Beyond "Capacity": Gendered Election Processes, Networks, and Informality in Local Governments in Nepal

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Introduction

The tenure of the first local officials elected under Nepal's 2015 Constitution is coming to an end. The local elections that put them in office in 2017 were groundbreaking in many ways. They were the first elections to be held in the newly federal Nepal, ending a 20-year absence of locally elected representatives. Importantly, as a result of quotas introduced to address women's chronic minority status in politics, over 14,000 women were elected (Asia Foundation 2018: 6), including to the higher posts of mayor and deputy mayor.[1]

This political moment is an opportune time both to review how women were selected as candidates for these local elections and to embed the experiences of the first cohort of elected deputy mayors—roughly 93 percent of them women (Mahato, Paudyal, and Baruah 2019)—within a deeper understanding of how political processes in Nepal are being (re)networked and (re)negotiated at the local level. This is especially important for ensuring meaningful political participation.

While much donor and state attention has focused on building the skills and capacities of these newly elected women to make them effective in their formal political roles, recent research has shown the need to look beyond formal institutions and processes to understand the informal rules that affect the ability of female

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1   Quotas have dramatically increased female political representation in federal Nepal: women hold 33.5 percent of the federal parliament, 34 percent of the provincial assemblies, and 41 percent of the elected positions in local councils and ward committees (Cantrell and Ohman 2020).

elected representatives to fulfill their duties (Asia Foundation 2018, Tamang 2018).

This paper focuses on two distinct but interrelated inquiries. The first seeks to understand the over-representation of men in local political office through an examination of recruitment and selection by political parties. The second examines how informal institutions shapes formal ones. Institutions are understood as "rules and procedures (both formal and informal) that structure social interactions by constraining and enabling actor's behavior" (Helmke and Levisky 2004:727). Chappel and Waylen note that informal institutions "[b]y their very nature…are hidden and embedded in the everyday practices that are disguised as standard and taken-for-granted" (Chappell and Waylen 2013: 605).

With respect to political selection, studies on the dearth of women in politics in Nepal, especially in politically important posts, have highlighted societal values discriminating against women, lack of internal party democracy, the dominance of men in key internal posts, and the high cost of electoral campaigns (Jagaran Nepal 2007, Renaissance Society et al. 2009, Cantrell and Ohman 2020). Little research has been conducted, however, on the primary process by which women enter public office, candidate selection.

Research elsewhere has pointed to the key importance of understanding the "secret garden" of candidate selection (Gallagher and Marsh 1988). Focusing on political parties as gendered organizations, with gender understood as operating "both as a (constructed) category and as a feature of institutions,"

(Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016: 372), enables the analysis of individual and party-level interactions where informal "rules of the game," beyond the formal rules laid out in party statutes, contour the selection of women as candidates (Norris and Lovenduski 1995, Bjarnegård 2013, Kenny 2013). The orientation towards political recruitment begins to answer questions about men's dominance of the political arena left opaque thus far by a narrow focus on women's capacity, qualification, and political interest. An understanding of candidate selection processes shifts our attention to the way political institutions are sustained and reproduced (Bjarnegard and Muray 2015, Chiva 2018) as part of the larger question of the "hegemony of men" (Hearn, 2004: 49). Put differently, the focus on parties as gendered organizations guided by both formal and informal rules allows us to better problematize men's power, advantage, and privilege (Murray 2014, Bjarnegård and Murray 2015, Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016). The insights this offers are concrete; for example, we can explore the institutional processes by which elected officials actually get into their positions and the potential impact on the nature and scope of their decision-making power.

Beyond candidate selection, this paper also seeks to understand how informality shapes formal institutions. In concrete terms, attention is given to the interdependence of actors and institutions and the networks of connections that enable and constrain the exercise of formal political power. Mapping out the main vectors of power in which elected female deputy mayors are embedded places the focus on the networks that exert influence because of their informality and transcendence of traditional institutional boundaries. The emphasis is not just on

the possession of resources (as in traditional operationalizations of power) but on the actor's web of connections, which affects both resources and the ability to effectively utilize those resources (Wasserman and Faust 2012, Heaney and McClurg 2009). Building such knowledge and evidence is crucial to ensuring that programs that promote the political participation of women and excluded groups are connected to key decision-making spaces and processes.[2] While at first glance this may appear to be a confirmation of predictable dynamics already known to be at play, the attempt is to provide a better understanding of the multidimensional networks that contour the political landscape at the local level. This level of understanding, we hope, will also be useful to those who understand the macro-level problem sets but continue to implement programs that remain unlinked to political processes that pose as barriers to entry and hurdles to fulfilling formal political roles and duties.

Methodology

This paper is based primarily on qualitative interviews conducted between May 2019 and April 2021 in 12 urban municipalities (UM) and two rural municipalities (RM) covering mountain, hill, and Tarai areas in the following provinces and districts: Province 1 – Jhapa and Khotang; Madhesh Province – Bara; Bagmati Province – Dolakha and Nuwakot; Gandaki Province –

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2   This builds on lessons learned outlined in a 2017 OECD report which highlighted that some women, peace, and security programming in Nepal trained women in advocacy skills without linking them to peacebuilding processes (OECD 2017: 51).

Syangja and Gorkha; Lumbini Province – Palpa; Sudurpaschim
Province – Achaam, Baitadi, Kailali, and Kalikot; and Karnali
Province – Surkhet and Western Rukum.

Interviewees included development workers;[3] politicians at the
local, district, provincial and national levels, including elected
ward members; two deputy mayors; political party committee
members at the *nagar*[4] (town) and district level; local political
analysts; and one bureaucrat. In terms of political parties, the
paper focuses on candidate selection by the two major parties
at that time, the Nepali Congress Party (NC) and the Nepal
Communist Party–Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML), but also
includes interviews with politicians from the CPN (Maoist-
Center).[5] The majority of the candidate-selection interviews were
focused on the following seven districts: Jhapa, Bara, Dolakha,
Syangja, Palpa, Surkhet, and Kailali. Due to Covid-19 lockdowns
and other restrictions, the interviews were conducted primarily
over the phone. Development workers were interviewed via
emailed questionnaires with follow-up interviews over Skype or
Microsoft Teams. There were two main sets of questions, one
centered on candidate-selection processes in the local elections
and the other on how and why the respondent would rank the
power of various political actors in their specific areas. In total,
39 people were interviewed, of which 32 were men and seven

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3   These selected local development workers have close working relationships with
     municipalities and are particularly well positioned to analyze local power dy-
     namics.

4   The term *nagar* has been retained following the political definitions utilized by
     political party respondents.

5   In the 2017 local elections, the Maoists had forged an alliance with the Nepali
     Congress but partnered with the UML for the provincial and federal level elections.

were women. Interviewees included 25 "high-caste" hill men, four "high-caste" hill women, three Janajati men, two Janajati women, one Dalit man and woman, one Muslim man, and two Madhesi men.

