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# Nepal's Locally Elected Women Representatives

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## Exploratory Study of Needs and Capacity



स्थानीय सरकार सबलीकरण



The Australian Government - The Asia Foundation Partnership in Nepal



# **Nepal's Locally Elected Women Representatives**

## **Exploratory Study of Needs and Capacity**

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The findings and any views expressed in relation to this activity do not reflect the views of the Australian Government or those of The Asia Foundation.

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The initial data analysis was done by Samjhauta Nepal with inputs from Bikash Udhyami. Ms. Josefina YF Oraa, Senior Gender Consultant, provided the overall technical support. Mr. Mukesh Khanal assisted in the write-up of the final report with additional inputs from Josefina YF Oraa and Ms. Srijana Nepal, Program Officer, TAF. Ms. Nandita Baruah, Acting Country Representative, TAF provided overall technical guidance.

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## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

The successful completion of local, provincial, and federal elections in 2017 is an historic milestone for the country. Local elections were held after almost two decades. They became a key vessel for acting upon the Constitutional obligation towards gender and social inclusion in the government and ending the political impasse that beset the country for many years. Record number of women representatives were elected to office, and this has presented the representatives with both opportunities and challenges. The number of women especially from marginalized communities coming into power currently augurs well for gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) but, the road to women's substantive participation in leadership and decision-making roles is littered with manifold challenges.

Against this backdrop, The Asia Foundation in partnership with Samjhauta Nepal conducted a mix-method exploratory study in 20 rural/urban municipalities across the seven provinces to assess the existing needs and capacities of the locally elected women representatives along with the social, political, and economic challenges and opportunities that these women are faced with.

*What does the study tell us about the need and capacity of locally elected women representatives?*

The data shows that majority of the women have basic level education with high percentage having undergone secondary level education and small percentage having gone for higher education. Only 12% of the surveyed women representatives were illiterate, and another 22% were just literate i.e. could do very basic reading and writing. This belies the general perception/belief that the current group of elected women representatives are largely uneducated compared to their male counterparts. It would be useful to do a comparative study on the education level of elected male representatives, and compare against the existing data on education level of elected female representatives. It is interesting to note that irrespective of their educational status, 89% of the surveyed women elected representatives were involved in social groups, development projects, community activities, and various other engagements including party politics prior to winning the election. However, only 4% of these elected representatives had any prior direct political experience. This is understandable because Nepal has not had local elections for 20 years, and provincial/federal elections do not provide as many opportunities and seats as local elections.

Notably, 88% of women representatives were engaged in various economic activities like agriculture, business, social work/politics, and labor. Only 12% of these elected women representatives identified themselves as a housewife, and most identified themselves as being engaged in agriculture by professions, even if it constituted working on own farmland and they were not being paid or got direct remuneration. The fact that they made an economic and social distinction between the role of a housewife versus their involvement in any other economic activity

without direct financial remunerations, indicates a level of empowerment of these women, regardless of their educational status.

Forty-seven percent of the elected women representatives were encouraged by political parties to stand in the election, and 22% were encouraged by community members. It is important to bear in mind that no political party would pick a candidate to run for elected office if they did not have the potential to win. Therefore, it indicates that the political parties had faith in these candidates to win, and that their selection as candidates was not “random.” However, data collected could not provide information on what each political party was looking for in terms of eligibility and qualifications from its candidates. Many women stated in the focus group discussions (FGDs) that it could be their rapport with the community or their previous engagements outside the home. Some of the women indicated in the FGDs that the political parties nominated them to fulfill the quota obligations. However, they were concerned that their lack of prior political experience could hamper their performance and current roles as elected representatives.

When asked if they faced any challenges at work, 53% women representatives indicated that they did, and 48% of these representatives reported having no idea how to tackle those challenges. The FGDs showed similar findings. Regardless of educational status or age, majority of the surveyed women representatives indicated that financial and budget management issues were challenging and trainings in these would help them perform better at work. They also indicated the need for leadership and empowerment training, training and information on law, the constitution, and government policies. The current elected women representatives are keen to use their first term to acquire that political experience and gain valuable lessons and insights into political governance.

The findings and analysis of the study may be largely indicative given that the study sample is limited but more so because the present situation on the ground is dynamic. Yet, it cannot be denied that there is palpable excitement and optimism amongst elected women representatives to be an active participant in Nepal’s evolving governance structures. Tempering the optimism with realistic assessment of the challenges and work on hand is needed. Building capacities and supportive environment for women's leadership in local governance in the context of federalism in Nepal is needed. But more broadly, creating an enabling, gender-equal ecosystem for women's effective and meaningful participation in governance and in any activity, is crucial. For which, the following must be acknowledged and addressed:

1. the mandate of women elected representatives;
2. their capacities and experiences as well as their articulated challenges and needs;
3. the socio-cultural environment within which women elected representatives have to operate;
4. infrastructural limitations across places especially given topographical realities in the country; and
5. the intersectionality of gender with caste, ethnicity, religion, education, geographical location, age, among other factors.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nepal embarked on a new journey as a federal state after the successful completion of local, provincial, and federal elections in 2017. Local elections after almost two decades is a historic milestone for the country. It is also a strong step towards gender and social inclusion in the government and ending the political impasse that beset the country for many years. The visible and tangible presence of women in public life is an accepted indicator of inclusive and equitable social development. However, this public space is often hugely contested from a gender perspective, and women tend to be largely excluded from wielding any influence in such spaces.

The recent local elections were held in three phases: May, June, and September 2017. A total of 35,041 local representatives were elected across 753 local units: 6 metropolises, 11 sub-metropolises, 276 municipalities, and 460 rural municipalities (Election Commission 2017). Of these 35,041 elected representatives, 14,352 or 40.96% were women (Election Commission 2017). These accomplishments are not a standalone effort, it is a continuum in the long history of political struggle and engagement by women's rights/ human rights activists in the past to ensure representation of women and marginalized communities/groups in the political structure of Nepal.

The 2017 local elections were significant in advancing female political representation in Nepal. For example, the Election Commission mandated that at least 40.4% of total nominees be female, including a rule mandating that the chief and deputy chief nominations put forth by each political party in each local unit be gender-even. That is, if a political party nominated a man for the mayor's position, a woman had to be nominated for deputy mayor, or vice-versa. Because of this affirmative action, 40.9% of elected local seats are now held by women. Given the state of local, regional, and national politics in Nepal so far, and the lack of female representation in the past, the 40.9 % figure should be considered a watershed event.

The local elections have changed the political landscape, at least at the local levels, for Nepali women. However, much more remains to be done. There is the fact that 91% of the deputy positions—deputy mayors in municipalities and vice chairpersons in rural municipalities—were won by women, but men won 98% of chief positions—mayors and chairpersons (Election Commission 2017). This was because of the 753 mayor/chairperson positions across the country, women were nominated for mayor/chairperson in only 190 positions, i.e. only in 25% of the total positions. This can largely be attributed to an overarching patriarchal socialization that played out in the selection and nomination process for the two key leadership positions. The public perception towards elected women representatives remains clouded by the normative construct of gender roles and responsibilities. Reserved quotas still appear to be the only way Nepali women seem to be able to receive proportional nomination. For example, in the non-quota positions as ward members, of the 13,484 positions across Nepal, only 2% were won by women, mainly because they weren't even nominated for such positions since quota nominations did not apply to these positions (Paswan 2017).



The Asia Foundation recognizes these positive changes as well as the challenges that lay ahead for Nepali women seeking more and meaningful representation in all levels of government. cursory analyses of the 2017 local elections results clearly show that Nepali women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles is littered with substantial challenges. Patriarchy remains entrenched in the public psyche, which inhibits women for effectively operating in their leadership roles.

Against this backdrop, the Australian Government – The Asia Foundation Partnership on sub national governance in Nepal is looking at responding to opportunities and challenges of Nepal's transition to a federal republic. One major objective of this partnership is to enhance local government capacity for effective basic service delivery and economic governance. It also aims to understand the gendered expectations, and the nature and extent of Nepali women's engagement in society, including the economy, public affairs, and politics. Within this framework, The Asia Foundation in partnership with Samjhauta Nepal and technical oversight of Senior Gender expert Josephina Oraa conducted this exploratory study to assess the social, political, and economic challenges and opportunities that local elected women representatives are faced with.

