

# What does Nepal's recent elections reveal about patriarchy in politics?



*As Nepal successfully conducted historic local and parliamentary elections in 2017, considered as the end to the decade-long transition period, there are high hopes of improved democratic governance in the new, decentralised federal set up. **Sudeep Uprety** notes that it is a matter of serious concern for women as only a small number of female candidates won the direct elections.*

Nepal ranked 42 in the [Global Gender Gap Index 2016](#) in terms of the number of women parliamentarians. While that is a very encouraging sign as the overall rank of the country (including other socio-economic indicators) was 110, but is this representation 'meaningful' in the real sense?

As per the constitutional provision, women must constitute 33 percent in both houses of Parliament. This meant that to secure maximum number of male lawmakers for the rest of the remaining two-third seats, political parties fielded more male candidates for the direct elections. Unfortunately, only six women were elected in the recent polls, lesser than last two Constituent Assembly elections held in 2013 and 2008. In 2008, 30 women were elected, and this dropped to 10 in 2013.

While inclusion was at the forefront of the agenda of all political parties' manifestos and national debates, this discouraging figure exposes the existing patriarchy in politics amidst deep-rooted structural inequalities.

Political parties and their leadership do not seem to believe in gender equality when it comes to encouraging women in politics. This was evident as there were few female candidates nominated for direct elections. Perhaps this was guided by the patriarchal notion that [women would not be able to win](#) if they contested under the First Past the Post system (where selection of candidates is done based on most number of votes secured in their respective constituencies).

In a *Nepali Times* article, titled '[Masculine election](#)', female political leaders shared how parties were biased towards male candidates. The article talks about an interesting incident where three out of four candidates from CPN-UML had to be recommended for parliamentary elections for a constituency. However, the party held an internal election among only the two women aspirants while the two male candidates were chosen as default. When the female candidates raised this issue as an act of discrimination to the party leadership, it is reported that the complaint was not taken seriously.

Some male leaders accept that women are not acknowledged as capable candidates within political parties. [Gagan Thapa](#), popular leader from Nepali Congress, has said the lack of initiative among the top brass to groom women leaders and poor long-term vision of gender mainstreaming within the party structure are the major reasons behind fewer women candidates under the FPTP system.

Taking note of this situation, the [Supreme Court](#) had also asked major political parties to honour the constitutional requirement of having one-third women candidates in the Parliament. However, that request wasn't given serious consideration by the political parties.

Going by the numbers, in the 2017 polls, among 62 new comers elected to the Parliament for the first time, [only two are women](#). Likewise, even though political parties claim that they have respected the idea of including female candidates, [Sanjaya Mahato](#) argues this is a namesake inclusion when female candidates are often placed in less competitive posts or against top male political leaders.

*The Kathmandu Post* [editorial](#) laments electoral results a "strong pushback" on the agenda of inclusion. The editorial strongly urges the need to realise that women candidates having authority and voice over their geographic constituencies would make inclusion more meaningful rather than being confined to representation through a mandatory quota system.



*The unequal representation of women in politics is aggravated by the underlying socio-economic context and deep-rooted social injustice. Image Credit: Flickr/DFAT/CC BY 2.0*

This unequal representation is aggravated by the underlying socio-economic context and deep-rooted social injustice. Though education among women is improving (last national census statistics showed [increase in female adult literacy](#) from 35 percent in 2001 to 49 percent in 2011), illiterate women are more vulnerable to manipulation by men assisting them to vote, depriving women of having their own political say. A news story from [Bajhang](#) district mentioned how even literate women were presented as illiterate before election officers so that their husbands or sons could vote.

Interestingly, even in situations where there were more women voters, women still didn't have the freedom to make their own decisions but had to rely on their male family members. Sociologist [Chaitanya Mishra](#) regards this as an obvious phenomenon as men engage more in social interactions in the community and thus have a greater likelihood of influencing the choice of vote for their female counterparts.

Economics also plays an important role in terms of women's ability to contest elections. The fact that access and ownership to finances (as well as their ability to negotiate for fundraising to run election campaigns due to their greater social engagement) would rest more on men than women (2013 statistics of a [World Bank Enterprise Survey](#) showing only 22 percent firms with female owners), thereby encouraging more males putting forward their candidacy as compared to females.

### **Addressing complex structural inequalities**

According to Nadezhda Shvedova these are the three categories of political, socio-economic and ideological/psychological obstacles that a woman faces in the process of participation in the parliament.

These obstacles resonate with present day Nepal and the recent elections. Patriarchy is deeply rooted across various social spheres in Nepal, including politics. The much-needed transformation for women to enjoy equal space with men is yet a far-fetched dream as some of the complex structural inequalities that have existed for many years have not been addressed yet. For women to be on the level-playing field with men, it is time to we realise that structures (either in the form of legislations or provisions within the political parties) alone cannot change the status quo. Emphasis should now be more towards women-centric development in all aspects such as health and education, economic empowerment, integrity and political authority to ensure that current structural inequalities are addressed first.

As Michelle Bachelet, outgoing Chilean President and former UN Women Executive Director said, "For me a better democracy is a democracy where women do not only have the right to vote and to elect but also to be elected."

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### **About The Author**



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