Research on gender, political parties, and candidate selection has shown the central importance of political parties as gatekeepers (Bjarnegård 2013, Hinojosa 2012, Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Consequently, most of the interviews were done with committee politicians at the *nagar* and district levels, as they were the key players or gatekeepers in local candidate selection and had more detailed knowledge of the processes. As a result of the patriarchal structure of political parties and the consequently low number of women in positions of power (Renaissance Society et al. 2009, Panday 2019), all of these interviewees were men. This resulted in more interviews with men. Also noteworthy is that all the mayors, chief administrative officers (CAOs), and ward chairs in the above municipalities were men and were predominantly from the same upper-caste and class group.[6] However, all the deputy mayors in these selected municipalities were women. For ease of reference, in this paper the chair and deputy chair of rural municipalities are also referred to as mayor and deputy mayor, respectively.

Nepal's local elections were held in three phases: in Provinces 3 (Bagmati), 4 (Gandaki), and 6 (Sudurpaschim) on May 14, 2017; in Provinces 1, 5 (Lumbini), and 7 (Karnali) on June 28; and in Province 2 (Madhesh) on September 18. The findings reported below cover all three phases and provide a snapshot

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6   One UM in Khotang was an outlier in that out of 15 ward chairs 11 were Jana-
      jatis.

of the dynamics in specific local areas in the run-up to the first local elections. The qualitative method used here, while not representative in a statistical sense, points to causal mechanisms in an explanatory way and suggests a range of contributing factors.

General Candidate Selection

After a short introduction to the formal structure of local government and election scheduling, this section examines the political parties' formal candidate-selection procedures. These procedures vary, as local procedures exist in a hierarchy interwoven with interventions by the central level and economics retains its driving importance in candidate considerations.

Within Nepal's 77 districts, there are 753 local units: 293 urban municipalities, or *nagar palikas*, and 460 rural municipalities, or *gaun palikas*. Each local unit is further divided into ward —the smallest local units—comprising a total of 6,684 wards in Nepal. After the announcement of the May 14, 2017 date for local elections, the government published a schedule in accordance with the Local Level Election Act 2073v.s. (2017)[7] with deadlines for registering candidates, publishing candidate lists, filing complaints against candidates, and withdrawing names before the final publication of candidate names and the

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7   Nepal Law Commission, https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/np/wp-content/
     uploads/2021/01/%E0%A4%B8%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%A5%E0%A4%B
     E%E0%A4%A8%E0%A5%80%E0%A4%AF-%E0%A4%A4%E0%A4%B9-
     %E0%A4%A8%E0%A4%BF%E0%A4%B0%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B5%-
     E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%9A%E0%A4%A8-%E0%A4%90%E0%A4%A8-%E0%A5%
     A8%E0%A5%A6%E0%A5%AD%E0%A5%A9.pdf.

allocation of election symbols.[8] The process was duplicated for the other two stages of local elections after the announcement of their respective election dates.

The political parties' candidate-selection procedures in areas surveyed revealed both change and continuity, with changes largely due to the new federal structure. The continuities show the relationship between past and present contingencies, opportunities, and structural constraints. More specifically, when asked about political party directives for the elections, interviewees from both the NC and the UML stated that although the political parties had sent instructions related to the selection of candidates, they were of a very general nature.[9] Across parties, the ultimate authority to approve ward-level candidates lay with the district-level executive committee. For the NC, names selected by the ward-level executive committees were sent up to the next level—the *chettra* (area)—and then to the district-level executive committee, which approved the final list. The UML's intermediate level was said to be the *gaun* (rural) or *nagar* committee, after which the district committee had authority to add or remove names at its discretion. While the party constitutions of both the Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML require one-third female representation, interviewees gave

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8   A cabinet decision had been made on February 20, 2017, to hold local elections on May 14, 2017 (Pradhan 2017a). Two months later, however, on April 22, 2017, a political agreement with agitating political parties led to the decision to hold the local elections in two stages (Kathmandu Post 2017a). Ongoing objections by Madhesh-based parties led the government on June 15 to postpone the elections in Province 2, and a third phase of voting was scheduled for September 18 (Shrestha 2017).

9   Election documents for the 2017 local elections were obtained only from the Maoists. The challenges of finding formal procedures and written party regulations are not unique to Nepal. See Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016: 375.

varying accounts of actual practice. For example, in two UMs in Jhapa and Kailali, all but one UML politician interviewed stated that of the three candidates nominated, one had to be a woman. This may portend problems in the flow of information due to the environment of delay followed by haste in the selection of candidates, as will be discussed later.

Interviews identified additional layers of approval for the higher posts of mayor and deputy mayor. For example, a provincial NC leader indicated that all candidacies for mayor and deputy mayor were sent for approval to the central level, Kathmandu. In more detail, a NC deputy mayor in Khotang explained that the approval process for candidates began at the *gaun* (rural) or *nagar* committee,[10] with names then sent to the *chettra* (area) and then to the district level and on to Kathmandu for final approval. The UML had directed the party's district chapters to select candidates for rural and urban municipalities, while the central leadership chose candidates for the larger sub-metropolitan cities and metropolitan cities and endorsed candidate lists, reserving the right to make changes (MyRepublica 2017a).[11] Across the parties, consensus on candidates at the subnational level was said to be a key goal, and three nominations were usually forwarded to the higher level, numbered according to priority. Interviews discovered significant geographical variation in practices and

10   The province NC politician had explained that given the old central structures such as village development committees were still in place at that pre-election period, temporary committees for the *gaun* and *nagar* for election purposes had been established at that level.

11   The Maoist party's 2017 election document also subcategorized municipalities. Rural, urban municipal, and sub-metropolitan candidates were recommended by the relevant executive committees at their levels, with decisions made at the district level and confirmed by the provincial committee. Metropolitan candidates had an additional layer of final approval by the party's central committee.

procedures, and these differences appear to be related to informal rather than formal mechanisms.

Of these election processes, one of the most locally based examples of ward candidate selection emerged from the NC in a UM in Syangja. At the ward level, a committee was set up to receive the names of potential candidates, and the committee then held discussions to agree on a final candidate list. Names agreed upon and those yet to be finalized were then sent to the *nagar* level where the agreed-upon were finalized. In wards without consensus candidates—and some had 20–22 candidates—candidates were made to decide among themselves, or the ward committees were made to vote. Thus, the *nagar* committees were only given the final names. The rationale for this approach was that the "ground level" knows best, as the "higher-ups don't understand the ground," and that this practice produced a sense of ownership and accountability at the local level for the candidates selected.