To this effect, The Asia Foundation conducted a rapid study using a rapid questionnaire assessment, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. The aim of this study is to provide informed insights to develop interventions to support the capacity and skills development of elected women representatives, by taking into account their existing skills and capacities, and by being cognizant of largely patriarchal socio-cultural environment in which that have to operate.

## *1.2 Representation and Participation*

Despite decades of progressive policies—proposed and promoted by various Nepali governments as well as the international donor community—aimed at uplifting Nepali women, Nepal remains a very patriarchal society. Patriarchy hurts the lives and forward momentum of Nepali women in several ways. It continues to hinder Nepal's attempts to become a truly liberal democracy. For example, “socially constructed sexual roles” under the patriarchy “make it exceedingly difficult” for a Nepali woman to “identify and develop her own sexual desires and needs” (Tamang 2003). Yet, the good news is that Nepal continues to march forward. Therefore, achieving gender equality is not a matter of if but when.

Increased female representation in recent Nepali parliaments have been accompanied by criticisms of “tokenism.” The argument is that there is no “meaningful participation” from female elected representatives. While this is an issue that merits scholarly discussion, “affirmative action, such as quotas and reserved seats, can be an effective mechanism for accelerating women's representation in formal politics” (Falch 2010). The quota system is not perfect, but it challenges “the norm that



politics is a masculine sphere,” while lowering the “structural barriers that earlier limited women’s access to political positions” (Falch 2010, 30).

There should be no doubt that Nepali women enjoying greater political participation and representation is a positive thing, no matter how one looks at the issue and analyzes it, tokenism or not. There are four main reasons for this:

First, recent local elections provide an opportunity to female representatives and representatives from marginalized groups to access formal political spaces and enhance their rights. Some of this was seen immediately after the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections, when sub-alliances such as the Women’s Caucus, Dalit Caucus, and Indigenous Caucus within the Constituent Assembly were formed to advance women, Dalit, and Indigenous agendas.

Second, exclusion of women from public life leads a country towards authoritarianism (Fish 2002). The very act and fact of having more elected female representatives helps save democracy (Donno and Russett 2004). If it is true, that simply the presence of more female elected representatives cannot help secure Nepal’s fledgling democracy, but electing greater number of Nepali women into political office becomes an important first step towards inclusive governance.

Third, critics of meaningful participation underestimate the significance and influence of a lone individual in power. Even one Nepali female representative elected to a position of power can have a significant impact on the rights of all Nepali women. The impact created by Eleanor Roosevelt, as Chairperson of the United Nations’ Commission of Human Rights, for women all over the world is a good example of how one lone female in a position of power can impact the future and lives of other women. She was responsible for Article 1 of the United Nations Human Rights Declaration for stating that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” and Article 2 stating that “everyone” was entitled to such “rights and freedom ... without fear or favor” (Persadie 2012). Her actions ensured that the United Nations’ Charters were inclusive and worked equally for women’s rights as men’s. The lesson, here, is that even one powerful female ally in a position of power can have a significant impact on Nepali women’s lives. Therefore, it would be presumptuous to dismiss the potential roles that a large group of elected female representatives in Nepal can play towards creating a more inclusive and equitable governance system.

Finally, gender equality must start somewhere, and greater female representation in public life seems like a good place for that start. Critics of Nepali female representatives’ meaningful participation should recognize that gender equality requires upending millennia of patriarchy and other factors that have kept Nepali women out of participation in public life. It takes time. It will take time for Nepali female representatives to learn how to use their political power. Nepal’s recent local elections have elected record number of Nepali women into public office. Nepal’s transition to federalism ensures that local and regional political representation will be much more meaningful

than has been in the past. Transition to federalism also provides a regime change is akin to, as Beer (2009) says, “new ways of doing politics.” This requires learning how to adapt and make one’s participation more meaningful. In Nepal’s changing federalism contexts, this applies equally to Nepali male representatives.

## 2. BASELINE RESEARCH

The Asia Foundation-Australian Government Partnership on Subnational Governance in Nepal intends to respond to the opportunities and challenges that emerge from Nepal's transition to federalism. An important objective under this partnership is the enhancement of local government capacity for effective basic public service delivery and economic governance that benefits all. The Partnership also works towards more informed and inclusive subnational governance reform initiatives and policy discourses at all levels of government. As part of this informed discourse, The Asia Foundation partnered with Samjhauta Nepal to conduct a rapid exploratory study to assess the challenges and opportunities facing locally elected women representatives from the most recent local elections.

This study attempted to:

- Identify the priorities of elected women representatives, with components that assess broader community needs.
- Identify individual capacity as well as opportunities and constraints of elected women representatives, within political and socio-economic environments.
- Extract informed insights on capacity and skills needs, and broader interventions that could be designed to help support the elected women representatives in their roles.

The primary purpose of this research was to establish a baseline of the capacity and skills of recent locally-elected women representatives. The Asia Foundation expects to partner and work with these representatives to address their needs, challenges, and opportunities.

### 2.1 Research Methodology

This baseline study employed three tools: a rapid questionnaire survey, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews.

Rapid questionnaire survey recorded the views and opinions of the elected women representatives. In addition to capturing the demographic data of the surveyed women elected representatives, the questions in the questionnaire were structured to determine the representatives' primary occupation, prior political or community engagements, reasons for contesting the election, before and after feelings, opinions on what the primary challenges were for elected women representatives, self-identified skills or capacity development needs, and any plans for addressing those needs. The rapid questionnaire survey had a total of 190 women elected representatives as respondents. Annex 1 has the breakdown of the surveyed sample.

Separate focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with women and men elected representatives to identify and discuss some of the issues facing the newly-elected women representatives. The

FGDs with women representatives were designed to capture the elected women representatives' grasp of issues of importance to them, how such issues will be resolved/addressed, support received from various stakeholders, level of involvement in decision-making processes, challenges faced at work and in the family/community, and the ways/needs to face such challenges. The FGDs with elected men representatives were designed to capture their sensitivity to gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) issues, challenges to GESI friendly actions in the local units, identification of needs and strategies to address such challenges, and the men representatives' take on what kind of capacity or skills enhancement the newly-elected women representatives will need. A total of 190 elected women representatives (the same group that responded to the survey questionnaire) and 197 elected men representatives participated in the FGDs.

*Key informant interviews* (KIIs) were conducted with key stakeholders who would have strong and relevant views and opinions on the roles and challenges that the recently-elected women representatives faced at the local levels. Per that criteria, the key informants in this study were mayors, deputy mayors, chairpersons, and deputy chairpersons. These key informants would be able to accurately provide relevant information on what kinds of challenges and needs the women elected representatives were likely to face in their roles. Key informants were asked about GESI issues in their local unit, their understanding and prioritization of such issues, challenges to GESI-friendly decision making in the local unit, programs and strategies needed to address such challenges, and identification of capacity enhancement needs of newly elected women representatives. A total of 40 key informants (20 men and 20 women) were interviewed in this study. Three of the key informants were also respondents in the survey questionnaire and participants in the FGDs.

The study covered 11 urban<sup>1</sup> municipalities and nine rural municipalities in 10 districts spread across Nepal. The Asia Foundation and Samjhauta Nepal's research teams selected the districts using purposive sampling method, ensuring that all seven provinces, all three ecological belts—Terai, Hill, and Mountain—and both rural and urban municipalities were represented in the research. The final list of study locations had 11 urban municipalities and nine rural municipalities. The map below shows the location and spread of the 20 research locations, showing that the research locations cover the length and breadth of the country and represent the country well. Annex 2 has the complete list and breakdowns of these study locations.

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<sup>1</sup> Metropolis, Sub-metropolis and Municipality has been categorized as Urban Municipality in the study.

