

Representation of the Citizens in Nepali Local Governments through the Elected Dalit Women Leaders

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Abstract

The empowerment of Dalit is a significant challenge for the development in Nepal. Though recent amendments to the New Civil Code and the Constitution sought to eliminate caste discrimination, it persists in practice. Dalits traditionally and historically have been considered as “lower-caste” and, “untouchable” caste of people and are discriminated and oppressed socially, economically, and politically. Out of the projected 30 million populations in Nepal, approximately 2 million people are Dalit women, and this group of population is highly underrepresented in the political decision making. Due to the affirmative provisions in the new election laws, Nepal has ensured the Dalit women’s representation at local levels. This study aimed at exploring how education contributes to the Dalit women leaders’ capacity to represent their constituencies effectively. For the specific research purpose, two questions were explored: experiences of elected Dalit women leaders and role of education pertaining to their leadership ability. This research work was carried out by using critical paradigm and following interpretive case study method. It employed a case study method approach to collect a wide range of information using interviews and observation. It means reality for the Dalit women, the state and non-state actors and the broader community. Hence the knowledge-based was not based on just a single reality. This study explored that the elected Dalit women leaders’ ability to represent their constituencies effectively does not mainly depend on their educational achievements, however education positively affects their performances. Their personal competencies have significant roles to cope with negative experiences such as caste-based discrimination. Similarly, their social and cultural capital for example family support and their network with political leaders and key decision-making authorities contributes to their ability to influence decisions. While facing negative experiences, the Dalit women leaders are trying to fulfil the high ex-

pectations of their constituencies. The widespread informal “defecato” decision making processes have been undermining the elected Dalit women leaders’ legitimate role to raise the voice of the marginalised population. This study concluded that the marginalised Dalit communities are not empowered unless the elected Dalit women council members of the municipality gain equal chance to participate in decision making process representing their constituencies.

Keywords

Dalit Women, Women Representation, Local Governments, Democratic Governance, Women Empowerment, Gender Mainstreaming, Inclusion, Marginalization, Positive Discrimination, Reservation, Discrimination, Constitution Building, Education, Lifelong Learning, Exclusion, Decision-Making, Human Personality, Social Capital, Cultural Capital, Symbolic Capital, Economic Capital

1. Introduction

The empowerment of Dalit is a significant challenge for development in Nepal. Though the 1962 Naya Muluki Ain (New Civil Code) and the 1990 Constitution attempted to eradicate caste discrimination, it persisted. In South Asian cast-based Hindu hierarchical societies like in Nepal, Dalits are historically treated as the lower-caste people who are regarded as “untouchables” and face social, economic, and political discrimination. In Nepali society, land is one of the primary assets that determine an individual’s social status and standard of living. Dalits have small landholdings, and landlessness is widespread among them—36.7 percent of Hill Dalits and 41.4 percent of Madhesi Dalits are landless ([Nepal Social Inclusion Survey, 2012](#)).

Dalit women are the most marginalized group in Nepal. They face discrimination on multiple levels—as Dalits, as members of an impoverished underclass, and as women. Dalit women face widespread gender and caste discrimination as a result of severely imbalanced social, economic, and political power equations ([Feminist Dalit Organization \[FEDO\], 2015](#)).

In Nepal, there are 1.8 million Dalit women, accounting for 13% of the total female population ([National Population and Housing Census, 2011](#)). Dalit women’s lives are marked by exclusion through customary caste institutions founded on the concepts of purity and pollution, as well as patriarchy and gender discrimination. They face extreme poverty, humiliation, and denial of social and economic rights as a result of such exclusion and discrimination. Dalit women, like women from other minority communities or indigenous peoples, Madhesi (Madhesi refers to the people who live in the southern plains of Nepal, also known as Tarai, who speak Maithili, Bhojpuri, Abadh, and other languages and adhere to a culture and religion similar to that of North India),

and Muslims, frequently remain invisible, even in alternative reports submitted by civil society organizations to the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders, Nepal, 2018). Given the extreme and multiple levels of discrimination and vulnerability faced by Dalit women, the Civil Society's Alternative Report on the CEDAW Convention was submitted as a companion document to reinforce women's rights, highlight the Dalit women's problem, and made recommendations for the protection of Dalit women's human rights.

In Nepal, Dalit women are excluded from state institutions, governance structures, and the political sphere. Dalit women have a literacy rate of 34.8 percent and access to higher education is only 11.8 percent, compared to 54.5 percent of the total female population in Nepal (National Population and Housing Census, 2011). They are victims of severe violence, as approximately 49.1% of Dalit women face violence, with only 4.4 percent of incidents being reported to the police (FEDO, 2013). Since the *Jana Andolan* (People's Movement) II political change in 2007, which resulted in a peace agreement between the Nepali government and Maoists, the situation of women has undoubtedly improved, both at the political and social fronts. The political changes are more noteworthy as it has been reflected in the key decision making positions for example the parliament, provincial assembly and municipal council.

Between 2008 and 2012, the first Constituent Assembly (CA) election was a triumph in Nepali history; a significant achievement was the election of 197 women members, nearly 33% of the total seats. There were 25 Dalit women in the CA, out of 197 women. The second CA election, on the other hand, was less encouraging, with the number of elected Dalit women falling from 25 to 22. Similarly, positive changes in the political arena and the transitional vacuum necessitate the presence of charisma in the minds of national leaders. All that was required is unity, solidarity, and a steadfast commitment to making the concept of "equality" a reality (FEDO, 2015).

Nepal's 2015 Constitution established policies of proportional representation, affirmative action, and other economic development programs for Dalits. The Constitution states that special provisions shall be made by law to protect, empower, and advance women who are socially and culturally disadvantaged, Dalits, Adivasi, Madhesi, Tharu, Muslim, oppressed class, deprived communities, minorities, marginalized groups, peasants, laborers, youth, children, senior citizens, sexual minorities, persons with disabilities, pregnant, incapacitated, and helpless persons, and citizens from deprived regions.

The new federal structure created a total of 753 local government entities. Federalization of the country, as stipulated in the new Constitution of 2015, restructured its administrative units into seven provinces, each of which contains 753 local governments. Six Metropolitan Cities, eleven Sub Metropolitan Cities, 276 Municipalities, and 460 Rural Municipalities comprise the local governments. Each local government unit is further subdivided into wards, to-

talling 6557 in the country. Four members and a chairperson are elected by each ward. One seat is reserved for Dalit women among the four ward members.

At the local level, 7,710 Dalits were elected to various positions (Election Commission of Nepal [ECN]). This would mean that their representation has increased to 22% of the total, far exceeding their population size of 13.3%. 88 percent of Dalit representatives are women. However, this dramatic increase in Dalit women's representation in local bodies is due to the policy of reserving one seat in each ward for a Dalit woman (Nepal, 2017). While the Local Level Election Act 2017 provided for two female representatives at the ward level, it was later agreed to have one Dalit woman among the two female representatives. Given that Nepal has made significant strides in empowering Dalit women through a variety of social mobilization programs, policies that ensure equal educational opportunities for all women, including Dalit, and positive discrimination policies. As a result, Dalit women now have the opportunity to run for local government positions.

This study focuses on exploring how formal and informal education influenced the leadership quality of the elected Dalit women leaders in Nepal. I am interested in exploring the role of formal education and informal education such as capacity development activities and trainings on the elected Dalit women's ability in representing the agenda of the Dalit communities at the local level governments in Nepal.

2. The Role of Education on the Elected Dalit Women Leaders' Decision-Making Processes

Essence of Education for Gaining Public Trust and for Practical Reasons

Education seeks to nourish the good qualities in each one of us and draws out the best in every individual. Education seeks to develop the innate inner capacities of that as human being we process (Saeed, 2018).

Out of the 17 elected Dalit women from the three municipalities, the large majority (total 15) participants have never been to school and not have any formal education. This shows that most of the Dalit women leaders elected at the local level had no or little formal education.

Dewey's idea of education as a process of living through, a continuous reconstruction of experiences, fits with the experience of most of the elected Dalit women leaders. They are living and learning from their current realities as elected representatives of their constituencies and continuously reconstructing the experiences daily. They are learning from their current reality as elected members to the local councils.

Table 1 shows that most of the elected Dalit women leaders have never been to school. However, they have been working hard to represent their constituency and assert their voice both in the community as well as within the municipal council meetings, if they chance upon opportunity. In this study, it was very

Table 1. Educational attainment of elected Dalit women leaders.

Total Number Elected Dalit Women Leaders	Formal School	Not Been to School
17	3	15

evident that the role of formal education had very little to play in terms of selection and subsequent election of these women candidates as Dalit women leaders, as vast majority of them did not attend any or very little formal schooling. It also showed that formal education had very little or no influence on their inability to discharge their duties as elected representatives.

Majority of the participants did mention that if they were able to achieve functional literacy, it would have enhanced their own capabilities. But education does have its own perceptual advantage, as the general perception has been that if one is highly educated, they gain trust and confidence easily. This was strongly felt with the interview of the mayors and the deputy mayors of each of the three municipalities. The elected Dalit women leaders are illiterate and do not understand their role as they can hardly read, write and hence their participation is very minimal. This view expressed by majority of the non-Dalit members as well as other senior officials, but factually none of these women leaders feels this is the case, as they are able to engage, and deliver their elected roles, but did agree that it would have been easier and of greater advantage, if they had formal education.

