



Women in Nepalese Politics: The Role of Political Parties in Political Inclusion

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Abstract

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In Nepal, women's political participation has a long history and is bolstered by progressive constitutional and legal commitments, such as required gender quotas that demand a minimum of 33% representation from women. Despite these developments, women's leadership and meaningful

involvement in political parties are still scarce. The gap between legal commitments to gender equality and women's real access to power is the main subject of this study, which looks at political parties' function as institutional gatekeepers in influencing women's political engagement in Nepal. The study, which is based on a feminist institutionalist framework, uses a qualitative research design and semi-structured interviews with 25 women leaders from six major political parties at the federal level. It also analyzes party statutes, election laws, constitutional provisions, official election data, and pertinent literature. The results show that although political parties have legally enacted inclusive laws, gender quotas, and women-focused programs, these actions frequently lead to descriptive rather than substantive representation. Women's impact in important decision-making domains is nevertheless limited by informal norms, patronage networks, male-dominated leadership structures, and intersectional hurdles about caste, ethnicity, and class. Based on a feminist institutionalist paradigm, the study used a qualitative research design and semi-structured interviews with twenty-five female leaders from six major federal political parties. It also examines relevant literature, official election data, election laws, party statutes, and constitutional issues. The findings demonstrate that while political parties have legally implemented women-focused initiatives, gender quotas, and inclusive laws, these measures often result in descriptive rather than substantive representation. However, informal norms, patronage networks, male-dominated leadership structures, and intersectional barriers related to caste, race, and class limit women's influence in crucial decision-making domains.

Keywords: Feminist institutionalism, Gender equality, Gender quotas, Political Parties, Substantive representation, Women’s political participations

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Background

Historically, male-dominated historiography and deeply ingrained patriarchal political systems have ignored women's contributions to Nepal's political and social reform (Dhungana, 2014). Kamala Kunwar's involvement in the Anglo-Nepal War (1814–1816), in which numerous women are said to have died defending Nalapani Fort, and Queen Rajendra Laxmi's leadership in state consolidation are two early examples of women's political participation (Dhungana, 2014). A significant stage in women's political consciousness occurred from 1916 to 1941, when Yogmaya Neupane led a reformist movement promoting gender equality and caste (Dhungana, 2014). When Mangaladevi Singh spearheaded demonstrations in 1948 calling for women's voting rights, a major turning point was achieved, and women's activism was firmly connected to democratic claims.

Women continued to have prominent roles in political movements despite ongoing structural exclusion, especially during the democratic upheavals of 1990 and 2006. “The struggle of women for equality and political participation goes back more than a century, during periods of political instability. Nepali women's engagement in social, economic, and political freedoms has not been properly documented” (Bishnu R. Upreti, Drishti Upreti & Yamuna Ghale, 2020). Women's rights were recognized in the Constitution as a result of these movements, and women now have more political clout. But Nepal's political leadership has mostly developed under patriarchal frameworks that still favor elite control and male domination (Jalalzai, 2004). There are still a few exceptional women in leadership roles, yet there is still little widespread inclusion.

Nepal has made significant legal and constitutional pledges to promote gender equality. At least 33% of women must be represented in all state entities, according to Article 38(4) of the Interim Constitution (2007) and the Nepalese Constitution (2015). Additionally, Nepal has ratified international frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 5 on gender equality (United Nations, 1979; United Nations, 2015), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (CEWDA, 1979)”. Convention on the Political Rights of Women, Article 1 clearly mentioned “ Women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any discrimination. (UN, 1953)”

‘Despite these pledges, tokenistic quotas, male-dominated party structures, and deeply ingrained patriarchal norms continue to limit women's political empowerment’ (Shakya, 2017; Sharma, 2018).



“The path to achieving qualitative leadership is still primarily based on an outdated male model that shuts down women's roles. (Prasain, 2025)” Rather than being considered political decision-makers, women are often seen as electoral resources (Pradhan, 2004). Women only control 85 of 275 seats in the House of Representatives, 22–59 seats in the National Assembly, and 189 of 550 seats in provincial assemblies, according to electoral data that further emphasizes this disparity. From 41.95% in 2017 to 41.22% in 2022, women's representation at the local level decreased slightly (Election Commission, 2017, 2022). Women's influence over party decision-making is still restricted, despite quotas increasing numerical representation (Karki & Shrestha, 2019; Upreti, 2020). The majority of current research concentrates on sociocultural and economic obstacles that prevent women from participating in politics, giving political parties as institutional gatekeepers little consideration. This disparity highlights the need to investigate how women's access to power is shaped by internal party structures, norms, and practices.