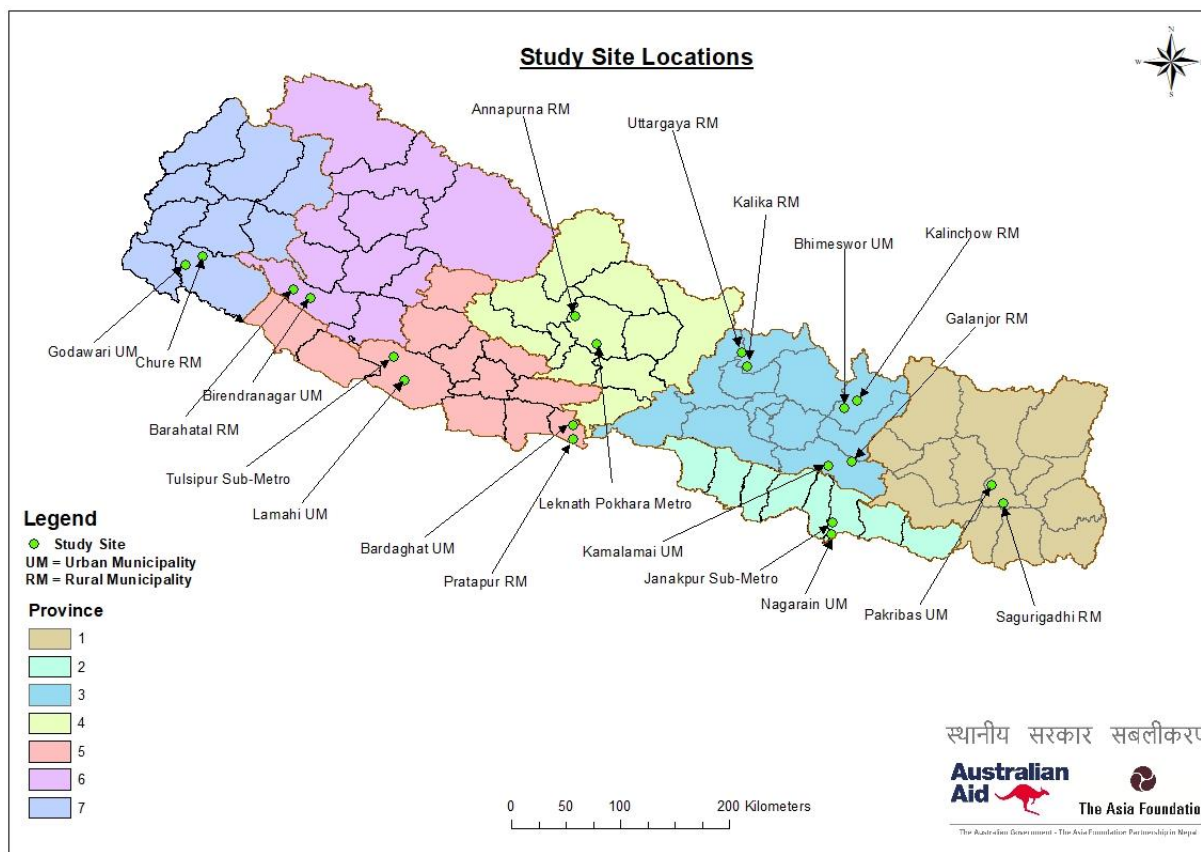


Figure: Study Site Locations

## 2.2 Coverage

The research was carried out between August 2017 and February 2018. In August 2017, The Asia Foundation and Samjhauta Nepal worked together to develop the three tools. The rapid survey questionnaire, focus group discussion topics, and key informant interview questions were prepared and pilot tested in Godavari municipality, Lalitpur district. Then, the tools were revised based on feedback received from the pilot test. The actual full research was, then, carried out in the study locations in September and October 2017. The field survey team comprised of a total of 18 enumerators and two supervisors.

## 2.3 Scope and Limitations

The urgency of the study considering the ongoing process of federalism in Nepal and the limited time available for the same have defined the scope and limitations of the research. Support interventions were meant to start in earnest but the study was needed to ensure purposive inputs. Thus, the study was deemed urgent to inform any support activities and engagements.

The research team acknowledges the limitation of the study, due to several factors. First, the findings from the questionnaire survey are the result of a rapid questionnaire survey, which was not exhaustive in its scope. There may be many more issues faced by Nepal's recently-elected women representatives, but this study focused on gathering their opinion on a few critical issues to understand their current needs and exiting levels of skills and capacity.

Second, the women representatives surveyed and interviewed for this research were not a truly random selection, but a purposive random selection. That is, the team surveyed and interviewed only "elected" women representatives, not the ones who contested the elections but lost. Also, the views of elected men representatives were only captured through the FGDS and KIIs and not from the survey.

Third, despite the research team's best efforts, we are cognizant of the fact that the 20 study locations from 10 districts may still not be very representative of the country.

Finally, this research's scope is limited because the idea was to take a quick snapshot of the issues and challenges, and was meant to be indicative of the experiences, but not be exhaustive. The aim was to carry out a quick research that would become a baseline to help develop ideas for further, fuller research sometime in the future.

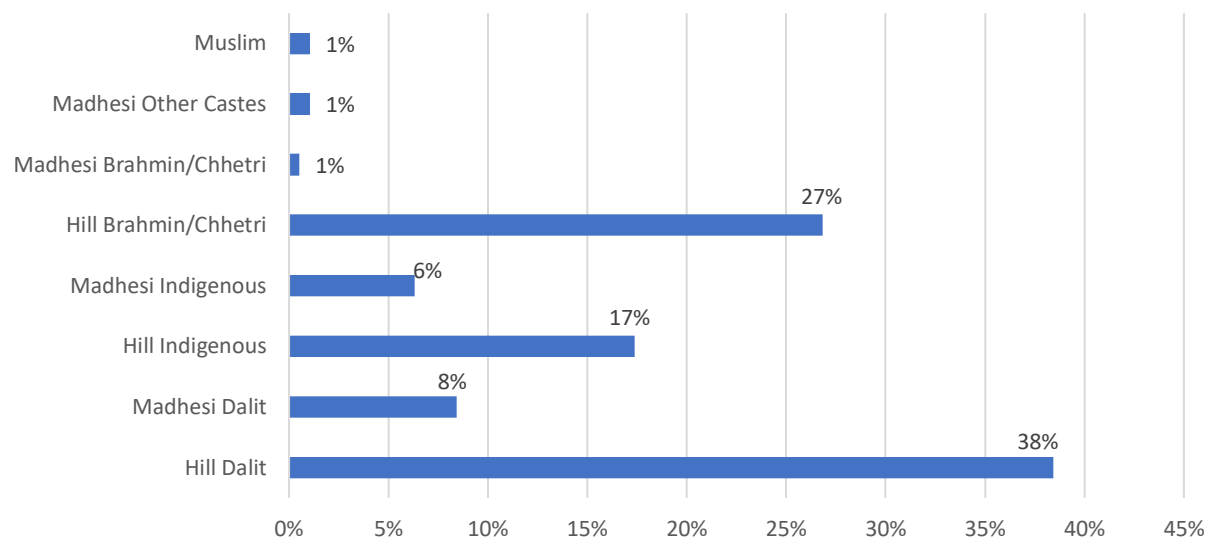
### 3. BROAD FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Survey Findings

##### In terms of background of elected women representatives:

Of the total 190 surveyed women representatives, a significant majority (46%) are either Hill or Madhesi *Dalit*, as Figure 1 shows. As the representation of Dalit women in local government is prescribed by law, the study shows the large participation of Dalit women.

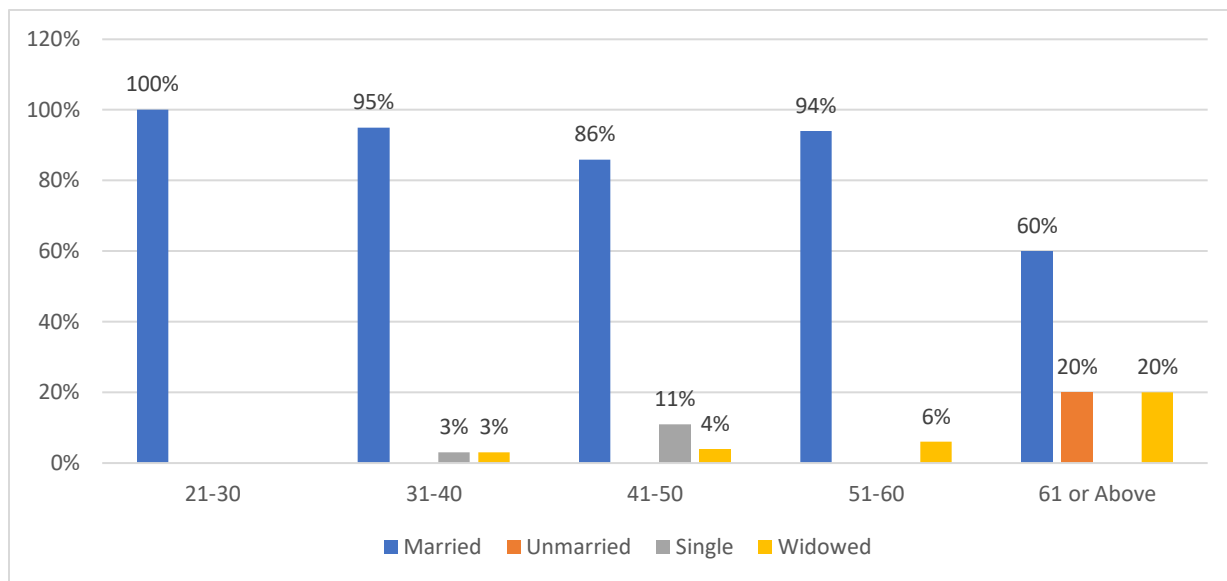
**Figure 1: Ethnic Distribution of Women Representatives (N = 190)**



Most number of women falls under the younger age groups of 21-30, 31-40 (Figure 2). Majority (92%) of the women are married with small percentage being single (separated, divorced) and widowed. This signal towards a selection bias by the political parties in nominating married women for the positions in order to ensure their continued presence in the constituency.

