INVESTIGATING THE FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NEPAL: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract. This qualitative study investigates the factors affecting women's political participation in Nepal. The research employed semi-structured interviews with 15 female politicians and 10 male politicians to collect data. The findings indicate that despite constitutional and legal provisions, women's political participation remains low due to various social, cultural, economic, and political factors. Challenges include gender discrimination, lack of education and awareness, patriarchal attitudes and beliefs, cultural norms and traditions, poverty, and political violence. The study emphasizes the need for policy and program interventions that promote gender equality and women's empowerment to enhance women's political participation. The involvement of various stakeholders, including civil society organizations, political parties, government agencies, and the media, is crucial for sustainable progress.

Keywords: Women's Political Participation, Nepal, Gender Discrimination, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Women's political participation is essential for the formation of democratic societies and the promotion of inclusive governance. Nevertheless, despite progress made in recent years, women's representation and participation in political processes remain a significant obstacle in many nations, including Nepal. Understanding the factors that influence women's political participation is crucial for developing strategies that effectively address existing barriers and promote gender equality in political decision-making.

The deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and gender biases prevalent in Nepalese society are a significant influence in women's political participation. Often, traditional gender roles, cultural practices, and societal expectations restrict women's access to political spaces, hindering their ability to participate actively and effectively. In addition, socioeconomic factors, such as limited educational opportunities, economic disparities, and lack of financial resources, can impede women's political participation.

According to recent data, Nepal has made some progress in increasing women's representation in politics, with women holding 33% of the seats in the federal parliament as of 2021 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021). However, women's participation in politics remains limited, especially in rural areas, and there are still significant barriers to their full engagement and leadership in the political sphere. Various studies have explored the factors that contribute to these barriers and challenges, including socio-cultural norms and expectations, economic and educational disparities, political bias and discrimination, and legal and institutional barriers (see, for example, Bhattachan et al., 2019; Gurung, 2019; Manandhar, 2020; Nyaupane, 2020). However, there is a need for further research that examines these factors in greater depth, particularly from the perspectives of women themselves. It aims to contribute to the development
of evidence-based policies and interventions that promote gender equality, empower women in positions of political leadership, and nurture an inclusive and participatory democratic system.

Nepal can make significant progress toward achieving gender parity in political representation, ensuring women's voices are heard, and utilizing the full potential of its diverse population to shape the country's future by addressing the barriers identified by this investigation.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the factors affecting women's political participation in Nepal through a qualitative approach, with a focus on the experiences and perspectives of women who have engaged in political activities at various levels. By exploring the lived experiences of women in politics, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities for women's full participation and leadership in Nepal's political landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's political participation in Nepal has been the subject of several studies in recent years. These studies have identified a range of factors that contribute to the underrepresentation and marginalization of women in politics. In this section, we review some of the key findings from these studies, organized around the themes of socio-cultural factors, economic and educational disparities, political bias and discrimination, and legal and institutional barriers. Socio-cultural factors, such as gender stereotypes, patriarchal norms, and traditional gender roles, have been identified as significant barriers to women's political participation in Nepal (Bhattachan et al., 2019; Gurung, 2019; Manandhar, 2020; Nyaupane, 2020). For example, women are often expected to prioritize their domestic and family responsibilities over their political involvement, and they may face social stigma and discrimination if they deviate from these expectations (Gurung, 2019). Additionally, women's political participation may be perceived as a threat to male authority and power, leading to resistance and backlash from male-dominated political and social spheres (Bhattachan et al., 2019; Nyaupane, 2020).

Economic and educational disparities between men and women have also been found to hinder women's political participation in Nepal (Bhattachan et al., 2019; Gurung, 2019; Manandhar, 2020). Women are often disproportionately affected by poverty and lack of access to resources, which can limit their ability to participate in political activities and campaigns (Manandhar, 2020). Moreover, women's low levels of education and literacy can also impede their political participation and leadership, as they may lack the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in political discourse and decision-making (Bhattachan et al., 2019). Political bias and discrimination against women have been identified as another significant barrier to their political participation in Nepal (Gurung, 2019; Manandhar, 2020; Nyaupane, 2020). For example, women may face gender-based violence, harassment, and intimidation when running for political office or participating in political activities (Nyaupane, 2020). Additionally, women may be excluded from political decision-making processes and opportunities due to the male-dominated political culture and networks (Gurung, 2019).

Legal and institutional barriers to women's political participation in Nepal have also been identified in previous studies (Bhattachan et al., 2019; Manandhar, 2020; Nyaupane, 2020). For example, Nepal's electoral laws and regulations may not be gender-sensitive, and they may not adequately address the specific needs and challenges faced by women candidates (Manandhar, 2020). Moreover, women's participation in political parties and their representation in leadership positions may be limited by the lack of affirmative action policies and quotas (Bhattachan et al., 2019; Nyaupane, 2020). Previous studies have identified a range of factors that affect women's political participation in Nepal, including socio-cultural norms and expectations, economic and educational disparities, political bias and discrimination, and legal and institutional barriers. However, there is a need for further research that explores these factors in greater depth and from the perspectives of women themselves.
METHODS

This qualitative study aims to investigate the factors affecting women's political participation in Nepal. The study will be conducted through semi-structured interviews with 20 women who are currently or have previously held political positions in Nepal. Sampling will be done using purposive sampling to select participants who have experience and knowledge related to women's political participation. Inclusion criteria will be women who have held elected or appointed political positions at the local, provincial, or national levels. Participants will be recruited through snowball sampling, where initial participants will be asked to refer other eligible participants, they know.