Role of Political Parties

Political parties constitute crucial institutions in democracies since they are the main venues for choosing candidates, recruiting leaders, and developing policies. Parties control who has access to political power and how political agendas are developed through their internal structures and decision-making processes. Although political parties have been crucial in Nepal's democratic transitions and governance, their internal structure is still strongly gendered. Men still control party organizations, especially at high decision-making levels, despite women's long history of political participation and agitation. Because of this, women's involvement in political parties is frequently restricted to auxiliary or supportive roles rather than positions of power and responsibility. In order to promote gender equality in politics, Nepal has enacted progressive constitutional and legal measures throughout the past 20 years. These laws include mandatory quotas that require at least 33 percent of state organizations and political institutions to be made up of women.

In 1959, out of 109 members, there was only one elected woman in Nepal. The Panchayati system during the 1970s and 1980s suggests a possible neglect of gender diversity in political discourse; however, this increased considerably during the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections, where of the 575 members, 197 were women (32.78 %). This occurred due to the quota system in proportional representation elections, it happened due to the quota system in proportional representation. In the 2022 legislative elections, 91 women (33.09 %) were elected out of a total of 275 members. In local legislation, the percentage was 41.2 % . (Indira D. Prasain and Ram P. Dhakal, 2024).’



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Political parties are now required under these reforms to legally include affirmative action and gender-inclusive wording in their laws and policies. As a result, there are now more women on party committees and in elected authorities. In crucial decision-making venues where actual authority is exercised, such as party presidiums, politburos, and strategic committees, women leaders are often left out. Therefore, rather than being instruments for changing patriarchal power dynamics within parties, quotas have mostly served as descriptive representation strategies.

The ongoing discrepancy between official pledges to gender equality and women's real access to power within political parties is the main research issue this study attempts to solve. Parties frequently violate their internal policies, despite their outward support for women's inclusion and adherence to constitutional demands. Candidate selection and leadership progression are still influenced by gendered norms, informal networks, patronage-based politics, and male-dominated leadership. Tokenistic inclusion, in which women are present in name but lack authority, autonomy, and influence over party choices, is the outcome of these dynamics. The efficacy of institutional reforms that prioritize statistics over addressing underlying power systems is called into question by such trends.

The majority of the literature that has been written about women's political participation in Nepal has focused on structural, sociocultural, and economic obstacles that are not related to political parties, such as poverty, patriarchy, and restricted access to resources and education. Even while these elements are unquestionably significant, political parties as gendered organizations that actively influence women's chances and limitations have not received enough scholarly attention. Women's participation in the struggle against feudalism ensured that, in the Constitution of Nepal, promulgated in 2015 (article 84(8), 33 % of the National Assembly would be women. In addition, 34 % of the Provincial Assemblies and 40 % article of the local assemblies were guaranteed to be women's representation. (Neupane, 2022). By analyzing the interactions between official regulations, such as party statutes and quotas, and informal norms, practices, and power dynamics within political parties, this study fills this vacuum. The study aims to better understand why women's political involvement in decision-making is still limited in spite of progressive legal frameworks by examining parties as institutional gatekeepers. It also intends to find avenues for more substantive and transformative inclusion.



Women's meaningful participation and leadership within political parties are still limited in Nepal, despite the country's long history of women's political involvement and the adoption of progressive constitutional and legal measures requiring at least 33 percent women's representation (Gov.Np., 2020). Internal party decision-making procedures, where power is still concentrated in male-dominated organizations, have not been significantly impacted by quota systems, despite the fact that they have increased the number of women in elected bodies. Political parties themselves are institutional gatekeepers whose internal policies, practices, and power dynamics influence women's political chances; prior study has mostly focused on social, cultural, and economic impediments to women's participation.

In order to close this gap, the current study uses a feminist institutionalist framework. “Feminist Institutionalism aims to understand and explain how power is distributed within institutions. Emphasizing gender as a primary unit of analysis, FI’s political project seeks to disrupt existing power settlements within institutions and facilitate change by identifying and challenging institutional barriers that maintain gender inequalities and other forms of discrimination.” (Holmes, 2020). and a qualitative research design. It analyzes party documents, legal frameworks, election statistics, and pertinent literature in addition to semi-structured interviews with 25 purposefully chosen federal-level women leaders from six major political parties. The study, which is informed by feminist institutionalism, looks at how party institutions' informal norms and practices interact with formal regulations like constitutional quotas to either promote or restrict women's political participation while upholding moral standards through the use of pseudonyms and confidentiality (Government of Nepal, 2015; Mackay et al., 2010; United Nations, 1979).