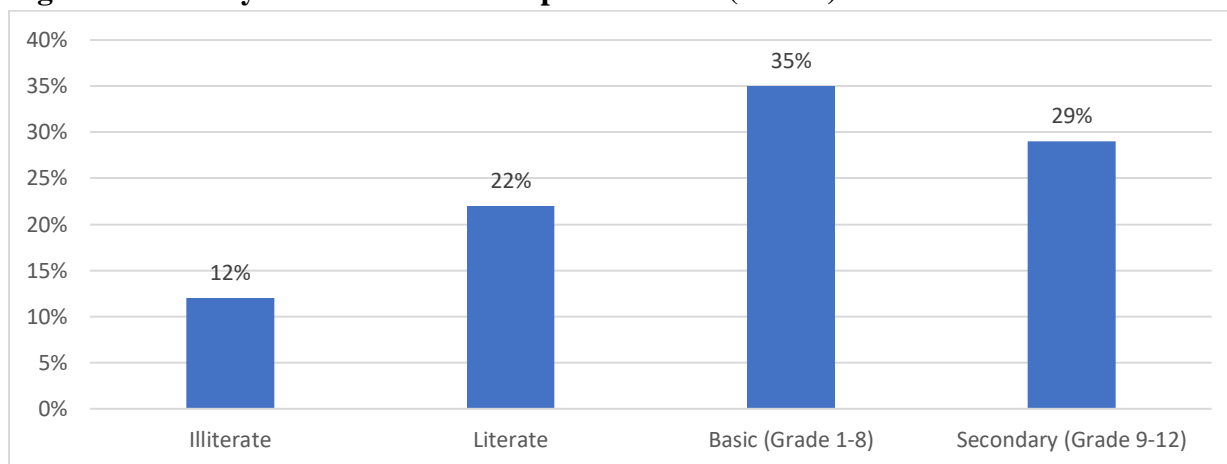


**Figure 2: Distribution of Women Representatives by Age and marital Status (N=190)**



It was interesting to find that contrary to major perception that elected women have low literacy, the survey found that majority (66%) of the respondents had done some schooling—basic to higher levels and only 12% were illiterate<sup>2</sup>(Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Literacy status of Women Representatives (N=190)**



<sup>2</sup> Literate in this study is categorized for the person who could do very basic reading and writing

### **In terms of pre-election engagement in the public domain:**

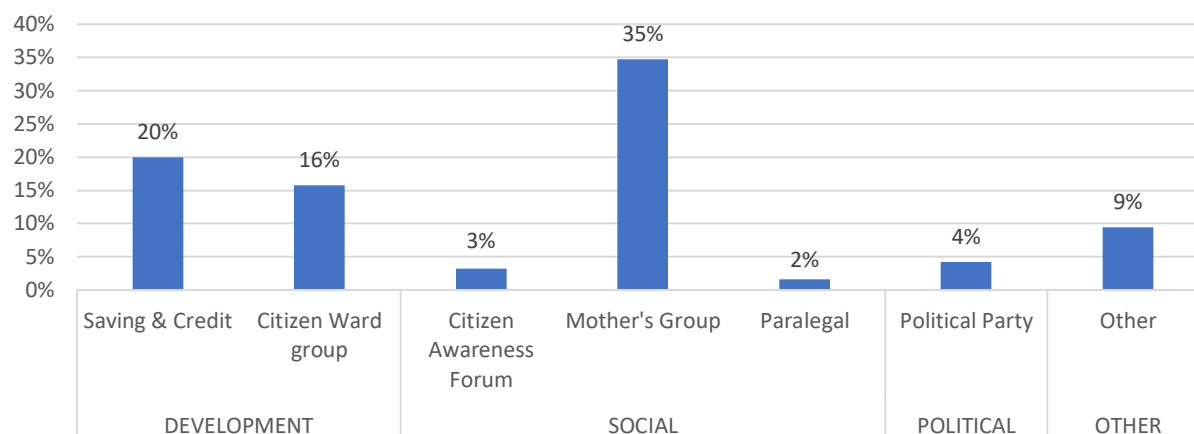
Women's experience of engagement outside the home is considerable with 88% of them engaged in various economic work and 89% of them involved in social, development, and political activities.

Majority (54 %) of the women identified their economic engagement as agriculture followed by business (19%), and social work/politics (12 %). Only 12% of the surveyed women elected representatives identified themselves as housewives. This categorization of the economic status by women was interesting. While women identified the role of a housewife as a non-economic identity there was no clear indication to prove whether their work in agriculture was paid labor or a part of their unpaid work in family owned fields. Women may be working as family labor in agriculture or family-owned business and maybe working as volunteer in social work or politics. But they tended to make an economic and social distinction between the role of a housewife versus their involvement in any other economic activity even though it may have been without any financial remuneration.

Remarkably, women working across various occupations were also involved in social, development, and political activities, e.g. 90% (93 out of 103) women in agriculture, 89% (32 out of 36) women in business, 96% (22 out of 23) women in social work/politics, 50% (3 out of 6) women in labor. As many as 86% (19 out of 22) women designated as housewives were involved in social, development and political activities.

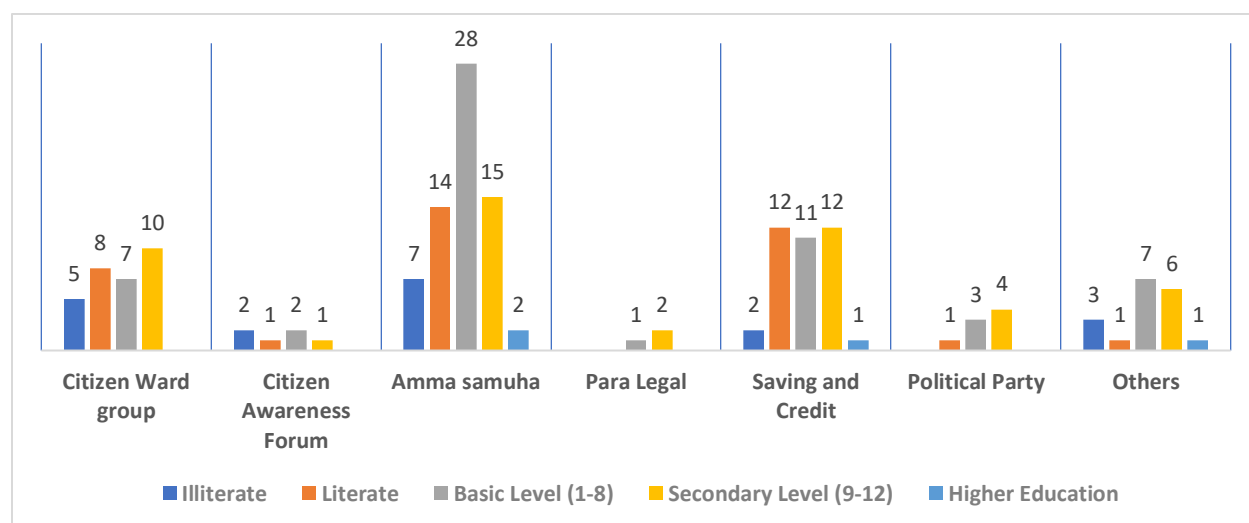
Of the 190 surveyed women representatives, 169 (89%) stated that, prior to winning the elections, they were involved in social groups, development projects, or political activities. Of these 169 representatives, as Figure 4 shows, most were involved in social groups, followed by development groups and only 4% of the respondents had prior political experience. While prior political experience would have been a boon for their roles as elected representatives, their past social and development experiences are equally important to perform their function as duty-bearer.

