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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Do political quotas work? Gender quotas and women's political participation in Nepal

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This article presents an investigation into the lives and lived experiences of women who joined politics through quotas. In particular, it explores the transformative potential of a quota policy through the 'subject position' of women politicians in Nepal, especially those who had no prior background in politics before being elected to their first political positions. Using Bourdieu's theory of capital, I reveal how political quotas have strengthened women's overall capital, allowing them to improve their position in both their families and society. Quotas have created new roles for women. The power and prestige attached to these new roles have not only offered some immediate changes to these women's lives, but also led to changing perceptions of women in politics, shifting the discourse from a view of women's participation in politics as an exception to one of it as an entitlement. This article is based on a qualitative study carried out with women politicians in Nepal.

Key words political quota • gender quotas • women in politics • political representation • political participation • Nepal

Key messages

- This study suggests that quota policies create new roles for women, or a new subject position that comes with a set of powers. The power and prestige attached to these political positions effect some immediate changes in women's lives (though these positions may initially appear symbolic in certain cases).
- The new roles of the women in such positions, which break with their traditional roles and give them the power to influence others, enable positive change in society, paving the way for future generations of political leaders.
- Despite the challenges, being a member of a political institution has given these women access to social capital, which would not have been possible otherwise.
- Political quotas not only accelerate women's representation in politics, but also strengthen their position in society. They establish women's credibility, pave the way for future generations and shift the social perception of women's presence in politics from being an exception to being an entitlement. Hence, although legislative change may not be an immediate outcome for women with no prior experience in politics, it is inevitable as they gain experience in their new roles.

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Introduction

Women's increasing participation in politics worldwide is mirrored by the growing scholarship on gender and politics (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008; Clayton et al, 2017; Childs and Dahlerup, 2018; Corrêa and Chaves, 2020; Turnbull, 2022). Despite increasing interest in examining various aspects of quota policies, the question of the effectiveness of quotas seems to have dominated the gender and quota debate thus far. The question of 'representation' seems to be central to gender and politics scholarship. Initial studies on women's representation in politics focused on so-called 'descriptive representation' and scrutinised the 'activities' of elected women representatives. In recent years, especially in the past decade, there has been an increasing focus on 'substantive representation', that is, the 'actions' of women representatives and their ability to make claims (O'Brien and Rickne, 2016; Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2017; Mastracci, 2017; Weeks, 2018; Jankowski and Marcinkiewicz, 2019; Lu, 2020). Although these overly simplified binary categories (that is, descriptive versus substantive representation) may have made it easier to understand the very complex, dynamic and unique experiences of women representatives in a black-and-white fashion, this divide is problematic in many ways. First, it suggests patriarchy as a main problem and yet reinforces 'patriarchal standards' for measuring effectiveness (that is, the indicators of effectiveness being women's ability to make claims, the presence of women in leadership positions and women's access to finance), thus undermining the very agenda of gender equality in politics. Second, it reinforces the notion of women as victims and dismisses each woman as an agent of change, regardless of her background. Third, it undermines women's contributions and makes them invisible, rendering them descriptive and unworthy of attention.

Moreover, because of a focus on effectiveness that is tied to a narrowly defined substantive representation, which often means women's ability to influence decisions, their ability to enact new legislation/bills or their ability to make a claim, women's contributions and influence outside of these institutions are not recognised. In fact, women may be unable to influence a decision in an institutional setting because of a number of factors (not necessarily because of their capacity or merit), though they may be making significant contributions to society. However, current theorising on substantive representation either does not recognise such contributions or renders them descriptive. This reductive approach to assessing women's contributions also raises an important methodological question about the ontological position of the researcher and epistemology of the research.

Scholars have previously noted the ontological and epistemological limitations of the current 'mainstream political science'. For instance, Robbie Shilliam (2021: 18) argues that 'political science is formed as a discipline from imperial heritages and with abiding colonial logics', and Kantola and Lombardo (2017: 325) argue that feminists have continued this tradition to gain recognition within 'mainstream political science', and in the process of being accepted or recognised, they have reproduced their 'own hegemonies and marginalisations'. This phenomenon can be found both in the methodological approaches to inquiring into political subjects (that is, the dominance

of the positivist approach) and the current theorisation of political successes/achievements. Such evidence-based scholarship, which stands against what feminists have advocated for, not only misses the important nuances, but also marginalises other forms of scholarship, while reinforcing (Western) hegemonies in the field of gender and politics (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). Childs and Lovenduski (2013: 493) remind us that ‘gender and politics scholarship is characterised not only by its dominant feminism but also its common concern to conceptualise representation in such a way that its practice can be systematically assessed’; and yet experiences that are complex and difficult to assess are left out of the debate or described as a messy reality.