Problem Identification: Major problems, still, the women’s decision-making level in all sectors of representation is lacking, and a patriarchal attitude is deeply rooted. It hampered the preparation of proper legislation to empower women's representation in all domains of life.

Objectives of the Research

This study's primary objective is to investigate how political parties may improve women's political engagement in Nepal, and the research seeks to:

- i. Examine the formal rules and procedures that political parties use to institutionalize gender equality.
- ii. Analyze how women have participated in and led within party systems.



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- iii. Determine the institutional, cultural, and structural obstacles that prevent women from actively participating in politics.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do political parties' internal structures and policies support women's political participation?
2. How much do women's official gender commitments transfer into meaningful leadership and participation?
3. What official and informal obstacles still prevent women from becoming empowered politically within parties?

Methodology

The qualitative research design used in this study was influenced by a feminist institutionalist paradigm. Semi-structured key informant interviews with twenty-five purposefully chosen federal-level female leaders from 5 major political parties in Nepal were used to gather data. To capture intersectional experiences, women from a variety of social backgrounds were included in the sample. Data collection procedure: There were questions prepared to cover the research questions, it was asked on the basis of the questionnaire, and answers were recorded manually. It was sought with their permission before the commencement of asking questions.

Document analysis of party statutes, constitutional clauses, election laws, official election figures, and pertinent scholarly literature supplemented the primary data. Symbolic names were used to anonymize interviews to maintain ethical compliance and confidentiality. The analysis was inspired by feminist institutionalism, which looked at how formal regulations like party statutes and quotas interact with informal norms like patronage networks and patriarchal practices to influence women's political paths (Mackay et al., 2010; Krook & Mackay, 2011).



Research Analysis and Findings

i-Demographic Analysis.

There were 25 representatives, including existing members of parliament and Ex-members also. There were five parties, namely Nepali Congress (NC), Unified Marxist and Leninist (UML) and Nepal Communist Party Maoist (Later Name changed to Nepali Communist Party, NCPM), Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Rastriya Swotantra Party (RSP) and Peoples socialist Party (PSP). Figure 1 shows that every party’s representatives participated in the study.

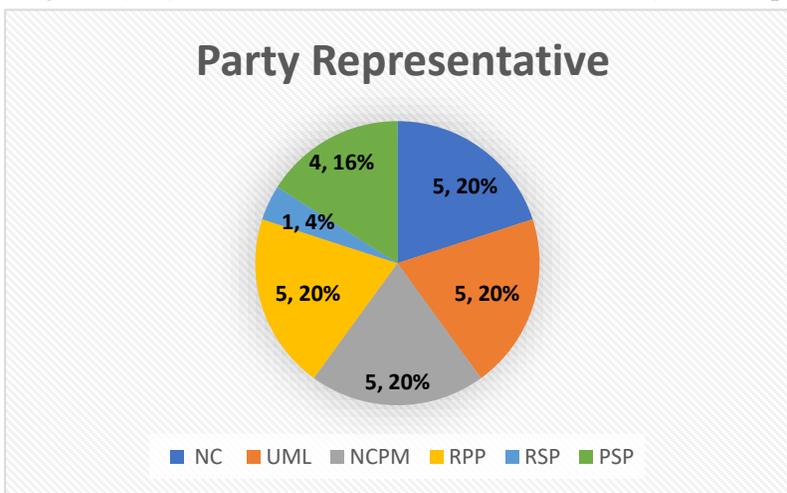


Figure 1 Party and Respondents %

In this analysis, their educational background and the age factor are analyzed. The green line represents the total number in each category how many are represented. It also indicated which age group has what level of education

Represented parties, age, and education.

