



Understanding voter attitudes toward women's political leadership in Nepal

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- Research highlights three main channels that may inhibit women's political representation: (i) lack of ambition or interest among women, (ii) lack of demand from citizens, and (iii) party gatekeeping against female candidates. In Nepal, we investigate these channels with two large-scale surveys.
 - Prior to the 2022 local elections, we surveyed nearly 7,000 incumbent female ward members and found that many aspired to run for higher office, yet very few received party tickets.
 - In 2025, we surveyed 1,760 citizens to measure voter demand for female leaders. When assessing familiar local politicians, voters of both genders favour men—most often the sitting ward chair, who in nearly all cases was male. But when asked to compare men and women directly on leadership traits, preferences diverge by gender: women generally favoured female leaders on key attributes, while men leaned toward male leaders.
- Taken together, the evidence suggests that party nomination processes, currently dominated by male selection committee members, may underweight female voters' preferences and overstate the risks of fielding women in leadership positions.

Introduction

Globally, women are underrepresented in politics. Electoral gender quotas have been a widely-used tool to address this challenge, but gender gaps, especially in the higher echelons of political leadership, remain.

Past research points to three primary channels that may inhibit female political representation (Ashworth et al., 2023): (i) lack of demand from citizens (Schwarz & Coppock, 2022), (ii) lack of interest or ambition among women (Fox & Lawless, 2004; Teele et., 2018), and (iii) party gatekeeping against female candidates (Fujiwara et. al, 2024). In Nepal, our team has conducted two large-scale surveys to investigate the relative contribution of each of these channels and inform future policy design.

Research overview

In 2015, a new Nepali Constitution established electoral gender quotas, which increased women's representation in local politics from 0.6% in 1992 to 40% in 2017.

Under the new constitution, most local representatives are elected at the lowest tier of the federal system, in 6,743 wards, where two of the four ward member seats are reserved for women. These bodies are headed by a separately elected, non-reserved ward chair who holds implementation and decision-making authority. Ward chair candidates are vetted, in most cases, by political party selection committees rather than open primaries, meaning that political aspirants must successfully present their credentials to local political elites before they campaign with voters.

By 2022, despite significant success in increasing representation through quota-protected ward member positions, women still remained underrepresented in ward-level leadership positions: only 1% of existing female ward members ran for ward chair, and less than 1% of elected ward chairs were women. Our research seeks to identify specific constraints in the Nepali political context through large-scale data collection.

Do women lack ambition and interest to run? In the Spring of 2022, we surveyed 6,819 incumbent female ward members to understand their aspirations to run in upcoming elections. After the elections, we followed up to measure candidate behaviour and vote totals.

Do parties fail to select women in part because of voter preferences? In the Spring of 2025, we surveyed 1,760 Nepali citizens across 55 local areas in Nepal to understand whether they display biases against female candidates. The sample includes 880 male and 880 female respondents. We measured

citizen attitudes across two measures: (i) first, we asked them to rank their own currently elected ward representatives; (ii) second, we asked them to express preferences explicitly between “male ward chairs” and “female ward chairs.”¹

Key findings

Female ward members aspire to run for ward chair positions

Before the 2022 local election, we conducted a nationwide field experiment with half of Nepal's female ward members elected in 2017 to ask about their aspirations, beliefs, and to provide information about either the selection committees' gender composition or women's electability. Among respondents, 58% reported plans to re-contest their current position, and an additional 23% aspired to run for a higher post. However, this ambition translated into candidacy only rarely, as only 40% received candidacy for the same position, and just 1.9% were nominated for higher office.

