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Political Empowerment is not the Same as Gender Equality

By: Trishna Rana

As tens of thousands of Nepalis queued up at voting booths on Sunday for the first local elections in almost 20 years, a great deal of attention was focused on how women would perform. There is tangible hope that close to 40 percent of future mayors, deputy mayors and village council chiefs could be women, a marked improvement from their current position. There are zero women Chief District Officers across 75 districts of Nepal and less than two percent of Local Development Officers are women.

Nepal is considered the most progressive country in South Asia in terms of women's political participation and presence in public life. After emerging from a decade long war, the country recorded a massive surprise during the 2008 elections for the Constituent Assembly (CA) by electing more than 33 percent women into the national parliament. This number fell to 30 percent in the second CA polls in 2013. Currently, the president, chief justice of the supreme court, speaker of the house, and election commissioner in Nepal are all women. The new constitution guarantees 33 percent quota for women at all levels of government. The Local Level Election Act passed in 2017 stipulates that all political parties nominate at least 50 percent women for key positions.

As important as it is to have greater number of women in public office, the conflation of women's political empowerment with overall gender progress is problematic for a number of reasons. First, not all women leaders are interested or know how to fight for feminist causes. In the case of the subcontinent, where nepotism is so rampant within political circles, speaking out against senior leaders or against the status-quo can cost women and men their jobs. Not surprisingly, even with high female representation, Nepal's first CA managed to pass a draft bill



with discriminatory citizenship provisions that would put single mothers and their children at grave risk. Women parliamentarians found it easier to follow the party whip. Second, women who actively take part in national politics often have to battle against structural barriers such as the division of labor within their families. Nepali women leaders worry about how long they can carry on with their public work given the dual burden they face: having to take care of their families and fulfill their political responsibilities equally well. Finally, while women in Nepal and across the world shatter the glass ceiling of politics, the field remains a firm bastion of male privilege. Women leaders face higher degree of violence and harassment than their male counterparts during their campaign trails and during time in office. In countries where there is a strict segregation in male and female spaces, women politicians are at a great disadvantage because they cannot openly socialize and network or their social reputation is at risk for sharing spaces with men.

While governments and development organizations must continue to promote and support women into taking up public roles, women's political empowerment will remain incomplete until these inherent biases and structural challenges are also addressed.

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