Education has always been viewed as a necessary component of progress and development, whether on an individual or societal level. Education has a transformative effect and has the potential to unite citizens (Freire, 1973). When people discuss education, they frequently confuse it with schooling. They make comparisons to formal settings such as schools or colleges. They may also consider jobs such as teaching or tutoring. The issue with this is that, while it is important to assist people in learning, the way many schools and teachers operate does not always qualify as education. They have chosen, fallen into, or been pushed into “schooling”—the process of instilling knowledge in people according to a plan often devised by others. Paulo Freire (1973) coined the term “banking” to refer to the act of depositing knowledge. This type of “education” quickly devolves into treating students as objects to be acted upon rather than as people to be related to.

As we define education in this country, it is a process of inviting truth and possibility, of encouraging and allowing time for discovery. As John Dewey (1916) put it, it is a social process—“a way of life, not a preparation for future living”. Educators, in this view, seek to act with rather than against people. Their mission is to educe (from the Latin *educere*), or to bring out or develop potential. This type of education is purposeful and hopeful. It is learning that we seek to facilitate in the belief that people are capable of being “more”; informed, respectful, and wise. It is a cooperative and inclusive activity that assists people in

living their lives to the fullest extent possible.

Thus, education is not always about schools, colleges, or formal or informal systems, but about learning that can aid in deliberation and inspire hope for the future, that can inspire truth and possibilities, and that can ultimately aid in cooperative and inclusive activities that enable individuals to live their lives to the fullest while also contributing to and assisting others in the process. As a result, it is clear that education had its own set of benefits and contributions. However, in the case of elected Dalit women, a lack of formal education was not the primary impediment to performing their role as representatives of the women and the poor.

We Might Perform Our Roles Better If We Were Better Educated

Vidya municipality is in Province 2, bordering Kuti municipality in the north-east and Dhanauji Rural municipality in the west and Aurahi and Shahidnagar in the north and the international border with India in the south. The total population of this municipality is 32,266 and is divided into 9 wards with each ward over 3000 plus population on an average. The lowest population is in ward 8 with 2921 population and highest is ward 9 with 5001 population. The total area of this municipality is 45.53 Sq.km, which makes this one of the densely populated municipalities in province 2.

M.B. Das is one of the most popular Dalit leaders and comes from the Maoist party. He used to be an active commander of the Maoist people's army during the revolution. Prior joining the people's war, the mayor was a teacher in a local school. He has been actively struggling for the Dalit cause for over 26 years aiming to free the Dalit communities from exploitation and oppression. Initially, the party was reluctant to give him the party ticket, but later seeing his local popularity and followers, the party gave him the party ticket and he won the election with a large margin. The Deputy Mayor N. D. Mandal also from the Maoist party belongs to the Muslim community.

Accordingly, to the deputy mayor, "The first and foremost is lack of education; most of them are not educated at all. Also, I think, it is the family constraint, I feel the family restriction for women outside in public domain is also another big constraint, also they feel they are outcaste from the society and even if no one makes them feel, they have inferiority complex and they feel like they have to follow. The Dalits despite given the opportunity they cannot lead because they feel inferior without anyone making them feel so. This could be the result of the long rooted followed culture of caste system. They feel high caste will take the lead and they should follow" (Laxmi, elected Dalit woman leader in Vidya Municipality, Province 2)

The Dalit people in Vidya Municipality with about 70% Dalit population mainly the Mushar community, who are considered as the most deprived within the Dalit communities in Nepal. This community is generally landless labourers. This municipality is also home to 20% Muslim population, especially in the border villages. There is only about 10% population belonging to the Brahmin and Chhe-

tri, Yadav, etc. The mayor of this municipality believes in education “I believe education is the ultimate weapon for us to free our problems”. I have bought special scheme for the Dalit children; we provide special scholarship to 35 Dalit students to get higher education.

In terms of assets and access to resources, the mayor owns 30 *kattha* of land (approx. 1.01 hector), he narrated his story where as a young teenager, how he stood against the powerful upper caste people against the exploitation that his family had to suffer. “As a young boy, I grew up in a family where we did not own any land but used to lease land from the upper caste to cultivate and for agriculture purpose. As we are very hardworking community, we work day and night and our land produces good crops over the years.

The upper caste Yadav people were envious of our land and success, so one day my father was very sad as the water source, that was providing water to our farm came from a well, which came under dispute with few powerful upper caste people, who wanted to close the well, and my father could not say anything as they were very powerful. I told him that we should fight back, the next day early morning, he went to his farm with his brother and father and challenged the upper caste people who were gathered to close our well, which I challenged and told them if they break the well, he will physically fight with them, and as these men were big and powerful, they laughed away, but when they came forward to destroy the well, he used a sharp rod against one of the guys who came to destroy the well and injured him. Seeing the bloody scene, the rest of the members got scared and left the place. Then later they came in groups, but he managed to get some more weapons and organized his own community as well. Later the dispute was resolved by local administration and some supporters. My family was very scared, but they stood by me. This was my first encounter with the powerful people, and this became my strength in the later days of my life”.

Since he believed in education, he studied well and became a teacher. He also used to provide tuitions to other students. It was during those days where he started to actively get involved in social service and support his community members. This led to his interest in politics, where he applied for the primary membership of UML party, who did not give him membership as he was very vocal against the powerful Yadav community in his village and was always fighting for the cause of the poor and Dalits. This was the time when the Maoist movement started in the country, and he resigned and joined the people’s war. It was his organizational skills and capacity to mobilize the community that the party recognized, which helped him to grow up in the ranks and became the area commander for the people’s Army. His long years of experience in the people army made him an experienced leader, who believed in delegation of authority, and this is what he is also doing in the capacity of mayor, where he believes in delegation of functions to his dedicated team.

He also believes that public funds should be used for serving the citizen as an example he shared that for two years he used the funds allocated by the munic-

pality to buy a vehicle for him, instead he used this fund to buy tractors and bulldozer for his municipality and he used to travel by motorbike. Only this year he bought an official car and still he uses rented car for most of his travel in the municipality. He uses the official car only for official travel to Kathmandu.

Well, no. But we have been focusing more on life skills training as of now. We have been giving Dalit women training as driving lessons. We have asked Dalit women if anybody needed literacy classes where no one showed any interest for the literacy class. If they were interested, we could have arranged for a year, but nobody is interested in taking any class. They have no interest. One woman from Dhulikehl passed the SLC examination with her own interest through the literacy class, but I do not see any motivation among the Dalit women even for the literacy class (Laxmi, Dalit women leader, Province 2).

The mayor is a self-made leader and continued to stand up for his community members as well as the marginalised and women in his community. He earmarks 40% of his salary for supporting students from the Dalit community.

During the entire day, I spent time with the mayor in his municipality, the way he resolves issue of public interest is very tactful and he makes sure that his decision is fair and just and benefits all the citizens. I joined the mayor to participate in a public function organized by a local NGO on ending violence against women. The gathering had major Dalit women and marginalised community members participating, including non-Dalit as well as men and youth.

When asked about his elected Dalit women ward members, he said most of them are active, but he needs to support them and encourage them. Most of them have not gone to school or cannot read or write, but he still thinks that they are able to effectively represent their constituency. He shared and showed some of the proposals that were presented by the women Dalit leaders, but when asked if they actively participated in the deliberations, to which he said, generally they don't speak in the council meeting, as I have a separate meeting with them prior to the council meeting and discuss their issue and he himself takes up the issue at the council. Being a powerful male leader, he does not give the opportunity to these women leaders to speak up in public. When asked of allowing and giving chance to women leaders to speak will improve their confidence, to which he said that is possible, and he would be mindful of this and would give them opportunity to speak in the future.

Lifelong Learning Enhancing Dalit Women Leaders' Knowledge and Networks

Although my conceptual framework is based on both Bourdieu and Freire, I find it compelling to borrow the concept of John Dewey who is a constructivist. The reason why Dewey is referred here is because of the idea of reconstruction of real-life experience which is very much in life with the realities of all the elected Dalit women leaders who were interviewed for this study. If we further unpack John Dewey's concept of education, where the idea of education as a continuous reconstruction of real-life experience, then one can relate this as part

of “lifelong learning” with the Dalit women’s rich learning they gained in society.

There is a strong sense of recognition today, both at the global and local levels, among development professionals, governments, and educational institutions, that encouraging people to the idea of education, both life-wide and life-long, for vocational, professional, and individual purposes, that economic empowerment, social inclusion, and participation in democratic institutions, as well as the extension of individual independence or freedom to attain (Aspin & Chapman, 2008). In this light, a significant portion of scholarly attention and professional activity has been focused on civic and citizenship education, with public institutions such as the municipality, in the case of all the elected Dalit women leaders included in this study, believing that their municipality serves as a lifelong “school” for acquiring the necessary knowledge and skill set for effectively representing their constituency.