In this article, I am interested in exploring the lives and lived experiences of women in politics, their messy realities, and their multiple stories of successes and achievements – stories that are marginalised in the current gender and politics literature. To explore the journey of women politicians in Nepal, I adopt Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital, which enables me to investigate the fluidity of experiences and the impacts of quotas beyond political institutions. It also enables me to explore – without entering into the structure and agency debate – women’s accounts of the impacts they have made on their communities and to examine their effectiveness through their diverse stories and lived realities, without having to justify this effectiveness with numbers. Bourdieu’s theory of capital helps me examine the everyday lives of these women politicians, who are not simply at the mercy of the patriarchy; their experience in politics depends on their overall capital, which is contextual, dynamic and relational (Bourdieu, 1985; 1986).

This study suggests that a quota policy creates new roles for women, or a new subject position that comes with a set of powers. The power and prestige attached to these political positions effect some immediate changes in women’s lives (though their positions may initially appear symbolic in certain cases). In addition, the new roles of the women in such positions, which break with their traditional roles and give them the power to influence others, enable positive change in society, paving the way for future generations of political leaders.

This article makes three important contributions. First, it contributes to gender and quota scholarship by examining the transformative potential of political quotas beyond political institutions/offices, a topic that has been overlooked and under-studied (Baldez, 2006; Krook, 2006). Second, it contributes to our knowledge of gender and politics in Nepal, a highly contested but under-investigated subject. Third, it enriches our understanding of diversity beyond intersectionality discourse and raises questions about our own approaches to studying political subjects.

Methodology

The article is based on my ongoing research in Nepal. Over the past decade, I have interviewed 150 women and men politicians from the first Constituent Assembly (CA) election of 2008, the second CA election of 2013, the general election of 2017 and the local elections of 2017. In addition, I have had many informal conversations with women in governments from the local to the national level, including conversations with my own friends who have now achieved various political positions in Nepal. Although my wider understanding of the local context and the continuous investigation of women’s involvement in politics inform my analysis, this article is based mainly on the analysis of 34 interviews (24 with women and ten with men) and two focus group discussions (FGDs) with politicians from provincial and local governments, the

majority of whom had no experience in formal politics prior to being elected to their posts in 2017. The fieldwork was carried out in two districts of Province 2, Siraha and Dhanusha, between December 2019 and January 2020. Follow-up interviews with ten women politicians were conducted in December 2021. Purposive sampling and snowballing techniques were used to identify the research participants. All ethical standards were ensured, consent was sought from all the research participants prior to their interviews and their participation was voluntary. Feminist standpoint theory provided the overarching methodological framework for this research, whereby women's experiences were at the centre of analysis, while attention was paid to the diversity of women in politics (Harding, 1987; 2004; Haraway, 1988; Hekman, 1997).

Of the 34 respondents, eight were members of provincial parliaments, six were deputy mayors and 20 were ward members of the local government. They represented different caste/ethnic groups, including Dalits (the lowest caste in the caste hierarchy). To maintain anonymity, I have used pseudonyms for all my research participants.

Theory of capital

According to Bourdieu (1986: 15), capital is:

accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. It is a *vis insita*, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but it is also a *lex insita*, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world.

In other words, the positions of individuals in a given social space at a given time depend on the capital that they have accumulated over time and the 'relative weight of the different kinds of assets within their total assets' (Bourdieu, 1985: 197). What this means is that people's experience may be different in different contexts due to the relative weight of the capital that they possess. For instance, a civil servant could have greater capital and may be able to exercise more power than a farmer in a society in which government jobs are valued more than farming.

Bourdieu's theory of capital is comprehensive, as it recognises all types of assets that an individual possesses, including social, cultural and economic capital, in both their embodied and material forms (Bourdieu, 1985; 1986). For Bourdieu, economic capital is cash or property that one has inherited or accumulated during one's lifetime through various means. The acquisition of cultural capital (both that acquired as family values and that learned through socialisation) depends on the individual and their circumstances (Bourdieu, 1986: 18). Social capital is an entitlement acquired by being a member of a group, such as belonging to a family or other kinship group, a political party, or a club. Social capital enables a person to exert power over the group or individuals. However, the social capital of an individual is reliant on the context of a particular social space and is irreducible to physical proximity. Moreover, social capital is not completely independent from cultural and economic capital because it presupposes a certain homogeneity (Bourdieu, 1986: 21).