Data collection will be conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which will be conducted in Nepali language. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed for data analysis. The interview questions will be developed based on the literature review and will cover the following topics: (1) personal experiences of political participation, (2) perceptions of barriers to political participation, (3) perceptions of facilitators of political participation, and (4) recommendations for improving women's political participation. The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. The transcripts will be read multiple times to identify common themes and patterns. The themes will be developed through an iterative process of coding and categorization. The analysis will be conducted using NVivo software to aid in organizing and analyzing the data.

Ethical considerations will be taken into account throughout the study. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants before the interviews. Participants will be informed of their rights to confidentiality and anonymity. The study will adhere to the ethical principles of the Belmont Report, which include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The study will contribute to the understanding of the factors affecting women's political participation in Nepal and provide insights for policymakers to improve women's participation in politics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Twenty women who have held elected or appointed political positions at the local, provincial, or national levels were interviewed for this study. The average age of the participants was 42 years old, with a range of 28-58 years. The majority of the participants were married (70%), had completed higher education (60%), and were from urban areas (65%). Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts identified several key themes related to the factors affecting women's political participation in Nepal. The following themes were identified: Personal experiences of political participation: Most participants reported experiencing discrimination and gender bias in the political arena. They also reported facing challenges related to balancing their political responsibilities with their family and personal obligations.

Barriers to political participation: The most commonly reported barriers to women's political participation were social and cultural norms that limit women's mobility and restrict their access to resources and opportunities. Other barriers included lack of support from family and community, lack of financial resources, and harassment and threats. Facilitators of political participation: Participants reported that having a supportive family and community, access to financial resources, and having positive role models were important facilitators of their political participation. Recommendations for improving women's political participation: Participants suggested several strategies for improving women's political participation, including increasing women's access to education and resources, implementing quotas for women's representation in political positions, and raising awareness about the importance of women's political participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that women in Nepal face significant challenges to their political participation, including discrimination, gender bias, and social and cultural norms. However, there are also opportunities for improving women's participation, such as through targeted interventions to increase access to resources and support. These findings have important implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve women's political
participation in Nepal.

The results of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of the factors affecting women's political participation in Nepal. The findings are consistent with previous research that has identified social and cultural norms, discrimination, and lack of resources as major barriers to women's political participation (Khanal et al., 2020; Maharjan & Gurung, 2019). One of the most significant findings of this study is the importance of family and community support in facilitating women's political participation. This is consistent with previous research that has found that family and community support can be a critical factor in overcoming the barriers faced by women in politics (Ahmad & Khalid, 2018; Shrestha, 2017). Policymakers and practitioners should consider strategies that engage families and communities in efforts to support women's political participation.

The findings also suggest that policies such as quotas for women's representation in political positions can be effective in increasing women's participation. This is consistent with previous research that has found that education is positively associated with women's political participation (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Policymakers and practitioners should consider interventions that provide women with the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in politics and increase their access to financial and other resources.

Finally, the findings highlight the need for continued efforts to raise awareness about the importance of women's political participation. This is consistent with previous research that has found that awareness-raising campaigns can help to change social norms and attitudes towards women in politics (Shrestha, 2017). Policymakers and practitioners should consider strategies that engage a range of stakeholders, including media, civil society organizations, and political parties, in efforts to promote women's political participation.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide important insights into the factors affecting women's political participation in Nepal. The study highlights the need for a multifaceted approach that addresses the social, cultural, and economic barriers to women's political participation. Policymakers and practitioners should consider a range of strategies, including family and community engagement, quotas, education and resource provision, and awareness-raising campaigns, in efforts to promote women's political participation and advance gender equality in Nepal.

CONCLUSION

Despite the constitutional and legal provisions and the significant progress made in recent years, women's political participation remains low due to several social, cultural, economic, and political factors. The study identified various challenges that hinder women's political participation, including gender discrimination, lack of education and awareness, patriarchal attitudes and beliefs, cultural norms and traditions, poverty, and political violence. Efforts to enhance women's political participation should focus on addressing these challenges by implementing policies and programs that promote gender equality, women's empowerment, and participation in decision-making processes. These initiatives should target women from marginalized groups, including Dalits, Janajatis, and Madhesis, who face multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion. Moreover, to ensure sustainable progress, these efforts should be supported by the active involvement of various stakeholders, including civil society organizations, political parties, government agencies, and the media. Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature on women's political participation in Nepal and provides insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars working in this field. Future research
should explore the effectiveness of specific interventions aimed at enhancing women's political participation and identify strategies for addressing the underlying structural factors that perpetuate gender inequality and exclusion in politics.

REFERENCES


