

Women Candidacy under Nepal's First-Past-the-Post System

*An Analysis of Elections to the House of
Representatives and Provincial Assemblies*

The background of the lower half of the cover is a vibrant, abstract splatter of paint. The colors are a mix of bright yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, and green, scattered across a white background. The splatters vary in size and density, creating a dynamic and energetic visual effect.

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Ankalal Chalaune | Chiran Manandhar

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Provincial Assemblies**

Ankalal Chalaune | Chiran Manandhar

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1. Background

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN (Maoist)], which launched an armed rebellion on February 13, 1996, entered into a 12-point agreement with seven political parties to achieve peaceful political settlement and abolish monarchy.¹ The agreement outlined that the issues of class, caste, gender, and regional differences would be addressed through a progressive state restructuring. A successful movement led by the Maoist rebels and the seven political parties resulted in the reinstatement of the dissolved parliament in 2006.² The reinstated parliament made its commitment on the issue of women equality as a matter of urgent public importance resolution on May 30, 2006.³ Aimed at achieving proportional representation, the resolution was followed by a unanimous decision to ensure one-third women's participation in all government bodies. However, public perception and evidence suggest that the political leadership is lacking in the resolve and interest for its effective implementation.⁴

To address issues including gender equality, Part 4 of the *Interim Constitution of Nepal 2063* – on Responsibilities, Directive Principles and Policies of the State – mandated the abolishment of centralized and unitary

¹ The seven parties included Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) [CPN (UML)], Nepali Congress (Democratic), Janamorcha Nepal, Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party, Nepal Sadbhawana Party and United Left Alliance

² On May 22, 2002, the then King Gyanendra dissolved the House of Representatives (HoR) under the recommendation from the then Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. The same year on October 4, 2002 King Gyanendra sacked Prime Minister Deuba only to reinstate him on June 3, 2004. King Gyanendra deposed Deuba for the second time on February 1, 2005 and imposed a direct rule. This move by the King helped to bring the rebel CPN (Maoist) and the seven parties – which had already begun peaceful protests – closer together. This provided the background for the 12-point agreement. The agreement was followed by a nationwide mass movement from April 4 to 24, 2006. As a result of the mass movement, King Gyanendra in April 24, 2006 announced that he would yield back the power to the people and reinstate the dissolved HoR.

³ The motion was tabled by the then member of HoR Bidya Devi Bhandari and supported by members Kamala Panta, Narayan Prakash Saud and Nawaraj Subedi.

⁴ Pandey, Binda. 2021. *Samantaka Pailaharu: Rajnitik Andolonko Mahilawadi Vishleshan*. Pp 11. Kathmandu: FinePrint.

structure of the State through an inclusive, democratic, and progressive restructuring. The first constitutional amendment on April 13, 2007 added a provision allowing the participation of “Madheshi, Dalit, indigenous ethnic groups [Adivasi Janajati], women, labourers, farmers, physically impaired, disadvantaged classes and disadvantaged regions in all organs of the state structure on the basis of proportional inclusion.”⁵ The Interim Constitution also stipulated that at least one-third of the candidates for the constituent assembly elections must be women.⁶ The Constitution of Nepal, adopted by the Constituent Assembly, has mandated women’s participation in at least one-third of the seats in both the federal parliament and the provincial assemblies.⁷

The percentage of women candidates in the three HoR elections of 1991, 1994 and 1999 was limited to 6 percent (See Annex Table 1). Following the adoption of the principle of proportional inclusion, Nepal has held two constituent assembly elections and two elections for the HoR and provincial assemblies. The percentage of women candidates in the two constituent assembly elections of 2008 and 2013, and the HoR elections of 2017 and 2022 under First-Past-The-Post (FPTP), remained below 11 percent (See Table 1).⁸ Similarly, the percentage of women candidates under FPTP in the two provincial assembly elections of 2017 and 2022 remained below

⁵ UNDP Nepal. 2009. *The Interim Constitution of Nepal 2063: First to Sixth Amendments*. Pp 83. Lalitpur: UNDP Nepal.

⁶ *The Interim Constitution of Nepal 2063*, article 63(5).

⁷ *The Constitution of Nepal*, articles 84(8) and 176(9).

⁸ Nepal’s electoral system uses First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) and the proportional representation (PR) methods. Under the FPTP system, the candidate receiving plurality of valid votes is elected. Since a candidate is elected through direct voting by electorates within a given constituency, it is also called a directly elected system. Under the PR system, the entire country is considered a single constituency and political parties are awarded number of seats proportional to their share of the national vote. For the HoR, only the parties securing the threshold of 3 percent or more of the total valid votes get to choose their representatives. Similarly for the provincial assemblies, each province is considered a single constituency in which the electorate from the given province cast their votes to the political parties. Assembly members are elected – proportional to the party’s share of province-wide votes – in the order of priority from a closed list of candidates submitted by

9 percent (See Table 2). Even though it is evident that there has been a slight increase in the share of women candidates since 2008, the figures are significantly lower compared to the overall proportion of women in the population.⁹ Such disparity is also against the spirit of the principle of proportional inclusion ensured by the Constitution. This kind of gender bias existing within important bodies of the state necessitated this study. The study is focused on various issues that women face and the circumstances they have to overcome to become candidates under the FPTP system.

2. Methodology

An examination of the results from the HoR and provincial assembly elections held in 2017 and 2022 revealed limited representation of women. This study was undertaken to assess the underlying reasons for this phenomenon. Specifically, the study is centered around women's candidacy under the FPTP system for the HoR and provincial assemblies. The research involved interviews with HoR and provincial assembly members, prospective women candidates across all three tiers, and representatives of political parties with the goal to comprehend the process of candidate nomination and selection, as well as the obstacles faced by women in securing candidacy for elections through the FPTP system. The study also drew additional insights from discussions with journalists, civil society representatives, and women's rights activists. The analysis encompassed the details of candidates put forward by national parties that met the HoR threshold, as well as those represented in provincial assembly assemblies following the 2017 and 2022 elections.¹⁰ The study also drew upon previously published materials to discern the nature and trends in

each party to the election commission. Each party must secure the threshold of 1.5 percent of the total valid votes in the province to be represented under the PR system.

⁹According to the 2021 census, women's share of the population in Nepal is 52 percent.

¹⁰ According to Article 52 of the *Political Parties Act 2017* a party must receive at least three percent of votes under proportional representation and win at least one seat in the HoR to secure the status of national party.

women's candidacy. Documents issued by the Election Commission and the political parties were also examined. While the study evaluated nationwide data, it involved interviews with 44 representatives from the provinces of Sudurpaschim, Bagmati, Madhesh and Koshi either in-person or via telephone. Due to time constraints, the study covered only four of the seven provinces.

Officials from various party committees play significant roles in the candidate selection process. In terms of female candidacy, it is equally important to ensure the presence of women in such committees. The study, therefore, examined the level of inclusivity in these committees. Due to time constraints, the focus was primarily on three major political parties: Nepali Congress, CPN (UML), and CPN (Maoist Centre). The study assessed the status of women's representation within the central, provincial and district committees of Nepali Congress and CPN (UML), while for the CPN (Maoist Centre), the analysis was limited to only central and provincial committees. According to the party's constitution, central and provincial committees hold executive roles, while the district committees are primarily involved in coordination efforts.¹¹

¹¹ The details were requested from the central offices of the parties. Details were made available by CPN (UML) for all districts except Dhanusha and Mahottari in Madhesh Province; Manang in Gandaki Province and Bajhang and Darchula in Sudurpaschim Province. Nepali Congress only provided information on provincial and district committee presidents who were later reached by telephone to collect other details. For CPN (Maoist Centre), details were available only on provincial and central committees. According to the office secretary, information on local and district level committees were not updated in the central office. Information on central-level members and officials of Nepali Congress were retrieved from their website at <https://www.nepalicongress.org/central-working-committee>. Similarly, information on CPN (UML)'s central committee, politburo, standing committee members and other central-level officials were obtained from their website at https://cpnuml.org/committee/central_committee. Both websites were accessed on July 4, 2023. Non-geographic committees of the parties are excluded from this study.

3. Constitutional and Legal Provisions

The Preamble of the Constitution of Nepal explicitly declares the abolition of all forms of discrimination and oppression stemming from the feudal, autocratic, centralized, and unitary system. The Constitution commits to fostering an egalitarian society based on principles of inclusion and participation, and strives to ensure economic equality, prosperity and social justice by eradicating gender and other types of discrimination. Section 3 of the Constitution outlines Fundamental Rights and Duties while Article 18 of the same section calls attention to the right to equality, ensuring that all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law, with no one being denied equal protection. Article 18(3) extends special protection, empowerment, and advancement to socially or culturally oppressed groups, including women, Dalit, Adivasi Janajati, Madheshi, Tharu, and Muslim. Article 38 of the Constitution addresses women rights with Article 38(4) safeguarding the right of women to participate in all government bodies based on principle of proportional inclusion. Similarly, Article 42 deals with social justice by guaranteeing inclusive participation of women, sexual minorities and other economically, socially, or educationally disadvantaged groups. While Article 47 of the Constitution mandates the government to establish legal arrangements within three years of its enactment, the implementation of these constitutional rights has been hindered due to the absence of necessary laws.

