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Abstract: The study investigates the substantive representation of women in Nepali politics, focusing on the challenges faced by women parliamentarians despite the implementation of gender quotas. While quotas have increased descriptive representation at national and local levels, this numerical growth has not always led to substantial political influence. The study highlights obstacles such as patriarchal norms, political party dynamics, and traditional gender roles that prevent women from effectively advancing feminist policies. Key issues like the Citizenship Bill and the Domestic Violence Act illustrate how, despite having women in parliament, gender equality concerns often remain sidelined. Drawing on critical mass theory, the research suggests that while women's collective presence has fostered greater political activism, entrenched male dominance still limits their ability to shape policy. The findings stress the importance of moving beyond numerical representation and addressing deeper structural challenges to enhance the substantive representation of women's interests in Nepalese politics.

Key Words: Patriarchal Norms, Political Representation, Political Participation, Substantive Representation, Women in Politics.

Declaration: There is no conflict of interest, and the ethics of the research were adhered.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the share of women in Nepal's federal parliaments, local governments, and other political offices has significantly increased. However, it remains crucial to assess whether this rise in women's representation has substantially impacted policies that address the interests and preferences of women and gender equality in the country. Legal provisions such as the quota system have played a key role in increasing women's representation in Nepal's parliament. According to the Constitution of Nepal, one-third of the seats in the Federal and Provincial Parliaments must be occupied by women (UNDP, 2017).

The first democratic election in Nepal, held in 1991, saw only 7 women out of 205 parliamentary seats elected (Yadav, 2018). However, following the 2017 elections, a historic breakthrough was achieved, with more women being elected at all levels of government. The quota system ensured a more descriptive representation of women, with 91% of deputy mayor and vice-chairperson positions held by women, though only 2% of mayor and chairperson positions were filled by women (UNDP, 2017). Despite this progress, it is vital to investigate whether the increased number of women parliamentarians has led to a tangible impact on gender equality and the interests of the women they represent.

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Representation is a process that involves acting on behalf of others in decision-making to ensure their voices and interests are acknowledged. According to Pitkin (1967), representation involves "acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them." It can take various forms, such as formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive. Effective representation bridges the gap between citizens and governing institutions, thereby strengthening democracy. This research seeks to examine whether the increased number of women parliamentarians in Nepal has led to the advancement of gender

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equality and whether their representation serves the interests of women in Nepal.

Research problems

The study aims to explore how gender quotas have contributed to the increased representation of women parliamentarians in Nepal, focusing on their role in facilitating women's political participation. It seeks to identify the key supporting factors that have enabled this progress, including legislative measures, political movements, and international agreements. Additionally, the study examines the major structural challenges that women leaders face in achieving effective representation, such as patriarchal norms, gendered expectations, and political party dynamics. By understanding the impact of gender quotas and identifying the external and internal factors influencing women's political representation, the research highlights the barriers and opportunities women face in influencing policy and achieving substantive representation in Nepal's political system.

Research Questions

This study explores the following central questions derived from existing literature on women's political representation:

i. How do gender quotas contribute to the representation of women parliamentarians in Nepal?
ii. What supporting factors have aided the increased representation of women in Nepal's political system?
iii. What major structural challenges do women leaders face in achieving effective representation?

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology based on secondary data sources and rooted in a constructivist ontological perspective, which critically examines reality through a feminist lens. The study primarily relies on secondary data analysis to explore the political representation of women in Nepal, focusing on existing theoretical and empirical debates surrounding women parliamentarians. Primary data collection was not undertaken, as the research centers on synthesizing and analyzing relevant literature. The secondary data sources include academic articles, reports, and other pertinent publications that provide insights into the subject matter. This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the factors influencing women's political representation in Nepal, drawing from existing knowledge to deepen the understanding of the topic.

Theoretical Debates on Women's Political Representation

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) highlights that decades of male dominance in public life cannot be reversed by merely removing statutory impediments. According to CEDAW (1979), temporary special measures like quotas should be used to guarantee women's involvement in decision-making. International agreements like the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) emphasize the need for women's full involvement in political decision-making. In order to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also emphasizes how important it is for women to participate in governance.