Bourdieu's theory of capital is helpful for understanding the experiences of women politicians, as it enables us to navigate the interaction between structure and agency,

and to explore the dynamic but less tangible nuances that influence our experience in every social and political space. Thus, it helps explain why the experiences of women politicians are not homogeneous, even when they are working in the same male-dominated environment and even if all of them were able to enter politics because of quotas. The notion of capital also helps us understand not only the challenges faced by women politicians because of masculine domination and the patriarchal structure, but also the opportunities that their membership in these masculine institutions offers them. In other words, women's membership in male-dominated political institutions may be challenging, but it also offers social capital that opens up new possibilities for them. However, whether the same level of possibility is offered to all women politicians, and whether each of them benefits in the same way, depends on the overall capital of each individual and the underlying principles and norms of the social world to which they belong (Bourdieu, 1986). For instance, although women politicians in Nepal face many challenges because of the country's patriarchal culture and male domination in political institutions, if we break the social context down slightly, we start seeing that the experiences of a woman politician from the Madhesi community (people from the lowland, known as Terai/Madhesh), for example, differ from those of a woman politician from the Pahade community (people from the hills and the mountains, known as Pahad) because of their membership in different social groups, which gives them access to different social capital. Hence, in addition to the challenges that every woman politician may face, regardless of how they joined politics, certain women politicians face additional challenges because they belong to different social groups. This phenomenon is different from the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), as we are talking about capital and its relative weight, not the impacts of the intersecting identities. The capital possessed by women politicians determines what they can and cannot do, which may not always be because of patriarchy. Hence, capital theory enables us to understand that political space is an unequal space (constructed according to a masculine vision of the world [Nice and Bourdieu, 2001]), impacting people differently because of their differing personal capital, which is also reflected in the experiences of women politicians.

Although intersectionality theory seems indispensable in gender and politics scholarship, which justifies the decolonial feminist position, I have decided not to use it. Lived experiences are complex, and they are an outcome of not only intersecting identities, but also the overall capital of the subjects of experience. For instance, women who belong to the same caste, race, ethnicity or religion, or who have the same economic background, may still face different challenges due to their personal capital. Therefore, an intersectional perspective would not help capture the complexity of the challenges that these women face, especially in the context of Nepal.

Gender and political quotas

Political quotas for women, known as gender quotas, have become a popular mechanism to increase women's representation in politics. To date, 130 countries have adopted some form of political quota to increase women's representation in politics.¹ Although political quota legislation varies, there are currently three types of political quotas in practice: reserved seats, candidate quotas and political party quotas (Krook et al, 2009; Berry et al, 2020). Evidence shows that countries with political quotas have 25.6 per cent more women in politics on average than countries without quota provisions and that post-conflict countries have achieved rapid progress in improving

women's participation in politics (Tripp, 2016). For instance, women's participation in politics in Nepal has been transformed since a quota policy was adopted in 2008, increasing from less than 5 per cent in 2006 to approximately 33 per cent in 2008 at the national level. The 2017 local elections represented a major victory, as 41 per cent of those elected to local governments were women (Yadav, 2020).

Although gender quotas are among the most-debated policies, evidence from various countries suggests that such quotas have transformative effects beyond just 'the number' of women (Liu and Banaszak, 2017; Mastracci, 2017). A study that examines the effect of gender quotas on legislator experience in the European Parliament suggests that increased representation of women in legislative venues can 'not only open the door' or 'even the playing field' for elected women, but may also more broadly improve the quality of the representatives present in the legislature (Aldrich and Daniel, 2020: 171). Other studies establish causal links between political quotas and progressive policies. For instance, increased representation of women is associated with better governance (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2017), better democracy (Walsh, 2013) and increased attention to social justice (Weeks, 2018), and women's leadership is linked to gender-friendly institutional norms and organisational culture (Liu and Banaszak, 2017: 135). A study of 1,700 legislators in Argentina's subnational government suggests that electoral gender quotas transform parties, political networks and the way women (and men) perceive political office (Barnes and Holman, 2020). They argue that political quotas increase the diversity of women, in contrast to the arguments of previous studies (see also O'Brien and Rickne, 2016; Barnes and Holman, 2020). In addition, they assert that quotas change the way in which political parties operate and recruit, forcing them to change their eligibility pools. They also argue that quotas change not only women's representation in politics, but also men's representation (Barnes and Holman, 2020: 1284). The Taiwan case also suggests a correlation between quotas and an increase in women's participation, including a gradual increase in the pool of women candidates (Huang, 2015). Similarly, a study from Poland suggests that the gender quota there has a 'positive effect on candidate nomination and the number of elected female candidates' (Jankowski and Marcinkiewicz, 2019: 4).