Article 84 under Section 8 of the Constitution outlines the formation of the HoR of the federal legislature. The HoR consists of a total of 275 members, with one representative being directly elected through the FPTP method from each of the 165 electoral constituencies across Nepal. These constituencies are formed based on demography, geographical suitability, and other distinctive characteristics. Each federal constituency is further divided into two provincial constituencies: Constituency 1 and Constituency 2. One representative from each of these subdivided constituencies is elected directly to the provincial assembly through the

FPTP system. This arrangement results in seven provincial assemblies collectively having twice the number of members as the federal HoR.

Article 269(4)(c) of the Constitution details the establishment, registration, and functioning of political parties, stipulating that “there must be a provision of such inclusive representation in its executive committees at various levels as may be reflecting the diversity of Nepal.” This provision is further expanded upon in Section 15(4) of the Political Party Act (First Amendment) 2017, which mandates that a minimum of one-third of the members within the party committees at all tiers should be women.

4. Criteria for Candidate Nomination by Political Parties

This section examines the qualifications required for candidates nominated by the national parties in the HoR and provincial assembly elections of 2022 under the FPTP system. As electoral constituencies are demographically and geographically determined, districts continue to serve as geographical boundaries for these constituencies. Political parties have established a process in which local or constituency-level committees forward candidate recommendations to district committees. Subsequently, district committees share these recommendations, along with their opinions, to provincial committees. The provincial committees then relay their recommendations and opinions to the central committees. Ultimately, the central committees make the final selections.

Nepali Congress and CPN (UML) implemented a recommendation system that involved proposing three candidates per constituency, with at least one being a woman. In contrast, CPN (Maoist Centre) directed its committees to suggest a single candidate through unanimous agreement or up to three names in alphabetical order. All three parties established criteria for favoring candidates with higher likelihood of winning elections. While Nepali Congress and CPN (UML) required the inclusion

of at least one woman among the recommended names, CPN (Maoist Centre) did not enforce such a mandate. For the local elections of 2022, Chairperson Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’ issued a special notice to lower-level committees within CPN (Maoist Centre) to nominate women candidates with stronger prospects of victory, no such discussions ensued. “Chairperson Pushpa Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’ issued a special notice to lower-level committees to nominate women candidates with greater chances of winning, but the committees did not engage in any discussions on it,” a woman leader of the party raised a question, stating, “If lower committees can ‘disobey’ instructions from the party Chairperson to select women candidates who have a better chance of winning, why would women candidates receive priority when the instruction was only to nominate and send names of three candidates to the centre through unanimous agreement without mandating the inclusion of a fixed number of women?”

Even parties, that stipulated the requirement of including the name of at least one woman in the candidate recommendations, struggled to enforce the rule. CPN (UML), for instance, directed its committees to propose three candidates for each HoR and provincial assembly constituency, with at least one being a woman. However, according to respondents in this study, only one woman candidate was unanimously recommended from one-third of the constituencies. A female party leader from Bagmati Province remarked, “There were many cases where no woman was nominated among the three recommended candidates. Contrary to their own instructions, the central leadership accepted such recommendations. Despite the directive to propose three candidates, dozens of constituencies sent only a single name. And in such cases the unanimous choice would invariably be for male candidates.” She expressed her apprehension that such practices prevented the emergence of alternative leadership, and added, “This contradicts the essence of CPN (UML)’s multi-party democracy, which advocates the presence of alternatives in all matters.” Moreover, there were occurrences where women’s names were put forward solely to fulfill the criteria. A prominent woman leader from CPN (UML) in Bara district, who entered

politics during the 1980 referendum and went on to become a member of All Nepal Women's Association in 1985, had her name recommended for candidacy multiple times since the 1991 general election. She feels that her name was included as a mere procedural formality. She recounted finding out about her recommendation through a local radio broadcast once. Instances of women's names being suggested from constituencies other than their own, where they would have a higher likelihood of winning, further underscore that such recommendations are mere formalities (See Section 8 of this report).

Nepali Congress had outlined the criteria for nominating candidates from among the active members who were popular among the public and had actively contributed to the party's success in recent local elections. CPN (UML) directed its committees to recommend candidates who had demonstrated commitment to the party policies and programs, were highly popular with greater likelihood of winning, and had actively participated in previous movements. Similarly, CPN (Maoist Centre) established criteria that gave foremost priority to individuals who had not been formerly elected but exhibited full dedication to the party, displayed discipline and loyalty within the party structure, and held influence among the public to sway votes. Second priority was allocated to those who had been elected once before and fulfilled the first criteria, while the third priority was reserved for those who had been elected multiple times in the past.

Participating in electoral politics for the first time, the Janamat Party required all potential candidates to complete a detailed questionnaire regarding their personal information. Candidates also had to make a formal commitment affirming their capability to manage campaign expenses within the boundaries outlined by the Election Commission. Meanwhile, the Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP) selected candidates from among the interested individuals with permanent residency in their respective constituencies through a primary election conducted by the electoral college comprising registered party members. The party's central committee is responsible for publishing the final list of electoral college

voters, with the timeframe ranging from 90 days to one week before the election day. The scheduling of these primary elections is also determined by the same committee.

5. Women Candidacy since 2008

During the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections, a total of 368 women and 3578 men submitted their candidacy across Nepal, competing for 240 seats under the FPTP system. The share of women candidates stood at a meagre 9 percent. Among these candidates, only 30 women candidates won – constituting merely 12 percent of the total members elected through the FPTP system (See Table 1). The then CPN (Maoist), which had championed the cause of proportional inclusion, fielded the highest number of women candidates, totaling 42, surpassing other political parties.¹² Among these, 24 women secured direct election, while Nepali Congress and Madheshi Janaadhikar Forum Nepal each saw two women candidates being elected, alongside a single woman candidate from CPN (UML) and Tarai Madhesh Loktantrik Party (See Annex Table 2).¹³

The share of women candidacy under FPTP has consistently remained below 11 percent across the two constituent elections of 2008 and 2013, and the two HoR elections of 2017 and 2022. Despite the anticipated advancement of women's leadership after the 2008 Constituent Assembly Election, the proportion of women candidates has shown a stagnation. Remarkably, the percentage of women candidates remained at 9.3 percent in both the 2008 and 2022 elections. While this figure slightly increased to 10.9 percent in the 2013 election, it experienced a subsequent decline to 7.5 percent in the 2017 election (See Table 1). A closer examination of women candidacy across both the HoR and the seven provincial assemblies

¹² Election Commission Nepal. 2009. *2008 Constituent Assembly Election Result Handbook*. Pp: 16. Kathmandu: Election Commission Nepal.

¹³ Ram Kumari Yadav, one of the 24 members elected through the FPTP system from CPN (Maoist), died following a cooking gas explosion on August 14, 2010

reveals a consistent downward trajectory. This trend is further exacerbated by a lower number of elected women candidates. A majority of respondents interviewed for this study affirmed that even when political parties do nominate women candidates, they are often limited to constituencies where the party's prospects of victory are slim. These findings are substantiated by the actual election outcomes.

Table 1: Candidacy and Results from Constituent Assembly and House of Representatives Elections under First-past-the-post

Election	Candidate			Elected	
	Total	Men	Women	Men	Women
Constituent Assembly Election 2008	3,946	3,578 (90.7%)	368 (9.3%)	210 (87.5%)	30 (12.5%)
Constituent Assembly Election 2013	6,124	5,457 (89.1%)	667 (10.9%)	230 (95.8%)	10 (4.2%)
House of Representatives Election 2017	1,925	1,781 (92.5%)	144 (7.5%)	159 (96.4%)	6 (3.6%)
House of Representatives Election 2022	2,412	2,187 (90.7%)	225 (9.3%)	156 (94.5%)	9 (5.5%)

Source: Election Commission Nepal

This study focuses on the status of women's candidacy across political parties, particularly those that met the constitutional threshold in the 2017 and 2022 elections. In these elections, CPN (Maoist Centre) had the highest representation of women candidates, constituting 6.8 percent and 17.4 percent respectively. In the 2022 elections, Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP) presented a higher percentage of women candidates, at 9.2 percent, compared to other parties. Among major parties, Nepali Congress featured 5.8 percent women candidates in the 2017 election and 5.5 percent in the 2022 election. Similarly, CPN (UML) fielded 4.9 percent women candidates in the 2017 election, a number that rose to 7.8 percent in the 2022 election (See Annex Table 5).