**Figure 4: Public Engagement Experience prior to the Elections (N = 169)**



It is interesting to note that irrespective of their educational status 89% (169 of 190) of the women elected representatives were involved in social groups, development projects, community activities, and various other engagements including party politics prior to winning the election (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Distribution of Women by Education and Public Engagement Experience prior to the Elections (N=169) (Figures in Numbers)**



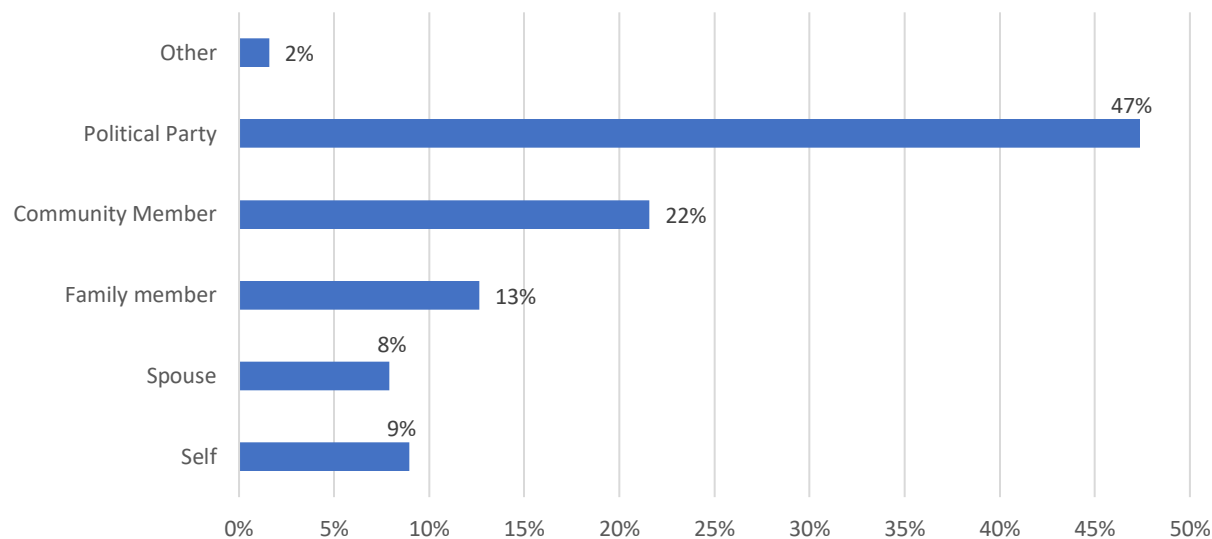
### **In terms of women's decision or influence to run for election:**

Majority (47%) of the women representatives stated that the 'encouragement' to run for election came from the political parties and followed by community members (22%) (Figure 6). Owing to the provisions of the law, the political parties were purposively encouraging women to run for election – data collected, however, could not provide information on what each political party was looking for in terms of eligibility and qualifications from its candidates. But women opined during the FGDs that it could be their rapport with the community or their previous engagements outside the home.

Family members provided 'encouragement' in 13% of cases and husband/spouse in 8% of cases. The low percentage of women getting encouragement from husband/spouse as compared to the family members could be due to the reduced presence by husband/spouse because of outmigration or due simply to the hierarchy within the household where the husband/spouse's voice is secondary to that of the parents.

Women assert that the decision comes from one's own in 9% of cases. The most number of women who drew encouragement from oneself came from age group 41-50 with basic level education.

**Figure 6: Encouragement for Contesting the Election (N = 190)**

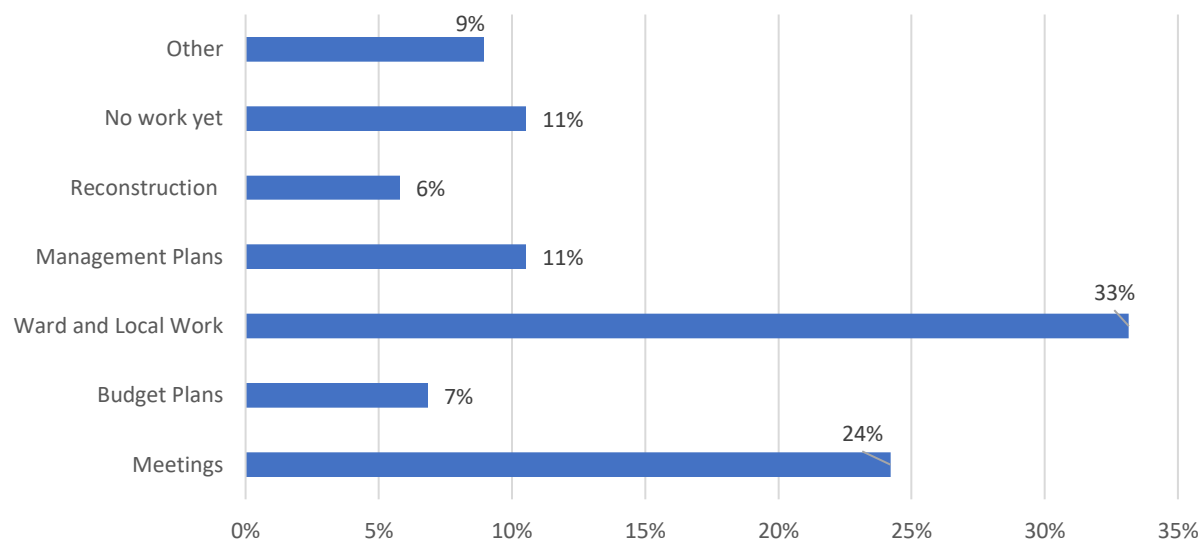


### **In terms of post-election public engagement experience:**

At the time the study was being conducted, all newly elected representatives were busy with induction and the formalities required to assume office and 10% of elected women representatives

were yet to start work in office. For the rest, their involvement has been limited to “work for ward area and help people”, attending meetings, management planning, budgeting, “reconstruction” and various other activities (Figure 7). Women were tentative in their engagement as they were yet in the process of understanding their role as elected representatives as well as the official procedures to be followed in the conduct of their duties. They understand, however, that they must interface with the community and that people now approach them for advice and action on certain issues as elected representative.

**Figure 7. Post-election Public Engagement Experience (N = 190)**



It is relevant to note that elected representatives at the Ward Level do not get salary although they are provided reimbursement for transport expenses when attending meetings and official functions. Women who do not have economic resources find this burdensome, especially because women are not familiar with the paperwork required to even get reimbursement, let alone application for cash advance for official use, if available.

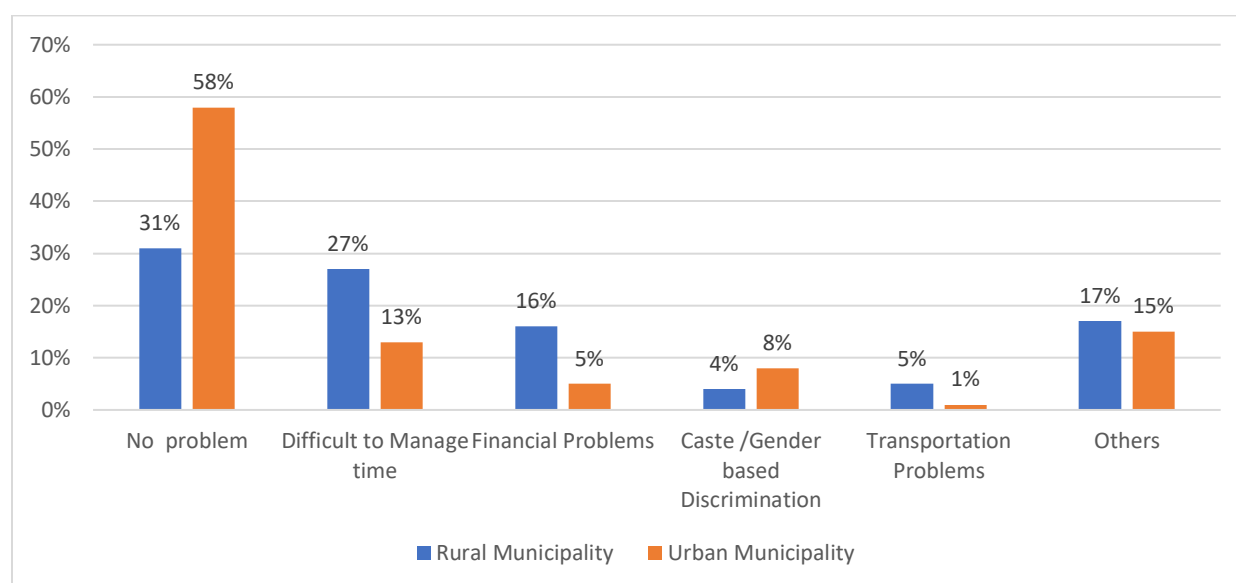
Women have yet to assert their space, physically and in terms of meaningful participation as elected representatives through decision-making and ability to negotiate the labyrinth of the governance structure/power. Indeed, knowledge on their roles and power as elected representatives, on local and national issues, on laws, among others, and skills required for effective functioning as elected representatives would enhance women's voices and enable their agency.

