

BREAKING THE SILENCE...



Research Report

on

**Gendered Violence Against
Women and Gender and Sexual Minorities
in Politics in Nepal**

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Neelam Sharma
Lead Researcher

Foreword

Purple Foundation is a non-profit organization established by passionate anti-slavery women professionals and activists in Nepal in 2019. It aspires to create a slavery-free society where every individual can live with equal and full dignity. Purple Foundation promotes a feminist perspective and agenda and advocates good governance, rule of law, and inclusive democracy.

Gendered violence has been widely observed in Nepali politics for decades, reflecting Nepal's social structures and practices. Over the period, it has widely spread to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and others as technology has advanced, taking the form of dis/misinformation and hate speech directed at women and gender and sexual minorities. The gendered violence in politics has far-reaching consequences creating a direct barrier to leadership opportunities including violation of human rights and freedom of speech. It creates barriers to inclusive democracy by harming the current and future potentials of women and gender and sexual minorities (GSM) in politics.

In this challenging context, Purple Foundation conducted nationwide research for the first time in Nepal to assess the degree and extent of online and offline gendered violence against politically active women and GSM in Nepal, and the effects of the violence on their political participation and representation. The research was conducted from February to November 2022 in sampled 14 districts of all seven provinces of Nepal by using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The research reveals an alarming scenario of gendered violence in Nepali politics as 91% of respondents accept that it is widespread, and 66% confirm that they have experienced one or more gendered violence in their political life. A total of 28% of respondents share the experience of online gendered violence as a serious concern. These are grave concerns to enhance women's and GSM's participation in politics. Hence, Purple Foundation recommends the election commission, the government bodies at various levels, political parties, media and online platforms, and other relevant stakeholders take necessary measures to address the online and offline gendered violence at different levels.

On behalf of Purple Foundation, I would like to extend high gratitude to USAID and NDI-Nepal for their financial and technical assistance, the research team, and the respondents from different political parties, government and non-government agencies, experts, and journalists for their support to make this research meaningful.

Sirjana Kafle

Chief Executive Officer
Purple Foundation

Acronyms

A.D.	Anno Domino (English year)
B.S.	Bikram Sambat (Nepali year)
CA	Constituent Assembly
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Accord
CPN UML	Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist)
ETA	Electronic Transaction Act
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FOE	Freedom of Expression
FPTP	First Past the Post
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GSM	Gender and Sexual Minorities
IDI	In-depth Interview
IT	Information Technology
JSP	Janata Samajwadi Party
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBT	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans
LSP	Loktantrik Samajwadi Party
NC	Nepali Congress
NCP-S	Nepal Communist Party Socialist
NDC	National Dalit Commission
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission
NWC	National Women Commission
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Glossary

Disinformation: False information or content that is deliberately created and knowingly shared to deceive or cause harm. It can be targeted at a particular race, gender, ethnicity, or marginalized group.¹

Focus Group Discussion: A form of qualitative research where questions are asked about the perception's attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or ideas of the respondents. A focus group discussion involves gathering people from similar backgrounds or experiences together to discuss a specific topic of interest²

Gender and Sexual Minorities: Groups of people whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or sexual characteristics are different from the presumed majority of the population, which are heterosexual, cis-gender, and non-intersex individuals.³

Gendered Violence in Politics: Harm that violates an individual's or a group's political rights because of their gender identity. This form of violence is motivated by a desire to repress, deter, control, or otherwise coerce the individual's or group's political rights due to their gender.⁴ This includes dis/misinformation and hates speech.

Gendered Violence: Any type of harm done to a person based on their actual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity⁵. This includes dis/misinformation and hates speech. This is also otherwise known as gender-based violence.

Hate Speech: Threatening speech, expression, or writing that expresses prejudice against a person, group, race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, or sexuality.⁶

In-depth interview: A type of interview with an individual that aims to collect detailed information beyond initial and surface-level answers. For this reason, these interviews are often quite long and can involve multiple interviews with one participant⁷. In this research, the in-depth interviews were conducted with politicians representing women and GSM, potential victims of online and offline gender-based violence, and those who are likely to experience GBV.