6. Women Candidacy for Provincial Assembly Elections under First-Past-the-Post System

The share of women candidacy for provincial assembly elections was 7.4 percent in 2017 and 8.7 percent in 2022. This shows that women candidacy is even weaker in provincial assemblies than in the HoR. Among the provinces, Karnali had the lowest number of women candidates in both the elections. On the other hand, Bagmati Province had the highest representation of women candidates with 11.4 percent in the 2017 provincial assembly elections, while Gandaki Province led with 12.3 percent in the 2022 elections. In comparison to the 2017 election, the percentage of women candidates increased slightly in both these provinces in the 2022 election. That number had almost doubled in Koshi Province. Compared to 2017, the number of women candidates in Madhesh Province also increased by 1.7 percent in 2022. However, number of women candidates in 2022 decreased compared to 2017 in Sudurpaschim and Lumbini Provinces (See Table 2).

Across the seven provincial assemblies, a total of 330 members are elected under the FPTP: 32 in Sudurpaschim, 24 in Karnali, 52 in Lumbini, 36 in Gandaki, 66 in Bagmati, 64 in Madhesh, and 56 in Koshi. The law mandates that a minimum of one-third of the total members represented in the provincial assembly from each party must be women. However, there is no specific provision in the law concerning representation under the FPTP system. Political parties utilize the Proportional Representation system to attain the mandatory one-third women's representation in the assembly. Nonetheless, achieving this representation becomes challenging for parties that exclusively field men candidates under the FPTP system.

Table 2: Candidate Details for First-Past-The-Post in the Provincial Assembly Elections of 2017 and 2022

Election	2022					2017				
	Candidacy					Candidacy				
Province	Women	Men	LGBTIQ+*	Total	Women	Men	LGBTIQ+	Total		
Sudurpaschim	13 (6.7%)	180 (93.3%)	0 (0.0%)	193	15 (8.4%)	164 (91.6%)	0 (0.0%)	179		
Karnali	3 (2.6%)	113 (97.4%)	0 (0.0%)	116	3 (2.3%)	130 (97.7%)	0 (0.0%)	133		
Lumbini	29 (5.9%)	466 (94.1%)	0 (0.0%)	495	46 (7.7%)	555 (92.3%)	0 (0.0%)	601		
Gandaki	29 (12.3%)	206 (87.7%)	0 (0.0%)	235	22 (9.3%)	215 (90.7%)	0 (0.0%)	237		
Bagmati	80 (12.0%)	588 (88.0%)	0 (0.0%)	668	72 (11.4%)	561 (88.6%)	0 (0.0%)	633		
Madhesh	74 (7.3%)	932 (92.6%)	1 (0.1%)	1007	55 (5.6%)	930 (94.4%)	0 (0.0%)	985		
Koshi	52 (10.2%)	458 (89.8%)	0 (0.0%)	510	27 (5.7%)	443 (94.3%)	0 (0.0%)	470		
Total	280 (8.7%)	2943 (91.3%)	1 (0.0%)	3224	240 (7.4%)	2998 (92.6%)	0 (0.0%)	3238		

Source: Election Commission Nepal.

* LGBTIQ+ = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and gender diverse, Intersex, Queer and +.

Parties that fail to secure at least 1.5 percent of the total votes cast are ineligible for obtaining seats via the Proportional Representation system, even if they secure seats through the FPTP system. Even if a party secures a considerable number of FPTP seats, their proportional representation seat allocation will be reduced proportionately if their vote share is lower. This scenario makes it challenging for parties to attain the mandatory one-third women's representation. An example from the Karnali provincial assembly after the 2017 election illustrates this.

The CPN (UML), CPN (Maoist Centre), Nepali Congress and Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) were the four parties being represented in the Karnali provincial assembly. The RPP received a solitary seat through the Proportional Representation system, despite not winning any seats under the FPTP system. The party chose a woman in that seat. CPN (UML), CPN (Maoist Centre) and Nepali Congress respectively secured 14, nine and one seat through the FPTP system. All 24 were men. CPN (UML), CPN (Maoist Centre) and Nepali Congress respectively secured six, four and five seats through the Proportional Representation system. To attain the mandatory one-third representation, Nepali Congress sent two women while CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist Centre) had to send women in all the seats they were allocated through the Proportional Representation system. Consequently, in the assembly consisting of 40 members, only 13 were women, all of whom were elected through the Proportional Representation system. Even with political parties' efforts to meet the legally mandated one-third women's representation using proportional representation seats, the overall representation of women in the provincial assembly remained limited to 32.5 percent. A similar scenario could arise if more men are elected as independent candidates through the FPTP system. Hence, electing women through the FPTP system becomes crucial to ensure their constitutionally mandated minimum representation at 33 percent.

None of the parties represented in the Karnali provincial assembly fielded women candidates for the FPTP system during the 2022 election. Among

the parties represented in the Sudurpaschim provincial assembly, CPN (UML) nominated one woman candidate, while Nagarik Unmukti Party picked three women candidates. None of these women candidates were elected. Similarly, among the ten parties represented in the Lumbini provincial assembly, CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist Centre) nominated two women candidates each, Nagarik Unmukti Party had three, and Janata Samajwadi Party (JSP) picked one woman candidate for the FPTP system. The situation was similar in other provinces. Nepali Congress did not nominate a single woman candidate in six of the seven provinces, apart from Bagmati Province, where they fielded five women candidates (See Annex Table 4).

An examination of data from all seven provinces shows that a total of 1094 independent candidates contested the 2022 provincial assembly elections through the FPTP system. Among them, 996 were men and 98 were women. 12 independent candidates, including one woman, got elected in these elections. Madhesh Province had the highest number of independent candidates, out of which one woman and five men candidates got elected. Similarly, three independent male candidates got elected in Lumbini Province while one independent candidate each was elected in Gandaki, Karnali and Sudurpaschim Province (See Annex Table 4). Madhesh Province had the highest number of independent candidates (547), whereas Karnali had the lowest (16). Of the total candidates fielded by political parties, 1192 were men and 78 were women (See Annex Table 4). Even within the category of independent candidates, the number of men was far higher than that of women. The number of independent women candidates is, however, slightly higher than the number of women nominated by political parties under the FPTP system. Some candidates shared their decision to run as independents after failing to secure candidacy from their respective parties. Moreover, the practice of political parties nominating “dummy candidates” to gain additional advantages, such as vehicle permits and extra representatives for polling

and vote counting, was also highlighted as a factor contributing to the elevated count of independent candidates.

Among the overall 2,363 candidates for the FPTP system, consisting of both independent and political party candidates, only 176 (7.4%) were women. Out of the 330 provincial assembly members elected through the FPTP system across seven provinces, 316 (95.8%) were men while 14 (4.2%) were women. This highlights the significant disparity in the number of men and women candidates.

7. Reasons for Low Number of Women Candidates

Several factors contribute to the nomination and election of a low number of women candidates under Nepal's FPTP electoral system. These include patriarchal party structures and mindsets, questions about the scope of women's political influence, higher burdens of informal meetings and auxiliary responsibilities on women, opposition from influential men leaders, implications of individual marital status, and the rising influence of money in politics, which are discussed here.

7.1 Patriarchy and Non-Inclusive Party Structures

Patriarchal party structure and attitudes are the main reasons for the low representation of women in politics. These structures reinforce gender stereotypes and create barriers for women who wish to participate in active politics.¹⁴ Important decision-making roles in influential party committees are mostly held by men. These committee members are more likely to rise as leaders and engage in various activities that help them establish their own political identity among the public. This creates a cycle where men

¹⁴ Tamang, Seira, Sumina Rai Karki, Amol Acharya and Srijana Nepal. 2022. *Beyond "Capacity": Gendered Election Processes, Networks, and Informality in Local Governments in Nepal-Policy Note*. Kathmandu: Australian AID and The Asia Foundation.

dominate leadership positions, and women are left behind or relegated to supporting roles. Many of the women interviewed for this study shared their experiences of being ignored by party leaders in the decision-making process and struggles of trying to have their voices heard within their own party. A woman leader from Nepali Congress in Sudurpaschim Province said, “There is a prevailing attitude within political parties that gives the impression of men leaders assigning positions to women leaders.”

Being entrusted with the responsibility over a geographical region is considered crucial for establishing oneself as a leader in politics.¹⁵ The *Political Party Act 2017* mandates a minimum of one-third women’s representation across all levels of political party committees. However, most political parties have confined women to the role of committee members. An examination of the division of responsibilities indicates that higher-ranking officials within committees have a greater likelihood of establishing themselves as leaders compared to other members. Due to the large number of members on the committees, it is not feasible to hold meetings all the time, yet decisions must be taken daily. There is a growing practice where senior committee officials make important decisions on their own, using meetings only to endorse those decisions. Senior committee officials also get opportunities to appear as guests in various programs and make public speeches, which helps them build the image of a leader among the public.

