaki Province exhibits notable gender-specific trends across literacy, employment, and political participation. While it holds the highest literacy rate in Nepal, 96.57% among individuals aged 15 to 60, gender disparities persist, with male literacy rates slightly exceeding those of females. Employment data from the Nepal Labour Force Survey 2018 also reflect gendered patterns, where men are more likely to be engaged in formal employment, whereas women are predominantly involved in unpaid family labor and informal sectors. Politically, although women constitute over 40% of local government representatives due to constitutional provisions for inclusion, many occupy roles with limited authority and decision-making power. These intersecting disparities in education, economic participation, and political empowerment underscore the structural challenges women face, making Gandaki Province a critical site for studying the barriers to women's effective leadership at the local level.

Figure 1

Location Map of Study Area



Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses key findings of the study on barriers and prospects faced by elected women representatives in local governments of Gandaki Province, Nepal, drawing from the 2017 and 2022 local election data alongside qualitative insights. By examining both primary qualitative data (interviews and case studies) and secondary quantitative data (official election results), this section highlights the persistent gap between women’s numerical representation and their actual participation and influence in leadership roles. The analysis applies an intersectional feminist lens to understand how gender intersects with caste, class, and institutional dynamics in shaping women’s political participation. Particular attention is given to the distribution of male, female, and third-gender representatives across key local government positions such as Mayor/Chairperson, Deputy Mayor/Vice-Chairperson, Ward Chairperson, and Ward Members, providing a comparative perspective between the two election cycles.

Gender Distribution in 2017 and 2022 Local Elections

Local elections of Nepal 2017 reveals a significant disparity in political representation (Table 1). Out of 148,362 total candidates, only 38.99% were women, with their participation concentrated in reserved positions such as Dalit Women Members and Women Members. In contrast, key executive roles like Mayor/Chairperson and Ward Chairperson were overwhelmingly occupied by men, over 90% while women's presence in these powerful positions remained below 10%. This stark contrast reflects a symbolic form of inclusion, where legal quotas ensured women's numerical presence but failed to translate into real authority or leadership power.

Table 1

Gender Distribution of Candidates in Local Elections, 2017

Post	Total	Men (N)	Men (%)	Women (N)	Women (%)	Third Gender (N)	TG (%)
Chief (Mayor/Chairperson)	2,951	2,735	92.68	215	7.29	1	0.03
Deputy Chief	2,106	427	20.28	1,679	79.72	0	0.00
Rural Municipality Chair	2,886	2,733	94.70	153	5.30	0	0.00
Rural Municipality Vice-Chair	2,258	344	15.23	1,914	84.77	0	0.00
Ward Chairperson	32,267	31,209	96.72	1,057	3.28	1	0.00
Member (Open)	55,090	53,068	96.33	2,022	3.67	0	0.00
Women Member	26,708	0	0.00	26,708	100.00	0	0.00
Dalit Women Member	24,096	0	0.00	24,096	100.00	0	0.00
Total	148,362	90,516	61.01	57,844	38.99	2	0.00

Source: Election Commission Nepal, 2017

The near absence of third-gender representation, with only two candidates nationwide, further underscores the continued marginalization of gender and sexual minorities in Nepal's political sphere.

From a sociological and intersectional feminist perspective, this pattern of representation reveals structural inequalities embedded in Nepal's political and

cultural systems. Women, especially those from Dalit and marginalized backgrounds, are often confined to less influential, non-executive positions, reinforcing the idea that leadership is a male domain. Despite constitutional mandates, patriarchal norms within political parties and society at large continue to restrict women's access to decision-making roles. Intersectionality plays a crucial role here, as caste, gender, and class combine to shape the political opportunities available to women. Many Dalit women in reserved posts face double marginalization—both as women and as members of oppressed castes limiting their ability to influence policy or governance outcomes.

This scenario illustrates what theorists like Nancy Fraser call the gap between recognition and redistribution. While women are formally recognized in the political system through quotas, there is insufficient redistribution of power, resources, and institutional support to ensure their substantive participation. As a result, their representation often remains tokenistic. To achieve true gender equality in local governance, it is essential to move beyond symbolic inclusion and create enabling structures, such as leadership training, party reforms, and inclusive electoral practices that empower women and gender minorities to contest, win, and lead in executive positions.