Given that our lives revolve and are confronted by a variety of realities, they can occasionally threaten the social cohesion of our complex society and are frequently the source of growing societal concern. Social cohesion is defined as the “quality of the trust and accountability relationships that exist within a society, both between its members and between members and their institutions” (Berman & Phillips, 2004: p. 6). This concept is closely related to social capital, which is defined as “the norms and networks that facilitate cooperation between or within groups” (OECD, 2001, p. 12). The term “citizenship” refers to “individual members’ commitment to the well-being of their fellow members of society and to the proper functioning of society’s institutions” (Berman & Phillips, 2004: p. 6). Thus, the ability of all these elected Dalit women members included in this study to represent themselves is entirely dependent on their peers and colleagues, who provided the social capital for these elected Dalit women leaders.

Social capital is a term that refers to a social agent’s capacity to exist within a variety of social structures. It is defined as the network of contacts and relationships, as well as the collective capital held by members of the domestic unit or family (Singh & Koiri, 2016). Thus, social capital is defined as “the totality of the resources, physical or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group as a result of the existence of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Claridge, 2015).

In this context, if one considers the educational objectives of an elected leader, they should encompass broadly three dimensions: 1) cognitive dimension focused on knowledge of democratic institutions; 2) a pragmatic dimension focused on action and experience; and 3) an effective dimension focused on attachment to the societies and communities to which one belongs. Social and communication abilities are deemed critical (cf. Berman & Phillips, 2004; Torney Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). All of these dimensions can be strengthened and developed within an adult learning environment. Given the fact that these elected Dalit women leaders possess significant cultural, social,

and symbolic capitals that have benefited them more than human capital.

Additionally, it was discovered that each of these elected Dalit women leaders demonstrated a strong interest in learning about and adapting to their role as elected representatives, and they anticipated support and guidance from their peers as well as the municipal leadership. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the role of each municipality in this study area can be clearly identified with all of the characteristics of an “adult school” environment, with the Municipality offering these elected Dalit women leaders an excellent opportunity to “learn by doing” in an adult real-world informal learning environment.

It is critical to understand the difference between formal and informal schooling or education in this context. To consider formal, informal, and non-formal education, it is necessary to consider informal learning at school.

Formal education refers to the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded “education system” that spans the years from primary school to university. This includes a range of specialized programs and institutions that provide full-time technical and professional training in addition to traditional academic studies.

Informal education is a truly lifelong process through which each individual acquires attitudes, values, skills, and knowledge through daily experience and the educative influence and resources available in his or her environment—from family and neighbours, from work and play, from the marketplace, and from the library and mass media.

Non-formal education is any organized educational activity conducted outside of the established formal system—whether independently or as a component of a larger activity—that is intended to serve identifiable learning clients and learning objectives (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974).

Thus, if we examine each of these municipalities in this study area, it should have functioned as an informal education centre, where each of these elected Dalit women leaders relied on their respective municipalities as a lifelong learning school in order to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to exercise their constitutionally defined role as an elected representative of their respective constituency.

According to the embedded perspective on citizenship-oriented education, the values and norms of a municipality are inextricably linked to those of formal school life, which serves as a training ground for critical dimensions of civic behaviour found throughout society. To understand this better, it is important to mention that there are three components of a school life, and they are

- 1) the institutional rules and norms of the school as an organization,
- 2) the leadership style of the school head, and
- 3) the school cultures, related concepts are the “hidden curriculum” and “school ethos”.

All these components are shaping the school’s identity applies the concept of institutions at the micro-level of organizational functioning, when he writes about “the concept of institutions inside school organizations” (p. 3). Components of

this concept are formal rules, informal rules, enforcement mechanisms, clarity of objectives, and the “institutional climate”. School culture can be defined as “the basic assumptions, norms and values, and cultural artefacts that are shared by school members, and which influence their functioning at school” (Maslowski, 2001, p. 5).

If we use these same yardsticks to the each of the municipalities to qualify them as equivalent to that of a formal school environment, then all these three components, mentioned can be considered for effective learning to happen, whereby the municipality rules and regulations can be broadly defined as the organization and the executive council and the Mayor as the leadership and the elected municipal council members as the whole school environment which sets the culture of the learning environment related to hidden curriculum and ethos depicted by the members to fellow members. Therefore, each of these elected Dalit women leaders saw the municipality as a place to learn and improve their own skills and abilities, so that they will be able to discharge their duties as elected leaders of their respective constituencies.

But the study information and the subsequent analysis depicted a completely different story as it is evident that the Municipality as a lifelong learning school has clearly failed these elected representatives, particularly the elected Dalit women leaders. If one takes the first aspect where, the institutional rules and norms, which is clearly biased toward these elected Dalit women leaders. For instance, all the members interviewed admitted that they did not get the meeting notice along with the agenda on time; in many instances, they are not even informed of the meetings. This clearly shows that the institutional rule and norms are very discriminatory and does not give equal importance or treatment to all the members. In many cases, it is only after the meeting is over the municipal official sends the decision register and the minutes for getting the signature of these elected Dalit women members.

If we look into the second component of leadership style, in all the three municipalities the leadership was from a higher caste and all of them men, and even within the executive committee, it was dominated by men and mostly from upper caste and influential members of the society. They do not also consider that these elected women Dalit members matter at all. Except for Vidhya Municipality where the mayor is from the Dalit community, is still not sympathetic or proactively reaching out to the elected Dalit women members. This clearly shows the leadership priority and how the leaders have failed to empower marginalised communities by mobilising the newly elected Dalit women members at the local level. Thus, voice of those section of the society who have always been subjected to discrimination and oppression and are not receiving adequate support from the senior leaderships.

The municipal culture, which is very much like that of the leader’s attitude, most of the elected members within the council feel that these Dalit women are only here because of the constitutional provision. Hence, they do not have to be taken seriously or even consulted for any decision making. The behaviour and

attitude depicted by the council members was almost the same as the larger society and in many cases in their own constituencies. But it is also evident that if the member was a man, even though from the Dalit community still had an agency and could exercise his constitutional given duty of representation. But with all the elected Dalit female members who were interviewed said that they were utterly ignored and subjected to all kinds of harassments and discouraging attitudes shown by the rest of the members.

I met Jyoti Devi in the ward office, as she was in the office to meet the ward chair. She is an impressive and articulate lady with lot of confidence. She lives in Janakpur and visits her constituency every week. Although this is her father in law's village, she was nominated by the party in general quota, and not as Dalit woman candidate. She came to this village when she was married at the age of 16. She has studied up till class 8 and is considered educated in her community. Her husband has completed School Leaving Certificate (SLC) and was teacher for 12 years, now he is a migrant worker in Kuwait. She grew up in a political family where her father was a very active member of the UML. She has two sisters and a brother. Although she was a good student, and wanted to study more, due to her marriage, she could not continue her education. In school, she used to be very active amongst her peers and also used to be considered as the leader amongst her classmates and friends. "I want to complete my School Leaving Certificate (SLC)", I am preparing for the past two years and will take my exam in India. I am waiting for my husband's leave, so that when he comes home this time, I will travel to India and complete my SLC. I have attended some training of the party and some NGOs on livelihood, social mobilization, etc. These trainings are extremely useful as they build my confidence to address the community challenges.

After marriage things changed as her husband's family was very conservative and she did not have the freedom that she enjoyed at her own home village. "My movements and social activities were restricted". Her husband was a teacher in Bajura district, and since she moved with him to Bajura. After 5 years of marriage, slowly things started to change in Bajura. Since it was just my husband and two children, there was an opportunity, where UML party was looking for some women who could help with some community work. She convinced her husband and joined this community work and slowly started to get involved in public life and in local politics. One of the elected Dalit women shared;

"My access to the mayor is because of my husband, as both were teachers and are good friends, although I don't belong to the mayor's party, but as a Dalit woman leader, the mayor is very supportive. My husband and in laws support me to join politics and it is almost 10 years that I am actively working for the party. From the Municipality itself, and my party also gave training on how to move forward. Previously, I was a very shy person and could not even reply when asked my name but after the leadership training, now I have been able to speak, although I still fear public speaking" (Shreejana, an elected woman leader from Vidya Municipality).

I do address the issue of both Dalit and non-Dalit members, as they are all my constituency members so I cannot ignore the non-Dalits, but generally the non-Dalit members don't come to her. They directly deal with ward chair or the mayor. She does feel offended with these behaviours of the non-Dalit members, but then it is up to them, so cannot force, but she also feels that perhaps the mayor and the ward chair should encourage these non-Dalit members to approach me as their representative. I also try and organize public meetings with my constituency members occasionally, but this is not regular. The main agenda of these public meeting is to discuss development agenda and community needs.

Generally, when she is here in constituency, if there are disputes between Dalit or even non-Dalits community members, she tries to address them and hold a discussion with them. As an elected leader, I can deliver services to my constituency and it is very encouraging to see that my constituency member does trust me, particularly the Dalit community members. If given a chance I would like to contest for deputy mayor in the next election. I have a very good relationship with all my colleagues and the ward chair. When asked why one of her own ward member Meena Kumari Devi has a very different opinion, she said, "Meena Kumari Devi is getting old, and she does not have the energy like before. Although I have tried to encourage her to attend the meeting, she seldom comes to these meetings nowadays. I can raise the issues and concern of my constituency in ward meetings as well as in the assembly as well". In terms of my own challenge, "I need some more training and capacity building, and also ward should get more allocation from the municipal council". This year we got only 3 million for our ward; hence we need to get more allocations. Although we managed an investment of 50 million for this ward, but only 3 million was allocated. This is very little compared to our requirements. The total budget of our municipality is 260 million, so we need to get more allocation for each ward. We also need staff, account staff, sector staff, agriculture extension staff, health staff, veterinary staff, etc. as well to be able to deliver the services to our constituency. In my ward, the most pressing need is unemployment. The mayor mentioned in the last meeting about the PM employment guarantee scheme. We should implement this in our municipality, but for some reason, this is still not been implemented, perhaps we don't know how to access this scheme. We also need to establish big factories to generate employments. In terms of self-development, I need more training and capacity development in leadership skills. In my ward, most of the members are Dalit 55% and 45% are non-Dalits. The ward chair is Non-Dalit. He is from Yadav community, rest of all the members are Dalit members, and I have very good relationship with the ward chair.