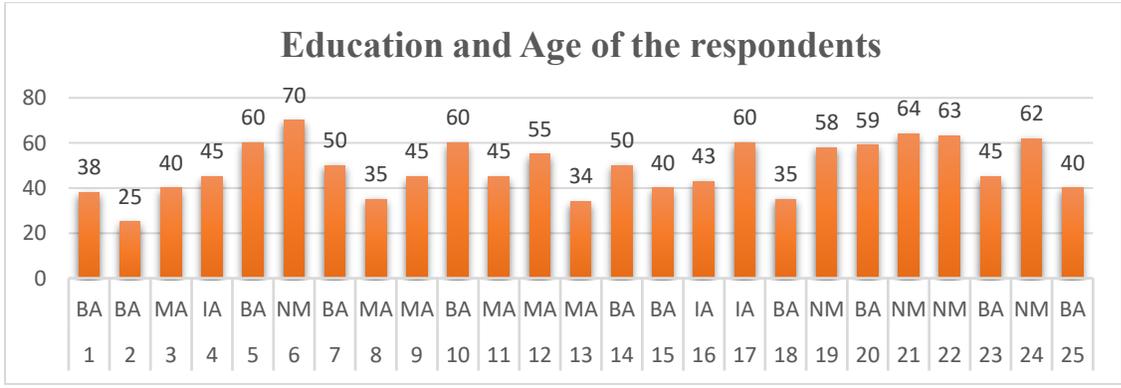


Figure 2: Education and age of the respondents



In the figure 2, the respondents' age and education were analyzed. It was found that the highest age was 70 years, and the lowest was 25 years. In education, MA and Lowest IA, among these, Not mentioned (NM) was found 5 times.

Analysis of the Research

1. Political parties' formal policies and procedures for gender equality

Through party statutes, internal rules, and quota measures in accordance with constitutional mandates, the findings show that political parties in Nepal have formally institutionalized gender equality. Gender quotas, usually between 33 and 40 percent (Gov.Np., 2020), have been implemented by major political parties in their central and subnational committees. Additionally, several parties have established women's wings, leadership development initiatives, and policy pledges to increase women's participation. These official regulations represent the parties' declared commitment to gender inclusion and serve as a sign of adherence to the law and the constitution.

Interviews and document analysis, however, provide empirical evidence that these statutory prohibitions are applied unevenly and enforced inconsistently. “Party presidiums, politburos, and inner circles are examples of informal executive bodies that still hold a disproportionate amount of decision-making power.” 65 % of the respondents have said that political leaders are not eager to transfer decision-making power to their female counterparts, even though they are capable. These entities are primarily male and function beyond the purview of official quota processes. Party laws, therefore, do not guarantee women's access to strategic decision-making positions, even while they ostensibly guarantee women's representation. This discrepancy shows that formal norms serve more as procedural tools for numerical inclusion than as tools for power redistribution inside party structures.

2. Gender Commitments Translated into Leadership and Substantive Participation

According to the report, greater female numerical representation has not resulted in meaningful leadership or involvement. Despite the fact that women have gained access to central committees and elected bodies through quota systems, they are still notably underrepresented in positions of high leadership, including executive committee members, general secretary, and party presidents. Among the respondents, 52 % said that “It was common for women executives to describe being left out of strategic discussions, informal negotiations, and agenda-setting processes when actual power is used”.



According to feminist institutionalist theory, this trend illustrates how informal norms continue to subvert official gender obligations. Patronage networks, factional loyalty, financial resources, and established male connections remain important factors in the selection and promotion of party leaders. As a result, women's involvement frequently stays symbolic, with them nominated to meet quotas but having no autonomy, influence, or control over party decisions. These results show that without institutional reforms that question informal power dynamics, gender pledges enshrined in legal regulations are insufficient to result in substantive representation.

3. Institutional, Cultural, and Structural Barriers to Women's Political Empowerment

Several interconnected institutional, cultural, and structural barriers that limit women's political empowerment within parties are identified by the study. Institutionally, opaque candidate selection procedures, centralized leadership structures, and the absence of effective accountability and grievance mechanisms limit women's ability to challenge exclusionary practices. Complaints related to harassment, discrimination, or marginalization are often ignored or inadequately addressed, reinforcing a culture of silence and discouraging women's active engagement. 'Determined to advance the goals of equality, development, and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity' (Womenwatch, 1995). These silent practices are breaching the Beijing Declaration

In terms of culture, long-standing patriarchal conventions still portray politics as a field for men, casting women as activists or supporters rather than decision-makers. In informal political spaces where influence is negotiated, women leaders have reported encountering disparities based on caste, ethnicity, class, and geography that intersect with these cultural norms. Even under quota-based systems, women who are Dalit, Janjaati, Madhesi, or economically marginalized face increased exclusion, which restricts their access to leadership roles. These findings underscore that women's political exclusion is not merely a result of insufficient legal provisions but is deeply embedded in the institutional culture and structural organization of political parties.

