

# NEPAL

## »» Women's participation in local government

Following more than 50 years of feminist activism and advocacy on political reform, Nepal adopted a landmark quota system to guarantee the representation of women – including women from marginalized groups – across all levels of government.

The first local election since the quotas – in 2017 – and the most recent – in 2022 – both saw women elected to roughly 41 per cent of local government roles. Feminist movements continue to advocate for social norm change to ensure that women candidates in Nepal – including those from the Dalit<sup>6</sup> community – can hold the highest local office and can participate safely and effectively in local government to contribute to change for gender equality.

### Feminist activism for political change

Feminist movements have played a leading role in advocacy and activism for political reform in Nepal for decades, persistently pushing back against patriarchal and discriminatory systems. Building on this long history, focused activism and collective efforts led to the inclusion of women in the newly-established Constituent Assembly in 2008.

**A lot of feminist and women's groups were key in making sure that the 30 per cent quota system was implemented in all aspects of governance.**

— Anonymous

The 2015 Constitution and subsequent local election laws established a quota system whereby at least one woman must be selected for either mayor or deputy mayor (reflecting similar commitments at the national level). The gendered experience of caste was also recognized: the Local Level Election Act required at least two women to be appointed to the local ward committee, of whom one must be a Dalit woman.

The first local elections in 2017 marked a significant and historic moment in women's political representation, with Nepal placed as the 16th best-performing country globally on representation of women in local government.

### Realities for women elected at the local level

Prevailing gender norms mean that women elected in 2017 and/or 2022 have usually filled deputy mayoral (rather than mayoral) positions. Following the 2022 local elections, just 4 per cent of mayors were women and 78 per cent of deputy mayors were women. However, the deputy mayor role is far from ceremonial. Deputy mayors coordinate local judicial committees, NGO programs, and budget oversight and implementation. The rise in women's local representation has also positively influenced women's wider political engagement, as well as perceptions of their roles and abilities.

Of the women elected to local government in 2017, nearly half were Dalit women, with most holding roles in local ward committees to fulfill the quota requirements. However, the quota system has not transformed the discrimination faced by the Dalit community. In 2022, as many as 123 reserved seats for Dalit women remained vacant, with political parties claiming an inability to identify suitable candidates. Interviewees for this research highlighted that very little attention is paid to Dalit participants in committee meetings and decision-making processes. Local and international feminist actors have aimed to support women candidates, especially those from the Dalit community, to facilitate their political participation.

### Continued activism from feminist movements

Feminist movements continue to challenge persistent patriarchal attitudes and practices that hinder women's representation and power in local politics. These begin even before a woman is elected: interviewees for this research stated that women candidates are often severely underfunded and struggle to find the resources they need for their campaigns.

The commitment to collective action is borne out in feminist movements' determination to pool funding and support one another, learning from and drawing on experiences of women's cooperatives across the country. One interviewee noted

recent collective efforts to raise funds to distribute to and support women candidates in the upcoming 2025 elections.

**Whenever there is a political campaign, male members have greater access to resources. They go into communities and offer snacks and alcohol to their cadres in exchange for their support. Women don't have comparable resources to campaign.**

— Anonymous

While significant barriers still stand in the way of Nepali women's meaningful political participation, movement actors are determined to build on the strong history of powerful women and collective action that has preceded them, and to continue to push for true intersectional leadership by women to exist in reality, and not just on paper.

**I am aware that when we want to talk about gender issues, it is not always easy – because they are considered taboo topics. However, in Nepal, it has become so politicized that no one can shy away from these issues anymore. Of course, we have not seen the results we want to see, but it is an issue that no one can hide from, and the movements are very much there, and conversations are ongoing...A lot of young people are engaged in these spaces and that makes it hopeful.**

— Dr Nisha Onta, Founder & ED, Governance Lab

<sup>6</sup> "Dalit" is a term used to refer to any member of a wide range of social groups that were historically marginalized in Hindu caste society.