A district-level leader from Madhesh Province raised concerns about discriminatory behaviors towards women even during public events at settlement, local and district levels. “Forget about appointing women as office bearers, junior men leaders who hold no responsibilities are invited on stage during formal functions, but even senior women leaders who hold responsibilities are not acknowledged in these occasions. How can women establish their identity as leaders under such circumstances?” the

¹⁵ This refers to the leadership responsibility over a defined region, such as ward committees, local-level committees, district committees and provincial committees.

leader questioned. A number of respondents in Madhesh Province echoed similar sentiments. Speaking of instances where men leaders do not accept women as equals, a CPN (UML) woman leader remarked:

“To exclude women from senior positions in party committees is to deprive women of the opportunities to establish themselves as leaders in specific geographical regions. Leaders simply have not been able to embrace women’s leadership within political parties. So how would they provide women opportunities to demonstrate their leadership skills among the public by choosing them as candidates? This prevailing attitude within the party leadership has diminished women’s prospects of being nominated as candidates under the FPTP system.”

With men dominating all high-ranking committee positions at different levels, women’s representation is dismal. Among CPN (UML)’s district committee chairpersons and Nepali Congress’s district presidents, there isn’t a single woman representative. Under its constitution, Nepali Congress’s district working committees consist of one president, two vice-presidents, two secretaries, two joint-secretaries, and one treasurer, amounting to a total of 616 office bearers across all 77 districts. Out of these 616 officials, only 24 are women. Likewise, CPN (UML)’s district committees consist of five members each, including one chairperson, one vice-chairperson, one secretary and two under-secretaries. This amounts to a total of 385 office bearers across 77 districts. Among them, none of the presidents and secretaries is a woman. Out of the 385 officials only 36 are women, including 30 under-secretaries and six are vice-chairs (See Annex Table 6 and 9).

Each provincial committee of Nepali Congress consists of nine members, including one president, two vice-presidents, two general secretaries, three joint general secretaries, and one treasurer, which totals to 63 office bearers across seven provinces. Only nine out of the 63 officials are women. Among the provincial committee presidents and general secretaries, there isn’t a

single woman. Only one vice-president and one treasurer are women while the remaining seven women hold positions as joint general secretaries. Similarly, each provincial committee of CPN (UML) comprises five members, including one chairperson, one vice-chairperson, one secretary, and two under-secretaries, which sums up to 35 office bearers across seven provinces. Out of these 35 officials, only seven – all under-secretaries – are women. There are no women in any other position. Likewise, each provincial committee of CPN (Maoist Centre) consists of nine members, comprising one chairperson, three vice-chairpersons, two secretaries, two joint-secretaries, and one treasurer, amounting to 63 office bearers across seven provinces. Only eight out of these 63 officials are women. Among them, two chairpersons, one vice-chairperson, three joint secretaries and two treasurers are women, while there are no women secretaries (See Annex Table 7, 10 and 12).

Among the 13 central-level office bearers from Nepali Congress, there is only one woman holding the position of a joint general secretary. There are eight joint general secretaries among these 13 officials, and the remaining positions consist of one president, two vice-presidents, and two general secretaries, all of whom are men. CPN (UML) has 18 central-level office bearers with one chairperson, one senior vice-chairperson, six vice-chairpersons, one general secretary, six secretaries and three under general secretaries. Among them, only one vice-chairperson and one secretary are women. Among CPN (Maoist Centre)'s 22 central-level office bearers, only one vice-chairperson is a woman. The remaining positions, including one chairperson, one senior vice-chairperson, two vice-chairpersons, one general secretary, six under general secretaries, nine secretaries, and one treasurer, are all held by men (See Annex Table 8, 11 and 13).

Women respondents interviewed for this study cited critical awareness and the ability to challenge leadership weaknesses, as well as the capacity to express voices independently, as qualities of competent leadership. But respondents said such “competent” women were often targeted and excluded

by the male leadership. Most women respondents emphasized how men prevented women from assuming important party roles and participating in elections, driven by fears about women's progress bypassing their own. A former Deputy Mayor from Saptari district used to be critical of the district leadership of her party, Loktantrik Samajwadi Party. She alleged that the district leadership deliberately withheld information from her regarding the program to gather names of potential candidates because of her earlier criticisms of party leaders. She only discovered later that the central-level party leaders had arrived and initiated the process for collecting names of potential candidates. When she visited the registration centre and tried to submit her name, she was stopped. Similarly, a woman leader of Parsa district claimed that several attempts were made to exclude her from the candidate list under the Proportional Representation system because of her criticisms of the then Chief Minister of Madhesh Province and a member of federal parliament. They stopped inviting her to party meetings despite being a central-committee member of her party, JSP. She expressed, "I was commended for my work as Deputy Mayor of the municipality. The public had great trust in me. The electoral momentum was growing in my favor. But if I must face obstacles in securing a nomination for the provincial assembly under the Proportional Representation system, just because I voiced well-intentioned criticism of leadership's wrong steps, how can I hope for an opportunity under the FPTP system?" Such attitudes from the leadership have negatively impacted women's chances.

Another aspect contributing to the underrepresentation of women pertains to their limited access in candidacy selection. Women leaders' experiences indicate that the minimal presence of women at decision-making levels results in weak access and limited lobbying for them. All the political leaders interviewed for this study concurred that a higher representation of women with a better understanding of gender perspectives and concepts in various party committees would facilitate improved decisions that favor women. A central member of CPN (Maoist Centre) remarked, "Most political parties lack women's representation in their candidate

nomination committees. Even the few women present in such committees often demonstrate patriarchal thinking when it comes to gender issues. As a result, there is a lack of goodwill for women and a lack of belief that they can secure victories in FPTP elections.” Nepali Congress, CPN (UML), CPN (Maoist Centre), and JSP had scant women members in their candidate nomination committees. Party leaders revealed that the limited number of women in these committees struggled to strongly advocate women candidates recommended by lower committees for nomination under the FPTP system.

Party leaders acknowledged that numbers played a role in lobbying efforts during candidate nomination process. They highlighted how, for instance, when one woman expressed interest in candidacy from a constituency, there would be ten men competing for the same position. They argued that the committee’s male majority would unite to oppose the nomination of women candidates, asserting that women would not win the elections, thus influencing the leadership’s decision-making. A central member of Nepali Congress, who was elected from Mahottari district under the proportional representation system in the 2008 elections and through the FPTP system in the 2017 elections, had a similar experience in the 2022 HoR election:

“My name was recommended by all the lower-level party committees as a candidate for Mahottari-3 constituency during the 2022 HoR elections. However, the district-level leaders strongly lobbied against my nomination with party President Sher Bahadur Deuba. On the final day of nominations, since the morning, I was trying to contact the leaders who were part of the candidate nomination taskforce. When no one answered my calls, I sensed an unfavorable turn of events. As a central member of the party and a two-time candidate from the same constituency before, I expected them to at least consult with me, even if they decided against my nomination. Supporters of various candidates aspiring for nomination were bustling around the place where leaders were holding the meeting to

finalize the selection. How could I approach the leader who was not picking up my phone? I had heard late-night rumors that Loktantrik Samajwadi Party leader Sarat Singh Bhandari would be nominated on behalf of the five-party alliance in my constituency. Those rumors turned out to be true. There were instances where male aspirants, unlikely to secure the nomination under normal circumstances, managed to snatch it through overnight ‘lobbying’ with the party leadership. But going to the party leader’s house and pleading for the candidacy wasn’t a viable option for me.”

The name of a woman, who was the central member of CPN (Maoist Centre), was unanimously recommended from the Sunsari-2 constituency in Koshi Province for the 2022 HoR elections. However, she couldn’t secure the nomination due to limited access within the candidate nomination committee. Having been elected through the Proportional Representation system in the 2017 HoR elections, she had also served as a state minister in the federal government. Having previously been elected through the Proportional Representation system once, she said she had planned to contest the 2022 HoR elections directly under the FPTP system. But the constituency from which she claimed her candidacy, where her party, CPN (Maoist Centre), held a relatively stronger organizational influence, was allocated to the Nepali Congress candidate as part of the electoral alliance. She failed to secure the nomination due to the absence of members who could strongly advocate for women candidates in the nomination process. A woman leader from CPN (Maoist Centre) in Bagmati Province highlighted that having women in leadership roles would facilitate effective lobbying but noted that even the highest-ranking women leaders were heavily influenced by patriarchal thinking. Nonetheless, having women in top positions allowed women to access their leaders at any time of the day while similar interactions with male leaders could raise unfair questions about women’s character. Leaders from the Dalit community emphasized that lobbying for Dalit women candidates with top leadership was an even greater challenge.

7.2 Questions about Women's Sphere of Political Influence

Questions are raised when a woman, who has established herself among the public through politics in her birthplace, gets married elsewhere and strives to continue pursuing politics in that same place. Even in the place to which a woman relocates after marriage, she is regarded as too new a face to be given important political positions. According to a CPN (UML) leader, even the central-level leadership harbors the notion that a woman doesn't belong to the place of her own birth, where she has dedicated her entire life to establishing herself in politics, after getting married. Recalling an incident during the candidate nomination process before the 2013 Constituent Assembly election, she said:

“The party leadership asked me names of potential women candidates. I recommended one woman who was not only born and raised in the Kathmandu-2 constituency but had also actively participated in student politics as well as the regular party politics. After I suggested her name, the leadership asked me where she got married. In contrast, a man in the same position doesn't face any issue being accepted as the leader of the constituency, even if he has been living outside for many years. A woman's constituency is essentially the place where she has worked to establish herself politically.”