However the more prevalent informal practice was central level intervention. And interestingly, examples of the most centralized procedures also came from the NC. For example, the NC district chair of Kailali underlined the fact that if consensus could not be achieved, the central-level committee in Kathmandu would appoint the candidates for posts from ward chairs to mayors to provincial members of the political party. He found this process clearly absurd since voting at these levels could have resolved any issues, but the center had insisted that the issues be forwarded to them. He rhetorically asked, "How would [NC leaders] Sher Bahadur Deuba, Ram Chandra Poudel, and Krishna Sitaula know these people?" Overall, much less interference from higher

authorities was reported in ward-level candidate selection, an indication of the relatively lesser importance of these posts for central political leaders.

These dynamics were also evident in the selection of mayors and deputy mayors. In Bara, both UML and NC district and *nagar* committees complained of widespread interference by higher-ups. For example, the UML *nagar* committee had sent three names as potential candidates for mayor, but the center had chosen another name, not on the list, as the candidate. The chair of the *nagar* committee stated that this was true for the selected UM in Bara, as well as two other places within the district. Underlining that this was not just limited to Bara, but was a widespread practice in the NC party as a whole, a member of the NC district executive committee in Bara said, "if one person gets a place on the ticket, and another person comes through the window, then you see why people are not happy with the system." Similar dynamics were highlighted in a UM in Jhapa. According to a UML *nagar* committee member, the current deputy mayor had not been among the three names forwarded by the committee, but had been inserted by the district committee later. Thus, despite the stated emphasis on local choice, hierarchy and centralized decision-making have continued under the federal structure, undermining formally established local democratic procedures.

Another key, but informal factor cited by many respondents as affecting candidate selection was the economics of elections. For example, the UML *nagar* committee chair in Bara complained of widespread buying and selling of electoral tickets during the election. The NC district chair in Palpa asserted that elections

had become a very expensive affair, making it difficult for honest politicians to run for office. The NC area chair said he had heard that in order to be a ward chair one needed to spend Rs 15 to 20 lacs (Rs 1.5 to 2 million), while buying an individual vote could cost around Rs 1,000. Deputy mayors were obviously not untouched by these dynamics. For example, a Maoist deputy mayor from a rural municipality in Achaam stated that when she had initially sought the mayoral ticket, party representatives had asked around as to whether she had the necessary funds to run for the office. To give another example, one candidate for deputy mayor revealed publicly that her husband had bought her the ticket. Even when not explicitly stated, as in the example from Jhapa of a deputy mayoral candidate being inserted from the district level, the ability to finance the election campaign was a factor; the deputy mayor's husband was a contractor with the means to support his wife's election campaign. Signifying both the extent and awareness of such practices, the media have aired the complaints of party members accusing party leaders of favoring candidates with money (see for example Sejuwal 2017).

Gendered access to resources, including unequal inheritance laws in effect at the time[12] and the social and cultural obstacles to women inheriting land and property, hobbled female candidates in their pursuit of nominations by limiting their ability to finance a successful election campaign. Given all of the above, some have advocated better enforcement of political finance regulations to redress the disadvantages to women (see for example Cantrell and

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12   Equal inheritance rights for sons and daughters made by the new Civil Code
       only came to effect in August 2017.

Ohman 2020). However, a detailed survey on the 1999 national elections showed that "election finance" encompassed a wide range of costs beyond election publicity and the mobilization of party workers, and included distribution of money and goods to voters and the purchase of brokers and guns (Dahal 2005: 96–97). In the absence of more up-to-date research, opportunities for women and the obstacles posed by the various costs involved are hard to gauge. The latter are important insofar as some of the costs involved, such as the distribution of clientelist goods and money, require trustworthy people in politically strategic positions, which is more than likely to involve male-dominated patronage networks.

Allocating Seats

Minimum quotas for women in local elections were widely heralded as a measure to increase women's political presence. This section examines the effect of formal quotas in the context of informal, every day, social norms and values, and how the supply of potential women candidates and the demand for them by political parties are contoured by formal and informal categories of ethnicity/race (*jat/jatiya*), geography, and factional priorities.

Past research has examined how patriarchal Hindu social norms, reinforced by the constitutional and legal infrastructure and the parties' conservative ideology, tend to channel women's political participation into the lower tiers of party membership and involvement rather than into leadership roles. As in many other countries where political parties are patriarchal organizations

hostile to women's advancement (Brechenmacher and Hubbard 2020), men's preconceptions about women's inability to contribute intellectually within the party, and the placing of "token" women in reserved seats, tend to bar women from leadership roles, as do social and cultural norms that delegate domestic duties solely to women (Jagaran Nepal 2007, Renaissance Society Nepal et al. 2009, Malla 2011). It is in this political context that Nepal's Local Level Election Act 2073v.s. (2017) mandated that political parties fielding candidates for both mayor and deputy mayor in either urban or rural municipalities must include a woman. In addition, among the five elected representatives of the ward, two seats must be reserved for women, one of whom must be Dalit.

Inquiries into the allocation of seats found some notable patterns in responses. Of those related to formal rules, one was the constant refrain that "the deputy has to be a woman," a legally incorrect statement: the law specifies only that when political parties field candidates for both mayor and deputy mayor, *one* of these candidates must be a woman. The response reveals the assumption that the more powerful position of mayor would *obviously* go to a man, and the underlying unwillingness of men political leaders to give powerful positions to women. As a Maoist official complained about her party, men are uninterested in women leaders and reluctant to follow their orders.[13]

It was clear that political parties were most focused on the position of mayor: utterances like "we won the municipality" were

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13   This is a point that has been made many times by senior women political leaders. See for example an interview with UML leader Binda Panday: https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/nepali-leaders-unable-to-accept-women-in-power/.

invariably tied to winning that office. Tellingly, a UML district committee member in Dolakha stated that after the selection of candidates for the mayoral ticket, "no importance was given to the discussion of candidates for deputy mayor." This was despite the fact that, unlike in the previous centralized government structures, substantial powers have been given to the post of deputy mayor with clear and important responsibilities different from those of the mayor, such that the "deputy" designation is a misnomer with respect to most of the deputy mayor's roles.

Quotas aside, other formal seat-allocation considerations were contoured according to criteria based on ethnicity/race (*jat/ jatiya*), and geography, officially outlined in party constitutions and actively put into practice. For example, while a woman widowed during the Maoist conflict (1996–2006) who was recommended as a NC candidate in a UM in Bara brought the sympathy vote to the NC, according to a NC Bara District executive committee member, she received the ticket under the Muslim quota. Revealing the regional variations in these selection criteria, the NC Kailali District chair stressed geography, which was intricately tied to caste politics. He described how the NC deputy mayor of a UM in the area was able to unite the influential but otherwise divided Achham vote because she was from the "lower- caste," usually in electoral conflict with "upper-caste" groups in Achham, but had married into an "upper-caste" Rawal family. Indicating again the importance given to balancing geography, in Jhapa a candidate for deputy mayor nominated by the center had to be changed because the mayoral candidates were from the same area. In Dolakha, race and ethnicity rose to the fore when a "high-caste" woman who had put herself forward

as a candidate for ward chair was passed over in favor of a Thami (Janajati) man because, according to the male respondent, the majority of the population in the area was Thami. Gender, caste, and ethnicity appear to have weighed against this woman's candidacy in the eyes of the party's male gatekeepers.