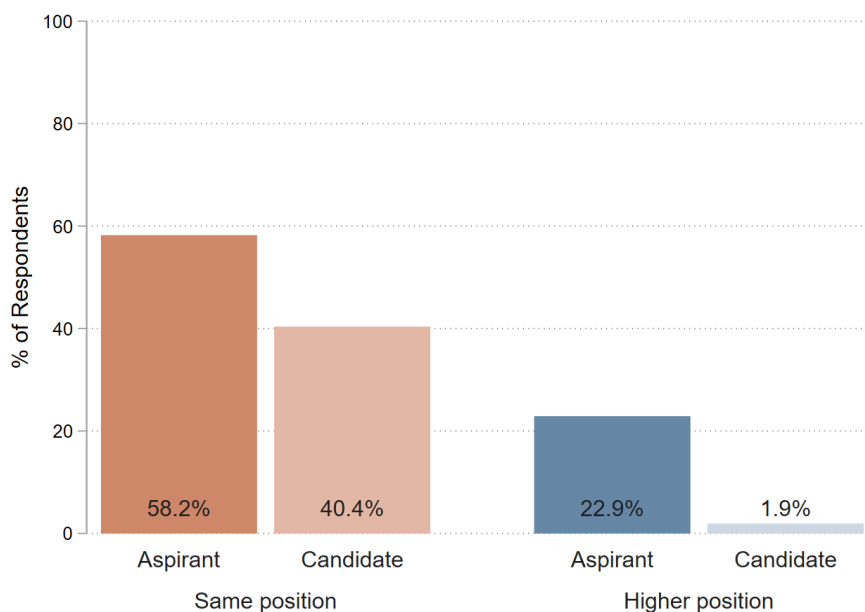


Figure 1: Female ward members' aspirations and candidacy status

The low translation of aspiration for higher (open-seat) offices into actual candidacy underscores the role of selection barriers women face within parties, even when they demonstrate political ambition and electability. But are these barriers due to political party leaders' accurate beliefs that women are less competitive candidates, or do they reflect their own preferences and gender

¹ To account for the potential influence of social desirability bias on self-reported preferences, our survey incorporated measures such as the Crowne–Marlowe scale, implicit association tests, and the Goldberg paradigm. A detailed discussion and results will be provided in a forthcoming research paper.

biases? As a next step in our analysis, we interviewed voters to understand their preferences for women candidates.

When faced with choices over existing local politicians, both male and female voters pick men for ward chair

In 2025, almost two years before the next round of local elections, we asked voters to rank existing politicians in their local area (including their ward chair and four of their ward representatives) as future candidates for ward chair, and across multiple dimensions of leadership. Faced with choices between actual politicians, 88% of male voters and 83% of female voters chose a current male ward representative as their first choice for the next election (see Figure 2). This is, in large part, due to a preference for the sitting ward chair, chosen by more than half of respondents and a man in almost all wards—a predictable outcome given the authority and visibility of the role.

Voters also tended to rank male representatives more highly on specific leadership traits. For example, when asked to identify the best leader among the same group of current representatives, 92% of men and 87% of women chose a male representative. Similarly, a vast majority of male and female respondents ranked male representatives most highly in terms of being hard-working, honest, having time to dedicate to the position, sharing their priorities for the ward, and being capable of delivering services. As above, much of this difference appears to be explained by incumbency: indeed, about half or more of respondents consistently ranked the current ward chair highest across these dimensions.

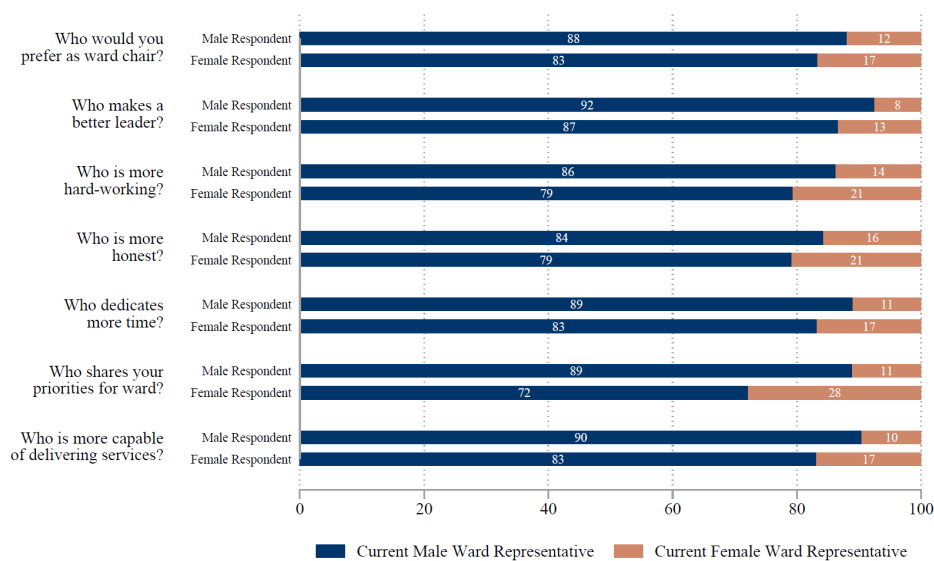


Figure 2: Voters' rankings of their current ward representatives

When explicitly asked to compare male and female ward chairs, voters' preferences often diverge by gender