A woman leader born in Mahottari got married in Parsa district. She was an active participant in the Madhesh movement at different times and had also provided support to other protestors. She left her teaching profession to enter active politics when Dr. Baburam Bhattarai formed the Naya Shakti Party. Following subsequent party mergers, she became a central member of Janata Samajwadi Party, and currently of Nepal Samajwadi Party. Despite being married in Parsa, she made Mahottari, the place of her birth, her political constituency. She sought to become the mayor of a local unit in Mahottari for the 2022 local elections and developed plans to enhance education, health, and agriculture sectors to strengthen

her mayoral bid. While others were proposing “smart cities,” she tried to introduce discussions about “smart agriculture.” But when she went to file her candidacy, she was stopped on grounds of her marriage to a different location, supposedly making her bid ineligible. She had to seek assistance from the police to register her nomination. A Nepali Congress woman leader born in Dhanusha revealed that she encountered similar challenges and lack of cooperation when she tried to be involved in politics in Mahottari after her marriage, with people accusing her of “usurping other people’s opportunities.”

7.3 Practice of Repeated Candidacy from Same Constituency

Repeated success in elections under the FPTP system has been established as a benchmark to prove competence and influence of political leaders. Several prominent leaders from Nepali Congress and CPN (UML) have contested from the same constituency in every election since the 1992 parliamentary election. In these constituencies where the same male candidate contests in every election, there are limited opportunities left for aspiring women. The conversation about candidate selection often begins with the presumption that women don’t win elections, which reduces women’s chances of contesting multiple times in the same constituency.

Political party leadership is influenced by the mindset that men win elections, and the incumbents will win again. This perception seems to have influenced their formulation of candidate nomination standards. For example, CPN (UML)’s candidate nomination procedures and standards for the FPTP system in the 2022 HoR and provincial assembly elections stated: “The argument against repeated candidates for the FPTP system is not practical. Alongside the party’s mass popularity, factors like electoral strategies, necessity and public appeal are also considered. Unlike in indirect elections like proportional representation, not all voters under the FPTP system have specific affiliations and identities. Voters who

can be influenced play a crucial role in the FPTP elections. Therefore, apart from other considerations, those with the highest probability of winning are nominated. The matter is also tied to electoral strategies and calculations.” A CPN (UML) woman leader pointed out how this provision on the argument against repeated candidate not being logical and pragmatic – and the argument in favor of nominating anyone who can win, has disproportionately favored men. Respondents interviewed for this study concurred with the need for a legal provision limiting candidates to no more than two consecutive nominations.

7.4 Rising Influence of Money in Politics

Money is necessary for carrying out regular political activities, securing candidacy in elections and financing election campaigns. Despite the election commission’s ceiling on spending, candidates appear to exceed the limit significantly.¹⁶ Candidates who can spend significant amounts of money in elections are considered more formidable. In comparison to men, women tend to have lesser access to power, networks, and economic resources. This diminishes their likelihood of being chosen as candidate by the parties.¹⁷ A woman leader from CPN (Maoist Centre) in Bagmati Province highlighted how women are discouraged from participating in direct elections due to the high cost of these elections, which are seen as beyond women’s capacity to manage. She noted that the top leadership of parties acted in this manner. Most respondents in Madhesh Province mentioned that their families’ stronger financial situation made it easier

¹⁶ Democracy Resource Center Nepal. 2022. *Observation of Local Elections 2022*. Lalitpur: Democracy Resource Center Nepal. Accessed on July 5, 2023. <https://www.democracyresource.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Nepal-Local-Election-Observation-Report-Nepali-July-2022-1.pdf-1.pdf>

¹⁷ Martin Chautari. 2011. Rajnitik Vitta ra Nagarik Adhikar. *Jankari Patra* Volume 6, April. Accessed on July 5, 2023. https://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/mcpb/pdf/MC_PolicyBrief_06_NEP.pdf

for them to pursue politics. They expressed that this had enabled them to assert their candidacy in both local and the FPTP elections.

Political leaders shared that money was spent under various pretexts, ranging from mobilizing to create a favorable campaign environment to securing candidacies. A woman leader from Loktantrik Samajwadi Party, aspiring to become a Deputy Mayor candidate in Birgunj Metropolitan City, disclosed that the party had asked for financial contribution to support the ‘Madhesh Dignity March,’ an event organized by the party in Birgunj a month prior to the election. A district-level leader of the party asked her for a “financial donation to ensure the success of the program as the prospective candidate for Deputy Mayor.” She revealed that she provided NPR 150,000 to cover the cost of 150 kilograms of goat meat. Another central-level woman leader from Nepal Samajwadi Party also recounted similar experiences of being asked by various parties to contest parliamentary election in exchange for financial contribution. Reflecting on her experience during the 2022 local elections, she stated, “Leaders from all levels, starting with the ward committee chairperson, seek money from aspiring candidates on various grounds. We have faced situations where, if you don’t have money to pay the leaders, no other qualifications matter. This practice is more deeply ingrained in older parties. They try to prevent women candidates from contesting elections by pointing to its high costs. The leadership holds the perception that women can’t manage such expenses.” A central-level woman leader of Janata Samajwadi Party echoed a similar sentiment:

“From my experience of the most recent elections, a candidate spends around 30 to 40 million rupees for a provincial assembly seat in the FPTP system. There was a leader in our party who had been providing financial support for the operation of the party office in Parsa for a long time. The party had initially decided to nominate him as a candidate for the HoR election through the FPTP system. His candidacy had already been projected through various

activities. But in the end, someone else who was willing to make a bigger financial contribution received the approval and received the nomination. How can we, as women, expect to contest direct elections when seats are put up for open auction, and people are competing in terms of money? Therefore, I expressed my interest in the Proportional Representation system. All party committees involved in the process nominated me as their top choice under this system. My name remained as the first choice in the closed list of candidates that the party prepared to submit to the Election Commission. But while actually submitting the final list, another individual who had paid money replaced me as the party's top choice candidate. The leadership could not openly ask for money from me. I also don't have enough money to compete for an election seat. As a result, I wasn't elected because my name was pushed back in the closed list of candidates for the Proportional Representation system. How can I expect to contest a direct election under these circumstances? Even families are reluctant to have women members contest such elections by spending money. Despite all my struggles in politics and my investment in building the party organization, my hopes of contesting direct elections are gradually dying due to the increasing influence of money.”

The secretary of the working committee in Parsa district from Janata Samajvadi Party rejected allegations of trading election seats for money. However, the secretary acknowledged that the candidate was required to pay a levy to the party for membership renewal of all organized party members within the constituency. The secretary confirmed that the candidate had paid NPR 250,000 in total for 5,000 members, at the rate of NPR 50 per member.

Even after securing nomination, attracting voters through campaign activities costs a significant sum of money. This drives up the overall costs of elections. Women who lack access to resources, do not have the privilege

of contesting elections by spending large amounts of money. The district in-charge from Janamat Party in Saptari district claimed that the party had prioritized women candidates for both the HoR and provincial assembly elections. Many women were approached to contest in both these elections. However, since the party was newly established, most politically active women had already contested in local elections held in April 2022. The expenses incurred during the local elections had already exhausted them financially. The financial burden deterred them from contesting again for the HoR and provincial assembly elections, which would involve higher expenditures.

Women leaders highlighted that even in constituencies where securing financial resources was more feasible, women candidates faced a lower level of trust compared to men. They noted that industrialists and businesspersons were less willing to put their weight behind women candidates. Women leaders further contended that interest groups hesitated to back women candidates fearing that they might not fulfill their interests after being elected to executive roles. According to women leaders, some interest groups not only withheld financial support for women candidates but were also actively involved in organized efforts to sabotage women's chances of nomination by propagating media narratives that women candidates would lose elections and lobbied influential party leaders on the issue.

7.5 Limited Access to Informal Meetings and Burdens of Multiple Responsibilities on Women

Informal meetings and discussions hold pivotal roles in political decision-making. Political leaders have found these engagements to be especially significant during the candidate nomination process. However, due to traditional biases, discriminatory attitudes, and a lack of cooperation, women face challenges to participate in many of these informal meetings. Nearly every respondent interviewed for this study pointed that women

were dissuaded by their families from entering politics due to its demands of constant travel, regular meetings, and an unpredictable schedule. Women representatives shared their experiences of having to manage household chores without sufficient family support, leading to missed opportunities and an inability to fully commit to politics. In contrast, men face no such restrictions and are readily available anytime, anywhere, for informal meetings with various parties to secure their nomination. Important discussions involving pledges and negotiations occur informally. But unlike men, it's difficult for women to participate in such informal meetings. A woman leader from CPN (Maoist Centre) in Sudurpaschim Province said on this matter:

“Unlike men, women can’t dedicate their entire day to political activities. Women are not able to participate in many informal meetings which make important decisions. On the other hand, household chores are seldom shared in the family. Only after fulfilling these responsibilities can a woman turn her attention to politics. If a woman stays in informal meetings beyond a certain time of day, society issues her the ‘certificate of bad character’. Consequently, women are deprived of candidacy opportunities even when they arise.”