¹ NDI, Disinformation and Electoral Integrity (2019)

² https://www.herd.org.np/uploads/frontend/Publications/PublicationsAttachments1/1485497050-Focus%20Group%20Discussion_0.pdf

³ [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/SDGs SexualAndGenderMinorities.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/SDGs%20SexualAndGenderMinorities.pdf)

⁴ Bardall, G.S. (2018), Violence, Politics and Gender

⁵ United Nations

⁶ Panos South Asia, How to Identify and Counter Online Gendered Disinformation A Handbook (2021)

⁷ Guion, L., Diehl, D., and McDonald, D, Conducting an In-depth Interview, (University of Florida, 2011).

Inclusive Democracy: Participation of all citizens in policy formulation to include all citizens in the mainstream of politics.⁸

Key Informant Interview: Qualitative in-depth interviews with people who know what is going on in the community. The purpose of key informant interviews is to collect information from a wide range of people—including community leaders, professionals, or residents—who have first-hand knowledge about the community.⁹

Marginalized Groups: Different groups of people within a given culture, context, and history are at risk of being subjected to multiple discrimination due to the interplay of different personal characteristics or grounds, such as sex, gender, age, ethnicity, religion or belief, health status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, education, or income, or living in various geographic localities.¹⁰

Misinformation: False information that is unknowingly created or shared, without the intention to mislead.¹¹

Online Gendered Violence: Online gender-based violence occurs when women and gender-diverse people face violence in online spaces because of their gender.¹²

Online Violence: Any form of violence that is expressed in the virtual world through the use of the internet and technology. It includes threats of physical harm, abusive texts, images, and videos, harassment, defamation, sexual abuse, discrimination based on gender, race, class, or caste, doxing, and so on. Online violence has offline consequences.¹³

Perpetrator: A person or group of persons who commits an act of sexual exploitation and abuse or other types of crime or offense. Perpetrators can refer also to state institutions, entities, or agents that failed to meet human rights obligations.¹⁴

⁸ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Inclusive Political Participation and Representation* (2013)

⁹ https://www.wichita.edu/about/conferences/documents/CHP_Summit/Resources/Gaillard_CHPKeyInformant/KIIG_SHS.doc#:~:text=Key%20informant%20interviews%20are%20qualitative,hand%20knowledge%20about%20the%20community.

¹⁰ <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1280>

¹¹ NDI, *Disinformation and Electoral Integrity* (2019)

¹² Panos South Asia, *How to Identify and Counter Online Gendered Disinformation A Handbook* (2021)

¹³ Panos South Asia, *How to Identify and Counter Online Gendered Disinformation A Handbook* (2021)

¹⁴ https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/SEA%20Glossary%20%20%5BSecond%20Edition%20-%202017%5D%20-%20English_0.pdf

Political inclusion: The idea that every citizen, regardless of class, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, group, culture, and ethnic or religious background, should have an equal right and opportunity to engage with and contribute to the functioning of these institutions and processes¹⁵.

Politically Active Women: Females who have political party membership and have been actively involved in mainstream party politics at micro, meso, and macro levels.

Social Media: Electronic communication platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, Zoom, Google Meet, and others) that allow users to form online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content.¹⁶

Victim: A person who has experienced sexual or gender-based violence¹⁷. The commonly used term for a victim is 'survivor' in this report.

Violence against Women: Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.¹⁸

¹⁵ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Gender Equality and Inclusion in Democracy. (2017): <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/political-inclusion-vital-sustainable-democracy>

¹⁶ https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_working_paper_social_media_disinformation_and_electoral_integrity_august_2019_0.pdf

¹⁷ https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/SEA%20Glossary%20%20%5BSecond%20Edition%20-%202017%5D%20-%20English_0.pdf

¹⁸ United Nations

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Executive summary

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has paved way for women and other minorities' advancement through provisions to ensure equal rights in various aspects of life, including their political participation. The Constitution in Article 38 ensures the "rights of women", Article 40 "rights of *Dalits*", and Article 42 "right to social justice". The Political Party Act 2017 reflects a commitment to developing inclusive leadership, which is endorsed by the major political parties by making their commitments to meet their legal obligations and addressing the gender gap in politics.