Beyond the formal factors noted above, there were clear informal, enduring rules.One long-standing, widely known, and crucially important but informal consideration central to deciding seat allocations was party factionalism and the related interests of key party leaders. For example, according to the NC district chair in Kailali, NC leaders have an unspoken agreement "not to disturb each other" in their respective areas, such that in the western part of the country, Sher Bahadar Deuba's authority is supreme, whereas in Syangja, Tanahu, etc., Ram Chandra Paudel's pick is foremost, and in the east, Krishna Sitaula has priority. These dynamics obviously affect female candidates. For example, two women, a mother and daughter, who declared their candidacies for the post of deputy mayor in two different municipalities of Jhapa were said to be close to NC leader Krishna Prasad Sitaula, whose hometown is Bhadrapur (Kathmandu Post 2017b).

Candidate selection also brought intraparty power struggles to the fore, illustrating that "the most vital and hotly contested factional disputes in any party are the struggles that take place over the choice of its candidates" (Ranney 1981: 103). There were factional tussles over candidate choice, a factor underlined by a UML politician who at the time of the first local elections had been a member of the district executive committee. But there were other examples that reflected the long-standing

political practice of considering factions to achieve consensus. In Bara, a NC district executive committee member stated that the majority faction of the party, led by Sher Bahadur Deuba, applied a "balancing" step to mayoral tickets that they received from the local level, such that someone from Ram Chandra Paudel's faction received a place on the mayoral ticket from one of Bara's election areas even though the candidate was neither recommended nor even from the area. In Surkhet, the area NC chair stated that for one UM, because the mayor came from the faction then established by Sushil Koirala,[14] the deputy mayoral candidate was chosen from Deuba's faction.

While the issue of popularity in the selection of candidates was occasionally raised, interest in balancing factions, geographies, population groups, etc., dominated party deliberations. It is not clear how, if at all, these considerations are related to the selection of candidates who could win at the ballot box. And as discussed before, the calculation of the "ability to win" by male, party leaders is not just linked to being popular with voters, but also the capacity to mobilize resources. In all of these dynamics, and as illustrated in the Bara example above, concerns about local legitimacy and democratic processes appeared to be marginalized.

Gendering Selection

While the preceding discussion has covered some of the familiar territory of political party dynamics, closer attention to the formal

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14   Senior NC leader Koirala died in early 2016.

and informal mechanisms of candidate recruitment reveals the production and reproduction of gendered outcomes that has received less attention. The focus is on individual and party-level interactions that occur within a framework of formal and informal rules shaped by gender norms (Lovenduski and Norris 1993). More specifically, this section contextualizes the newly introduced gender quotas and the purported issue of "supply" of female candidates within the history of candidate recruitment and the patrimonial traditions and patron-client relations that dominate all political institutions in Nepal (Hachhethu 2008).

Concepts of supply and demand have been used to explain patterns of female representation, with supply-side factors affecting who comes forward as a potential candidate and demand-side factors affecting who is deemed "desirable" by political elites (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). It was clear that the quotas forced Nepali political parties to expand their search beyond just male candidates. Unsurprisingly, locally elected female representatives, by a margin of 47 percent to 22 percent, said that political parties rather than community members had encouraged them to run (Asia Foundation 2018: 18). Male politicians interviewed for this study remarked that while female candidates for ward-level positions had been readily available, the "supply side" for Dalit ward women was more problematic—a Jhapa UML *nagar* committee called it a problem even in urban areas like Damak. The issue of the "supply" of suitable deputy-mayoral candidates was cited in a few instances as well. For example, when asked if the party had conducted a review of their losses in the deputy mayoral elections, the man UML *nagar* committee coordinator in a UM in Kailali replied, "we gave what we had," indicating

that they had had no alternative candidates—a "lack of supply." Important to note is that rather than some inherent weakness of women or their unsuitability for public office, his statement reflects the long history of women's exclusion from the public sphere in Nepal, and the major political parties' historical lack of investment in recruiting, training, and promoting women, especially those from excluded groups.

Previous efforts to increase the supply of qualified female candidates focused on why women did not run for office—such as gendered divisions of labor and patterns of socialization, fewer resources of time, money, and experience, or a lack of confidence or political ambition compared to men. Analysis of the demand side of women's political participation focused on the attitudes and preferences of party gatekeepers, who either implicitly or explicitly discriminated against women candidates (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Building on this work, later research illuminated the "constitutive" nature of supply and demand—the way that supply factors are shaped by the demand from political parties in which men have been historically overrepresented. Women's evaluation of their own suitability as electoral candidates has been informed by the history of previous candidate selections, which inhibits them from seeking nomination (Krook 2010, Kenny 2013).

Male respondents in this study stated that formal calls had been made for candidates to offer their names for ward member, ward chair, and mayor or deputy mayor positions. When asked if women had come forward for ward chair and deputy mayor positions, most said no. There were some exceptions. In a UM in Jhapa, for example, the UML consensus candidate for a ward

chair was a woman,[15] and in Surkhet and Dolakha, women had submitted their names for the position of mayor and ward chair.

The reasons most commonly offered by male interviewees for the perceived lack of "supply" of women candidates centered on choices made by women. For example, in the opinion of the UML coordinator of the *nagar* committee for a UM in Kailali, capable women were simply more likely to run for deputy mayor than ward chair. This was an opinion echoed by the NC *nagar* chair in a UM in Jhapa, who argued that there were six women competing for deputy mayor, but "no one wanted to be [ward] chair." Similar sentiments were expressed by a UML *nagar* chair in the same district. He explained that mayoral and deputy mayoral candidates did not want "to go down" and become ward chairs, just as ward chair candidates did not want to become ward members. Both interviewees pointed to what they perceived as a lack of "courage." According to the UML politician, women didn't have the courage to try for the position of ward chair or mayor. A NC leader asserted that the women didn't want to struggle—they just wanted the reserved posts.

When asked for the analysis behind their claims, interviewees cited the limited change in society allowing women into the public and political spheres, the general lack of education, skill, and capability of women, the failure of the parties to develop women leadership, and the rising costs of electioneering. Interspersed among these arguments, however, were remarks that

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15   This women candidate lost in the election. Further inquiry is needed as to whether she had been given a candidacy in an unwinnable seat, as has been the common practice in Nepal.

suggested other factors worthy of consideration.

For example, the NC *nagar* chair in Surkhet stated that there were no "powerful" female candidates for ward chairs, but added that perhaps "they were not able to come forward to make claims." Research elsewhere has shown that women are less likely to put themselves forward as candidates, and that self-nomination has been recognized as disadvantageous for women (Hinojosa 2012: 44). The formal requirement of self-nomination and the emphasis on the reluctance of female candidates to come forward obscures the fact that men, more than women, are formally and informally encouraged by male party leaders to run for office, on the assumption that men are more electable (Bjarnegård 2013). According to a UML politician, two male UML candidates in Dolakha who were unsuccessful in their mayoral ambitions were requested to stand for ward chair posts; one did so and won. It is unclear to what extent women who failed in their bids for deputy mayoral and other candidacies were then encouraged to run for other posts.