7.6 Perception of Electoral System

The perception that the Proportional Representation system is exclusively designed for women leads to them being discouraged to contest elections under the FPTP system. This system intends to ensure the representation of women from oppressed castes, region and class, gender and sexual minorities, as well as men. However, a prevailing misconception, even among several male leaders of political parties, is that the Proportional Representation is supposed to secure at least 33 percent of women representation. A leader of the CPN (Maoist Centre) alleged that there has

been an effort to forcefully establish the narrative that all FPTP seats were intended exclusively for male candidates. Taking this into consideration, members of the HoR registered a resolution on matter of urgent public importance on August 1, 2022 calling to ensure proportional inclusion among candidates for the 2022 November elections under the FPTP system.¹⁸ The reason for debating the resolution was stated as follows:

“... Article 38(4) of the Constitution of Nepal mandates the inclusion of women in all government bodies based on the principle of proportional inclusion. The intent of this provision is to ensure proportional inclusion of both men and women in either of the FPTP and the Proportional Representation systems adopted by Nepal’s mixed electoral system for the elections to the federal parliament and provincial assemblies. However, the outcomes from the 2022 elections reveal a pattern in candidate nomination giving the impression that the FPTP elections were solely reserved for men and Proportional Representation elections exclusively for women. This resulted even in discrimination against men who could have been elected through the Proportional Representation system.

Considering this past reality, it is imperative to ensure equality of women candidates under the FPTP elections.

... In the ongoing context where the Election Commission is engaging with the stakeholders to create a consolidated draft of amendments to the current Election Act, this resolution on matter of urgent public importance is registered with the recognition that

¹⁸ The resolution was proposed by Amrita Thapa and seconded by Laxmi Pariyar, Laxmi Kumari Chaudhary, Chanda Chaudhary, Rangamati Shahi, Bina Budhathoki, Lila Devi Sitaula, Rekha Sharma, Yashoda Gurung Subedi, Renuka Gurung, Pramila Rai and Parbati Kumari Bhujel. The resolution called to ensure 50% women candidacy at the local level (mayor/chairperson, deputy mayor/vice-chair, ward chair and the chief and deputy chief of district coordination committees), and in cases where it wasn’t possible to nominate Dalit women candidates at the ward level, then women from other marginalized or minority groups would be nominated by extending the candidate nomination to the following day.

facilitating a parliamentary discussion on this topic and coming up with recommendations would be helpful for the Commission. The resolution's aim is therefore to guide the government in undertaking the actions outlined below to facilitate the necessary legislative process. While nominating candidates under the FPTP system for federal parliament's HoR and provincial assembly elections, it must be mandatory for all political parties to ensure women's representation proportional to their population share.”

Similarly, Binda Pandey, a CPN (UML) member of the HoR, also filed a Calling Attention Motion to address the issue of creating laws, as per Article 34(4) of the Constitution of Nepal, to guarantee the proportional participation of women in the November 2022 provincial assembly and federal parliament elections. Both resolutions were deliberated in parliament on August 9, 2022.

Article 47 of the Constitution of Nepal mandates the legislation of all necessary laws for the implementation of Fundamental Rights within three years from the date of commencement of the Constitution. However, even after seven years since the promulgation of the Constitution, the government has not shown any urgency in formulating these laws. Section 17 (4) of the *Local Level Elections Act 2017* provides that for the position of chairperson/mayor and vice-chairperson/deputy mayor in rural municipalities and municipalities, at least one of the two candidates must be a woman. However, political parties did not adhere to this provision under the pretext of coalition, resulting in the loss of 159 seats for women in the 2022 local elections.¹⁹ Despite being an independent constitutional body, the Election Commission could not force the political parties to abide by the legal and constitutional provisions. Although the Commission instructed parties to ensure one-third women's representation in FPTP

¹⁹ Based on the evidence provided in the resolution filed by the then HoR member Binda Pandey, and discussed on August 9, 2022

candidate nominations for the November 2022 HoR and provincial assembly elections, it failed to enforce its own directives.

Women leaders from Nepali Congress, CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist Centre) visited the Election Commission of Nepal's office to draw attention of the officials to ensure the application of proportional inclusion, as per Article 38 (4) of the Constitution, while nominating FPTP candidates. A leader who was present in the meeting explained how the officials of the Election Commission pointed to the pressure from the top leadership of political parties for the lack of enforcement of the instructions and urged the woman leaders to press their leaders instead. The woman leader further added, "Implementing the constitutional order is both the right and the duty of a constitutional commission, but the Election Commission stepped away from its own constitutional duty." The political parties also demonstrated a lack of responsibility towards the Constitution."

The Election Commission tends to focus solely on the constitutional requirement of having at least 33 percent women in the parliament, while overlooking their right to proportional inclusion as guaranteed by Nepal's constitutionally protected Fundamental Rights. As per the Constitution, population is the fundamental basis for proportional inclusion, the representation of women in government bodies must therefore be ensured accordingly. However, the 2023 bill to amend and consolidate laws related to elections, drafted and submitted to the government by the Election Commission, falls short of ensuring women's proportional inclusion. The draft bill includes a provision that mandates political parties to ensure a minimum of 33 percent women's representation, regardless of the number of constituencies the parties choose to contest, when nominating candidates for the FPTP system in the HoR and provincial assembly elections.²⁰

²⁰ Section 74 of the draft bill to amend and consolidate election-related laws submitted by the Election Commission of Nepal

8. An Unacknowledged Reality

Most of the respondents of this study argued that political parties prioritized chances of winning over candidates' gender. They pointed to the prevailing perception among party leaders that women are less likely to win as a reason for not selecting them. Respondents claimed that party leadership often holds the belief that women lack essential qualities for winning elections, such as familiarity with electoral strategies, the ability to secure and manage financial resources, and competence in informal engagement as well as access and mobilization of government resources like civil employees, police, and the military. Respondent leaders alleged that women were primarily nominated in constituencies where their chances of victory were slim. This claim is substantiated by evidence discussed in previous sections (See Sections 5 and 6 of this report). Notably, women who triumphed in the 2022 HoR and provincial assembly elections through the FPTP system helped challenge the notion that women cannot win elections. Representative examples include Rekha Sharma of CPN (Maoist Centre) from Dang in Lumbini Province and Sita Gurung of Nepali Congress from Terhathum in Koshi Province elected to the HoR, and Surita Kumari Sah elected to the provincial assembly in Madhesh Province.

Rekha Sharma contested against Shankar Pokharel, General Secretary of CPN (UML), and former Chief Minister of Lumbini Province. Pokharel was credited with relocating the capital of Lumbini Province from Butwal to Dang and was projected within his party as a potential future Prime Minister. Some CPN (Maoist Centre) leaders noted that while Rekha Sharma was claiming her candidacy from Dang district, there was reluctance within the party due to her marriage in a different district. Different scenarios were discussed within the party while assessing potential election results. Anticipating an unfavorable election outcome for the party, other potential male candidates eventually withdrew their claims. Only then was Rekha Sharma's nomination confirmed. CPN (Maoist Centre) leaders interviewed for this study highlighted how Sharma had asserted her candidacy through the FPTP system without fearing defeat

and secured victory against all odds. Similarly, Sita Gurung defeated CPN (UML)'s Bijay Subba, Chairperson of the party's Central Election Commission, who had previously won multiple HoR elections. Surita Kumari Sah, who was previously elected to both the constituent assembly as well as the provincial assembly, claimed her candidacy from Loktantrik Samajwadi Party in the 2022 provincial assembly elections. She accused top party leaders, including Mahantha Thakur, Rajendra Mahato, and Sarat Singh Bhandari, of depriving her of the nomination, telling her "you would lose." Denied candidature by the party, she contested as an independent and won the election. These instances challenge the prejudice, traditional bias, and rejection exhibited by Nepal's political parties against women during candidate selection for elections under the FPTP system.

9. Conclusion

Adopted after the People's Movement of 2006, The *Interim Constitution of Nepal 2063* embraced proportional inclusion. The Constitution of Nepal, promulgated by the Constituent Assembly, ensured the participation of at least one-third women in Nepal's elected bodies. Political parties utilize the Proportional Representation system to attain the mandatory representation of women. The number of women elected through the FPTP system is dismal. With the Constitution adopting the principle of proportional inclusion, women's participation in all structures ought to be guaranteed in proportion to their population. However, the leadership of political parties hasn't taken any steps to ensure more than one-third women's representation in the HoR and the provincial assemblies.