Gendered violence has been widely observed in Nepali politics for decades, reflecting the social structures and practices in Nepal. With the evolution of technology like social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, gendered violence has expanded to these platforms and taken the shape of misinformation and hate speech against women and gender and sexual minorities (GSMs). The violence brings profound impacts as it creates a direct barrier to free speech undermining democracy, and negatively impacts current and future women and GSM leaders' political ambitions.

In this challenging context, Purple Foundation conducted a research to assess the degree and extent of online and offline gendered violence against politically active women and GSM in Nepal, and the effects of the violence on their political participation and representation. The research obtained technical and financial support from USAID and NDI-Nepal. This research brings some recommended actions for the relevant policymakers to check and address the online and offline gendered violence issues and to promote inclusive and accountable democratic practices in Nepal.

Considering the complexity of the research, a mixed-method approach was used to investigate the scale and depth of gendered violence in politics. The research included a mix of structured interviews, and participatory tools, such as surveys, in-depth interviews (IDI), focus group discussions (FGD), key informant interviews (KII), and social media observations in addition to review of the existing reports, and literature. The research was led by politically aware and trained people who followed the principles of voice, inclusion, and diversity who ensured the participation of various gender, ages, castes, ethnicity, and geographical areas. The research was conducted in 14 districts and seven provincial headquarters in Nepal, considering ethical issues, such as confidentiality, informed consent, and trauma-informed interviews. In addition, the research team received consent from participants using a consent form. The research participants were chosen using purposive sampling. Five validation workshops were conducted to verify the findings and its dissemination to the wider women and GSM population. An advisory committee ensured the quality of the research and provided necessary technical inputs in designing and implementing the research.

Key research results

The research results are based on the 492 surveys, 80 in-depth interviews, 48 interviews with key informants, and seven focus group discussion (90 participants) in 14 districts of Nepal, representing all seven provinces. The research finds that gendered violence in Nepali politics is highly prevalent. A total of 91% of survey respondents have answered that gendered violence in politics is widespread and 66% have said that they faced one or multiple kinds of gendered violence in their political life. In addition, politically active women from marginalized and GSM communities face higher and specific violence levels. A total of 61% of survey participants share that they face gendered violence in politics by their own political party colleagues. They share that character assassination, undermining capacities, insult, hate speech, disregarding and refusal of leadership, sexual harassment, and physical attacks are the major types of gendered violence faced by politically active women.

The research finds that a total of 87% of respondents use social media, out of which, 28% face online gendered violence. Online gendered violence varies based on the kind of political affiliation, education, age, geography, and social structure. Research results show that online violence during elections is high than at other times spreading mis/disinformation and hate speech from own and opposition political party members. It was said that during the elections media also spread fake news without fact-checking, insulting women, and GSM politicians by using abusive words, and cartoons.

The research finds variation between provinces in gendered violence. For example, in comparison to other provinces, politically active women from Madhesh province share less online violence (19%) whereas the same respondents share high offline violence (90%). Similarly, 54% of the respondents from the Humla district share their experience of online violence. The access, use, and control over smartphones and social media platforms are seen as the factors affecting the result.

However, the research finds a gap in the implementation of policies to control online and offline gendered violence. The research shows that the implementation of cyber law is still a big challenge in Nepal. A total of 76% of the survey participants share they did not report the online gendered violence they face because of the complexity of the reporting, which is highly centralized. They also share that their political party lacks a proper reporting mechanism to report such cases. In addition, respondents said that parties do not consider this issue a priority and try to keep it within the party rather than pursuing any formal system.