A study conducted in eight countries in the Middle East suggests that 'the participation of women in politics alone was challenging the traditional norms of their role in society' (Lu, 2020: 398). This study suggests that electoral quotas promote the substantive – not only symbolic – representation of women in politics. However, it also claims that culture is more of a barrier than political institutions (Lu, 2020). Lihi Ben Shitrit (2016: 782), discussing the context of the Middle East, also argues that political quotas have a 'tremendous symbolic effect'. She asserts that political quotas help transform the perception of women in politics or their role in the political sphere. Tan (2015) claims that unlike Taiwan and South Korea (see Yoon and Shin, 2015), where the governments faced significant pressure from women's organisations, Singapore had no pressure from any groups but still made significant progress in increasing women's representation from 0 per cent in 1980 to 32 per cent in 2011 due to a quota policy. The increasing presence of women in Singapore's parliament has also improved their credibility and electability in recent elections (Tan, 2015).

These studies have established several transformative effects of political quotas. However, these studies do not dig deeper into why and how these transformations

occur. Moreover, most studies on gender quotas are quantitative inquiries that seek to establish causal links and do not incorporate women's lived experiences into their analyses, especially the less tangible and dynamic nuances of such experiences that occur within and outside the political institutions that are catalysts of social change.

Political context of Nepal

During the past three decades, Nepal has undergone a significant political transformation. The people's movement of 1990 established a multiparty democracy, overthrowing a unitary government of 240 years. However, in 1996, the country fell into civil war, one that the second people's movement of 2006 brought to an end. The Constitution of Nepal of 2015 established a federal structure with seven provinces, 77 districts and 753 local governments. The federal government has a National Assembly with 56 members and a House of Representatives with 275 members. The Provincial Assembly has 550 members, and local governments have 35,041 members.

Women in politics in Nepal

Despite the gendered character of accounts of Nepal's history, which have systematically silenced women's contributions (see [Lyytikäinen et al, 2020](#)), Nepali women have been involved in all of the country's political movements. From the Shah Dynasty to the current era of democratic governments, women have played significant roles in Nepali politics, shaping modern Nepal and Nepalese women's movements. Queen Tripura Sundari, also known as Lalit Tripura Sundari Devi (1794–1832), who was married at the age of 11 and widowed at 12, ruled the country for 26 years (1806–32). Similarly, Queen Rajendra Laxmi (1814–before 1900) and Queen Aishwarya Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah (1949–2001) were known as strong and powerful queens ([Thapa, 2012](#); [Dhungana, 2014](#)). Women's participation in the Nalapani War (1814–16) was significant, as they fought alongside men and defeated the British East India Company ([Dhungana, 2014](#); [Pandey, 2019](#)).

Women's involvement in the 'ordinary' politics of Nepal also has a long history. Yogmaya Neupane (1867–1941) is known as one of the country's first women's rights activists ([Lyytikäinen et al, 2020](#)). She fought against the *Sati* system (the burning of widows on their husband's pyre) and forced the government to abolish the practice of *Sati* through her non-violent movement ([Pandey, 2019](#)). Dwarika Devi Thakurani became the first woman deputy minister in a short-lived parliamentary democracy in 1959, and Sushila Thapa became the first woman minister in 1988 ([Upreti et al, 2020](#)). Women made remarkable contributions to the democratic movement of 1990, which transformed the political landscape of Nepal by ending the 30-year *panchayat* system ([Upreti et al, 2020](#); [Pandey, 2019](#)).

The Maoist conflict (1996–2006) also saw significant participation from women. One third of the Maoist militia were women, who fought together with men and assumed several leadership positions during the civil war ([Yami, 2007](#); [Yadav, 2016](#)). However, the journey of Nepalese women in politics has been full of challenges. For instance, despite women's leadership during the civil war and the Maoist Party claiming to be the champion of gender equality, women's participation in leadership roles in the Maoist Party decreased as soon as the party joined the formal political

structure, starting with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (Riley et al, 2022). No woman was present during the signing up of the CPA in 2006. However, following pressure from both within and outside the political parties, four women were included in the drafting committee for the interim constitution (Yadav, 2016). As a result, the interim constitution of 2007 was highly progressive from the perspective of gender equality, introducing a mandatory 33 per cent quota for women in politics.

Since then, Nepal has seen a historic transformation in women’s representation in politics, which has climbed from 5 to 41 per cent, securing within a decade the highest rank in South Asia on women’s political representation and advancing ahead of many developed countries on the same metric. Women have also assumed various key positions since 2008, including president of Nepal, chief of justice and speaker of the House of Representatives (Yadav, 2020); the list continues to grow.