The Concept of Critical Mass

Kanter (1977) originally introduced the idea of critical mass in women's political representation in relation to business settings. According to Kanter, minority groups—like women in male-dominated environments—can only have an impact on organizational dynamics and culture after they hit what she later referred to as "critical mass." When women attain about 30% representation in political settings, they start to build coalitions and have an impact on decision-making (Dahlerup, 1988). Women hold a "tilted group" position rather than a "token" one in Nepal's parliamentary system, with 33% of the Federal Parliament and 34% of the Provincial Parliament, enabling them to influence the institution's politics and culture (Kanter, 1977). In Nepal's Constituent Assembly elections, a women's caucus emerged across party lines to address women's issues, resulting in notable legislative victories like the

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approval of nine legislation specifically for women, demonstrating the application of the critical mass theory (Yadav, 2018).

The Role of Critical Mass in Political Representation

The phrase "critical mass" was first used by Dahlerup (1988) to refer to the point at which a sizable minority of women in political office may significantly impact change. Critical mass implies that a minority of about 30% can start to change the dynamics and impact political agendas, rather than requiring women to make up 50% of parliament. In nations like Nepal, where the constitutional provision for 33% women in the Federal Parliament seeks to create this tipping point, this notion has influenced gender quota systems. Dahlerup (2006) points out that although statistics are important, other elements, including political background, women's mobilization, and coalition building, are equally essential to attaining significant policy results.

Arguments for Women's Representation

Women's representation in political institutions is necessary for a number of reasons. The justice argument, which contends that women ought to have equal rights to engage in public decision-making; the utility argument, which emphasizes the advantages of women's participation in governance; and the deliberative argument, which contends that women's viewpoints enhance public discourse, are the five main arguments listed by Sawer (2010). According to symbolic considerations, women's representation in parliament also fosters gender equality and increases esteem for women (Phillips, 2007). Finally, according to the agency argument, women's interests may be different from men's and their involvement is required in order to address these differences (Mansbridge, 1999).

Despite the strength of these reasons, the agency's argument is still debatable. According to feminist researchers, women are not a homogeneous group, and the concept of a collective women's interest is complicated by differences based on race, class, and other identities (Snyder, 2008; Spelman, 2003). Furthermore, not all women lawmakers may be dedicated to promoting gender equality; thus, their mere presence in parliament does not ensure that women's interests will be protected (Phillips, 2007).

a. Quotas and Their Role in Women's Representation

One of the most important strategies for boosting women's representation in political institutions is the implementation of gender quotas. Women now make up a larger percentage of Nepal's legislative bodies, according to the constitution's provision for proportionate representation of women. It is still up for dispute, though, whether quotas are a good way to guarantee substantive representation. According to Yadav (2018), quotas are said to result in descriptive representation, when women are elected to office but may not always support laws that directly benefit them. Some contend that quotas are necessary to ensure that women's opinions are acknowledged in decision-making processes and to combat long-standing gender discrimination.

b. Challenges to Women's Political Representation

Even with the advancements brought about by gender quotas, Nepali women still confront several systemic obstacles. These difficulties include the predominance of male political leaders, cultural and societal biases, restricted access to resources, and discrimination based on gender. Additionally, conventional gender stereotypes that privilege men in leadership positions frequently limit women's political engagement. These challenges must be overcome by women leaders as they strike a balance between their political obligations and gender role expectations from society (UNDP, 2017). These systemic obstacles show that in order to guarantee that women's representation results in significant policy achievements, institutional support and societal change are still required.

Summary of arguments for increasing women's political representation

S.N.	Representation	Argument
1	Equal right to represent (Justice argument)	Right to participate in public decision-making – making the right not to be discriminated

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against by the structure of public life.

2	Utilitarianism (Utility arguments)	An increased pool of talent reduces corruption and partisan advantage
3	Improving deliberation (Deliberative democracy arguments)	The debate needs to be enriched by women's perspectives or a collectively mediated exercise, and civilization effects on the debate
4	Representativeness (Symbolic argument)	Effects on aspirations, legitimacy of institutions, and widening cultural choices
5	Protection of interests (Agency arguments)	Women have different interests and/or values from men, and these need protection

(Source: Sawer, 2010)

Gender Quota System

There are various types of gender quotas in politics, such as legislative quotas, party quotas, and reserved seats. According to Dahlerup (2006), reserved seats are automatic arrangements that guarantee women hold particular political offices without having to take part in the nomination process for candidates. On the other hand, there are two kinds of party quotas: candidate quotas, which mandate that political parties propose a minimum percentage of women candidates, and aspirant quotas, which restrict candidate preselection to women (Matland, 2006). A specific number of seats in national and local parliaments are set aside for women by legislative quotas, such as the ones in place in Nepal.