Research reveals that gendered violence in politics creates extremely adverse situations in personal and political life. It affects politically active women and GSM's physical and mental health, leadership capabilities, and opportunities. Respondents strongly share their views that gendered violence in politics is directly linked with good governance and inclusive democracy.

Key findings

The research has found many in-depth qualitative and quantitative findings which are included in the main section of this document. The following bullets outline the key research highlights:

- ***This a serious violation of human rights:*** The research identifies that gendered violence in politics is undermining the dignity and self-respect of politically active women and GSMs. Online gendered-based violence has also curtailed the rights of women and GSMs in politics to freely express themselves as it has been causing them to 'self-censor' limiting their online interactions, violating their constitutional and legal rights.
- ***The narrative of a 'leader' is outdated:*** The research finds that the narrative of 'leadership' in Nepali politics and society needs to be changed from understanding only 'men as leaders' to 'inclusive leadership'. The masculine understanding of leadership undermines women's and GSMs' capacity and potential. Therefore, a wide dialogue is needed to transform the understanding and perception of leaders.
- ***Relearning and reconstructing social norms and values are fundamental:*** Patriarchy gives absolute priority to men and dominates women and GSMs in both the public and private spheres. Discriminatory values, norms, beliefs, and practices are continuously re-instated and imposed on women and GSMs, systematically pushing them back. These all are reflected in high rates of offline and online violence attacking and discouraging politically active women, and GSMs. As a result, women's and GSM's presence, and participation in social and political debates on online mediums media are severely restricted.
- ***Intersectional intervention is a precondition:*** Various forms of inequalities often operate together and exacerbate each other as evidenced by the research findings. Individual identity can overlap creating compounding experiences and discriminations. It is very important to understand the voices of those experiencing intersectional identities to understand the depths of inequalities. This also means recognizing the historical background, speaking out against the root causes of inequalities with the intersectional feminist lens and taking affirmative actions as a vital means to addressing violence against women in politics.
- ***Undermines the good governance and rule of law:*** Unequal participation and lack of access to justice weaken good governance and destabilize the rule of law. A functional law enforcement system with effective and necessary policies and mechanisms in place is key to preventing gender-based violence which is a pervasive violation of the fundamental rights of women and GSMs. The high rate of online and offline gendered violence and its relation to unequal leadership is evidence of undermining the character of good governance and an absence of rule of law.
- ***A threat to inclusive democracy:*** Online gendered violence against women and GSMs encompasses all forms of aggression, intimidation, and

extortion. This seeks to exclude women and GSMs from politics and other public spheres. This is a structural, systematic, intentional, and politically motivated tactic which is a barrier to women in politics and threatens inclusive democracy. Combating gendered violence against politically active women, and GSMs is key to strengthening the democratic process.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the Purple Foundation developed recommendations for various stakeholder groups – government bodies at all tiers, political parties, technology companies, and media to combat online and offline gendered violence against women and gender and sexual minorities in Nepali politics and strengthen inclusive democracy by promoting political participation of underrepresented groups in Nepal.

The Federal government of Nepal is recommended to:

- Ensure that women, marginalized, and GSMs enjoy the rights guaranteed in the Constitution of Nepal. Review and amend the existing laws that contradict the Constitutional rights and international treaties that protect the socio-political rights of women and minorities, and signed by the Government of Nepal.
- Amend the ‘Electronic Transaction Act 2063 (2008)’ with clear definitions and provisions for online gendered violence including cyber security. In addition, decentralize the Cyber Bureau currently housed in Kathmandu to Province level.
- Train Cyber Bureau personnel to be fully functional to deal with the complaints with a gender sensitive lens and ensure provision of a trauma counselor to engage with survivors.
- Develop a policy to enable social media companies to register in Nepal, making it mandatory.

The local government bodies are recommended to:

- Modify the school curricula by integrating digital safety measures and, online and offline gendered violence against women and GSMs from primary grade onwards in coordination with the Cyber Bureau, Gender experts, and the Ministry of Education.
- Design and implement awareness-raising programs on gendered violence on women and GSMs, and expand digital education and safety at the local level.