Political quota in Nepal

A candidate quota provision was introduced by the 1990 Constitution, which required each political party to have at least 5 per cent women candidates in any election. However, this provision did not guarantee seats that would be won by women, nor were any special measures adopted to ensure women’s leadership in political positions. Three elections were held while this rule remained in place (1991, 1994 and 1999), but women’s representation remained at approximately 5 per cent. However, since the introduction of the one-third legislative quota in the interim constitution of 2007, women’s representation in politics has significantly increased. The first CA election of

Table 1: Quota provisions in the 2015 Constitution of Nepal

Federal government	
President and vice president	One must be a woman – at the time of writing of this paper, the president of Nepal was a woman
Speaker and deputy speaker of House of Representative	One must be a woman – at the time of writing of this paper, the deputy speaker was a woman
Chairperson and vice-chairperson of National Assembly	One must be a woman – at the time of writing of this paper, the vice-chairperson was a woman
House of Representatives	165 elected through FPTP from 165 constituencies, and 110 elected through PR. No reservation for FPTP or winning seats. Women’s quota is filled by PR seats (see Table 2)
National Assembly	56 elected members – one third of seats reserved for women
Provincial government	
Speaker and deputy speaker	One must be a woman – at the time of writing of this paper, all seven provinces had women deputy speakers
Provincial Assembly	60% elected through FPTP and 40% through PR – one third of seats reserved for women. Women mostly came through the PR provision (see Table 2)
Local government	
All positions elected through FPTP	Reservation for leadership positions at the candidacy level; no reservation for winning seats. Two seats reserved for women at the ward level, with one for Dalit women

2008 saw a historic win for women, with 32.8 per cent representing Dalits, minority ethnic groups and war widows (Yadav, 2016). The country adopted a mixed electoral system to ensure one third of women in office via either a direct election (first past the post [FPTP]) or a proportional representation (PR) system (via nominations) at both the federal and provincial levels, and 40 per cent in local governments, with a mandatory representation of 50 per cent in leadership positions.

As Table 2 suggests, the 2017 elections saw a low number of women candidates elected (8.13 per cent) via direct elections in the federal and provincial governments because the mandatory quota was set at the candidacy level, not at the level of winning seats for women. Hence, gender quotas were mostly filled by PR seats. However, a real victory for women politicians can be seen in the local elections. A record number of women were elected – nearly 41 per cent of all representatives – as a result of the legislative quotas, which guaranteed two of the five elected ward committee member seats for women and one of the two leadership positions in municipalities for women. A total of 14,342 women were elected in the 2017 local elections, a historic achievement.

Becoming a politician

Although each woman's journey into political office was unique, this study suggests three main routes through which the women entered politics: family connections, the Dalit quota and personal merit. Although the opportunity to become a politician presented itself to all my research participants because of the quota, I mention the Dalit quota specifically because it corresponds to half of the seats reserved for women at the local level. As for the other reserved seats, some were won because of family connections and others because of the women politicians' personal contributions to their communities. A study conducted by The Asia Foundation (2018) with 190 local representatives from 20 urban and rural municipalities across seven provinces suggests that most women representatives (89 per cent) were already active in their communities, for example, in the form of social work or development activities, prior to the election, though only 4 per cent of the women were involved in politics prior to being elected to their current roles. This finding suggests that regardless of their routes into politics, most of the women politicians were already active in their communities before entering electoral politics.

One of my participants, Rita, joined politics because of her family. As she said:

'My father-in-law has been the community leader for a long time. He is the one who should be standing as mayor, or my husband as his eldest son. However, our party chose another person for mayor. Because of the quota legislation, one of the two key positions had to be given to a woman candidate; the male members of our family could not go for it, so it came to me.' (Deputy Mayor, December 2019)

Gita had no previous experience in politics but received the opportunity because of the quota reserved for Dalit women. As she said:

'I live with my in-laws, as my husband is working abroad. One day, my father-in-law came from somewhere in the afternoon and asked me for

Table 2: Outcomes in the 2017 elections by gender

2017 elections		2017 elections										Grand total	Total percentage (%)
		SN	Gender	Local election		Provincial Assembly		House of Representatives		National Assembly			
			FPTP	PR	FPTP	PR	FPTP	PR	Members	President	Vice President		
1	Men	20,689	313	48	159	26	35	0	1			21,271	59.21%
2	Women	14,352	17	172	6	84	21	1	0			14,653	40.79%
3	Third gender	0	0	0	0	0	0					-	
	Total	35,041	330	220	165	110	56					-	
	Grand Total	35,041	550		275		56	1	1			35,924	

Source: Nepal Election Commission.

my citizenship papers. Since I can't talk to him directly [in the Madheshi community, it is seen as disrespectful to talk to one's father-in-law], I asked my mother-in-law why he was asking for my citizenship papers. So, my mother-in-law asked him, "Why do you need them?" He shouted at us and said, "Why does it matter? Just give me what I asked for." I took the citizenship papers out and gave them to my mother-in-law, and then she passed them on to him. I only found out [why he needed them] when he came home one day, happy, and said, "You have become a *panch* [a community leader] now. Get ready for a victory rally." Usually, I have to cover my face when I go out, but this time, I was told not to cover my face, as I was the leader now, and people wanted to see me.' (Ward Member, December 2019)