Therefore, one can conclude that the Municipality as an organization has clearly failed to give equal opportunities to these elected Dalit female leaders and has deprived them of exercising their constitutionally provisioned representation of their constituency. Also, the very constituency also does not see them as their representative either, as most of them do reach out to another member of the

council and the mayor.

Exclusion in the Key Decision Making Processes as a Major Challenge

There is substantial evidence that poor and minority groups' exclusion from political decision-making is a significant factor in both political and civil conflict and instability (Memon, 2007). The majority of conflicts in today's world are linked to marginalization and identity. Whether it is the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar, the Syrian conflict, the north-western China conflict, Darfur, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, the occupied Palestinian Territories, Sri Lanka, Nepal, or Turkey, all of these conflicts share a common factor: they are all linked to the poor peoples' rights to recognition and participation being ignored or confounded.

However, efforts to increase opportunities for the minority groups to engage in democratic institutions and processes have frequently resulted in conflict prevention, whether through constitutional and electoral system reform or genuine participation in political parties and justice systems. This is also true in the case of Nepal. Providing space for minority groups to express and indeed celebrate their identities has been critical in peace-building processes, as demonstrated by minority group engagement in post-apartheid South Africa's constitutional and electoral system reform, which enabled South Africa's diverse ethnic, social, and linguistic groups to participate in democratic politics at a more representative level (Memon, 2007).

As the results of the electoral policy reform in Nepal, substantial number of Dalit women is elected to the local level government in the first local level election across the country. However, this reform has not fulfilled the intended outcome of addressing the social exclusion and inequality in society. Most of the elected women leaders are not fully empowered to represent their constituencies. Based on the experiences of the elected Dalit women leaders and my observations, it is clear that there is not much progress has been made, when it comes to inclusive decision-making process. This is mainly due to the existing socio-cultural realities, where the domination of the elite and the powerful upper caste continue to avoid these elected members by dismissing them as been illiterate and inexperienced when it comes to matter of development or any other issues that are related to the society at large. Although each of the elected Dalit women members has proven track record of being accepted leaders and well respected within their communities and in some cases even the non-Dalits have reached out to these members seeking assistance. But the continuous institutional collective alienation by the municipal councils and its leadership have only proved that unless and until a whole of society approach is not initiated, these cosmetic inclusions will not result in complete or total inclusion of these marginalised members of the society.

This also clearly shows that lack of education or illiteracy is shown as one of the major barriers to gain trust from the citizens, but it is used as an excuse for the elites to continue their oppressive domination over the marginalised Dalit

communities. The Dalit community members are performing their duties when they are receiving support from the decision-making authorities such as Mayor, Ward Chairs, and party's senior leaders.

3. Findings and Discussions

The Dalit elected women leaders have been experiencing significant amount of challenges and discriminations in their role as an "elected Dalit women leaders". However, their personal capabilities play a significant role in coping such negative experiences and involve in local level decision making. Thus, individual's coping skills and psychological strengths contribute to their ability to influence decision making processes is my first finding of this study.

The main participants of my study have been elected Dalit women leaders and their individual capacities in decision making. There are many such psychological concepts, but for this research, I investigated the construct of Freudian theory of human personality which broadly divides into three major components called "Id, Ego and Superego" which form the defence mechanism within our self. Each one of us has memories, thoughts, feelings and impulses and we deal with all these in our own ways. In most cases, people deal with difficult feelings by utilizing what are known as defence mechanisms. These defence mechanisms are unconscious psychological responses that protect people from feelings of anxiety, threats to self-esteem, and things that they do not want to think about or deal with and try and build strategies to defend them.

Several ego defences have been identified by scholars (Laughlin, 1970). Still, here we take a close look at a few of them, namely denial, rationalization, and idealization as the key ego defences that play a critical barrier and stand as gate-keeper for individual identity to be suppressed within the organizational culture of the municipalities in this study. The limitation is that these pieces of evidence are from the individual interviewed, and this research has not taken the organization as its subject of investigation. I will try and argue based on individual shreds of evidence based on the interviews of the elected Dalit women leaders of these municipalities.

Let us take the first ego defence, "denial". To deny something is to negate or disown it. Through denial, individuals and organizations seek to disclaim knowledge and responsibility, to reject claims made on them, and to disavow acts and their consequences. The idea that belief structures can blind decision-makers and compromise organizational effectiveness by leading these decision-makers to deny the existence of problem has long been recognized (Walsh & Fahey, 1991).

Now, for instance, the fact that in all these three municipalities, there is very little or no program related to Dalit empowerment or Dalit focused development program, is evident, that the municipality has continued to ignore and deny the existence of challenges faced by these Dalit communities. It is also evident that none of these elected Dalit women representatives could convince the municipal

council to support a specific program that can directly benefit these poor members of their constituencies.

One of the elected Dalit women leaders, wanted to help some Dalit families with economic development activities, but the municipality did not support the proposal and denied saying that there are other pressing development needs, to which the member refused to accept. Later the member mentioned, “Once a road was made in our area, but we did not know. At 8 o’clock during the night, they asked us to sign papers saying the work was urgent. I asked them what papers had to be signed at this late hour. “It’s needed early in the morning,” they said. We, 2 members, signed the papers, as we didn’t understand. But the very next morning, our party members came asking us if they gave us Rs 5 lakhs for signing those papers. I told them not to talk like that. People asked me to file a complaint, and I agreed. Due to this reason, we don’t trust ward president. We told the president that he should have told us about road construction, asked us to see if the works related to the road were fine or not, but he tricked them into signing the papers. So, I have filed the complaint, but nobody has taken an action on our complaints”.

It clearly showed that the municipality used denial tactics not to accept the proposal of the Dalit women leaders’ request to support economic development activities instead went on with their agenda to sanction funds for road construction, which would benefit the rich and the powerful within the municipality.

If we now look at the next ego defence angle, “rationalization” is an attempt to justify impulses, needs, feelings, behaviours, and motives that one finds unacceptable so that they become both plausible and consciously tolerable. Like the fact that the mayor and the other decision-makers in the case mentioned above where, the member identified economic development as the core gaps that needs support for these poor members of her constituency, but the municipal decision-maker rationalized road project as the essential and critical toward upliftment of the whole constituency, which in any case only stand to benefit the powerful and the elites. But this collective rationalization by the few powerful within the municipality used “selective principle” to justify their decision. “I thought I would fight for my community, but I myself was discriminated against by my Colleagues” (Raj Kumari, 2022).

If we consider idealization as the next ego defence mechanism at work, it is the process by which an object is “overvalued and emotionally aggrandized” (Laughlin, 1970, p: 123) and devoid of any negative characteristics. It entails the application of an irrational judgment, which results in the creation (in the imagination) of a “fantastic” and “impossible” person, standard, or other entity. **Bion** (1968) builds on Freud’s pioneering work to examine how groups can idealize a leader, tradition, object, or idea to the point of severely impeding learning and work.

Our evidence also brings out the idealization aspect, whereby most of the elected Dalit women leaders have to either collude or stifle to support the more

significant groups' agenda, idealizing the objective or response of the majority members and then convince their constituents that how such an activity will be beneficial to them as well. S. Pariyar of Panchakal municipality, where the Dalit agenda is secondary to the overall vision of the municipality told, "I want to bring some changes in agriculture sector in my communities".

"I want to solve the problem of drinking water, and ensure it reaches every household". If we look at this statement by an influential Dalit woman leader of the municipality, it clearly shows how the influential powerful mayor's vision has been idealized by this elected Dalit member and co-opted into the mainstream vision and agenda and side-lining, the Dalit constituent members' issues and challenges.

My second finding is, the elected Dalit women leaders' ability to influence local level decision making is highly influenced from their social and cultural capital, for example their education, family support, and their networks. I looked at this finding using the idea of cultural capital, which is said to include things such as "verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials" (Stampnitzky, 2006). Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital specifically looks at the three states of embodied, objectified and institutionalized (Stampnitzky, 2006) and as further defined by Goldthorpe's "cultural capital", published in 2007 where he argues the influence of cultural capital on one's ability to shape individual qualities. The emphasis on background in which one comes from or the context of one's upbringing plays a critical role in our ability to perform or not perform. Let me explain this with the example of children. Those children of what one calls the "dominant class" come with significant advantage. The children from this class share a standard mode of speech, style of social interaction, and aesthetic orientation with their teachers, and neither the content of what they are taught (syllabus) nor how they are taught (pedagogy) are likely to appear strange to them.