Despite having led for change multiple times in the past, the party structure and leadership mindset remain patriarchal. This attitude has become the main obstacle for the development of women leadership. Voters have endorsed women's leadership by electing them at different levels, but the influential male leaders are yet to accept women's leadership in their own parties. As a result, the numerical representation of women as office

bearers in federal, provincial, and local-level party committees remains extremely low. There are allegations that even the limited number of women in party structures lack a clear understanding of gender-related concepts and gender bias. People need leadership opportunities from political parties to establish their identity in a constituency before becoming viable candidates for elections under the FPTP system. Parties have failed to recognize women's leadership and have been unsuccessful in providing a conducive environment to them for establishing political identity within a constituency. On the other hand, women are evaluated based not on their performance but on personal issues like marital status during candidate selection. Men have utilized a strategy to marginalize women from the electoral competition by disconnecting them from the political arena. There should be clear guidelines for evaluating party responsibilities. A woman's political activities should align with the constituency where she can contest elections.

The male-dominated candidate selection committees have not only diminished women's access but also resulted in the absence of advocates for women candidates during elections. Political parties' selection criteria itself is biased against women. Even parties with mandatory women representation provisions failed to enforce them. This exclusion of women starts right from the candidate recommendation process. Parties must commit to implementing their own candidate recommendation standards.

Women engaged in politics often face a lack of support in their community roles from their families. Instead, they become targets of society's discriminatory attitude against women. This prevents them from engaging in important informal activities during the candidate nomination process. Consequently, they are denied opportunities for candidacy nominations.

Control over financial resources increases access to power and enhances social standing. Unfortunately, women lack significant control over economic resources in Nepal. The expenses linked to election-related activities have seen a sharp increase. Money plays a pivotal role in the

contest for power, starting from the candidate selection stage. The prevalent belief that women cannot manage high costs of FPTP elections often leads to their exclusion from candidacy recommendations.

As an autonomous constitutional body, the Election Commission should have the authority to compel both the government and political parties to uphold Fundamental Rights. However, the experiences from the 2017 and 2022 HoR and provincial assembly elections reveal that the Commission failed in execution of its constitutional responsibilities and duties.

The Constitution of Nepal adopted the principle of proportional inclusion and provided the basis for ensuring proportional representation of women in all government bodies, protecting it under the fundamental rights. Therefore, to abide by the fundamental rights protected by the Constitution, political parties need to enact laws ensuring at least 50 percent of women candidates in elections under the FPTP system. It is necessary for political parties to shift their practice of electing women only through the Proportional Representation system and ensuring adequate women's participation in elections under the FPTP system as well. This change in practice will help to establish the notion that women can be elected through the FPTP system, and that the Proportional Representation system is also designed for men. Additionally, the practice of the same person contesting elections for many years and remaining in the leadership position without viable alternatives cannot be considered democratic. Therefore, introducing a provision limiting individuals to a maximum of two consecutive terms in a specific electoral system is advisable.

Members of the federal parliament must consider these matters while deliberating the election-related bill. Following the HoR Rules, the women's coordination committee should collaborate to formulate legislation on women's participation, aligning it with the Constitution and seeking consensus from all parties and parliament members.

Annexes

Table 1: Women's Candidacy and Representation in House of Representatives Elections of 1991, 1994 and 1999

Election Year	1991			1994			1999		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Candi-date	1265 (94%)	80 (6%)	1345 (100%)	1356 (94%)	86 (6%)	1442 (100%)	2095 (94%)	143 (6%)	2238 (100%)
Elected	198 (97%)	7 (3%)	205 (100%)	198 (97%)	7 (3%)	205 (100%)	193 (94%)	12 (6%)	205 (100%)

Source: Women's Caucus, Constituent Assembly Secretariat, Nepal Law Society and International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). 2011. *Women members of the Constituent Assembly: A study on the contribution of women in the constitution making of Nepal*. Page 47.

Table 2: Political Party-wise Result under First-Past-the-Post in Constituent Assembly Election 2008

S. No.	Political Party	Elected		Total
		Women	Men	
1	CPN (Maoist)	23	97	120
2	Nepali Congress	2	35	37
3	CPN (UML)	1	32	33
4	Madheshi Janaadhikar Forum Nepal	2	28	30
5	Terai Madhesh Loktantrik Party Nepal	1	8	9
6	Nepal Sadbhawana Party	0	4	4
7	Janamorcha Nepal	0	2	2
8	Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party	0	2	2
9	Rashtriya Janamorcha	0	1	1
10	Independent	0	2	2
Total		29	211	240

Source: Election Commission Nepal.

**Table 3: Political Party-wise Result under First-Past-the-Post in
Constituent Assembly Election 2013**

S. No.	Political Party	Elected		Total
		Women	Men	
1	Nepali Congress	6	99	105
2	CPN (UML)	3	88	91
3	CPN (Unified Maoist)	1	25	26
4	Madheshi Janadhikar Forum Nepal (Loktantrik)	0	4	4
5	Terai Madhesh Loktantrik Party Nepal	0	4	4
6	Rashtriya Prajatantra Party	0	3	3
7	Madheshi Janaadhikar Forum, Nepal	0	2	2
8	Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party	0	1	1
10	Nepal Sadbhawana Party	0	1	1
10	Tarai Madhesh Sadbhawana Party Nepal	0	1	1
11	Independent	0	2	2
Total		10	230	240

Table 4: List of Candidates under First-Past-the-Post in Provincial Assembly Election 2022 (Candidacy and results from provincial assemblies only)

Province (Total Seats in FPTP)	Political Party/Independent	Candidacy			Elected	
		Men (%)	Women (%)	Total	Men	Women
Sudurpaschim (32)	Nepali Congress	18 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	18	12	0
	CPN (UML)	29 (96.7%)	1 (3.3%)	30	3	0
	CPN (Maoist Centre)	12 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	12	8	0
	CPN (Unified Socialist)	6 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	6	3	0
	Nagrik Unmukti Party	12 (80%)	3 (20%)	15	5	0
	Rashtriya Prajatantra Party	27 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	27	0	0
	Independent	35 (97.2%)	1 (2.8%)	36	1	0
	Nepali Congress	12 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	12	9	0
	CPN (UML)	24 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	24	5	0
	CPN (Maoist Centre)	10 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	10	9	0
Karnali (24)	CPN (Unified Socialist)	6 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	6	0	0
	Rashtriya Prajatantra Party	21 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	21	0	0
	Independent	16 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	16	1	0

Province (Total Seats in FPTP)	Political Party/Independent	Candidacy			Elected	
		Men (%)	Women (%)	Total	Men	Women
Lumbini (52)	Nepali Congress	34 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	34	17	0
	CPN (UML)	45 (95.7%)	2 (4.3%)	47	18	0
	CPN (Maoist Centre)	16 (88.9%)	2 (11.1%)	18	4	1
	CPN (Unified Socialist)	8 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	8	0	0
	Nagarik Unmukti Party	19 (86.4%)	3 (13.6%)	22	2	0
	Rashtriya Prajatantra Party	35 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	35	2	0
	Janata Samajwadi Party	18 (94.7%)	1 (5.3%)	19	2	0
	Janamat Party	18 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	18	1	0
	Loktrantrik Samajwadi Party	23 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	23	2	0
	Rrashtriya Janamorcha	3 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	3	0	0
	Independent	158 (96.3%)	6 (3.7%)	164	3	0
	Nepali Congress	21 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	21	18	0
	Gandaki (36)	CPN (UML)	31 (91.2%)	3 (8.8%)	34	10
CPN (Maoist Centre)		11 (91.7%)	1 (8.3%)	12	4	0
Nepal Samajwadi Party		1 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	1	1	0
Rashtriya Prajatantra Party		25 (86.2%)	4 (13.8%)	29	0	0
Independent		26 (76.5%)	8 (23.5%)	34	1	0

Province (Total Seats in FPTP)	Political Party/Independent	Candidacy			Elected	
		Men (%)	Women (%)	Total	Men	Women
Bagmati (66)	Nepali Congress	37 (88.1%)	5 (11.9%)	42	23	2
	CPN (UML)	64 (98.5%)	1 (1.5%)	65	13	0
	CPN (Maoist Centre)	22 (91.7%)	2 (8.3%)	24	12	2
	CPN (Unified Socialist)	11 (91.7%)	1 (8.3%)	12	4	1
	Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party	44 (75.9%)	14 (24.1%)	58	1	0
	Rashtriya Prajatantra Party	60 (92.3%)	5 (7.7%)	65	7	0
	Hamro Nepali Party	22 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	22	1	0
	Independent	156 (81.3%)	36 (18.8%)	192	0	0
	Nepali Congress	26 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	26	13	0
	CPN (UML)	31 (93.9%)	2 (6.1%)	33	14	1
Madhesh (64)	CPN (Maoist Centre)	16 (94.1%)	1 (5.9%)	17	4	0
	CPN (Unified Socialist)	15 (88.2%)	2 (11.8%)	17	3	1
	Janata Samajwadi Party	32 (91.4%)	3 (8.6%)	35	9	0
	Janamat Party	57 (98.3%)	1 (1.7%)	58	6	0
	Loktantrik Samajwadi Party	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	18	6	1
	Nagarik Unmukti Party	13 (86.7%)	2 (13.3%)	15	0	0
	Nepal Sanghiya Samajwadi Party	13 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	13	0	0
	Rashtriya Prajatantra Party	51 (87.9%)	7 (12.1%)	58	0	0
	Independent	515 (94.1%)	32 (5.9%)	547	5	1