Sabina, who was a medical doctor and stood in the 2017 election when the opportunity came, said: "I was earning good money as a gynaecologist. However, I saw a lot of suffering among women. I wanted to do something about it, and this was the only way I thought I could make a difference. Therefore, I stood in the election" (Deputy Mayor, December 2019). Like Sabina, women members of the Provincial Assembly were also already active in their field prior to becoming MPs. Ramita, who is a member of the Provincial Assembly and often regarded as an outspoken and a strong person, was active in student politics. She also actively contributed to the Madhesh movement of 2007 and 2015. However, after graduation, she started working for a non-governmental organisation (NGO), as she thought she would never have an opportunity to enter "actual politics". Coming from a marginalised community (Madheshi), politics was out of reach for her. However, with the changing political context, including the introduction of a federal structure and reserved seats for women, her dream of becoming a politician came true. As she said: "I was nominated by my party for the 2017 election and the rest is history. I am committed to serving my people, no matter what!" (December 2019). I met Ramita again in December 2021 to see how she was doing and to determine the challenges she faced after being in the post for over four years. She remained highly driven and enthusiastic, and was planning for her next move.

The diversity of the cases that I have presented is representative of the women in both local and provincial governments. These cases not only demonstrate women taking different routes to politics, but also suggest that prior to the introduction of the quota, politics was out of the question for many, not because of women's merit, but because it was simply out of reach.

Women's experience after becoming politicians

I start this section by elaborating further on Gita's story, as it provides a glimpse into the shifts taking place, both at the family level and in society, because of the changed subject position of women politicians. Gita had no idea of her candidacy until she had won the election. I met Gita at her municipal office, which was approximately 6 km from her village. When we finished the interview and exited the office, we saw her father-in-law approach us. Gita laughed and said, "Look at him. He is already here and brought a shawl for me." Gita had been late arriving for her appointment with me, so she had rushed out of her house. Since it was wintertime but sunny, she had forgotten to take her shawl and was worried that she would now have to walk back

home in the cold. However, her father-in-law had already arrived to accompany her and had brought a warm shawl. Such behaviour would have been unimaginable if she were only a housewife because a married woman going out alone was not allowed in her community, let alone her father-in-law bringing her a shawl. These events were possible because of Gita's new position, which had a certain power attached to it that was well regarded by society, and her membership in political institutions had strengthened her social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This also meant that there was pride in being her father-in-law.

According to Bourdieu (1985; 1986), one's value, or what one is capable of doing, including the acceptance of one's acts in a given space, in one's community or at work, depends on one's cultural capital. Cultural capital is also connected with family honour. Hence, defining boundaries concerning what women can and cannot do is important in the context of Nepal, where there are certain expectations regarding women's behaviour and performance. Until recently, it was difficult for most women to enter politics in Nepal because politics was viewed as an occupation for men. Women who went out to join political activities and movements were seen as bad women who did not care about their family's honour (see Yadav, 2016). Therefore, they were discouraged from going out to participate in political events. However, this view is changing because of women's increasing participation in politics. In Gita's case, her cultural capital has also been strengthened due to her new position, and the honour of the family is no longer dependent on her covering her face or not going out in public. Its honour is now dependent on her work. Her new position has strengthened her social relations, providing an enabling environment for her to exercise her agency. People's perceptions about her have also changed. She is no longer just a wife or a daughter-in-law; she is now a community leader. People listen to her. They come to her for help and advice. As another ward member, Naina, said: "I was no one before. Nobody cared who I was, but now, even police and government officials greet me and give me respect" (January 2020). These examples suggest that their new position immediately improved the elected women's social and cultural capital; however, they still needed to prove themselves to win the trust of their community. For instance, Rabina, who was elected as a deputy mayor, said:

'Initially, people wouldn't listen to me. They thought I knew nothing and I only got this opportunity because of the quota. However, after they saw me working hard and proving myself to be good at work, they started respecting me. The same people who thought I wasn't capable are now coming to me for help.' (January 2020)

Due to the habitus, the embodied social rules and norms that shape how we view the world, people initially did not believe that women were capable of performing their new roles, but with the significant increase in women's involvement in, and contributions to, politics, that perception has slowly started to change, consistent with the findings from the Middle East (see Shitrit, 2016; Lu, 2020). A survey carried out by Inter Disciplinary Analysts (IDA) in 2020 of over 7,000 people from 75 districts of Nepal suggests that most Nepalese people have no problem with women entering politics, including assuming leadership roles. Moreover, crisis seems to expedite such changes. As Sarina, a deputy mayor, said:

‘When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, people thought, “What will these women do? They can’t go out at night on their own.” However, I worked very hard. I managed quarantine centres and provided all the support they needed. I proved myself to be better than any men, and now people’s perception about me has changed.’ (December 2021)

Women politicians also said that the pandemic provided them with an opportunity to prove themselves and win the trust of their constituents. In addition, the new positions of women have brought significant changes to their cultural capital, which has a trickle-down impact. For instance, there has been an increase in women’s participation in public affairs due to the increasing number of women politicians, as families feel safe sending their daughters and daughters-in-law to participate in public events, which was not the case before. As Sanam, a deputy mayor, said: “Before, women did not want to participate in any events we organised because the family would not allow them to go. However, increasingly, more women are coming out and joining our events” (December 2019). The general perceptions of what women can and cannot do have also changed. Girls are encouraged to attend school. The literacy rate has increased significantly among female youth (aged 15–25), from 32.67 per cent in 1991 and 80.21 per cent in 2011 to 90.88 per cent in 2018.²

Women’s economic capital has also been strengthened since they assumed political positions. They have a salary and access to public funds, which has elevated their position within their own families and in their communities. For instance, Kalyani, a ward member, said:

‘I have done many things for my community. I took a group of women on an educational tour. They have now seen the world. This [indicating the street] was muddy during the rainy season. We couldn’t walk ... forget about bringing a car! Now look, I have built this road. It’s concrete, and we all can enjoy using it.’ (December 2019)

The little street, which used to be muddy up to the knees during the monsoon season, now looked neat. Since local residents live in small houses, the street is a social space and a playground for children in this community. Hence, paving the road was of major assistance to the community. The ward member also said that the next thing she would like to do is build a temple. Due to what she has been able to achieve since becoming a ward member, both her family and her community have more respect for her. However, despite all the positive experiences, because of the embodied nature of cultural capital, constructed based on the masculine vision of the world, which takes time to change, and because of the different rules prevailing in each social sphere, women politicians experience challenges. For instance, Rita, who is a deputy mayor, said: “Women political leaders have a double burden: they are not free from their household chores, but they are also expected to perform like men at work” (December 2019). Although their new positions have improved their overall capital, raising their status in both the family and society, women are expected to be at their best in both worlds, which has increased their workload. Moreover, the working environment remains male dominated. Government officials, ward chairs and executive officers are all men, and they do not (want to) listen to women politicians. Nepotism, corruption, unequal access to information and resources, lack

of support for women politicians, and patriarchal norms and values were some of the challenges that women politicians faced in Nepal, which have also been observed in other contexts (see [Turnbull, 2022](#)). However, these challenges have not stopped them from working together for a better future. As a participant in an FGD said: “We used to say ‘Yes’ to everything they asked us. We signed the budget, and they took all the money. We won’t let that happen again” (December 2019). Due to the challenges that they face in a male-dominated political space, there is a sense of solidarity among the women leaders.

Despite the challenges, being a member of a political institution has given the women access to social capital, which would not have been possible otherwise. However, the experiences of women politicians are not homogeneous because social capital is linked with the cultural and economic capital of the individual. Hence, we observe differences among the experiences of women representatives even when they are at the same level and come from the same caste, class, ethnicity and/or religion. For instance, women politicians at the higher echelon may face different challenges from those faced by women at the lower echelon. In turn, women at the higher level with similar backgrounds do not all necessarily face the same challenges, as their overall capital, which works in tandem with patriarchy, influences their overall experiences.

Has the political quota worked?

Whether political quotas work depends on many factors, including the larger social, political and cultural contexts in which the quotas have been implemented. What seems evident from Nepal is that the larger the political quota is, the greater the impacts are. The 5 per cent quota for women in Nepal helped create some basic infrastructure for women politicians by allowing women to make the political space more gender friendly, advocate for women’s rights within political institutions, enact gender-friendly laws and policies, serve as role models, and inspire others to join politics. However, the 5 per cent quota did not increase the number of women in political positions: their representation in formal politics remained very low until the introduction of a new quota policy in 2007 with the interim constitution. The interim constitution ensured a 33 per cent quota, which brought many gender-friendly policies, and the new constitution of 2015 ensured a quota of up to 40 per cent at the local government level, enabling a large number of ordinary women to join politics, which would not have been possible otherwise. However, women’s representation in leadership positions remains a challenge. Although the constitution guarantees 50 per cent of leadership positions in local governments for women, only 2 per cent of mayoral positions are held by women. This is not because women cannot win elections, but because they are not given the opportunity to stand for mayoral positions. As one of my respondents said: “Even though I was more capable than the mayor, our party did not give me the ticket for mayor [that is, her party did not nominate her for the mayoral position]” (December 2019). Similarly, no reservation at the candidacy level for mayoral positions, or reservation for the winning seats, means that there is room for manipulation. For instance, when there is a coalition between two or more parties for the purpose of election, there is a risk that both leadership positions could go to men, as was observed in the 2022 local elections.