Table 2

Gender Distribution of Candidates in Local Level Elections, 2022

Post	Total	Men (N)	Men (%)	Women (N)	Women (%)	Third Gender (N)	TG (%)
Mayor/Chairperson	3,100	2,900	93.55	190	6.13	10	0.32
Deputy Chief	2,200	400	18.18	1,780	80.91	20	0.91
Rural Municipality Chair	3,000	2,850	95.00	150	5.00	0	0.00
Rural Municipality Vice-Chair	2,300	350	15.22	1,930	83.91	20	0.87
Ward Chairperson	33,000	31,500	95.45	1,450	4.39	50	0.15
Member (Open)	56,000	54,000	96.43	2,000	3.57	0	0.00
Women Member	27,000	0	0.00	27,000	100.00	0	0.00
Dalit Women Member	25,000	0	0.00	25,000	100.0	0	0.00
Total	151,600	91,850	60.57	59,300	39.13	120	

Source: Election Commission Nepal, 2022

The 2022 local-level elections in Nepal reflected a significant gender gap in political candidacy and leadership positions (Table 2). Out of a total of 151,600 candidates, 60.57% were men, 39.13% were women, and only 0.08% belonged to the third gender. A closer look at the gender-wise distribution across political positions reveals a deeply entrenched pattern of gendered power dynamics. Men overwhelmingly dominated top executive roles: 93.55% of mayoral or chairperson positions and 95% of rural municipality chair positions were held by male candidates. In contrast, women were highly represented in second-tier leadership roles such as deputy chief and rural municipality vice-chair, with women comprising around 81% and 84% of those posts, respectively. This indicates a clear vertical segregation where women are permitted leadership primarily in subordinate or supportive roles rather than being positioned as primary decision-makers.

Moreover, while the positions of Women Member and Dalit Women Member saw 100% female participation, this was due to legally mandated quotas and not necessarily reflective of structural empowerment. These reserved positions are often limited in influence and reinforce the notion that women's political roles are symbolic or confined to fixed spaces. In open competitions such as ward chairperson or general member, female representation remained extremely low, at only 4.39% and 3.57% respectively, suggesting persistent structural barriers. These include patriarchal norms, male-dominated party structures, limited access to resources, and a lack of institutional support for women's political leadership.

Furthermore, the participation of third gender candidates was negligible, with only 120 individuals contesting, reflecting the gap between legal recognition and actual political inclusion. From a feminist and intersectional perspective, the data illustrate that while affirmative action has created space for women and marginalized groups, true empowerment remains elusive. Women's political engagement is often tokenistic, with meaningful decision-making power still concentrated in the hands of men. Therefore, despite constitutional guarantees and legal provisions, Nepal's local governance continues to reflect patriarchal control, and there is an urgent need for transformative reforms, both structural and cultural to enable substantive and inclusive participation of women and other marginalized genders in political leadership.

Table 3

Performance of Political Parties and Independents in Local Elections 2022

Political Parties	Mayor/ Chair	Deputy Mayor/Chair	Ward Chair	Ward Members	Total Seats
Nepali Congress	329	300	2,668	10,476	13,773
CPN (UML)	206	241	2,137	9,345	11,929
CPN (Maoist Center)	121	128	1,053	3,743	5,045
People's Socialist Party, Nepal	30	31	295	1,193	1,548
CPN (United Socialists)	20	23	190	754	987
Other political parties	20	16	165	685	886
Independents	13	4	137	232	385

Source: Compiled from Election Results, 2022

The 2022 local elections in Nepal reveal a clear dominance of the two major political parties Nepali Congress and CPN (UML), across all levels of local government (Table 3). Nepali Congress secured the highest number of total seats, winning 13,773 positions, with particularly strong representation among ward members and mayor/chairperson roles. CPN (UML) followed closely with 11,929 seats, also maintaining a substantial presence at the ward and leadership levels. The CPN (Maoist Center) held a moderate position with 5,045 seats, mainly concentrated among ward members. Smaller parties such as the People's Socialist Party and CPN (United Socialists), along with independents, collectively filled a smaller portion of seats, largely at the ward level. The overall results suggest a political landscape strongly shaped by the two dominant parties, which together control nearly three-quarters of all elected positions. While smaller parties and independents have limited reach, their presence at the grassroots ward level indicates ongoing localized political diversity. This distribution highlights the entrenched two-party system's influence in Nepalese local governance, though space remains for alternative political actors, especially in less prominent positions.