As a young social work student, while I was placed in a juvenile correctional home in Mumbai, one afternoon as part of the group work, I had an interaction section with a group of convent school going children and with the few inmates of the correctional facility, I displayed a set of few pictures displaying lion, tiger, cat, goats, sheep, and dog and asked the convent educated children what is common in these pictures, they immediately responded that they are pictures of "animals" I was impressed, as with all these trends of education, I felt that their response was the correct response, but this was not true with the inmate at the juvenile home, when I asked the same questions to the inmate of the juvenile home they said "all have four legs", to me this response was basic and felt that the inmates of the juvenile home were not considered "educated" or sophisticated compared to those of the convent educated children. This is because in my mind, the sophistication in convent educated students respond to my question as "animal" was influenced by my own biases, where I felt that the word "animals" presented a complex idea compared to the response from the inmates,

which I felt very basic not complex enough “they have four legs” but later as we were having lunch, I asked the convent kid what was common amongst animals their response was that “ they all have four legs” and this response made me realize the inhibition and bias in my own thought process, where I could identify immediately with those sophisticated convent educated children and misjudged the inmate as lower in knowledge compared to the convent school students. This I call the social style or the standard mode of communication, which is culturally influenced, as their first response was more sophisticated compared to the response of the inmates, who spoke the basic, but factually correct, but in my mind these inmates were considered inferior to the convent school children.

Children from other social classes, particularly those from working-class or peasant backgrounds, on the other hand, perceive school as an alien and even hostile environment—a cultural and social world that is distinct from their families and communities, and one in which they are likely to feel out of place. While children from dominant class backgrounds gradually gain advantage from a positive interaction between the influences of home and school, children from less advantaged class backgrounds experience difficulties, with the likelihood of increasing difficulties, in adjusting to their new environment. With the exception of a few exceptional cases, these latter children will then fail to progress further in the educational system, either because they are excluded from higher levels of education as a result of their poor performance, or because they exclude themselves.

Profits and capital are sought after by the players on the field, but they are not distributed equally. If capital is specific to a particular field and relatively worthless in other fields, this is known as specialization. For example, it is possible to discuss an intellectual field in which, despite the fact that some recognition can be gained outside the field, the scholarly significance can only be fully appreciated within the field.

Consider the following: a research centre belongs to the scientific field, a parent-teacher association belongs to the educational field, a bank is a part of an organization’s economy, a theatre belongs to its cultural field, a ministry belongs to its bureaucracy, and so on and so forth. However, each of these fields can be a component of one or more larger fields, as well as contain subfields within each of these fields on their own. The research centre, for example, may be considered a part of the political field because of its connections to political agendas and political institutions, for example. Maya Devi, for example, describes herself as an ideal wife who supports her husband, a good friend to her peers, a political leader who fights for her constituency who shares the same political ideology as the UML, and so on.

In the case of Maya Devi, the amount and type of capital that M.D. Paswan as an agent possesses can be well located in the social field: the social field can be described as a multi-dimensional space of positions such that each actual position can be defined in terms of a multi-dimensional system of co-ordinates whose

values correspond to the values of the first pertinent variables; the amount and type of capital that M.D. Paswan as an agent possesses can be well located in the social field. Consider Maya Devi in her role as a member of her family, where the roles she plays and the value she uses and the capital she relies on are vastly different from her role as an elected public leader, and the value she uses and the capital she relies on will be vastly different as well. Agents are thus distributed in two dimensions: in the first, according to the total amount of capital they own; and in the second, according to the composition of their capital—in other words, according to the relative importance of the various types of capital in the total amount of capital they own. Agents are distributed in both dimensions according to the total amount of capital they own (Walsh & Fahey, 1991). Agents in a field are motivated to pursue their objectives, whether they are aware of doing so or not. There is a never-ending battle to keep or change the distribution of capital, or to convert the type of capital in circulation. Walsh & Fahey (1991) direct the researcher's attention to these competing interests, the conflicts that they generate, and the overall logic of the field, which is a useful focus for the researcher.

If public relations practice is viewed as a practice that assists organizational actors in a variety of fields in pursuing their interests with the assistance of various forms of capital, then it fits this picture. In addition, the distribution of capital is an expression of power relationships, which should be investigated further. One major advantage of drawing on Bourdieu rather than other resource analyses is his emphasis on the relational and dynamic aspects of resources; this is especially true in light of the evidence that has been gathered in this research. This understanding, in which the Sangita Devi's position is viewed in relation to other women leaders and explained as a function of different types and amounts of capital, field-specific appreciations of these forms of capital, and the constant attempts to acquire, hold on to, or convert capital is what will finally allow Sangita Devi and all of the other elected Dalit women leaders to be able to deliver on their mandated role as public leaders. "I was treated in such a way that as a Dalit woman, there is nothing I could contribute in the Decision Making" (Raj Kumari, 2022).

Further support for this position is provided by the information gathered on the ground. Dalit women leaders interviewed revealed that the majority of the 16 elected leaders had very strong or moderate cultural capital, indicating that the majority of them are considered and perceived as an elite within the Dalit communities, come from politically powerful families, and can identify with the other dominant communities within the village. The family status of the vast majority of these women leaders provides them with the opportunity to network with influential political leaders, as was demonstrated in the case of Sangita Devi in the Vidhya municipality in India. "It is because of her family's exposure to specific political events and association with certain influential leaders that her family has achieved a significant level of prominence in the community." "She and

her family members were held in such high regard by all of the members of the community and leaders.” The same can be said for other female Dalit leaders who come from similar families, which has allowed them to stand out from other Dalit families in the community. Dalit women leaders interviewed found that 75 percent of those who were elected come from families with strong to moderate cultural capital, and only 12 percent come from families with weak cultural capital. The conclusion is that most of these women leaders possess excellent cultural capital, which places them in a position of strong leadership ability, which is positively correlated with their human capital as well as their educational attainment.

It is beneficial for Dalit women to have access to both formal and informal education and training, but it is also important for them to gain the trust of their constituencies as well as key decision makers. Furthermore, the stronger the economic status and wealth accumulation of the Dalit women leaders, the stronger the political network they have, to influence decision-making processes at the local level.

Look at it through the lens of economic capital, which is material wealth—“accumulated labor”—that has been institutionalized in property rights and that then generates monetary returns, or profits, for its owners in order to allow for additional accumulation. Economic capital, on the other hand, is capital that is “embodied” in individual dispositions and competencies that provide privileged access to such capital in its “objectified” form of economic assets and artifacts, and that has been institutionalized as a result of these dispositions and competencies. This is also evident in the information gathered from the field, where the vast majority of Dalit women leaders interviewed treated economic artefacts in the form of assets they own or have access to as “objectified” forms of economic artefacts. For example, Sangita Devi owned a large house as well as a large amount of paddy land, and was considered to be economically well off in comparison to the majority of her constituency members.

Claussen, S. and Osborne, J. (2012) argue that ideas of appropriateness can be inferred or derived from any other ideas of appropriateness and that these ideas have relative value. Consequently, neither the culture that dominant classes uphold nor the teaching and learning that takes place in schools and colleges can be justified on the basis of any inherent superiority, nor can it be justified on the basis of any more pragmatic considerations such as the requirements that modern societies typically impose on their members, such as the knowledge and skills that they must possess in order to engage in productive work or to be effective citizens. The content and method of instruction must be understood to be always dictated by the interests of dominant classes, and indeed, as such conceived, what constitutes economic capital is that which will best ensure the reproduction over time of the prevailing unequal distribution of such capital and, consequently, of social power and privilege more generally (Ihlen, 2005).

For example, if the municipal council (Nagar shabha) is thought of as a class-

room where adult learning takes place, then it reinforces the argument made above, according to which the interests of dominant groups determine a large portion of the agenda. The type of plans and programs approved by the municipal council, which are primarily intended to benefit the dominant groups within the constituency or the municipality as a whole, demonstrates the level of discussion that took place in the municipal council.

The symbolic capital serves as a mechanism for legitimizing other forms of capital. "It is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition," Bourdieu says of symbolic capital, which he defines as a form of credit or advance (Claussen & Osborne, 2012).

Symbolic capital, according to Bourdieu, can be accumulated in the same way that economic capital can be accumulated, primarily because it can be freely converted from one form to another, ultimately resulting in the accumulation of advantages such as additional wealth, power, allies, and marriage partners. His critique of rational action does not pit idealism against materialism, but rather slightly broadens the concept of rationality to include the pursuit of social gains, specifically symbolic capital, as well as the pursuit of material gains. The highest profits in symbolic capital can be realized, according to Bourdieu, when individuals act in ways that reliably demonstrate a lack of interest in material acquisition, such as through conspicuous consumption or conspicuous generosity.

The monetary value of the display in terms of symbolic capital is determined by the amount of time, energy, or wealth that was expended to create it (Bliege & Smith, 2005). At a time when marriage negotiations are critical, Bourdieu explains that behaviours that appear at first glance to be economically "absurd", such as purchasing an ox solely to demonstrate that one has surplus resources, actually increases a family's symbolic capital, or their "credit of renown" (Bliege & Smith, 2005). He argues that this "exhibition of symbolic capital (which is always very expensive in economic terms)" raises the social standing of the family by demonstrating the superiority of its goods, which is in turn linked to the characteristics of its members. It is because of this high social standing that the family can, for example, acquire powerful affines through marriage and additional material wealth, as well as (in the case of the Kabyle, at least) demonstrate the ability of its male members to defend and preserve the family's lands and women. Bourdieu continues to refine the relationship between the individual attributes and the symbolic value of the display in distinction with other forms of communication (Bliege & Smith, 2005).