The division of geographic areas of influence among top party leaders, and the candidate-selection methods outlined above, suggest that pervasive informal networks—"old boys clubs"—play a central role in the recruitment and selection of electoral candidates. This was alluded to in a 2005 report on political parties in Nepal, which stated that "closeness to party leaders or senior party officials" was key in candidate selection (Dhungel 2005: 42). Networks provides the encouragement to run (if not the nomination) and the political and financial resources necessary to be selected (Kenny 2013, Franceschet and Piscopo 2013, Bjarnegård 2013).

Further, given the general understanding of political patronage networks, as noted above, it is possible that the offices of ward chair and mayor are seen by potential women candidates as "reserved for men," with informal party pressure discouraging women from coming forward. Media coverage during the 2017 local elections found this dynamic at play, with women aspiring to mayoral candidacy feeling "compelled" by the party to run for deputy mayor, or feeling that "the party is reluctant to pick me, simply because I am a woman. I may have to make do with running for deputy mayor" (Himalayan Times 2017). Tellingly, while the UML *nagar* chair in Jhapa said that women did not really want to be mayor, as noted above, he later said that perhaps they chose the deputy mayor position because all the "big men" wanted the mayor position. Highlighting the constitutive nature of candidate supply and demand, not only are women said to be less likely to possess the appropriate "qualifications" for office (more below), but concerns over the appropriateness of their qualifications may prevent them from running for office. In other words, women's calculations about standing for office are shaped by the demand of political parties and their own evaluations of the candidates their parties have selected in the past (Chapman 1993, Krook 2010).

Gendering Criteria

The foregoing discussion highlights the shortcomings of a "supply-side" focus on women's purported lack of self-confidence, their extra burden of household chores, and the social and cultural norms that prevent them from fully entering the public sphere.

This section continues to focus on how elite decision-makers control access to political office, by highlighting the composition of selection committees and the pervasive influence of informal definitions of "qualifications," which, in the absence of accepted formal criteria, contour candidate selection towards senior, male leadership.

Local-level initiatives like that of the UM in Syangja above, which focused on internal ward selection processes in order to better understand "ground-level" realities, appear to point to the positive benefits of decentralization. This particular UM had also used application forms that included work experience, and held interviews with candidates. Scholars have suggested that women benefit from formal processes like these, because they prioritize objective rules and qualifications over favors, kinship, friendship, and other informal relations (Kopecky and Mair 2012: 6, Lovenduski and Norris 1993).

However, this example of a formal process was an exception in this study, and the absence of strict and detailed recruitment procedures clearly fostered informal measures based on subjective criteria and personal preferences. Studies have argued that local selection draws on local networks and patronage systems that are male-dominated and favor established party members, thereby exacerbating gendered and exclusionary dynamics (Bjarnegård 2013, Kenny 2013). Thus, decentralization does not automatically lead to more inclusive candidate selection, and attention must be paid to the composition of the selectors and the various dimensions of exclusion (Rahat and Hazan 2001, Hinojosa 2012).

Fundamentally, executive committees at the ward, *gaun*, *nagar*, area, and district levels continue to be dominated by men, regardless of political faction. Earlier quantitative research into women in local political posts in selected provinces found that just 8 percent of selection committees were women (Yale and the Governance Lab 2019: 2), although this was not disaggregated according to the different levels through which the candidate-selection process flows. Descriptions by district political members of the composition of selection committees invariably noted the presence of senior political party members, including former elected officials and ranking party members in the area. When asked for names of who exactly would be included in such discussions in Dolakha, UML interviewees listed known political leaders. All of them were men. As a perceptive male NC *nagar* chair in a UM in Jhapa noted, women are not in any important posts in the party, and "for mayor, the committee will nominate a man because they are all men."

This is made clear by the criteria used by party leaders for recruitment and selection of candidates. Desirable characteristics listed by interviewees included: loyalty to the party, sacrifice, dedication, trustworthiness, measurable investment in the party, important contributions made to the party (including doing work assigned by the party), popularity, and ability to attract votes. Some of these clearly align with officially listed criteria. For example, candidate-selection guidelines in the NC party constitution include active party membership and involvement in NC activities, including campaigning for NC candidates, involvement in social development work, actively promoting

party positions, and having good relations with the public.[16]

Feminists have pointed out that seemingly neutral criteria "shape perceptions as to who is a 'qualified' or 'desirable' candidate" (Krook 2010: 712) and lead to the selection of certain types of gendered bodies. In the Nepali context, vague, formal priniciples enable the entrance of long-established informal criteria. For example, the NC area chair of Surkhet explained investment in the party not in terms of money, but as "those whose life has been in the party, they've participated in *andolans* [movements], they've been jailed for democracy, beaten by police." This was widely reiterated by others. Political scientist Krishna Hachhethu (2002) argued that in Nepal, political parties originated in democratic movements, and therefore place a premium on political struggle and sacrifice in the recruitment of leadership and perceive a "leader" as a great man or heroic personality. It is evident that 20 years later the same criteria retain validity in political recruitment, although increasingly outweighed in importance by business and economic factors.

Further, criteria of seniority, loyalty, investment in the party, and sacrifice and dedication invariably tilt the balance toward those who currently wield the most power—the older generation of male politicians who struggled against the monarchy before the 1990 establishment of democracy and have been involved in the party for decades. This contributes to a dynamic in which "male party chairs expressed a consistent preference for traits associated with themselves" (Niven 1998: 73) in a screening process relying

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16   See https://api.nepalicongress.org/uploads/party-constitution/pdf/ncparty-con-
      stitution2967538613203-1603903756953.pdf.

on subjective judgements of "acceptability" to decide whether
the aspirant is "one of us" (Norris and Lovenduski 1995: 238).
Insofar as seniority is prioritized over merit, as at the national
level (see for example Ghimire 2016),[17] the potential entrance
of younger candidates, possibly more open to political change, is
limited. Thus, there is a risk that the new local political spaces will
continue to be led by the established order of older, male, high-
caste political elite. This was well understood by the NC *nagar*
chair in a UM in Syangja, who when describing the need for
candidates to have made contributions to the party, rhetorically
asked, "So how can we get new people?"

These criteria have clear repercussions for women. Given the
gendered organization of social life, men will have had longer
and more visible political careers and more opportunities to
gain influence and build political networks, even as women
have historically played equally valuable, but less visible, roles
in political movements in Nepal (Acharya 1994, Panday 2019).
These achievements are all the more remarkable given that
women have done this despite a political party culture in Nepal,
as elsewhere, that is masculinized in its structuring of long, late,
and geographically distant meetings and work demands that
conflict with the domestic responsibilities of women (Franceschet
2005, Verge 2015).