In politics, there are several different kinds of gender quotas, including reserved seats, party quotas, and legislative quotas. Dahlerup (2006) asserts that reserved seats are automatic agreements that ensure women occupy specific political positions without requiring them to participate in the candidate nomination process. However, there are two types of parties quotas: aspirant quotas, which limit the selection of candidates to women, and candidate quotas, which require political parties to suggest a minimum proportion of women candidates (Matland, 2006). Legislative quotas, like the ones in Nepal, allocate a certain number of seats in national and local parliaments to women. In Nepal, local elections mandate that at least one woman and one Dalit woman be elected from each ward, and women must hold at least one-third of the seats in the Federal Parliament. With women now holding 41% of local government jobs and 33% of national parliamentary seats, these quotas have greatly improved women's political representation (Dahlerup, 2007).

Empirical Evidence on Women's Political Representation

The study from nations like Australia and New Zealand shows that although more women are represented in parliament, more conversations on women's issues occur, but policy improvements are not always the outcome (Grey, 2006; Sawer, 2012). Women senators have successfully co-sponsored legislation on topics like abortion rights and childcare in various nations, but male-dominated legislatures frequently oppose them. This emphasizes how crucial it is to consider not only the proportion of women in positions of authority but also the larger institutional and political environment that affects their capacity to alter public policy (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008; Thomas, 1994). Therefore, critical mass by itself is not enough to achieve significant gender policy improvements, even though it can encourage more inclusive representation.

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The Challenges of Substantive Representation

The study from nations like Australia and New Zealand shows that although more women are represented in parliament, and more conversations on women's issues occur, policy improvements are not always the outcome (Grey, 2006; Sawer, 2012). Women senators have successfully co-sponsored legislation on topics like abortion rights and childcare in various nations, but male-dominated legislatures frequently oppose them. This emphasizes how crucial it is to consider not only the proportion of women in positions of authority but also the larger institutional and political environment that affects their capacity to alter public policy (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008; Thomas, 1994). Therefore, critical mass by itself is not enough to achieve significant gender policy improvements, even though it can encourage more inclusive representation.

The Intersectionality of Gender and Patriarchy

Although Nepal's quota system has improved the descriptive representation of women in politics, the interaction of gender with caste, race, and class makes it more difficult to represent women's concerns substantively. Gender norms enforced by Nepal's patriarchal system frequently restrict women's political power. Women are often relegated to supporting positions in both public and private domains as men predominate in political discussions and decision-making (Rai, 2015). Women's political engagement is made more difficult by the confluence of gender, caste, and ethnicity, since marginalized women frequently experience multiple levels of discrimination in the political arena (Upreti, 2020). These elements demonstrate that although quotas can provide opportunities for women, more extensive structural adjustments are required to achieve full gender equality in politics.

Substantive Representation in Nepalese Politics

Substantive representation, a concept introduced by political scientist Hanna Pitkin, refers to representatives acting in the interests of those they represent, rather than simply symbolizing or standing for them (Pitkin, 1967). This form of representation emphasizes the actions, results, and responsiveness of representatives to the needs of their constituents. Pitkin's criteria for substantive representation involve representatives' actions aligning with the interests of the represented, with results that reflect those interests, and a constant responsiveness to the group they serve. However, questions arise about whether the increased presence of women in political offices necessarily leads to substantive representation for women's interests. The presence of a critical mass of women may heighten their sense of responsibility, thus ensuring that women's interests are better represented (Vasanthi, 2004).

Empirical studies highlight the significant impact of increased women representation on policy. For instance, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) found that in Indian states like Rajasthan and West Bengal, policies addressing women's needs were more frequently introduced when women held political office. Similarly, Pande (2003) noted that reservations for scheduled castes and tribes led to more targeted policies benefiting these groups. However, representation does not always equate to effective policy change. In Nepal, the social construction of gender roles and patriarchal structures often hinders women's ability to represent women substantively in political offices (Sawer, 2006).

The leadership positions of women in parliamentary committees and as ministers have a significant impact on whether they can influence policy decisions for gender equality (Burt & Hardman, 1996). While women politicians may represent their constituents, they are also bound by party mandates and collective responsibilities, which can limit their ability to act purely in the interest of women. Delhruup (2006) asserts that the success of women in influencing policy depends not only on their numbers but also on the political context, the strength of feminist movements, and coalition-building among women parliamentarians.