When it comes to distinguishing characteristics, the items with the greatest distinctive power are those that most clearly attest to the quality of the appropriation, and therefore the quality of the owner, because their possession necessitates a long investment of time and capacities that cannot be acquired in a short period of time, such as artistic or musical culture, and which cannot be acquired quickly or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the most reliable indications of the quality of the person. The parallels with Veblen are striking (Trigg, 2001),

in which conspicuous generosity is no different from conspicuous expenditure in that both are ultimately strategic actions intended to accumulate symbolic capital. Both entail significant expenditures that serve to substantiate the value of symbolic capital. This solution to the paradox of economically irrational behaviour appears to have been recognized by both scholars. The evidence for this can be found in the fact that leaders such as Mayawati, who comes from a Dalit family and has been subjected to all kinds of atrocities and caste deprivation, has fought and risen to become the Chief Minister of the State of Uttar Pradesh in India, has spent six hundred million dollars to build a park for her mentor and leader of the Dalit masses. However, the cost associated with such strategies is outweighed by the benefits derived from manipulating social relationships with other people. The apparent paradox of wasting time and money is resolved if the cost of the display is sufficiently high to ensure that only high-quality individuals can afford to use them at all. This means that conspicuous consumption is supported by the cost associated with it, which are in turn the price that wealthy individuals pay for their social standing and status.

In analysing the field information, it is found that vast majority of the respondents, i.e., about 75% of them have invested in big houses and also on other extravagance like throwing community feasts, buying means of transport like car or bike, which the family members can use, investing in ornaments and expensive clothes, etc. Most of the respondents looked well dressed and had at least one expensive smartphone, although some of them did not know much of its functions, still carrying and displaying them increased their symbolic capital. In one of the cases, while we were searching for the house of the Dalit elected member of ward 2 of Vaidya municipality, the community members directed us to “the *thulu ghar*” (big house) within the community. This depicted that the leader and her family members were wealthy and came from a well-off family, reaching the house of the member, it was found that they had a huge concrete house with plenty of rooms and superstructure. The house stood out of the rest of the community members, who had only Semi-structured thatch houses.

This was also the case with Rita Devi, the Dalit woman member of ward 9 in the same municipality, where the house was a huge house. When asking for direction the community members on the way referred to “the biggest house” in the locality, which was very accurate. She had the most prominent house with multi-storey superstructure, also because of her husband who retired as forest officer, the house had right teak furniture’s and the house also had two, three shops which they had given out on rent. It was also the case with elected Dalit women members of ward 7 of the same municipality, where they had such a big house with lots of cattle and huge hay stake in front of the house.

All these strengthen the argument that symbolic capital is an essential aspect of claiming the status within the society as these women leaders had specific symbolic value displayed within the society that reinforced the fact that they were different and are more capable than the rest of the community members in their localities. The other evidence claiming the importance of symbolic capital

was depicted by the gesture of kindness shown by the Mayor of Vidhya to a fellow Dalit citizen, where the mayor paid part of the debt owed by this Dalit member who had dues to pay for a foreign employment agent who was from an upper caste and this member was unable to pay because the job which was assured did not materialize. He had to return to Nepal, and this erupted into a significant dispute, where the agent claimed that the Dalit member owed him Rs. 75,000 as balance payment for arranging his employment, but the Dalit member claimed that he was cheated as the assured job did not materialize, and he was unable to pay the agreed amount. The mayor, who was witness to this whole incident at a public function, immediately stepped in and resolved the dispute by paying 50% of the amount due from the Dalit member to the agent. This immediately becomes the talk of the community, praising the kind gesture of the mayor in helping his community members from more embarrassment and dispute. This put the mayor in high pedestal within the community. This gesture clearly contributes to the symbolic capital of the mayor, as his status within the Dalit community reinforced as their leaders and who could be trusted and counted to stand by them.

The information also brought to forefront, the assets, and land owned by each of the elected Dalit women leaders, who were part of this study, be it in the terai or in the mid-hills, ownership to land is seen as an essential resource, both in terms of economic value and also in terms of the symbolic capital.

All the above types of evidence apparently show that symbolic capital plays an important role in building the confidence of each of these elected Dalit women leaders and most of them possess such symbolic capital within the society and which is also an important attribute toward their ability to represent their constituency and stake rightfully reinforcing their leadership ability.

My third finding is the elected Dalit women leaders are working very hard to fulfil the high expectations of their constituencies while facing the historical socio-cultural burden to struggle against the caste and gender-based discriminations and oppressions rooted in the society. The discussion is to look into the attribution of social capital, which is referred as the ability of social agents to exist within varied social structures and is regarded as the system of acquaintances and networks, including the collective capital held by members of the domestic unit or family (Bliege & Smith, 2005). Social capital is thus described as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Chia & Lin, 2019). Social capital is argued to be significant in education through its association with knowledge. For instance, Belay, S., Melese, S., & Seifu, A. (2022) argue that “social capital is about the quality of engagement and relationship building among people, which affects their access to knowledge and information” (p. 90).

And Bourdieu further distinguishes, though with less elaboration, social capital as expressed in possession of both informal and formal networks of acquaint-

tance and recognition that give returns via “contacts”, support, and representation.

In the field of social science, the concept of social capital has become somewhat of a buzzword. It is frequently used to describe the resources available to a community, as well as the degree to which its members share common values and trust in one another. While the concept is grounded in critical sociological perspectives such as Pierre Bourdieu’s (e.g., [Claussen & Osborne, 2012](#)), his work has only rarely been applied in public relations, in this instance it is. According to Bourdieu, social capital is one of several resources that an actor can draw on in order to pursue their interests and establish their position in society.

There are many different types of capital for which agents or organizations compete, each of which can be incorporated or materialized. These types of capital include economic, linguistic, and scholastic capital, to name a few examples. Economic capital (money, property, and other assets), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and educational qualifications), and social capital are the three fundamental types of capital identified by [Claussen & Osborne \(2012\)](#) in his article on the forms of capital (connections and membership of groups). At the same time, even though he claims that these forms of capital can be regarded as symbolic capital, he does not elaborate (prestige, honour). Social capital, for example, is always used as symbolic capital because it is “governed by the logic of knowledge and acknowledgment”, according to the author ([Claussen & Osborne, 2012](#)).

Thus, if one analyses the information from the social capital lens, almost 90% of the elected Dalit women leaders in this study have excellent family support, community support as well as political party support. The vast majority of the Dalit women leaders interviewed mentioned that they had support from their families. As mentioned in the interview by Maya Devi, an elected Dalit woman leader, it is the exposures to these political events and the association with these leaders gave a significant status to her family within the community, all the community leaders and community members had such great respect for her and her family members. The association of her family with the senior level political leaders mainly contributed toward recognizing her family as an influential family in her community. It was further reinforced with the statement by Jyoti Devi who mentioned “this is because of my father in law’s position within the party and also within the village, where he is recognized and well regarded both by the community as well as by the party, so when the party was looking for Dalit women candidate, they approached my father in law. I got the UML party ticket to contest the local election, and this is both because of my effort and also the reputation of my in-laws in the village”. In case of Sita Devi, her husband was very popular in the community and had been doing lots of social services and helping the community members, and it was her husband’s reputation that prompted the party to approach with party ticket “as we were here, and people knew that I was teacher’s (husband) wife. So, the party decided to give the ticket

to me”. All these pieces of evidence show clearly that the social capital did play a significant factor in these elected Dalit women leaders, as each one of them derives their confidence as a leader because of their social capital and they build on their social capital.

Due to the way my theoretical framework connects each of these unique attributes of capitals to that of human capital, I am attempting to combine all three capitals—cultural, symbolic and social—into human capital, which is defined as a collection of traits—all of the individual and collective knowledge and abilities possessed by individuals in a population (Human Capital Report, 2013). These resources are the total capacity of the people, which represents a form of wealth that can be directed toward the accomplishment of the goals of the nation or state, or a portion of those goals, respectively.

Taking this into consideration, if we further dissect human capital, we can break it down into three key capitals: 1) intellectual capital, 2) social capital, and 3) emotional capital, respectively. An attempt to capture the social, biological, cultural, and psychological complexity of the human being as they interact in explicit and economic transactions is represented by an aggregate economic view of the human being acting within economies. There are numerous theories that explicitly link education to investment in human capital development, and the role of human capital in economic development and productivity growth, as well as the role of innovation, has frequently been cited as a justification for government subsidies for education and job skills training.

Numerous criticisms have been levelled at and continue to be levelled at “human capital”. Michael Spence proposes signalling theory as an alternative to human capital as a means of increasing productivity. According to Pierre Bourdieu, human capital is a nuanced conceptual alternative that encompasses a variety of other factors such as cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capitals. In light of these and other debates, it appears that the concept of “human capital” has become a reified concept with insufficient explanatory power.