Interviewed men were aware of these obstacles to the participation
of women. The UML *nagar* committee coordinator in Kailali

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17   The election of relatively younger people into the central committee of the Ne-
      pali Congress may presage some changes. See https://kathmandupost.com/pol-
      itics/2021/12/17/the-young-turks-of-congress.

emphasized that Nepali culture did not allow a woman to just walk around in public (and therefore work for the public at all hours and gain public prominence and favor), and that the household rested on her shoulders. He stated, "The husband comes and eats *bhat* [rice] and goes." It was in this context that the deputy mayor of a UM in Surkhet was widely commended by interviewees for her performance as head of the municipality in the extended absence of the mayor, with descriptions of very masculine attributes: she spoke well, went everywhere, and participated broadly and actively.

In a related point, men are also more likely to have been given the opportunity to shoulder responsibility and do "the work given to the party," especially in terms of political posts. For example, in a UM in Surkhet, the relatively young NC mayoral candidate was not only stated to be popular (one of the very few times the term was referenced in interviews regarding candidate selection), but had been *nagar* secretary twice and chair of the youth wing, thus fulfilling key criteria such as service to the party, loyalty, trustworthiness, and experience. According to the NC *nagar* chair in Jhapa, the emphasis on previous positions as a requirement for the party's ticket held true across political parties and was a source of significant discontent within the party.

The gendered implications of these widespread practices are evident. Women are less likely to be nominated by parties because they are less likely to have the experience, networks, and access to resources to win. With circular logic, this then denies them the political careers that would enable them to accumulate this experience as well as to build networks and election funds.

For example, members of parliament in Nepal have admitted to money-making activities of dubious legality to recover costs from past elections and to finance their next election bid (Thapa 2002: 45). In the local context, the executive post of mayor is valuable as it offers access to resources that not only bolster power but sustain patronage networks. Quotas have allowed a large number of women to win elected office, but there are very few holding executive positions.[18] This limits their ability to gain entry to, network, and leverage politically important economic and patronage relations.

An important informal dimension of candidate recruitment is that fluency in the Nepali language—and a certain "high" form of Nepali at that—favored for speeches and rallies, preselects certain types of gendered candidates and disadvantages other types of men, including Janjatis and people from the Madhesh. It is telling that female candidates, including some running for deputy mayor, have been criticized because they "cannot speak;" a criticism internalized by women in politics themselves.

In general, the "unsuitability" of these women results from standards favoring "masculine" norms and qualities, which privilege the criteria, traits, and experience disproportionately held by the male, high-caste, political elite. As feminist theorist Meryl Kenny states, "[F]emale candidates often fail to be selected not because they are less "qualified," but because of the way in which the necessary "qualifications" for political office are defined" (Kenny 2013: 158). All of this reproduces the hegemony of "high caste" men.

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18   Only 18 mayors/chairpersons are women.

Networks of Power

Most of the existing analyses related to the power of deputy mayors have been tied to the issue of capacity,[19] long raised by reports on women in politics (Jagaran Nepal 2007, Renaissance Society et al. 2009). However, the focus on the possession of resources (capacity and qualifications) leaves untouched the issue of connections and relationships, which affect both resources and the ability to effectively utilize those resources. Beginning with an outline of the formal institutional framework, this section traces the complex, multilevel networks involved in the functioning of political parties in general and candidate-selection processes and criteria in particular, and considers their impact on the reproduction of men's dominance and the ability of elected officials to fulfill their roles.

The Local Governance Operational Act centers authority in the mayor as both chief executive of the local government and head of the local municipal council—a "blended authority," according to senior constitutional expert Surya Dhungel (Dhungel 2017). This concentrates power, including budget decisions and staff apointments, in the hands of the mayor.[20] According to a

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19   See for example Capacity Building Project for Elected Women Representatives and Functionaries (2018–2019), by Women Act, http://www.women-act.org.np/projects/capacity-building-project-for-elected-women-representatives-and-functionaries-2018-2019/.

20   While much attention has been given to the fact that deputy mayors head the budget and planning committee, this overlooks the fact that the mayor has the official authority to appoint members to that committee and that another committee related to the budget, headed by mayor, also exists, which undermines the power of the deputy mayor.

politician in Khotang, the municipal head is institutionally equivalent to the nation's prime minister. While the powers of the deputy mayor are substantial and separate from those of the mayor, encroachment on these powers and duties by the mayor has been widely reported, and research has revealed the general exclusion of deputy mayors from meaningful participation, and varying degrees of collusion between male mayors, CAOs, and ward chairs while making key decisions (Tamang 2018). In general, however, the power hierarchy in local government is assumed to have the mayor at the top, followed by the deputy mayor, then perhaps by the CAO, and finally by the ward chairs, each of equal standing.

Multilevel Settings

In the context of male-dominated patrimonial traditions and patron-client relations, and the specific manner in which electoral tickets are filled, it is obvious that even while examining municipal-level politics, attention must be given to the central role played by political actors at the national and provincial levels as well. Interviews revealed that non-local party leaders are significant players in the local power structures. For example, in the UM in Palpa, the federal MP was identified as the most powerful politician in the municipality, while in a UM in Jhapa, the prime minister at the time, K.P. Oli, who is from Jhapa, and the provincial assembly member were named as the first- and second-most powerful.

Indeed, some interviewees pointed out that given the nature of the candidate-selection process, the actual power to make local decisions does not truly reside with local elected officials. For

example, in a UM in Khotang, it was claimed that the deputy
mayor had been placed on the ticket by political leader Sherdhan
Rai, who later became the chief minister of Province 1, and
therefore that "power remains with him [Rai]." Similarly, in a UM
in western Rukum, it was said of the mayor that he was "himself
not powerful…he is directed from above." For that municipality,
it was asserted that the Maoist leader Janardan Sharma gave the
orders, with a key role played by his relative,[21] who, while only a
ward chair, was said to wield the most power in the municipality.
A Maoist leader explained that the ability to control candidates,
and thus elected officials, also played a role in candidate selection.
For example, of the selection of one provincial chief minister, it
was relayed that there were many more capable people, but that
this person had been selected because he was of junior status and
would be easier to control.

Unsurprisingly, given the nature of political networks, access
to political party figures beyond the municipal level was clearly
important for local actors. For example, in a UM in Dolakha, the
mayor was said to be close to federal minister Parbat Gurung. In
a UM in Palpa, the mayor was said to have a strong relationship
with federal MP Som Prasad Pandey from the same political
party, and in a UM in Surkhet, interviewees emphasized that
the mayor was close to former minister and current federal MP
Purna Bahadur Khadka, the Nepali Congress general secretary.
In a UM in Syangja, the Ward 13 chair, despite being a member
of the opposition in the municipal council, was said to be the

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21   While important, the role of family connections and networks is not discussed
      in this paper.

second-most powerful ward chair in the municipality because his party was leading the federal government and because he hailed from the same area as Padma Aryal, a federal minister.