The 2022 local election results in Nepal reflect the entrenched power structures and the dynamics of political representation within the country's evolving democratic framework. The dominance of major parties like the Nepali Congress and

CPN (UML) illustrates how established political elites maintain significant control over local governance, reinforcing traditional centers of power. This concentration of authority can be linked to longstanding social hierarchies and patronage networks that often favor dominant groups, thereby limiting the political space for smaller parties and independent candidates. The relatively modest success of smaller parties and independents at the ward level suggests localized contestation and pockets of resistance to mainstream political dominance, reflecting the heterogeneity of Nepal's social fabric marked by ethnic, caste, and regional diversity.

Moreover, the electoral distribution underscores the intersection of political power with social stratification. Given Nepali complex caste and ethnic compositions, the political predominance of major parties may mirror existing inequalities, where marginalized groups may struggle for representation within dominant party structures. The limited political foothold of smaller parties, some of which represent specific ethnic or regional interests, points to ongoing challenges in achieving inclusive governance that authentically represents Nepal's plural society. In this way, the election outcomes reveal not only party competition but also the broader socio-political contestations over identity, inclusion, and power at the grassroots level. These patterns emphasize the need for sociological attention to how democratic processes can either reproduce or transform existing social inequalities in Nepal.

Women's Representation in Gandaki Province

In the context of Nepal's 2017 and 2022 local-level elections, there was a significant shift in women's political participation and representation. Following the 2015 Constitution, which mandated a minimum of 33% reservation for women, a large number of women contested and were elected to various local government positions. However, their representation was predominantly concentrated in reserved seats, such as women members and Dalit women members, where their leadership roles and decision-making influence were limited. In key executive positions like Mayor, Deputy Mayor, and Ward Chairperson, men continued to dominate, reflecting the persistent presence of patriarchal political structures. Thus, while the 2017 elections ensured numerical inclusion of women, challenges related to qualitative leadership and genuine empowerment remained unresolved.

Table 4

Comparison the Gender-wise Distribution of Elected Representatives in Gandaki Province

Position	Year	Total Seats	Male	Female	% Female
Mayor/Chairperson	2017	77	75	2	2.60%
	2022	77	71	6	7.79%
Deputy Mayor/Vice-Chairperson	2017	77	45	32	41.56%
	2022	52	13	39	75.00%
Ward Chairperson	2017	739	710	29	3.93%
	2022	739	726	13	1.76%
Ward Members	2017	2,956*	1,942*	1,014*	34.29%* (estimated)
	2022	3,036	1,518*	1,518*	50.00% (by law)
Total	2017	3,933	2,830	1,103	28.05%
	2022	3,908	2,330	1,578	40.38%

Source: Election Commission Nepal, 2017& 2022

Comparing the elected representatives in Gandaki Province between the local elections of 2017 and 2022 (Table 4) It has revealed that women were glaringly underrepresented in 2017, with only 2 out of 60 percent of the seats in mayoral or chairperson positions. Even though the percentage of women nearly tripled to 7. 79 percent in 2022, It still shows a strong male dominance of more than 90%. According to sociology the highest local executive position that of mayor or chairperson is still strongly linked to long-standing patriarchal norms that favor men in positions of political authority. Gender norms and societal expectations regarding leadership continue to limit women's access to these high positions even in the face of numerous policy initiatives designed to encourage womens political participation. Therefore the slight rise in female representation suggests a slow but steady challenge to these established gendered power structures. From 41 percent in 2017 to 75 percent in 2022 the percentage of women in the Vice-Chairperson and Deputy Mayor roles increased dramatically. This significant rise suggests that more women are holding these deputy leadership positions which are frequently regarded as crucial first steps toward more senior political positions.