The most important aspect of human capital is linked to three fundamental characteristics, which are obligation, expectations, and trustworthiness. These three characteristics determine the quality of human capital. And these three characteristics are formed based on the other three capitals that we had discussed earlier, cultural, symbolic, and social capitals.

Let me explain this through an analogy. If one of the Dalit woman leader does something to the elected non-Dalit member of the municipality that benefits the non-Dalit member, and the Dalit woman leader trusts that the non-Dalit member returns this favour in the future. This established expectation on the part of the Dalit woman leader and obligation on the part of the non-Dalit member for the future. This obligation can be conceived as a credit slip that Dalit woman leader holds against the non-Dalit member for future use. Imagine if all Dalit woman leaders hold such credit slip against several non-Dalit members of the municipal council, then the Dalit woman leader is considered to call in these

credits to the Dalit women leaders' favour in the future. I define this credit as human capital. Now this credit, human capital cannot be built overnight and need adequate cultural, symbolic, and social capital that contribute to a firm and powerful human capital. This human capital can also be attributed to the capability argument made by Sen, as each human being is born with certain capabilities, and the deprivation of exercising their capability is the main reason for underdevelopment and conflicts. If we take all these arguments into perspective, all these elected Dalit women leaders have proven their capabilities.

All these elected Dalit women leaders are bestowed with substantial cultural, symbolic and social capital contributing to their overall human capabilities, but they have been constrained to effectively exercise their duty as elected Dalit women leaders. They have always been brushed aside as incapable by the municipalities despite the fact they are elected. Hence, it is the institutional environment that has been the bottleneck depriving these elected Dalit women leaders to exercise their representative functions as public leaders effectively. This is evident from the information that all the primary participants of this research have substantial cultural, symbolic, and social capital, positively contributing to the overall human capabilities, but are unable to exercise their representative duty, for which their respective constituencies have elected them.

My fourth finding is, each municipality has as an informal team, that takes most of the critical decisions in an informal basis "defecato" and therefore the elected Dalit women leaders' formal identity and decision making authorities to represent the marginalised citizens are largely ignored at the local level.

"They used to avoid sitting near me at the meetings but after I kept on warning them against caste-based discrimination they gradually stopped such behaviour, but in decision making matters, I was by and large kept out of the loop." (Raj Kumari, 2022). It led me to look at the institution to which they have been elected to; the municipalities as organizations have their own identity. Hence, I looked into the organizational identity from a psychodynamic perspective, in their paper on Brown and Starkey bring the relationship between individual identities vs. that of the organizational identity in which their finding clarifies that organizations are disposed all forms of ego defences, such as denial, rationalization, idealization, fantasy, and symbolization, that preserve shared self-esteem and the endurance of existing identity. They argue that organizational identity precedes individual or group identities. Individual identity depends upon both one's identity, which is shaped by their cultural, symbolic, and social capital, and is shared from one's relationship with others, although the effect of each of these two factors differs between individuals and over time (Besley & Coate, 1997). It is also clear that like individuals, the psychological group and organization, in our case, the municipalities seek to maintain self-esteem, and this generally means acting conservatively to preserve an existing identity. It is also supported by the evidence from the field, where most of the elected Dalit women representatives expressed their frustration to the fact that they are not heard or

even consulted during all the critical decision-making processes.

As mentioned by Sita Devi “As ward president is from congress, he supports me. But mayor, being from another party does not involve us in the works. Even when Nagarsabha (municipal council) was held, mayor did not give importance to us. He uses the power of money to be in the majority and gets his works done”. It reinforces the fact that the mayor although from the Dalit community does not encourage these elected Dalit women to bring the issue of their constituencies and protect the interest of those who are powerful and elite whose issues and concern have always been given priority and thus shaping the organizational identity of the municipality. The domination of organizational identity over individual identity is further evident from the words of M.G. Paswan, who is the only elected Dalit mayor with majority of Dalit constituencies. Still, yet being the mayor, he is unable to challenge the influence and domination of the powerful non-Dalit agenda in his municipality, he expressed this in his words “in my municipality, although, we have 45% Dalit community members, and it was only because of my community support, that I won the election as an independent candidate, but today because of the structural issue within my community, where majority of them do not have access to productive resource like land, water, etc., they depend on non-Dalit members of our society. He said that the non-Dalits have manipulated my voters against me, even though, I am an elected mayor of this municipality. This is because, as a Dalit, we have no option but to depend on these non-Dalits for our livelihood”. Hence, the municipal council gives value to these powerful members’ voice and agenda, which in turn shape the organizational identity and pushes the voice of the elected mayor himself.

According to Jyoti Devi who is educated elected Dalit woman leader says that even her voters do not approach her. “Yes, that is also one of the reasons, as the mayor, ward president, they hold much positional power, whereas a member, I don’t have any official position in the executive committee. Hence, there should be a role for Dalit women in the executive committee.” This also shows how the organizational identity is shaped, as most of the agenda is set by those who are in power and positions within the organization and shapes the organization’s collective self-concept.

Any information or action that threatens or challenges the organization’s collective self-concept is either neglected, or ignored, abandoned, rejected, reinterpreted, hidden or lost, and the processes by which organizations preserve their identities are, in many ways, analogous to the methods that individuals employ in defence of their self-concept (Brown & Starkey, 2000). There is much evidence from the research to back this argument, wherein both Videha and Kamala municipalities, most of the agenda are set by the mayor and closely-knit group of elected representatives. The Dalit leaders’ agenda or issues are either ignored, rejected, or even manipulated to serve the interest of those powerful, who stand to benefit the most and are always in line with the organizational identity of the municipality.

This is also evident that management's role, in this case, the executive committee in the municipalities is to promote mature and adaptive thought and action in pursuit of the collective organizational recognition, of course, that what counts as the collective organizational good is both contestable and identity dependent. If one looks at most of the institutions in Nepal, they have always been led by elite. The most powerful, hence many a time, the poor seldom identify themselves with these institutions or organizations, as in most cases, these organizations have only served the agenda of those influential dominant community members. The effort made by political reforms and electoral reforms has facilitated the entry of those deprived and minority community members to find a place in these organizations. Still, the organizational identity is so powerful that either they deprive these elected Dalit leaders to exercise their rightful duties, or simply co-opt these representatives into their elite agenda in the name of collective organizational good.

The fact that individual and organizational concepts of self are maintained by a variety of defences that are engaged to avoid psychic pain and discomfort, allay or prevent anxiety, resolve conflict and generally support and increase self-esteem. This is the reason why most of these elected Dalit women leaders either become indifferent or tacitly accept the domination of those powers within the organization, just to avoid discomfort and prevent uncomfortable situations within the organization, and this is evident from the fact that those who raise the voice are either ignored or not invited to the critical meetings including in the municipality council meeting.

4. Summary of the Study

Lot has been said and researched on the link between education and leadership ability. But there are very few studies on how far the formal and informal education of the women leaders from the marginalised community contributes to the effective representation of their constituencies, mainly at the local level.

The study was conducted on this research space, mainly in the Nepal's new federalized context, where the vast majority of the elected Dalit women leaders at the local governments have little or no formal education. Through the electoral law reform, in line with the Constitution, the Dalit women leaders have gained the opportunity to run for public office at the local level. Hence, they got this rightful opportunity to be elected to the 753 local municipalities with exclusive authorities to exercise the power of local level governments. Generally, it is perceived that the Dalit women leaders elected through the legal mandate, have very little or no capacity to represent their constituencies. Due to the perceived poor capacities of the Dalit women leaders, it is a predominant view that they are unable to contribute to empower their constituencies, the marginalised population as they have no capacity, power and voice in decision making. Hence, denying the very agency of these elected women Dalit leaders, many stakeholders, particularly the leaders from the high-caste and

gendered society created a discourse that electing Dalit women is worthless provision of the law.

Understanding the elected Dalit women's experiences was possible by using interpretive case study design. Likewise, I applied both descriptive as well as an exploratory research design for carrying out the study. The participants were primarily the elected Dalit women leaders who have been elected to the local governments in each of the three municipalities. Similarly, three sets of sites were selected for case study from the same types of participants for the qualitative interpretation. Open ended questions were prepared and freely used to assess the leadership ability and the habitus in which each of these elected representatives has been in.

It is believed that each of the elected Dalit women leaders' expectation, experience, and their coping strategies differ according to their immediate environment and based on the cultural, symbolic and social capital they have accrued over the years and had very little to do with their formal educational qualification. The evidence gathered through this study brought to light, that having formal education can have positive contribution toward effective representation, but not a prerequisite as most of the elected Dalit women who were part of this study displayed their ability to represent their constituencies, and clearly showed good leadership qualities, despite not having any formal educational qualifications. However, each of the interviewed Dalit leaders did admit that if they were educated, it would have been beneficial and that they could do more. But many of them also qualified what kind of education they preferred, they were not thinking of formal education, the education they had said was mostly in the form of on-the-job training and capacity development which mostly falls under the informal education systems and less to do with formal education or qualifications.

However, each of these elected Dalit women leaders' experiences was not significantly different among those from the Tarai and that of the Mid-hills in Nepal. It showed that the less qualification or no education was not really the most critical barrier to represent their constituency, including Dalit men and women and other marginalised communities. Still, there were other issues which came on their way, rather than education or being illiterate.