Political parties are recommended to:

- Amend the party manifesto, and internal party policies from a feminist lens, and revise the internal system, and training curricula, accordingly. Establish an effective case-reporting mechanism to address online and offline gendered violence in the party structure. Prepare a training package to train party cadres on diversity, inclusion, and, gender equality and its linkage to inclusive democracy.

- Acknowledge the social agenda as apolitical agenda, and put women, marginalized, and minorities first in taking the lead for social transformation and justice.
- Establish a parliamentary caucus to raise voices against gendered violence in politics and other related issues. This should also create a 'safety net' to support the survivors of severe gendered violence in politics in the short and long run.

The Election Commission is recommended to:

- Regulate and monitor the political parties to ensure inclusive participation as guaranteed by the Constitution of Nepal. Update election code of conduct and related policies regularly in favor of women and GSMs, and guarantee the specific needs and rights of them as a candidates or voters.
- Effectively monitor social media, online, print media, and election campaigns during elections. Establish an easy and effective case reporting system in case of violation of the election code of conduct.

Technology companies (mainly social media platforms) are recommended to:

- Establish a country office, and create a stronger, easy, and more accessible online complaint reporting mechanism in coordination with the Government of Nepal, and the cyber bureau.
- Develop in-house expertise to better deal with Nepali language materials in their content moderation.

Media- including online, print, and television are recommended to:

- Promote and deliver gender-responsive and gender-inclusive content, images, and language and create editorial guidelines regarding fact-checking. Follow ethical journalism and ensure that there are actions against the populist, sexualized, sensational content.

Civil society, family/society, and self are recommended to:

- Promote and deliver digital rights education, conduct further research on various dimensions of gendered violence, and its impact and relation to inclusive democracy.
- Stop looking upon women and gender and sexual minorities and marginalized politicians low, endorsing patriarchal values and norms, and end 'victim blaming and shaming' and judging them based on appearance, sexuality, and background. Report the cases of gendered violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gendered violence has been widely observed in Nepali politics for decades. With the evolution of technology like social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, gendered violence against women and GSM has taken shape of dis/misinformation and hate speech in Nepal, and globally. Much of the political discourse now takes place online and an increased number of people rely on social media as a primary source of news, while political leaders increasingly use the platform to reach out to their constituents. As a result, the platforms are changing the nature of elections. The platforms are also becoming a source of what Dustin Carnahan calls “infodemic”¹⁹ and vulnerable to external influences through this process of ‘information manipulation’. As political news and messages are going online, the phenomenon is challenging how information is created, manipulated, and disseminated. And the effects of social media information on political participation are inextricable. Online violence against women in politics has profound impacts: it is a direct barrier to free speech, undermines democracy and its values and principles, and negatively impacts current and future women's and GSM's political ambitions, particularly those of young women.

“Facebook sees approximately 300 million new photos uploaded daily, while six thousand Tweets are sent every second. The most popular YouTube channels receive over 14 billion views weekly, while the messaging app Telegram boasts over 500 million users. Such platforms have also been used to promote instability, provide platforms for the spread of political conflict, and call for violence.”
Stimson, July 2022.

In Nepal, political polarization has served to expose the vulnerability of individuals and contribute to the manipulation of personal reputations during elections. The anonymous rumors or hate speech or mis/disinformation on online platforms have been making adverse impacts on women politicians and politicians from GSMs, as much of this misinformation and hate speech are spread against them. In general, women, and GSM political candidates are bearing the brunt of hate speech and mis/disinformation before, during, and after elections, and when left unchecked, mis/disinformation and hate speech threaten to erode democratic practices and values, making marginalized political leaders (such as women and GSMs) even more vulnerable. Purple Foundation conducted this research with the objective to therefore assess the extent of gendered based violence faced by women and GSMs who are politically active in Nepal, with technical and financial support from the USAID and NDI-Nepal.