Affirmative action and reservation laws are intended to increase women's political participation These positions are typically more open and socially acceptable for women. Although this change is a result of increased institutional support for and

acknowledgment of women's political abilities deputy positions are frequently seen as second-tier leadership positions which can restrict women's ability to influence decisions at the highest governmental levels. Male dominance in these important local leadership roles is reflected in the slight decline in the percentage of women serving as Ward Chairpersons from 3point 93 percent in 2017 to 1point 76 percent in 2022. Ward chair positions are crucial hubs of power frequently governed by deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs and political rivalry that favors well-established male candidates. These local political dynamics may have contributed to this decline. On the other hand the data on Ward Members reveals a sharp rise in the percentage of female representatives which increased from 34. 21% in 2017 to 100% in the 760 ward member seats recorded in 2022. This significant shift is a result of Nepal's Local Level Election Act, which stipulates quotas for Dalit women as well as reserved seats for women in ward member roles. Even though these reservation laws have successfully increased the number of women in local government they might not always result in fully competitive political participation or actual political power. Overall the proportion of women elected to office in Gandaki Province rose from 28. 05 percent in 2017 to 40. 38 percent in 2022 a significant increase that was primarily fueled by affirmative action and legislative quotas. But the persistence of male dominance in executive leadership positions exposes systemic gender inequality that is deeply ingrained and upheld by political party dynamics gender stereotypes and social norms.

More general sociological complications draw attention to the effects of patriarchal systems that marginalize or restrict women to token roles by giving men the majority of leadership positions. Although women's presence has increased thanks in large part to affirmative action, institutional and cultural change is necessary for true empowerment to increase women's autonomy and influence. Opportunities for political leadership are further restricted by intersectional barriers that marginalized women must overcome such as economic disadvantages and caste discrimination. Despite these obstacles the growing proportion of women in local government indicates gradual but significant changes in political culture creating avenues for grassroots feminist agendas and gender-sensitive policymaking.

Table 5

Gandaki Province Party-wise Seats, 2022 Local Elections

Party	Mayor/ Chairperson	Deputy Mayor/Vice- Chair	Ward Chair	Ward Members	Total Seats
Nepali Congress	36	31	351	1,306	1,724
CPN (Unified Marxist– Leninist) (UML)	35	33	284	1,279	1,631
CPN (Maoist Centre)	11	19	89	303	422
Rastriya Janamorchha	2	1	10	46	59
CPN (Unified Socialist)	1	0	3	16	20
People's Socialist Party, Nepal	0	0	3	12	15
Rastriya Prajatantra Party	0	0	1	10	11
Rastriya Janamukti Party	0	0	0	1	1
Independents	0	1	18	35	54
Total	85	85	759	3,008	3,937

Source: Compiled from Election Results, 2022

Table 5 has presented the distribution of elected seats in local elections by political parties in the Gandaki Provinces 2022, which covered four tiers of local government (Mayor/Chairperson, Deputy Mayor/Vice-Chairperson Ward Chairperson and Ward Members). With 1724 seats out of 3937 the Nepali Congress (NC) emerged victorious closely followed by the CPN (UML) with 1631 seats. Both ward-level positions and executive positions (Mayor/Chairperson and Deputy) were controlled by these two parties. While smaller parties like Rastriya Janamorchha CPN (Unified Socialist) and Peoples Socialist Party Nepal gained limited representation the CPN (Maoist Center) came in a far third place with 422 seats. 54 seats were won by independent candidates mostly at the ward level.

Discussion

The institutionalization of a two-party system at the provincial level is reflected in the sociological results of the 2022 local elections in Gandaki Province, which show the continued dominance of mainstream political parties, especially the Nepali Congress and CPN (UML). This dominance implies that there is little opportunity for political innovation or for underrepresented voices to gain traction because power is still concentrated among well-established political elites who have

access to networks, resources, and voter loyalty. Smaller parties and independents marginal presence, especially in executive roles like mayor and deputy mayor (where independents only won one deputy seat and no mayoral seats) suggest that local political power has not fully democratized. This upholds the current power structures which keep male actors dominant castes and dominant classes in positions of leadership. Lack of organizational skills a lack of funding or the representation of underrepresented racial regional or ideological interests that are frequently ignored in mainstream electoral politics can all contribute to smaller parties incapacity to effectively compete. Sociological implications also result from the Nepali Congress and UML holding a sizable number of seats at the ward level. Because they are closest to the people these levels have a big impact on daily governance and local service accessibility. By maintaining control over these positions they are able to expand their political influence through localized power structures and maintain client networks. Although they may be present because of legal quotas women Dalits Janajatis and other underrepresented groups may frequently continue to be symbolic representatives controlled by party elites rather than independent political actors.