Similarly, the study shows that the organization environment, the family background, the social set up within the community had much more effect on each of these elected Dalit women leaders' abilities to discharge their duties and be able to represent their respective constituencies effectively. Likewise, the findings from the case study show that the leadership ability is not individual capability alone, but is influenced by other factors like environment, family, and opportunities within the organization. All the respondents had a similar sort of experience even with different qualification background. They wanted to represent their constituencies effectively.

This study clearly shows that the individual personalities and their agency

played an important role in shaping their ability to strategies coping up mechanism that each of these elected Dalit women leaders adopted to able to discharge their duties as the representative of their own constituencies. How each one of them had used their past and present memories, thoughts, feeling and impulses and the way they dealt with the challenging situation that each one of them faced as elected leaders. How each of these elected Dalit women leaders used psychological defense mechanisms like denial, rationalization, and idealization, as the key ego defenses that play the critical barrier and stand as gatekeeper for individual identity to be suppressed within the organizational culture of the municipalities in this study.

In all these three municipalities, there is very little, or no program related to Dalit empowerment or Dalit focused development program. It is evident that the municipality has continued to ignore and deny the existence of challenges faced by these Dalit communities. It is also evident that none of these elected Dalit women representatives could convince the municipal council to support a specific program that can directly benefit these deprived members of their constituencies.

Rationalization was the other tactic used to justify impulses, needs, feelings, behaviours, and motives that each of these elected Dalit women leaders used to position themselves to accept things that were unacceptable so that they become both plausible and consciously tolerable through a collective rationalization by the few powerful within the municipality used “selective principle” to justify their decision. This tactic has been used by the elites and most of the elected Dalit women leaders have found this way to position them which seemed less confrontational and gave the false assumption of inclusion. Finally, the idealization as a defense mechanism is clearly evident in this study, whereby most of the elected Dalit women leaders have to either collude or stifle to support the more significant groups agenda, idealizing the objective or response of the majority members and then convince their constituents as how such an activity will be beneficial to them as well in the long run.

The elected Dalit women leaders in this study came with their own set of values, thoughts, ideas and verbal expressions that formed their individual strength as leaders where the concept of cultural capital was discussed and it explored the verbal faculty, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences influenced each of these women leaders. These were linked with the social field that is multi-dimensional space of positions such that each actual position was defined in terms of a multi-dimensional system of co-ordinates whose values correspond to the values of the first pertinent variables. Again, the distribution of capital based on the relational and dynamic aspects; this is particularly true from the evidence that is gathered in this study. The information from the field also reinforces this argument further, where a majority of them come with a very strong or moderate cultural capital, as most of them are considered and perceived as an elite within the Dalit communities and come from politically influential families and can identify themselves with the other dominant communities within the village.

Hence, it can be confidently argued that most of these women leaders have an excellent cultural capital, which puts them in a strong leadership ability positively correlating with their human capital as well.

It was also interesting to see how the economic status and wealth acquisition had its bearing on the political acumen amongst each of these elected Dalit women leaders. When one views with the economic capital lens which is in the form of material wealth—“accumulated labor”—that is institutionalized in property rights and that then yields monetary returns, or profits, to its owners, allowing for further accumulation. Correspondingly, economic capital is capital “embodied” in individual dispositions and competencies that give privileged access to such capital in its “objectified” form of economic assets and artifacts, and that is in turn institutionalized. This is also evident in the information from the field, where vast majority of the Dalit women leaders interviewed processed as “objectified” form of economic artifacts in the form of assets they own, or have access to, for instance, owning a big house and also large amount of paddy land and is considered economically well off compared to most of her constituency members.

The social status and the public display of their influence in the society by each of the elected Dalit women leaders as the symbolic capital legitimizes the position of these elected Dalit women leaders. About 75% of the respondents in this study have invested in big houses and also on other extravagance like throwing community feasts, buying means of transport like car or bike, which the family members can use, invest in ornaments and expensive clothes, etc. Most of the respondents looked well dressed and had at least one expensive smart phone, although some of them did not know much of its functions, still carrying and displaying them increased their symbolic capital. This depicted that the elected Dalit women members and her family were wealthy and came from a well-off family. All these strengthen the argument that symbolic capital is an essential aspect of claiming the status within the society, as these women leaders had specific symbolic value displayed within the society that reinforced the fact that they were different and are more capable than the rest of the community members in their localities.

The contribution of individual and personal network maintained by each of the elected Dalit women leaders with powerful individuals in the society played a very crucial role in their ability to position themselves as influential leaders’ is the fifth findings of this study. Almost 90% of the elected Dalit women leaders in this study have excellent family support, community support as well as political party support. The vast majority of the Dalit women leaders interviewed mentioned that they had support from their families.

As my theoretical framework connects each of these unique attributes of capitals to that of human capital, where attempt is made to combine all these three capitals, cultural, symbolic and social into human capital which is defined as a collection of traits—all the knowledge, talents, skills, abilities, experience, intel-

ligence, training, judgment, and wisdom possessed individually and collectively by individuals in a population.

Taking this into consideration, if we further dissect human capital, we can break it down into three key capitals: 1) intellectual capital, 2) social capital, and 3) emotional capital, respectively. An attempt to capture the social, biological, cultural, and psychological complexity of the human being as they interact in explicit and economic transactions is represented by an aggregate economic view of the human being acting within economies, which is an aggregate economic view of the human being acting within economies. There are numerous theories that explicitly link education to investment in human capital development, and the role of human capital in economic development and productivity growth, as well as the role of innovation, has frequently been cited as a justification for government subsidies for education and job skills training.

Finally, it is evident that all these elected Dalit women leaders are bestowed with substantial cultural, symbolic and social capital contributing to their overall human capabilities, but they have been constrained to effectively exercise their duty as elected Dalit women leaders. They have always been brushed aside as incapable by the municipalities they are elected to. This led to look into the institutional environment that has been a bottleneck depriving these elected Dalit women leaders to exercise their representative functions as public leaders effectively. This is evident from the information that all the primary participants of this research have substantial cultural, symbolic, and social capital, positively contributing to the overall human capabilities, but unable to exercise their representative duty, for which their respective constituencies have elected them. This led to the finding that each municipality displayed a collective organizational culture that formed a very distinct institutional identity which overshadowed the individual identity of the elected Dalit women leaders at the local level.

5. Conclusion

The Dalit women leaders had substantial individual capital, social and cultural capital, hence have their own agency to influence the decision making at the local levels. The ability of adequate representation and leadership quality is influenced from the individual's educational background both formal and informal. However, such influence is minimal comparing to their socio-cultural background, trust they gain from the key decision-making authorities and the support they have from their family and the social networks.

This finding leads me to conclude that elected Dalit women leaders are only able to effectively represent their constituencies when they are empowered to influence the decision-making processes using their individual soft skill as well as political networks and, in parallel, they effectively challenge the caste, class and gender based discriminations. The institutional deprivation within the municipal council as well as in the municipal organization that prevented the elected

Dalit women from discharging their duties as elected Dalit women representatives. The institutional identity of the municipality overshadowed and dominated the individual identity of these elected Dalit women leaders, whereby they were coerced into standing with the majoritarian views and programme, hence failing to voice their individual concerns and issues that were directly affecting or beneficial to their constituencies. The organizational environment, use of the formal institutions, for example the Municipality Council for formalizing the decisions which are often already decided in the informal settings by the key decision makers. In such context, influencing decisions is very challenging as almost all cases, the elected Dalit women are excluded in the informal decision-making process.

The elected Dalit women's ability to influence decisions making at the municipalities are undermined. This finding led me to conclude that unless providing all the municipality council members equal chance to participate in decision making process, their voices are not incorporated in the decisions and the voice of all members are not valued, consequently the Dalit women are not empowered to represent their constituencies in an effective manner. Hence, the cemented system of caste and gender-based discrimination can be better addressed if the political representatives of the Dalits and women are capacitated and empowered to represent their constituencies effectively.

The organizational identity overshadows the individual capabilities and either ignore individual voice of dissent or simply co-opt the individual view into collective institutional voice, which is influenced by the powerful and the elites. The leadership of the municipalities discouraged these elected Dalit women members by depriving them any opportunity to exercise their representative duties by disempowering and disengaging and excluding them in decision making processes.

The role of the key leaders in the local levels is the critical for empowering elected Dalit women representatives. Thus, it is essential to work with the key leaders, concentrate the elected Dalit women so that they are empowered for effective representation of the voice of deprived communities and contribute to reducing inequalities in society by addressing the issues of oppression based on the caste, gender, and class.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Abbreviations

APA	American Psychological Association
BC	Before Christ
CA	Constituent Assembly
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
ECN	Election Commission of Nepal
EU	European union
EUI	European University Institute
FEDO	Feminist Dalit Organization
FPTP	First Past the Post
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
GON	Government of Nepal
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
ISDN	International Dalit Solidarity Network
MOFAGA	Ministry of federal Affairs and General Administration
MoWCSW	Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare
NERCRMP	North-East Region Community Resource Management Project
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHDR	Nepal Human Development Report
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
OBC	Other Backward Classes
RJPN	Rastriya Janata Party Nepal
SHGs	Self Help Groups
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
UML	United Maoist Leninist
UN	United Nation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VDC	Village Development Committee