### **In terms of problems and challenges faced by elected women representatives:**

Forty-seven percent of surveyed women representatives stated that they have not been able to identify any problems or challenges at work. Still, 53% representatives indicated that they faced some kinds of challenges or problems. Of the 53% who identified problems cite time-management (19%), financial problem (9%), caste/gender-based discrimination (6%), and transportation (3%) among others as challenges in the exercise of their role.

More women from rural municipalities have identified problems such as time management and transportation compared to urban municipalities (Figure 8). Data from FGD's (in next section) underscores more detail issues identified by elected women representatives specific to geographical areas.

**Figure 8: Distribution of Women by Location and Challenges Articulated (N= 190)**



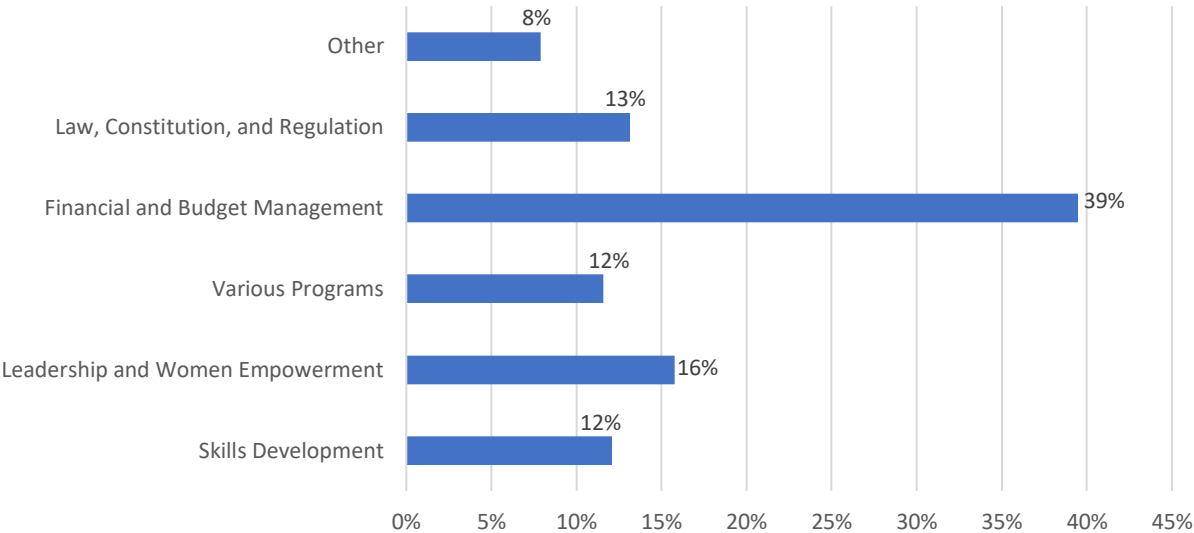
### **In terms of articulated needs by elected women representatives to enable their meaningful participation:**

The study has mapped the training needs for women elected representatives referencing women's own articulation of their limitations and challenges. Figure 6 shows, regardless of their educational status or age, majority (39%) of the women representatives have felt the need for financial and budget management trainings to help perform better at work, followed by leadership and women

empowerment training (16%) and law, constitution and regulation training (13%) (Figure 9). Some 12% of them articulated the need for different types skills and knowledge such as gender public speaking and communication.

Yet, where many elected women representatives do not have an appreciation of the problem/s before them, they cannot be expected to know completely the solution/s to the problems or challenges. Although, it must be noted that women are aware and knowledgeable of local needs and issues based on their close observation and experiences – and they themselves would know how to respond to a given situation. Nonetheless, a journey of genuine self-understanding in relation to the larger context is necessary for a meaningful and transformative participation by women elected representatives. Awareness-raising on issues viz-a-viz structural and societal realities would be a good start for this, keeping women's agency at the core of any intervention.

**Figure 9: Self-identified Training Needs (N= 190)**



**3.2 Focus Group Discussion Findings**

Separate FGDs were carried out with elected women and men representatives to understand and identify the underlying issues as an elected representative, socio-political context, challenges faced, their understanding of GESI concept, and their needs to effectively function as duty-bearer.

First, FGDs with both men and women underscores that despite Nepal's official long-standing commitment to the GESI Framework in line with its ratification of international normative standards on human rights, women's rights, gender equality and social justice, among others, inequality persists. Prejudice based on gender and caste/ethnicity/religion deems women and those



from marginalized caste, ethnicity and/or religion to be generally incapable of decision-making and the responsibility of governance. Reinforcing the prejudice against women is the latter's own internalization of gender stereotypes that keep them subordinated.

Elected representatives (men and women) were found to have a very limited understanding of GESI concept and its operationalization. Among those who have some understanding of GESI, and understand the need to act on issues of women empowerment and pro-GESI budgetary decision making, have been unable to act strongly or in a meaningful manner because of their own capacity and skill constraints on the issue.

Second, FGDs with men underscored the prevailing mindset among most men elected representatives (and that of the community) that subscribes to deeply entrenched gendered expectations and biases, e.g. private-public and productive-reproductive divides that relegate women in the private sphere charged with reproductive roles. The FGDs also made it clear that patriarchy continues to dominate the discourse not only around GESI issues, but also around broader women's issues. Many men representatives that participated in the FGDs were not reluctant to express that the "quota system" was the only reason for successful election of so many women representatives in the recent local elections.

*"If the government won't have implemented this compulsory quota system, none of the women would have been sitting here as elected members. They are here to just fill numbers and fulfill the quota requirement of political parties. They are sitting idle."* FGD Men, Bardaghat urban municipality, Annapurna rural municipality, Uttargaya rural municipality, Nagarain urban municipality.

In Janakpur, elected men representatives questioned the intent and efficacy of the government's policy that has resulted in uneducated *Dalit* and women being elected to office. Men were also quick to mention the low literacy levels of women elected representatives, and stress that literacy programs were needed for such representatives. However, it is unclear if the men representatives who raised these concerns were more educated than their *Dalit* or women peers. Perhaps, this is an issue that deserves a separate survey research. The women representatives in the FGDs considered their men counterparts to be "natural leaders" and "competent." This is further proof that patriarchy remains so entrenched in the Nepali society that Nepali women seem to accept men superiority as a matter of fact, so much so that even elected women representatives consider themselves less capable than their men peers.

Regardless of men's capacity, knowledge and qualifications, they are deemed by everyone - including by women, to be the "natural leaders", and "competency" is ascribed to them without question. Unsurprisingly, albeit unfortunately, in keeping with the law that requires 50% women among the Mayors/Chairpersons and Deputy Mayors/Vice Chairpersons, large shares of women have been installed as Deputy Mayors/Vice Chairpersons with men as Mayors/Chairpersons.

Third, the survey locations were diverse, and the issues that were identified as major critical issues differed accordingly. For example, in Rasuwa district, witchcraft, violence against women, and child marriage were major issues faced by women. In Surkhet, the major issues were polygamy, chhaupadi,<sup>3</sup> and child marriage. In Dhanusha, domestic violence was a major issue, in addition to the culture of men dictating a woman's place is inside the house and that women should wear veils over their heads, as is customary. At the end of the day, men decided what was right for women in Dhanusha. In Kaski, it was illiteracy. Therefore, the different sets of critical issues were identified in different locations. This means, any future intervention or programming geared towards assisting the elected women representatives will have to consider the variety and varying degrees of difficulty associated with the issues. Programs, assistance, and interventions will have to be designed differently for different locations.