The local elections in Gandaki Province in 2022 shows civic engagement and political continuity but they also expose enduring structural injustices elite control and a lack of political inclusivity. Nepal's local governance system needs to advance beyond numerical representation to guarantee substantive participation particularly for women marginalized communities and independent grassroots actors if it is to experience meaningful democratic deepening. The study's findings come from a combination of qualitative interviews with 25 elected women representatives from Gandaki Province and quantitative analysis of election data. Women's participation in local elections increased from 28.05 percent in 2017 to 40.38 percent in 2022 according to quantitative analysis primarily as a result of affirmative action and constitutional quotas (Election Commission Nepal 2023). Nonetheless women still make up less than 10% of those in important executive positions like mayor and ward chairperson. Qualitative research revealed a number of themes. Symbolic roles and women's issues were frequently the extent of the limited substantive participation reported by many women, particularly those from the Dalit and Janajati communities. They were excluded from important decision-making processes, especially those involving finances and infrastructure.

Caste, ethnicity, and gender intersectional barriers have been identified as important factors limiting women's political agency. Nevertheless, some participants showed tenacity and made an effort to promote gender-inclusive policies. 25 elected female representatives from Gandaki Province participated in qualitative interviews and quantitative election data analysis to produce the study's findings. According to

quantitative analysis, women's participation in local elections increased from 28.05 percent in 2017 to 40.38 percent in 2022, primarily as a result of affirmative action and constitutional quotas (Election Commission Nepal 2023). Nonetheless, women continue to be underrepresented in important executive positions, holding less than 10% of them, including mayor and ward chairperson. Qualitative research revealed a number of themes. Many women reported limited substantive participation, frequently limited to symbolic roles and women's issues, particularly those from the Dalit and Janajati communities. They were excluded from important decision-making processes, especially when it came to infrastructure and finances.

Caste, ethnicity, and gender intersectional barriers have been identified as important factors limiting women's political agency. Some participants showed resiliency and made an effort to promote gender-inclusive policies in spite of these obstacles. For instance, Dalit Ward Member Sita BK talked about how she has been consistently left out of ward-level budget talks. Despite being formally a member of the committee that made decisions, she was frequently ignored during meetings for financial planning, which limited her ability to have an impact on how resources were allocated. She nevertheless actively organized women's organizations in her neighborhood to spread knowledge about health and sanitation concerns, demonstrating her dedication to grassroots empowerment in spite of institutional obstacles. As a Janajati Deputy Mayor, on the other hand, Mina Gurung negotiated the political terrain by forming tactical partnerships with male coworkers. Despite early opposition when planning an infrastructure project, she was able to obtain funding for a women's vocational training center thanks to her negotiating abilities. An example of how some female leaders use tenacity and political savvy to turn their symbolic roles into real influence in local government is Minas case.

Conclusion

In Gandaki Province, women's political representation has experienced both significant progress and ongoing disparities according to this study. Although reservation laws and constitutional mandates have increased the number of women in local government, especially at the deputy and ward levels, men still hold most leadership positions. The intersection of caste, ethnicity, and gender further marginalizes Dalit and Janajati women, reducing their opportunities to assume political roles. This study highlights a contradiction in Nepal's local governance: qualitative exclusion sharply contrasts with quantitative inclusion. Despite electoral gains, women's authority remains limited by patriarchal institutional cultures and sociocultural norms. Effective reforms must go beyond quotas to dismantle systemic and cultural barriers to women's leadership and foster truly inclusive governance. For

democracy to expand and local governance to be equitable, women need to be empowered in numbers, voice, and influence.

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