Province (Total Seats in FPTP)	Political Party/Independent	Candidacy			Elected	
		Men (%)	Women (%)	Total	Men	Women
Koshi (56)	Nepali Congress	26 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	26	17	0
	CPN (UML)	50 (96.2%)	2 (3.8%)	52	25	0
	CPN (Maoist Centre)	17 (89.5%)	2 (10.5%)	19	9	0
	CPN (Unified Socialist)	9 (81.8%)	2 (18.2%)	11	2	1
	Janata Samajwadi Party	34 (97.1%)	1 (2.9%)	35	0	0
	Rashtriya Prajatantra Party	40 (90.9%)	4 (9.1%)	44	1	1
	Independent	90 (85.7%)	15 (14.3%)	105	0	0
	Total number of candidates (including independent), and results across seven provincial assemblies	2188 (92.6%)	176 (7.4%)	2364	316	14
	Number of independent candidates across seven provinces	996	98	1094		
	Total number of political party candidates participating across seven provincial assembly elections	1192	78	1270		

Source: Election Commission Nepal.

Table 5: Number of Political Party and Independent Candidates, and Results under FPTP during House of Representatives Elections 2017 and 2022²¹

Election	2022						2017					
	Candidate			Elected			Candidate			Elected		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Political Party/ Independent												
CPN (UML)	130 (92.2%)	11 (7.8%)	141	40	4	44	98 (95.1%)	5 (4.9%)	103	78	2	80
Nepali Congress	86 (94.5%)	5 (5.5%)	91	57	1	58	145 (94.2%)	9 (5.8%)	154	23	0	23
CPN (Maoist Centre)	38 (82.6%)	8 (17.4%)	46	17	1	18	55 (93.2%)	4 (6.8%)	59	33	3	36
Rashtriya Swatantra Party*	119 (90.8%)	12 (9.2%)	131	5	2	7	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rashtriya Prajantra Party	132 (94.3%)	8 (5.7%)	140	7	0	7	6 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	6	1	0	1
Janata Samajwadi Party	72 (91.1%)	7 (8.9%)	79	7	0	7	102 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	102	0	0	0
Janamat Party**	52 (96.3%)	2 (3.7%)	54	1	0	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rastriya Janata Party Nepal#	-	-	-	-	-	-	102 (95.3%)	5 (4.7%)	107	10	0	10
Sanghiya Samajwadi Forum Nepal##	-	-	-	-	-	-	102 (95.3%)	5 (4.7%)	107	10	0	10
Independent	790 (91.1%)	77 (8.9%)	867	5	0	5	454 (92.3%)	38 (7.7%)	492	1	0	1

Source: Election Commission Nepal.

* The party did not exist in 2017 and was only formed before the 2022 elections. ** The party did not exist in the 2017 and was only formed before the 2022 elections. # Rashtriya Janata Party, which secured the threshold of a national party in 2017 elections, transformed into a new party before the 2022 elections. Notably, a significant number of leaders associated with this party have affiliations with the Loktantrik Samajwadi Party Nepal. ## Subsequently, the party underwent a name change during the House of Representatives and Provincial Assembly elections in 2022. Presently, many of the leaders linked to this party are aligned with the Janata Samajwadi Party Nepal.

²¹ Of the parties in the House of Representatives that failed to secure the national threshold under the Proportional Representation system, four men from Loktantrik Samajwadi Party, 10 men from CPN (Unified Socialist), two men and one woman from Nagarik Unmukti Party, one man from Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party, and one man from Rashtriya Janamorchha were elected under the First-Past-the-Post system.

Table 6: Representation of Women Office Bearers in Nepali Congress District Committees

Province	District Number	Post						Total office bearers of each district committee = 8
		President (1)	Vice - President (2)	Secretary (2)	Joint Secretary (2)	Treasurer (1)	Total	
Sudurpaschim	9	0	0	0	1	2	3	
Karnali	10	0	1	0	0	0	1	
Lumbini	12	0	2	3	1	1	7	
Gandaki	11	0	1	1	1	1	4	
Bagmati	13	0	1	0	2	1	4	
Madhesh	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Koshi	14	0	1	0	1	3	5	
All Provinces	77	0	6	4	6	8	24	

Table 7: Representation of Women Office Bearers in Nepali Congress Provincial Committees

Province	Post					Total office bearers of each provincial committee - 9
	President (1)	Vice - President (2)	General Secretary (2)	Joint -General Secretary (3)	Treasurer (1)	
Sudurpaschim	0	0	0	1	0	1
Karnali	0	0	0	1	1	2
Lumbini	0	0	0	1	0	1
Gandaki	0	1	0	1	0	2
Bagmati	0	0	0	1	0	1
Madhesh	0	0	0	1	0	1
Koshi	0	0	0	1	0	1
All Provinces	0	1	0	7	1	9

Table 8: Representation of Women Office Bearers in Nepali Congress Central Committee

Women Office Bearers		Central Committee Member	
President (1)	Vice-President (2)	General Secretary (2)	Joint General Secretary (8)
0	0	0	1
		Women	Men
		53 (34%)	103 (66%)

Table 9: Representation of Women Office Bearers in CPN (UML) District Committees

Province	District Number	Post				Total office bearers of each district committee = 5
		Chairperson (1)	Vice-Chairperson (1)	Secretary (1)	Under-Secretary (2)	
Sudurpaschim	9	0	2	0	2	4
Karnali	10	0	0	0	4	4
Lumbini	12	0	1	0	9	10
Gandaki	11	0	1	0	2	3
Bagmati	13	0	1	0	9	10
Madhesh	8	0	1	0	2	3
Koshi	14	0	0	0	2	2
All Provinces	77	0	6	0	30	36

Table 10: Representation of Women Office Bearers in CPN (UML) Provincial Committees

Province	Post				Total office bearers of each provincial committee = 5	
	Chairperson (1)	Vice-Chairperson (1)	Secretary (1)	Under-Secretary (2)	Total	
Sudurpaschim	0	0	0	1	1	
Karnali	0	0	0	1	1	
Lumbini	0	0	0	0	0	
Gandaki	0	0	0	2	2	
Bagmati	0	0	0	1	1	
Madhesh	0	0	0	1	1	
Koshi	0	0	0	1	1	
All Provinces	0	0	0	7	7	

Table 11: Representation of Women Office Bearers in CPN (UML) Central Committee

Chairperson (1)	Women Office Bearers						Standing Committee Member		Politburo Member		Central Committee Member	
	Senior Vice-Chairperson (1)	Vice-Chairperson (6)	General Secretary (1)	Under General Secretary (3)	General Secretary (6)	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
0	0	1	0	0	1	4 (17%)	19 (83%)	12 (22%)	42 (78%)	104 (30%)	248 (70%)	

Table 12: Representation of Women Office Bearers in CPN (Maoist Centre) Provincial Committees

Province	Post						Total office bearers of each provincial committee = 9
	Chairperson (1)	Vice-Chairperson (3)	Secretary (2)	Joint-Secretary (2)	Treasurer (1)	Total	
Sudurpaschim	0	0	0	1	1	2	
Karnali	1	0	0	0	0	1	
Lumbini	0	0	0	1	0	1	
Gandaki	1	0	0	0	0	1	
Bagmati	0	1	0	0	1	2	
Madhesh	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Koshi	0	0	0	1	0	1	
All Provinces	2	1	0	3	2	8	

Table 13: Representation of Women Office Bearers in CPN (Maoist Centre) Central Committee

Women Office Bearers							Standing Committee Member		Central Committee Member	
Chairperson (1)	Senior Vice-Chairperson (1)	Vice-Chairperson (3)	General Secretary (1)	Under General Secretary (6)	Secretary (9)	Treasurer (1)	Women	Men	Women	Men
0	0	1	0	0	0	0	11 (50%)	11 (50%)	119 (31%)	267 (69%)

Nepal's Constitution mandates the participation of women in all state bodies based on the principle of proportional inclusion, as a fundamental right. Women's presence in state bodies must, therefore, be ensured in proportion to their population. However, political parties have not taken initiatives to increase women's participation beyond one-third in both the federal parliament and provincial assemblies. Political parties have been utilizing the Proportional Representation system to ensure the constitutionally mandated 33 percent participation of women in the parliament. The number of women elected directly through the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system is dismal. Despite previously leading transformative movements, parties with non-inclusive structures and leadership dominated by a patriarchal mindset have obstructed the development of women's leadership. As a result, the presence of women office-bearers at various levels of the political party structures is negligible. To bolster women's candidacy under FPTP, the Election Commission of Nepal as a constitutional authority must also exert pressure on political parties and the government to implement women's rights as provided by the Constitution under the fundamental rights.