¹⁹ <https://www.lansingcitypulse.com/stories/the-other-pandemic-misinformation-thrives-in-the-shadow-of-covid-19,14440>

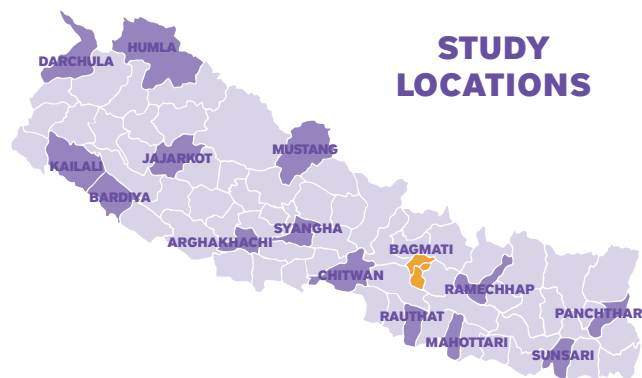
2. METHODOLOGY

The overall objective of the research is to understand the extent of online and offline gendered violence against women and GSM politicians and help shape future programs and policies in Nepal. Specifically, it has the following objectives:

- Assess the degree and extent to which online hate speech and dis/misinformation (with a focus on online gendered violence) have affected women and GSMs in politics in Nepal,
- Investigate how online GBV in Nepal influences the political participation and representation of women and persons from different gender and sexual minority groups, and
- Offer policy and practical options for Nepali policymakers and political parties, to help address these issues.

Considering the complexity of the research, Purple Foundation used a mixed-method approach to investigate the scale and depth of the issue. The research included a mix of structured surveys, and participatory tools, such as focus group discussions (FGD), in-depth interviews (IDI), and key informant interviews (KII). In addition, the research team made an observation of social media and a review of the existing literature. The survey participants are selected using 'multi-stage cluster sampling' at different levels, whereas the in-depth respondents were reached through 'purposive sampling'. The research was led by politically aware and trained researchers who followed the principles of voice, inclusion, and diversity ensuring the participation of various gender, ages, castes, ethnicity, and geographical areas. The research was conducted in 14 districts of Nepal (Figure #1)²⁰. Ethical issues, such as confidentiality and consent, and trauma-informed interviews were considered as the core principles²¹. The study team fully adhered to the safeguarding policies²² throughout their work. In addition, the team made its full efforts to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Figure 1: Research Areas (Districts)



²⁰ This research has covered two districts per province, representing the hills, mountains, and Terai regions.
²¹ For example, all data, photographs, stories will be taken with written consent and the confidentiality of the information will be fully maintained.
²² Safeguarding policy contains zero tolerance against any kind of abuse, exploitation, discrimination to ensure the rights of every individual's safety, wellbeing and dignity including child. Masks, sanitizer, face shields, gloves will be used and will make sure all the staff persons are vaccinated and COVID-19 tested.

2.1 Research tools

The research team employed a range of research tools to understand online and other forms of gendered violence against women and GSM politicians in Nepal. A detail of the tools is provided below.

Literature review

Both web-based and desk research was done extensively to understand the existing local and global context of gendered-based violence against women and GSMs in politics. In addition, international and national treaties, acts, policies, reports, academic papers, publications, and journal articles were reviewed, compared, and analyzed. The review finds that there is limited documentation of online and offline gendered violence against women and GSM in politics in Nepal.

Structured questionnaire survey

A structured survey with forty-eight questions, with multiple-choice and/or single-choice options, was conducted to collect primary data. The study team completed a total of 492 face-to-face surveys with politically active women and GSMs. The respondent selection process incorporated the concept of intersectionality. Hence, the selection of survey respondents ensured diversity of social groups, political parties, education levels, age groups, and types of political affiliation. The survey respondents were selected randomly, using multi-stage sampling, from a list of women and GSMs who were members of political parties and run for the elections either for state positions or political parties' internal positions in the study areas. The KOBO tool was used to collect and store the survey data. The distribution of survey participants is given in Annex B.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with women and GSM politicians using semi-structured questions which supported the collection of qualitative data to understand their perspectives and experiences of gendered violence. The respondents were selected at the ward, municipality, district, province, and federal levels. Two rural/municipalities were selected in each district – one in the district headquarters and another not sharing the boundary with the district headquarters – using a purposive sampling technique. The interview respondents are disaggregated by their political profile, geography, caste, age, and education. A total of 80 in-depth interviews were conducted of which four were GSM representatives.

