

# Breaking barriers: Nepali female leaders driving change

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Kathmandu's Deputy Mayor Sunita Dangol launches "Textbook-free Friday", an initiative to replace morning lessons with learning essential life skills in Kathmandu's public schools.

Photo Credit: [Facebook/KathmanduMetropolitan](#)

A silent revolution is unfolding across Nepal. 568 women were elected as deputy mayors or vice chairs during the 2022 local government elections. They are now challenging long-entrenched gender norms, making executive decisions and ensuring women's voices are heard where they were once ignored. Yet their work receives little recognition from national policymakers or international development partners and a glass ceiling persists, with only a much smaller percentage of women being elected to lead local governments.

A year ago, we met Helambu Rural Municipality Vice Chair Aspara Lamichhane in the mountainous district of Sindhupalchowk in central Nepal. At a local tea shop near the Melamchi River, she described how she championed community resilience, focusing on neglected women's issues:

*I have become a counsellor for women traumatised first by the flood and then by domestic violence. Women needed an official who listens, empathises, and helps — I try to be that person.*

Her leadership was vital. The devastating 2021 Melamchi river flood wiped out homes, farms and livelihoods. Women, disproportionately affected, struggled with mental health crises. Her swift, empathetic actions helped many cope. But she didn't stop there.

*As a woman and a flood victim, I stood at the United Nations Climate Change COP28 to amplify the voices of women in my*

*community — women who have lost everything and are still fighting for dignity.*

Her journey mirrors a broader transformation brought about by women leaders across Nepal. They are turning local governance into a force for gender justice, advocating for overlooked communities and reshaping power dynamics. In Bajhang, a district in far western Nepal, a former Vice Chairperson of Thalara Rural Municipality educated women on government services, formed community groups, and facilitated alternative employment for marginalised Gandharva and Badi communities, helping them transition to dignified trades like masonry, and to small businesses.

In Dupcheshwor Rural Municipality in Nuwakot district, just north of the nation's capital Kathmandu, a former female Vice Chair **established a women's network** to facilitate skills training and entrepreneurship. Programs to train women to make reusable sanitary pads and handicrafts were paired with bank partnerships for low-interest loans, empowering dozens of women.

Health care is another sector where women leaders are making transformative changes. In Fikkal Rural Municipality in far eastern Nepal, a Vice Chairperson — who subsequently became the Chairperson — has **led a healthcare revolution**. Institutional delivery rates surged from 10% to 75% under her leadership. Free uterine health check-ups have improved women's well-being, underscoring how women leaders are uniquely attuned to gender-specific challenges.

Beyond their executive roles, women deputy mayors also chair municipal justice committees — the first point of contact for citizens seeking justice in property disputes, domestic violence cases and other legal matters. These committees provide a critical lifeline for women who might otherwise be silenced. Women-led committees encourage greater participation of women and better outcomes.

Nepal's local governance system comprises 753 local entities, including metropolitan cities, municipalities and rural municipalities. Women account for **41% of elected representatives**, with 14,466 women elected to office during the 2022 local government elections. These outcomes are rooted in legal mandates. Article 38(4) of Nepal's Constitution ensures women's proportional inclusion in all state bodies. The Local Level Election Act of 2017 requires political parties to nominate a woman candidate for either mayor or deputy mayor positions, or Chair or Vice Chair positions in the case of rural municipalities, to support inclusive representation. (It should be noted, however, that a loophole has resulted in lower rates of female

candidates than initially expected due to parties being able to waive the requirement if they are only contesting one position.)

The change is not just legal — it is cultural. A once-unimaginable scene is now common: a woman in a traditional saree, seated at the head of a municipal office, confidently directing budget allocations. These moments signal a shift in power dynamics, but the journey towards true gender equity remains unfinished.

The gender gap **is still widely recognised** as a major challenge with a new form of gender bias emerging — one that acknowledges women's presence in politics but confines them to supporting roles. Just consider: women hold 75% of deputy mayor and vice-chairperson positions but **only 3.32% of mayoral and chairperson roles**. Political parties often reserve deputy positions for women while keeping top roles for men, reinforcing the stereotype that women are **secondary leaders** rather than decision-makers.

Economic barriers restrict women's political participation. Campaigning is expensive, and male candidates often have greater access to financial resources, making it difficult for women to compete equally. A study by Dr. Mahendra Sapkota, "**Political Leadership of Women in Nepal: A Critical Observation from the Local Elections 2022**", highlights four key challenges which sideline women, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds: gender bias, economic disparity, the commercialisation of politics and the misuse of proportional representation.

Women leaders in Nepal are demonstrating exceptional resilience, proving that gender-equitable governance is not just possible but necessary. Their work, however, remains underappreciated by media, policymakers, and development programs that claim to support gender inclusion.

Systemic reforms are essential. Women must have equal opportunities to contest and win elections — not just for reserved seats but for leadership roles at all levels. Legal mandates requiring parties to nominate women for deputy roles must evolve into action that creates pathways to top executive leadership positions. This will not happen automatically — women executive leaders must come together as a national network — using the power of social media. Development partners supporting gender equity in Nepal can assist by responding to the needs of these women leaders for learning and capacity building. An important step is to expose the "deputisation" of women leadership. Finally, there must be a cross-sectoral alliance of women leaders working across the media, political parties, the bureaucracy, academia and business to help shift perspectives.

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While there is a long way to go, what Nepal has achieved to date is not just a story of women's participation in politics — it is a story of transformation. These leaders are not merely filling quotas but reshaping governance, advocating for justice and setting new precedents for gender equality. It is time to recognise, support, and scale up these efforts. Women leaders are already driving change. Now, they need the resources and recognition to take their impact even further. There is also much to learn from the case of Nepal for gender equality across South Asia and beyond.

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