Despite increasing numbers of women in parliament, the notion that women will always represent women's interests is contested. Gender role attitudes, which view women's roles as primarily domestic, often reflect societal expectations that limit women's political participation (Bennett & Bennett, 1993). In Nepal, women candidates face significant barriers, including a lack of trust from voters and challenges within male-dominated political environments. Even when elected, women struggle to

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influence policy decisions effectively due to entrenched patriarchal norms.

The struggle for substantive representation is evident in the case of the Citizenship Bill and the Domestic Violence Punishment and Offence Act of 2009. The Citizenship Act of 2006, which denies a mother the ability to pass citizenship to her child by descent, has been the subject of debate for years. Despite efforts by women parliamentarians to amend the law, male-dominated political leadership has consistently blocked changes that would ensure gender equality. The 2021 Citizenship Ordinance made some changes but still reflects patriarchal attitudes, as it does not fully address the gendered nature of citizenship rights (Tuladhar, 2012).

The Domestic Violence Bill, passed in 2009 after years of struggle, is a crucial piece of legislation, but it too reflects the limitations women parliamentarians face in achieving substantive representation. Women representatives fought for the creation of a Women's Commission, yet their voices were overlooked in the constitutional assembly (Falch, 2010). Even with the presence of numerous women in parliament, their influence on key legislative issues remains limited by the patriarchal attitudes of male political leaders (Rai, 2015).

The case of Nepal demonstrates that the mere numerical representation of women in political offices does not guarantee substantive representation. Despite increased quotas and gender representation in parliament, women continue to face systemic barriers in policy- making, largely due to male-dominated political structures and societal attitudes toward gender roles. As Veena Ravi Kumar (2002) notes, politics has historically been a masculine domain, and in Nepal, male stereotypes in leadership remain entrenched at all levels of government.

Results

The results of this study reveal that gender quotas in Nepal have played a pivotal role in increasing the number of women in political offices, particularly in the federal parliament and local governance. The introduction of legislative quotas has resulted in women holding 33% of the seats in the national parliament and 41% at the local level, which marks a significant shift from historical underrepresentation. However, while the numerical presence of women in parliament has increased, their ability to substantively influence policy remains a complex issue.

The study identified several structural challenges that hinder the effectiveness of women parliamentarians in advancing gender-related issues. These challenges include patriarchal beliefs, political party dynamics that prioritize male leadership, and the socio-cultural norms that limit women's agency in politics. Despite these obstacles, women parliamentarians have been able to raise important issues, such as gender equality, domestic violence, and citizenship rights, though their efforts are often constrained by male-dominated political environments.

Additionally, the study found that the formation of women's caucuses and the support of women's rights movements have been instrumental in amplifying women's voices in the legislative process. However, the results also highlighted that substantive representation requires more than just numerical presence. It necessitates overcoming deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and creating an environment where women's concerns are prioritized, not just symbolically, but in actual policy outcomes. Thus, while gender quotas have facilitated women's political participation, the real challenge lies in translating this presence into meaningful influence in decision-making processes.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes on gender equality, women's representation, and gender quotas in Nepal. The impact of gender quotas on substantive representation is still complicated, despite the fact that they have clearly increased the number of women lawmakers. The study's conclusions highlight that women's interests must be represented effectively through more than just physical presence; it also calls for a dedication to gender equality and the resolution of systemic issues that still prevent women from fully engaging in politics. This study concludes by emphasizing the important contribution gender quotas make to improving women's representation in Nepali politics. Although quotas have been effective in increasing the number of women lawmakers, it is still unclear how they will affect substantive representation. The results indicate that although having women in political positions is crucial for promoting women's issues, political party dynamics, ingrained patriarchal systems, and the larger

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sociocultural background frequently limit their capacity to successfully impact legislation. To sum up, this study emphasizes how important gender quotas are to improving women's representation in Nepali politics. Although Nepal's gender quota system has been successful in increasing the number of women holding political office, there are still issues in guaranteeing that women's varied interests are adequately represented. The effectiveness of these initiatives depends on the political context, coalition building, and the wider intersectionality of women's experiences, even if critical mass theory indicates that women can impact political culture once they establish a strong presence. Women's experiences in Nepal's parliament and other political positions show that although quotas improve descriptive representation, addressing the unique needs of marginalized women and dismantling long-standing patriarchal structures are necessary to achieve meaningful policy achievements for women.

The impact on substantive representation is still complicated, even if quotas have been successful in increasing the number of women lawmakers. The results imply that although women's issues must be advanced by having them in political office, political party dynamics, ingrained patriarchal systems, and the larger sociocultural background frequently limit their capacity to effectively impact policy.

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