Fourth, just as women face varying issues, elected women representatives have varying levels of capacity and skills to address the issues. For example, FGD participants in Dhanusha stated that they did not feel heard, and, in Surkhet, chhaupadi is a major problem that women face, and illiteracy was a factor that hindered women's capacity to raise their issues. However, women in Kaski are not as homebound as those in Dhanusha and chhaupadi is not as big a threat to women in Kaski. Instead, elected women representatives in Kaski stated that GESI is often discussed during meetings, and despite initial difficulties in raising their issues, they now feel heard. Despite low skills and capacity, many elected women representatives that participated in the FGDs appeared very keen on taking on their new roles, learning, and contributing to local development. These observations from the FGDs show that the hurdles and associated difficulty levels vary by locations. This is a key observation, which suggests programs, assistance, or interventions must be developed separately for separate locations. Perhaps, a more detailed needs and capacity assessment is required to provide such assistance. The current research conducted a snapshot assessment, and the results may not be as robust as a larger, time-intensive research.

However, credit must be given where it is due. All FGD participants, including the elected men representatives, were quick to identify mass communication training, skill development training, leadership development training, administrative training, planning and budgeting training, and legal training as ways to improve their understanding and performance on such issues. The participants mentioned capacity and skills constraints as the primary obstacles to effective empowerment of elected women representatives. There was also a general understanding that it is important to bring more women into mainstream politics and their views and opinions need to be accounted for in the decision-making process. Many women representatives, especially in

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<sup>3</sup> Chhaupadi is a superstitious practice prevalent mostly in the far-western region of Nepal in which women are forced to stay in shed away from their main house during the menstruation period. Sometimes, a household has a shed built within the property specifically designed for housing menstruating family member for several days. Often, these sheds are small and windowless. Several women, over the years, have died from snakebite and animal attacks while inside these cramped sheds.

Janakpur, were forthright in admitting that they did not know their rights, which made fighting for equal rights even harder.

### *3.3 Key Informant Interview Findings*

Key Informant Interviews conducted with a select group of representatives (Mayor/Chairperson, Deputy Mayor/Vice Chairperson) revealed findings that were very similar to what the focus group discussions produced.

First, some key informant interview respondents made it clear that there is a prevalent attitude among men representatives that their elected women peers are treated as “quota leaders.” A key informant from Nagarain urban municipality in Dhanusha stated: “Women leaders are motivated by economic benefit. So, they do not participate in meetings and social programs.” The implication is that men participate for the social good, but women only do so when enticed with monetary compensation. Another key informant from Pokhara-Lekhnath urban municipality incredulously stated that “women should engage in competition, without reservation (quota).” It is unclear if the key informant was expressing personal beliefs or was quoting what the wider public thought of the issue. The woman Deputy-Mayor of Bhimeshwor urban municipality in Dolakha stated: “Locals in the municipality think men are hardware and women are software.” That is a strange way of saying men are better in making decisions and women are better in household works. These key informant interviews show that patriarchy continues to be a powerful force against women empowerment in Nepal. If powerful men in powerful positions hold these views, one cannot expect the wider public to be more GESI-conscious and pro-women. There is much work to be done.

Second, responses from a woman key informant from Chure rural municipality in Kailali sheds some light into the reason why many representatives—men and women—are unable to contribute as much as they could. The interviewee, a Tharu, stated that many in her community struggle to raise their issues and concerns because of the language barrier, as most are not fluent in Nepali, the official language. As a result, the community has delegated a recently elected woman representative, who is well spoken in Nepali, to speak in public on behalf of the Tharu community. It could be the case that many other communities in many other parts of Nepal have a similar issue, wherein they are unable to express their demands and demand their rights in an official capacity simply because of their poor Nepali skills. This could also be true of elected representatives from linguistic communities with poor Nepali skills.

Finally, a woman key informant from Bardaghat urban municipality in Nawalparasi stated: “We are behind because we are confined within our house to do all the household chores, look after families. Men members from our families discuss different issues including politics and so they know more than us. If we were allowed to go out and interact with communities and exposed

to different political scenarios, we can be better leader than men. Instead they sent our brothers to school and we assisted our mothers in household chores and father in the field”.

FGD participants from Dhanusha had expressed similar sentiments about not being able to leave housework, being forced to wear veils to cover their heads, and not being able to participate in community decision making as factors that hindered women empowerment in Dhanusha.

Therefore, the key informants reinforced the conclusions from the FGDs that Nepali women in some communities have more difficulty breaking the shackles. Women elected members from such communities need more assistance and help in carrying out their duties as elected officials, especially because it sets a precedent and encourages other women members from the same community to run for public office in the future elections or become more engaged socially or politically in the community or the local unit.

#### 4. ACTION POINTS

The findings and analysis may be largely indicative given that the study sample is limited but more so because the present situation on the ground is dynamic. Yet, it cannot be denied that there is palpable excitement and optimism amongst elected women representatives to be an active participant in Nepal's evolving governance structures. Tempering the optimism with realistic assessment of the challenges and work on hand is needed. Building capacities and supportive environment for women's leadership in local governance in the context of federalism in Nepal is needed. But more broadly, creating an enabling, gender-equal ecosystem for women's effective and meaningful participation in governance and in any activity, is crucial. For which, the following must be acknowledged and addressed:

- the mandate of women elected representatives;
- their capacities and experiences as well as their articulated challenges and needs;
- the socio-cultural environment within which women elected representatives have to operate;
- infrastructural limitations across places especially given topographical realities in the country;
- the intersectionality of gender with caste, ethnicity, religion, education, geographical location, age, among other factors.

Parallel and multi-level/multi-domain/multi-program interventions drawing on multi-stakeholders' engagement could include the following:

##### **1. Facilitating a policy framework/blueprint for capacity building and skills development that takes into account the socio-political and personal challenges of women elected representatives:**

Noting that the issues facing women spans the micro- and the macro-levels, and impact their social, economic and political situation, a comprehensive intervention plan must be worked out. Any and all barriers to women's meaningful participation must be recognized and dealt with both at the policy level and the program level.

Enabling women elected representatives to be effective leaders require broad-based approach that, while focusing on supporting them in their new role as elected representatives, should deal with persistent stereotypes against women, constructed 'secondary' role of women, gender-based violence, etc at home, the community, the workplace and beyond. As indeed, women's political participation is not isolated from their social and economic realities.

A policy framework/blueprint for intervention would be able to identify the various dimensions that require attention by various actors/stakeholders and resources available, and make for a collective agenda. This may include the suggested action points hereafter.

## **2. Designing a comprehensive training program aimed towards women's effective participation in local governance, GESI and social change:**

For all elected representatives through various modules:

### *2.1 Building/Facilitating Functional Responsibilities as Elected Representatives*

All elected local representatives, both men and women, articulated the need to understand the Constitution, their roles and responsibilities, the points of interface between and among three levels of governance in Nepal's federalism, the 'how-to' in conducting the affairs of the office including planning/budgeting, and other matters relating to their functions. While many of the men would have got exposure in governance from their previous experiences as members of the VDC or similar positions, many women are new in the political arena thus more focus is needed to build women's capacities.

As elected members of Municipalities, women have certain roles based on their elected position – as ward members, Deputy Mayors/Chairpersons or Mayors/Chairpersons. A clear understanding of their role is required and this may come through the official training provided by the government. If not, any capacity building intervention should either include this or have a short recap of these responsibilities along with an understanding of the mechanism of the functioning of the municipalities, representation and voting, decision making processes, among others. Alongside, there should also be inputs on engagement with community and their leadership role in the discharge of their duties.

With the new federal structure just taking shape, a clear understanding about the role of different tiers of governance is important especially among women with low levels of education and exposure. Within the federal system, the specific role of municipalities needs to be understood with emphasis on its role in the social and economic development within its jurisdiction. Federalism (e.g. devolution of funds, functions and functionaries), democracy and participation of people in local governance and good governance (e.g. human rights, social justice, women's rights, gender equality, social inclusion, etc.), citizenship, among other relevant topics, must be introduced.

It is imperative that basic sensitization on GESI is provided to both men and women to equip them with the lens to see the intersectionality of issues and respond to them in a manner that uses GESI framework. GESI sensitization is likewise important for all local representatives to enable them to do their planning/budgeting in a GESI-responsive manner. Further, this will ensure meaningful working relationship between men and women elected representatives across caste, ethnicity,

religion, age, qualifications, etc., all recognizing each other's equally critical roles in local governance.