Despite strong preferences for male incumbents when choosing between representatives that they know, when explicitly asked to compare male and female ward chairs on leadership qualities, voters' preferences often diverge by gender: women generally favoured female leaders, while men leaned toward male leaders (see Figure 3). On the question of who they would prefer as ward chair if all else were equal, men were most often indifferent (53%), with the remainder slightly more likely to choose a female (25%) than a male chair (22%). Women, by contrast, leaned more strongly toward female leadership: 41% preferred a female chair, 17% a male chair, and 42% were indifferent. On trait comparisons, men and women tended to agree in rating female ward chairs as more honest (with 63% in each group giving them higher marks), and in viewing male ward chairs as more corrupt (a view expressed by 86% of men and 81% of women) but also as having more time to dedicate to their position (a view shared by 66% for men and 57% for women). Beyond these shared views, however, patterns diverged along gender lines. Voters were more likely to believe that a ward chair of their own gender would share their priorities: 73% of women said a female chair would be more aligned with them, while 72% of men said the same of a male chair. Moreover, while 60% of women identified female ward chairs as more hardworking and more capable of delivering services, these beliefs are only shared by 45% and 50% of men, respectively.

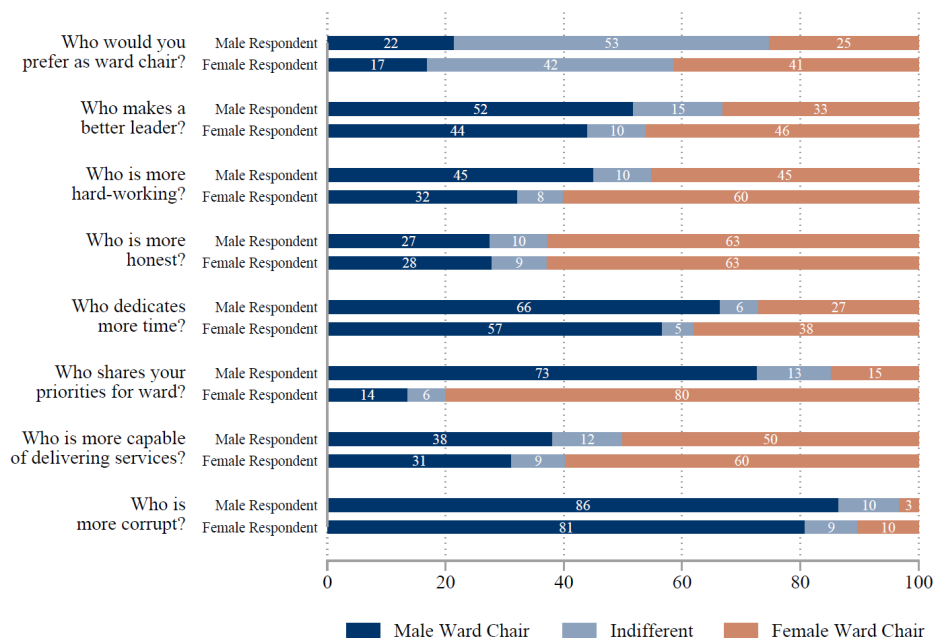


Figure 3: Voters' explicit attitudes towards male and female ward chairs

Policy implications

Our findings suggest that women's underrepresentation in political leadership is not simply the result of a lack of ambition among female politicians. Many female ward members aspire to run for higher office, yet few are selected by their parties to do so. At the same time, voters' attitudes are more nuanced than party nominations reflect. When evaluating familiar local politicians, citizens of both genders tend to favour men—especially incumbents, who are almost always male. But when asked to compare men and women directly on leadership traits, preferences diverge by gender: while both men and women agreed in viewing female chairs as more honest and male chairs as more corrupt, women were more likely to see female chairs as sharing their priorities, being hard-working, and capable of delivering services, whereas men leaned toward male chairs.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that party nomination processes, dominated by male selection committee members, may underweight female voters' preferences and overstate the risks of fielding women in leadership positions. Despite an act requiring all party bodies, including candidate selection committees, to comprise at least 33% women, the most powerful positions with real decision-making authority remain overwhelmingly held by men. If women voters' support for female leadership is not fully reflected in the candidates put forward by these male-dominated leadership structures, then party gatekeeping may itself be a critical barrier to women's advancement.

A remaining open question is how party selection processes contribute to women's underrepresentation in leadership. As a next step, we are surveying selection committee members of Nepal's major political parties to understand how they perceive voter preferences. Coupled with the voter surveys described here, this dual-survey design will allow us to compare what citizens actually want with what party elites believe they want—shedding light on whether party behaviour reflects accurate assessments of voter demand or independent discrimination.