There appeared to be tangible benefits to such connections. Access to those with power in the party was frequently cited as bolstering the positions of political actors. For example, in a UM in Surkhet, the Ward 4 chair was said to have become increasingly powerful as his ties to former prime minister Jhalanath Khanal grew stronger. In the same UM, the UML candidate for chair of Ward 16 lost the election but was nominated by his party to the municipal council and is now seen as more powerful in development activities in his ward than the ward chair who actually won. All of these examples point to the need to pay attention to the changing nature of political power and alliances within parties and the complex, multilevel settings in which parties operate.

The importance of political networks for ward chairs was also evident. Along with connections to national politicians, the power of ward chairs at the local level was invariably linked to "closeness" to the mayor or deputy mayor. For example, almost all development workers described the power of the ward chair as varying with how "close" he was to the mayor or deputy mayor. In a UM in Palpa, the chairs of Wards 3, 5, and 10 were said to be powerful as a result of being close to the mayor, while the same was said of the chairs of Wards 7 and 9 in a UM in Surkhet. The deputy mayor was also said to have these kinds of connections. In a UM in Syangja, the mayor is said to favor the Ward 11 chair, while the deputy mayor tilts towards the Ward 1 chair, who is also the spokesperson of the municipality. In a UM in Surkhet,

the highest-ranking ward chair was reported to be close to the deputy mayor. It is more common, however, for these important linkages to be with the mayor than with the deputy mayor.

Political Criteria and Undermining Legitimacy

The foregoing highlights the continuing importance of networks established or strengthened by the process of candidate selection and reconfigured in local governments. Examination of the formal and informal criteria that define "qualified" candidates reveals how the priorities of political parties and their leaders further impacts the functioning of municipalities.

More specifically, interviews revealed that the prioritization of seniority in political parties affects how municipalities are structured and function. For example, in a UM in Dolakha, the chair of Ward 4 was given the post of municipal spokesperson as compensation for not receiving the mayoral ticket even though he was more senior than the eventual winner. The seniority of the Ward 3 chair of a UM in Surkhet was ignored, and he allegedly attended only 20 percent of municipal council meetings and hardly any others, because he was more senior than the mayor but felt he was not accorded due respect.

These dynamics suggest that party status is often prioritized over effectiveness in fulfilling the duties of elected office. The example above of the Ward 3 chair from Surkhet also indicates that such political priorities may detrimentally affect policymaking, the delivery of goods and services, and overall benefits to the community at large. Furthermore, the case of the municipal council member in the same UM, now seen as more powerful in

the ward than the Ward 16 chair to whom he lost the election,
raises the issue of the delegitimizing of the will of the voters.

The role of factions in local governance was also evident—
unsurprisingly, given the manner in which electoral tickets
prioritized factional divides. In a UM in Dolakha, for example,
while both the mayor and the deputy mayor were from the
same party, the deputy mayor's faction had received fewer votes
than the mayor's at the party convention, thereby bolstering the
mayor's position in municipal politics. In a UM in Kailali, the
chairs of Wards 1, 2, and 8 are all allies of the mayor, who belongs
to the same party faction. A similar factional alliance is said to
prevail between the deputy mayor and the chair of Ward 4.

These "close" relationships have real political consequences. For
example, in a UM in Kailali, the mayor is said to act "boldly" only
in consultation with the chairs of Wards 1, 2, and 8, relying on
them to back his proposals in the municipal council. In a UM in
Jhapa, the Ward 1 and Ward 7 chairs are described as the mayor's
"left and right hand," and he is said to make no decisions without
their input. In a UM in Palpa, the mayor has close relationships
with several ward chairs, especially the chair of Ward 11, and he
solicits advice and suggestions from him, including in relation to
the budget.

Tellingly, these alliances are built not just along party and
faction lines, but among largely "high-caste" men. And there are
indications that these networks diminish the perceived status and
power of the deputy mayor, again highlighting the importance
of understanding these network relationships. For example, in

a UM in Palpa, the Ward 1 chair was said to view the deputy
mayor as irrelevant, as he had good relations with the mayor. In
a UM in Khotang, the Ward 4 chair was said to be close to the
mayor due to similar business interests, and despite only being a
ward chair he was ranked higher in power then the deputy mayor
by interviewees. In a rural municipality in Sudhar Paschim, the
mayor has delegated authority in his absence to a male ward
chair rather than the deputy mayor as prescribed in the Local
Governance Operational Act. There is evident a shaping and re-
shaping of male clientelist networks within local government
structures.

There seem to be some exceptions, however. The role of
majoritarian politics was clear in a UM in Surkhet where the
mayor's party is in the minority. The deputy mayor, from the
majority party, was said to hold informal strategy sessions with
allied ward chairs before municipal council meetings in order to
pass measures that the mayor opposed. At these meetings, the
chairs of Wards 4 and 11 would offer proposals that the chairs of
Wards 2 and 10 would immediately support. Important to note
is that given that the Deputy Mayor was stated to seek the inputs
of the unelected party leader, said to be the third most powerful
actor in the municipality, rather than her own initiatives, it
appears that party directives were being followed.

That this deputy mayor requested guidance from the party
leader indicates that party networks are an accepted resource,
although it is unclear whether the deputy mayor received just
instruction or some level of mentoring. Regardless, the utility
of this relationship for women elected representatives, who tend

to have less experience with the state bureaucracy and politics in general, is apparent.[22]

Indeed, according to a Maoist political leader, party support for women in positions of power is essential for them to fulfill their duties. She stated, for example, that it is actually easier for women to get support when the mayor and deputy mayor are from different parties, because the political party of the female deputy mayor will give full-fledged support to their party member. Such support is difficult if the mayor and the deputy mayor are from the same party, because the party is more likely to encourage the two to get along and to discount the concerns of the deputy mayor. These dynamics were evident in a UM in Achaam, where a deputy mayor from the Maoist party stated that she had filed an official complaint to the party about her fellow party member, the mayor, and his authoritarian activities, including his insistence that she follow his orders. Her requests for a meeting to discuss these issues had been ignored, and she had not spoken to the mayor in over three years. She remarked that "when you put things to the party, the leaders are also men." The importance of party support for women in and out of office seems clear, as does the prioritization of the gendered party hierarchy over local legitimacy and the fulfilling of elected duties.

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22   The Maoist leader stated that a weak chain of command in the political party had resulted in a lack of discipline and thus increased the dependence of elected officials and others on those they get along with rather than on the party hierarchy. It is unclear whether the reference was only to the Maoist party or to political party dynamics in general. Regardless, this further underlines the importance of understanding how candidates received party electoral tickets, as this has implications for relational networks of power.