## *2.2 Building/Enhancing Leadership in the Community*

Creation of self-belief and esteem, and the ability to recognize their agency are important to develop leadership among women. The understanding of the dynamics of power is critical and its interconnectedness with social, economic, and cultural aspects that create a mesh of subjugation of women. Recognizing the intersectionality of caste, age and gender among others is as important. Developing and enhancing leadership potential among the elected members include building self-belief, understanding identity, power dynamics, and society.

Women need support in setting agenda for development. This would presuppose skill to rally fellow representatives around priority issues and be able to build support groups/network, navigate the erstwhile men-dominated and men-structured system, etc. Recognizing each elected woman's relationship with the community generally and with other women is relevant in fostering solidarity and support system. Beyond party lines, women should be able to reach out to each other in their journey for self-actualization that would impact community development and national transformation.

A leadership training (including a module on communications) for women representatives would ensure that they actively participate in setting agenda, in decision-making, in making change happen. While this training is meant mainly for women, a training for men providing a gendered perspective on leadership and re-orienting their leadership approach and priorities would be useful.

## *2.3 Facilitating Personal Transformation and Development*

Social change is mediated by the dynamics at the micro-level, including relations and structures at the household level. A woman's effectiveness elsewhere can be affected, if compromised, by her situation at home – whether by the load of household and care work, by the limitations imposed by prevailing patriarchal system, by domestic violence, and other issues.

As oft repeated, “the personal is political”. Women should be facilitated to recognize personal issues, talk about them, find her solutions and reclaim her agency. Women must be able to recognize that their 'personal' issues are not isolated and many women can be found in the same position owing to a system that subjugates women and muffle their voices. Women must be able to redefine her personal situation and, in doing so, help transform situation for the better at the family level for both men and women and, ideally, facilitate intergenerational change.

This transformation at the micro-level becomes the bedrock for gender equality in the larger society so putting resources and time into this process should be seen no less as investment for national development. A specific focus on men is critical and discussed under 2.3 below.



## *2.4 Facilitating Capacity for Visioning*

It is crucial to facilitate women's capacity to chart their future and that of their communities. This requires visualizing goals for the community, roles of women leadership in addressing and articulating aspirations and linkages with various provisions available with local governance.

Almost all elected local representatives, both men and women, showed lack of GESI perspective. In acknowledging this, entrenched gendered expectations and roles, and prejudices based on caste, ethnicity, religion, age, qualifications, etc. should be challenged if women elected representatives have to meaningfully undertake their new roles as local representatives and leaders, and if social change has to happen.

Inputs hereon are needed as much for men who must learn to see the world from the prism of men, women and other genders. Men must be able to envision a world where everyone takes a meaningful part, where everyone's interest is represented and where goals are meant to benefit men, women and other genders equally. Training on men and masculinity would be a must at this point. Understanding the root of gender issues would lead to profound understanding and implementation of GESI.

The process of challenging and changing men's sense of supremacy and entitlement will take long. But, a beginning has to be made and, men elected representatives must lead the way for men re-examining their attitudes and behavior and eventually becoming genuine advocates for GESI.

## *2.5. Advocating on issues*

Capacity-building via training and various discussion fora pertaining to a range of issues in the community facing women, children, the elderly, people with disability, etc. and location-specific issues may be designed/developed (e.g. trafficking, VAW, chhaupadi, environment issues, etc.).

Sustained debates, discussions, etc. on federalism in Nepal and women coming into the political arena in great numbers, etc. should be facilitated among support organizations to understand more clearly Nepal's 's new framework for (subnational) governance based on federalism, facilitate consensus for action and foster partnerships. This could be supplemented by knowledge products with appropriate format/design and language easily understood by the target audience or visual, as the case may be.

Along with the content, advocacy skills must be facilitated/developed. Women must learn to articulate issues in a language and manner that official fora would require. For which, support to help women elected representatives analyze and convey issues with clarity and confidence (during meetings, discussions, planning, budgeting, etc.) would be useful. This will help them participate more substantively and effectively in local governance.

Mapping of stakeholders could further help in this regard. It is important to deal/connect especially with 'power centers' in the communities (e.g. 'elders', faith leaders, etc.) to influence their thinking and facilitate change in mindset where GESI is concerned.

### **3. Peer learning and building solidarity:**

Peer learning and solidarity support are important for this newly emerging leadership and capacity building interventions. There is need to create a mechanism of a *sharing platform* where women from different localities in the province can meet to not only share problems and solutions but also to raise collective issues - this can emerge as a possible local level federation of elected women representatives that can provide support to each other as well as raise issues of collective concern.

Advocating for these concerns can be undertaken through a structured federation supported by research institutes or NGOs which can provide background information and research to strengthen the advocacy agenda. The sharing platforms/federations, with support from NGOs can create linkages with the Provincial and Federal government, provide updates about new policies/orders to the members, and create co-learning opportunities.

With many women coming into the public domain for the first time, the need to support them to transition from the private to the public space cannot be over-stressed. One-off training will not suffice to help them with the transition but regular discussions, hand holding/mentorship, exposure programs, networking as relevant, etc. would be useful to ease them into their new role and space, and provide much-needed content and practical inputs. Women must be backstopped to 'own' their position.

### **4. Continued investment in social and development forums such as Amma Samuha, Credit and Savings/SHGs, etc. at the local level as enabling spaces for women's leadership:**

The study has shown that women have been involved in social, development and political activities before their election. Their group involvement would have provided them space – to access relevant information, to learn various skills, to network and access opportunities or, basically, to expand their horizon beyond the home. Women's leadership skills would have been honed from their group involvement. As many of the women elected representatives explained, their election to their post would have been because of their exposure in the community and the support from people who believe in what they could do. It is important, therefore, to continue to support the many avenues for women to get involved in the public domain. More leaders will be born out of these groups and, as the findings noted, younger women are actively involved.

### **5. A follow-up in-depth study/research:**

This exploratory study discovered that there is an implicit bias in capacity and skills assessments of elected women representatives. Some of this arises from the entrenched patriarchy in the Nepali society, which resulted in a casual implication from the surveyed group that elected women

representatives are less educated or less capable than their men counterparts in running their offices. There have been no empirical studies to prove that. It is unclear if the capacity constraints identified for elected women representatives only exist for women representatives or whether elected men representatives suffer similar constraints. This requires a separate in-depth study of both elected men and women representatives that can be informed for targeted intervention to support the elected representatives in performing their roles and function.

## ANNEX 1: Key Breakdowns of Survey Respondents

District	Frequency	Percentage
Dhanusha	21	11.1%
Nawalparasi	20	10.5%
Surkhet	20	10.5%
Kaski	20	10.5%
Dang	20	10.5%
Dhankuta	20	10.5%
Dolakha	19	10.0%
Kailali	18	9.5%
Sindhuli	17	8.9%
Rasuwa	15	7.9%

Ethnic Group	Frequency	Percentage
Hill Dalit	73	38.4%
Madhesi Dalit	16	8.4%
Hill Indigenous	33	17.4%
Madhesi Indigenous	12	6.3%
Hill Brahmin/Chhetri	51	26.8%
Madhesi Brahmin/Chhetri	1	0.5%
Madhesi Other Castes	2	1.1%
Muslim	2	1.1%

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage
Illiterate	23	12.1%
Literate	42	22.1%
Basic (Grade 1-8)	66	34.7%
Secondary (Grade 9-12)	55	28.9%
Higher Education	4	2.1%

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
21-30	34	17.9%
31-40	79	41.6%
41-50	55	28.9%
51-60	17	8.9%
61 and over	5	2.6%

## ANNEX 2: Study Locations

Province	District	Geography	Urban Municipality	Rural Municipality
1	Dhankuta	Hill	Pakhribas	Sagurigadhi
2	Dhanusha	Terai	Janakpur	
		Terai	Nagarain	
3	Sindhuli	Hill	Kamalamai	Golonjor
	Rasuwa	Mountain		Uttargaya
		Mountain		Kalika
	Dolakha	Mountain	Bhimeshwar	Kalinchok
4	Kaski	Hill	Pokhara-Lekhnath	Annapurna
5	Nawalparasi	Terai	Bardaghat	Pratappur
	Dang	Terai	Lamahi	
		Terai	Tulsipur	
6	Surkhet	Hill	Birendranagar	Barahatal
7	Kailali	Terai	Godawari	Chure

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