4. Party tactics and their shortcomings in advancing women's leadership



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Political parties have adopted several strategies to enhance women's participation, including leadership training, capacity-building programs, women's wings, and advocacy for gender-responsive legislation. While these initiatives have contributed to skill development, political confidence, and visibility of women leaders, their impact remains limited. Rarely are women's wings and training programs incorporated into central decision-making bodies, instead operating at the fringes of party power structures. According to the findings, such strategies run the risk of strengthening tokenism rather than promoting change if they are not accompanied by reforms that target patronage systems, informal norms, and male-dominated leadership cultures. Feminist institutionalism explains this limitation by highlighting how informal institutions frequently override formal reforms, thereby sustaining existing gender hierarchies.

Overall, the results clearly show that Nepali political parties' function as institutional gatekeepers, with official regulations encouraging descriptive inclusion and informal practices limiting substantive involvement. The study demonstrates that established institutional, cultural, and structural hurdles, along with loosely enforced formal regulations, limit women's political empowerment rather than the lack of legal frameworks. The findings closely match the stated research objectives and research questions by directly connecting women's leadership outcomes to formal party procedures, informal norms, and intersectional inequalities.

Discussion

This study shows that Nepali political parties have conflicting views on women's political engagement. On one hand, parties have formally committed to gender equality through constitutional provisions, gender-focused policies, party statutes, and quota systems. Without a doubt, policies like proportional representation and reserved seats have improved women's descriptive representation and increased the number of women entering the political sphere. The results, however, show that deeply ingrained patriarchal institutions nonetheless limit women's meaningful participation and impact despite these official initiatives. Women remain largely in positions, while strategic authority and key leadership positions remain excluded from critical decision-making processes. Lila Prasad Limbu & Purnima Shrestha (2025) explained that achieving gender equality requires a comprehensive approach that challenges discriminatory social and cultural norms, expands women's access to education and training, and supports their participation in decision-making positions. (Lila P. Limbu & P. Shrestha, 2023)



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In the absence of more extensive institutional change, the enduring tokenism, unofficial gatekeeping, and concentrated elite control highlight the shortcomings of quota-based reforms. Although quotas have been successful in increasing numerical representation, they have not always resulted in women's leadership, autonomy, or real empowerment. Formal regulations are frequently superseded by informal practices, such as factional allegiance, patronage networks, and male-dominated decision-making forums, which restrict women's access to mentorship, political resources, and career progression chances. As a result, rather than being based on merit or institutional justice, women's political participation usually rests on personal ties or the support of influential male leaders.

By emphasizing how political institutions uphold gendered power dynamics through both written and unwritten norms, feminist institutionalism offers a crucial perspective through which to view the conflict between formal inclusion and informal exclusion. Caste, race, class, geography, and party hierarchy all influence women's access to opportunities and influence in politics, as intersectionality further highlights. The obstacles that marginalized women must overcome are exacerbated, making it much harder for them to gain from official gender equality programs.

The study also emphasizes the need for more than just boosting the number of women in politics. Political parties must undergo institutional and cultural reforms in order to achieve true inclusiveness, and seniority, masculinity, and loyalty to patronage networks should no longer be the only criteria used to decide leadership. Regular gender audits, strong grievance and accountability procedures, open candidate selection procedures, and consistent funding for mentorship and leadership development initiatives can all help to increase institutional responsibility. Instead of being merely symbolic, auxiliary organizations, women's wings, and training programs must be incorporated into the core decision-making processes.

Conclusion

This study concludes by emphasizing that women's political participation runs the risk of staying primarily symbolic rather than transformative if structural injustices and unwritten norms are not addressed. To achieve true gender equality, political parties must embrace complete changes that eliminate patriarchal practices and encourage inclusive decision-making, going beyond formal adherence to quotas and regulations. To achieve meaningful empowerment, it is essential to actively involve males as supporters, promote intersectional diversity, and improve women's collective agency.



A multidimensional strategy is required for sustainable change, integrating institutional restructuring, legal reforms, and political party cultural changes. Only by taking such steps can Nepali parties become powerful change agents and create an atmosphere in which women's leadership is representative, egalitarian, and meaningful. Political parties may facilitate true gender-transformative leadership and inclusive government in this way, rather than just increasing the number of women in politics.

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