Other challenges of the current quota policy include women’s quota being filled by PR seats, which means that women do not have a constituency and lack the

same level of access to public funds as those who come through FPTP elections, depriving them of the possibility of establishing themselves in their constituencies. Likewise, a lack of consideration of intersectionality, resulting in women from the upper castes benefitting the most, and the poorly designed quota provisions for Dalits mean that there is no representation of Dalits in leadership positions. Finally, the working environment is still male dominated, posing challenges for women, as I outlined earlier.

However, despite the limitations of the current quota policy, women have benefitted from it. Political quotas have accelerated women's representation in politics, while strengthening the credibility of women in political life, as also found in other contexts (see [Tan, 2015](#); [O'Brien and Rickne, 2016](#)). As Maya, a deputy mayor, said: "We have faced many challenges, but we are building a bridge for future generations so that they don't have to go through what we did" (December 2021). The new constitution guarantees certain rights to deputy mayors through the introduction of a deputy mayor's own portfolio. For instance, deputy mayors are the coordinators of the local judicial committee, a very important role that puts them in direct contact with the local community. Another important duty of the deputy mayor is coordinating the programmes of NGOs, which again means working together with civil society organisations to improve people's lives. Likewise, they are also the head of budgeting and programming, and they lead the monitoring committee for local government programmes. All of these are very important roles in which deputy mayors can work independently and exercise leadership. However, this has been possible because of the presence of women at the higher levels of government.

Conclusion

In this article, through an analysis of the lived experiences of women politicians in the local and provincial governments of Nepal, I have argued that political quotas not only accelerate women's representation in politics, but also strengthen their position in society. They establish women's credibility, pave the way for future generations and shift social perceptions around the presence of women in politics from being an exception to being an entitlement. Hence, although legislative change may not be an immediate outcome for women with no prior experience in politics, it is inevitable as they gain experience in their roles. For instance, in Nepal, although women initially demanded only a one-third quota, they are now demanding proportionate representation, including guaranteed seats for direct election.

Moreover, once women join politics, regardless of their route of entry, their new position strengthens their overall capital, including social, economic and cultural capital. These new positions of women, which come with membership in a well-regarded (masculine) institution, not only pose challenges for them, but also offer opportunities, enabling them access to social and political spaces that were previously not available to them. Culture seems to be a barrier for women in politics, as also noted by [Lu \(2020\)](#). The significant increase in women's participation in politics helps change the culture within the institution and at home. Due to a significant increase in women's presence in politics, people's perceptions regarding what women can and cannot do are also starting to change. In situations of abnormal events and crises, such as pandemics, women leaders seem to thrive, as they take it as an opportunity to prove themselves and win the trust of their constituents.

Moreover, the effectiveness of political quotas also seems to depend on the local social, political, cultural and historical contexts, and women's status within these contexts. For instance, the fact that Nepal is a post-conflict country has also meant that there is a greater acceptance of women in new roles (see [Ketola, 2020](#); [Yadav, 2020](#)). Likewise, the presence of women in senior positions in the government seems to have helped with the quota being more impactful in Nepal through the introduction of additional legislative measures, such as deputy mayors' own portfolio. Despite securing a 50 per cent quota for women in leadership positions in local government, women working higher up at the policy level knew that women politicians might be confined to deputy positions (which was observed in both the 2017 and 2022 elections). Hence, they ensured that deputy mayors had their own portfolio through which they can make a difference. Many deputy mayors whom I interviewed said that reports of gender-based violence had increased because women felt safe reporting to their deputy mayor.³ However, the current methodological approaches to studying gender quotas, which centre on patriarchy as the only problem, overlook all these important contributions that women make regardless of their route into politics. It reinforces the dominant narratives around 'quota women', maintaining the divide between descriptive and substantive representation, and making it unhelpful for the local women's movement. Women politicians are not simply at the mercy of the patriarchy; their experience in their new roles depends on their overall capital, which is contextual, dynamic and relational ([Bourdieu, 1986](#)), as well as on the underlying principles and norms of the social world to which they belong, making it unique to each woman. Hence, to explore these nuanced experiences and recognise women's agency and their multiple stories of success, one must reflect on one's own methodological approaches to studying political subjects. Despite the challenges posed by patriarchy and male domination in political institutions, political quotas offer possibilities for the transformation of gender relations within and outside political institutions.

Notes

¹ See: www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-overview.

² See: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.FE.ZS?locations=NP>.

³ See also: <https://english.khabarhub.com/2020/28/144016/>.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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