Tracing Dynamics

While some local governments may follow the formal hierarchy—
the mayor at the top, followed by the deputy mayor, the CAO, and
then the ward chairs—the preceding analysis of the intersection
of formal and informal networks of power points to different
configurations of power in different contexts. For example, in
a UM in Bara, the mayor is followed by the CAO in the power
rankings and only then by the deputy mayor. In a UM in Kailali,
the CAO and the chairs of Wards 1, 2, and 8 are all ranked higher
than the deputy mayor. The ranking in a UM in Jhapa provides
a reminder to take into account the multilevel settings in which
political parties operate and their impact on the power matrix of
municipalities; there, the deputy mayor is ranked fourth in power
after the PM, the provincial assembly member, and the mayor.

All of these political networks have gendered implications, given
the predominantly male networks among the different layers
of government and within parties and factions, all of which are
being actively (re)configured at the local levels. The informal
political institution of clientelism—defined as "the exchange
of personal favors for political support"—operates within male
networks and maintains and reinvents male dominance in
numerous different ways (Bjarnegård 2013). This is evident in
the new local government institutions in Nepal. More attention
to the relational context will provide a better understanding
of the various networks that obstruct flows of information;
highlight where coordination, cooperation, or trust is fragile; and
reveal the political processes in which informal rules run counter
to formal institutions and who actually controls the balance of

power when multiple levels of organization are involved (Heaney
and McClurg 2009: 729–730).

The first local elections in the new federal system were a moment
of opportunity, but they also held two key challenges, according
to respondents. One was the limited time frame for candidate
selection: many interviewees were of the opinion that the process
had been rushed,[23] especially given the need in some cases to send
candidate lists to the center for final approval. Some respondents
said the short time frame combined with the layered nature
of approvals created opportunities for interference by central
political elites. For example, the UML *nagar* committee chair
in Jhapa stated that the last-minute announcement of electoral
tickets made it difficult to reject candidates imposed by the
political leaders, due to the rush to begin campaigning. The
upcoming 2022 local elections will be an opportunity to assess
how much these dynamics have changed and the impact they will
have on the selection of male and female candidates.

Although there has always been competition among many
for limited election seats, the second challenge identified by
politicians in UMs in Jhapa and Syangja emerges from the 20-
year absence of local elections which created a "backlog" of people
who felt entitled to an elective office due to their "investments" in
the party and their established political reputations. Regular local
elections could have accommodated this old guard, making way

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23   The media reported that last-minute finalization of candidates had resulted in
      the major parties suffering setbacks in the first phase of the local elections in
      2017 (Pradhan 2017b). Delays in candidate selection were also reported for the
      final round of local elections in Province 2 (Madhesh) (MyRepublica 2017).

today for younger politicians who, according to the UML *nagar* committee chair in Jhapa, are more popular, and according to the UML nagar committee member in Syangja, more social-media savvy and better able to connect to constituents. One politician estimated that two more cycles of local elections were needed to erase this accumulated backlog and make room for a new generation of young politicians.

While this is insightful, it is clear that the "backlog" mentioned above is in fact a backlog of older men. And it is unclear to what extent these elite, male, political gatekeepers include women in their idea of the "new generation" given the gendered notions of entitlement. More work is needed to understand how "neutral" political institutions and practices are embedded in formal and informal rules that privilege and empower men, naturalizing and normalizing their power advantages. This is especially so because the candidate-selection terrain has a clear impact on local government legitimacy and the ability of elected officials to fulfill their formal roles and deliver goods and services to citizens.

Gulzar et al. (2021) have shown that Nepali party leaders will change their choices of candidates when presented with voter preferences and rankings, and that this can improve the party's electoral performance. While suggesting some ways forward, this particular study in Kailali District is limited by the fact that it focuses only on one district and examines only ward-level elections, which as we have discussed, are less targeted for interference by senior, central-level politicians. The study also misses the internal party politics that shape how electoral tickets are disseminated. More specifically, as a Maoist politician pointed

out, the established candidate-selection processes enable party leaders to secure member support for their own future elections and agendas. It must be remembered that party members are the true constituency of party leaders and must be kept happy and secure.[24] And those who have secured candidate tickets and are now further enmeshed in patronage networks and clientelist relations, once they are victorious in the polls, must be judicious in the ways they exert power in electoral office. There is a circularity here in the structuring and restructuring of men's hegemony.

Finally, it is important to underscore that it is party priorities—rewards, compensation, hierarchy, and control—and not necessarily popularity with voters, competence, and qualifications that principally shape the selection of candidates for municipal office. These dynamics have implications for the delegitimization of people's votes; for law, policymaking, and service delivery; for the downward accountability of officials and institutions, and for the perpetuation of clientelist relations.

Possible Ways Forward

For Development Partners

- **Focus on the three stages of a political career.** Donor attention to female deputy mayors (and ward members) has focused predominantly on the last stage of a political career,

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24   Offers of high government posts to party members are part and parcel of the balancing act that party leaders must engage in to keep peace in the party given the limited number of posts available for new aspirants. See for example Ghimire 2021.

the ascension to elected office. But there are three stages that
deserve attention: the transition from eligible to aspiring
candidate, as women decide to run for office; the transition
from aspiring to actual candidate, as women are chosen to run
by their parties; and, finally, the transition from candidate to
officeholder, as women are elected to office by the voters (Di
Meco n.d.: 12).

- **Invest in research,** such as:
  o   Nationwide voter preference and ranking surveys;
  o   Detailed surveys of campaign financing;
  o   Assessments of gender and inclusion in the political parties,
      to enable evidence-based, party-specific interventions;
  o   Comparative studies of the gender and social-inclusion
      composition of political party executive committees at
      the ward, *gaun*, *nagar*, area, district, province and central
      levels.

- **Support cross-party alliances to push for internal party
  reforms**. Networks already exist that can be built upon, such
  as the Inter Party Women's Alliance.

- **Support networks uniting past and present deputy
  mayors,** to allow newly elected deputy mayors to learn from
  their predecessors, and to serve as a political network for
  those building their political careers.
  o   These networks could be used to build connections
      with senior party leaders—including women, Janajatis,
      Madhesis, Dalits, etc.—which would enable regular
      guidance and mentoring.

- o These networks could also be used to build stronger and more meaningful connections within women's wings of political parties.

- **Strengthen alternative forms of organizing and leadership.**
  - o Particularly important would be to build leadership skills and political capacities among young and non-elite women and members of excluded groups, who may be more open to changing the dominant political culture.

For Political Parties

- Adhere to the actual processes and procedures outlined in party constitutions for the selection of candidates at all levels.

- Use application forms and interviews for candidate selection, and form inclusive committees to vet potential candidates.

- Stipulate detailed, clear, and unambiguous criteria for the recruitment of electoral candidates for each level of government.

- Ensure 33 percent representation of women in executive committees at all levels.

- Recruit, train, and actively promote women, especially from excluded groups, using a publicly established quota.

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