Key Informant Interviews

The key informant interviews were conducted with political analysts, journalists, civil society leaders, government authorities, and academics who closely observed the political processes but were not a direct part of any political party. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire collecting qualitative data to get research participants' perspectives of gendered violence in politics. The respondents helped the research team to understand

their perspectives on violence at various levels. The Likert scale²³ was used to understand the respondents' opinions and agreement with statements related to current trends of online gendered violence. A total of 48 key informant interviews – 23 female, 21 male and four respondents belonging to the GSM community – were conducted.

Focus group discussions

A total of seven focus group discussions were organized, where a total of 90 persons from different political parties, civil society, and media²⁴ participated. The participants consisted of representatives 12 males, 74 females, and 4 members of the GSM community. In addition, a total of seven cases were documented to get an in-depth understanding of the experience of gendered violence in politics. The cases were identified from the respondents of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The cases provided evidence of type of online and offline gender-based violence, experiences of dealing with it, and its impact on a personal and political level.

Social media content review

To understand the type of content posted on Facebook and Twitter, the study team closely followed the content posted by eight prominent political leaders, who had a large number of followers, during the local election in May 2022. The information collected was then validated with the social media monitoring report conducted by Panos South Asia, an NGO based in Nepal. The lexicon of hateful words used against women politicians and mis/disinformation was documented, and they were cross-checked with in-depth interview respondents. The research team also reviewed multiple online news portals and reviewed their posts against women and GSMs. In addition, the study team randomly checked the Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of some other women candidates to learn how the lexicon was used and verified with the social media monitoring report from Panos South Asia. A list of commonly used lexicons is given in Annex A.

2.2 Research limitations

The research was designed and implemented during the Covid-19 context. Therefore, field researchers' training was conducted using virtual platforms. However, the expert team members traveled to the research districts and provided on-the-job support when the fieldwork started, boosting the confidence of field researchers, and ensuring the quality of the research being undertaken. The research was conducted in all seven provinces representing three geographical regions (the Mountains, the Hills, and the Terai). With this, the research covered 14 districts, in addition to seven provincial capitals, and the federal capital of Nepal. The research results are limited to the study areas

²³ The Likert scale is a five (or seven) point scale which is used to allow the individual to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement.

²⁴ Biratnagar, Janakpur, Kathmandu, Pokhara, Butwal, Surkhet, Dhangadi

and the research sample, therefore do not necessarily represent the views of the wider population. Further validation is expected to generalize the findings.

2.3 Quality assurance

Quality assurance was given a high priority while designing research and employing the research tools, storing data, and analyzing them. The research team members were trained on the research tools and processes and provided additional and regular expert backstopping support during the field research. In addition, the research team worked with an advisory committee which helped in ensuring the research quality from the beginning. Whereas the finding-validation workshops were instrumental to get participants' feedback on the preliminary results of the study.

The **Advisory Committee** was formed to ensure the quality of the research and provide necessary technical inputs. The advisory committee reviewed the research ethics, research objectives, questions, methodologies, and context before the data collection started. Representatives from major political parties²⁵, members of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), National Dalit Commission (NDC), Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, Ministry of Federal affairs, and a representative from the GSM community comprised the advisory committee. The initial findings of the research were shared with the advisory committee, who reviewed and provided their feedback.

After the preliminary data analysis completion, the research team hosted five stakeholder validation workshops at the federal and provincial levels to verify the initial findings (See Annex D for the photographs of the consultation workshop). The team has carefully considered the comments from the workshops when finalizing the report. The workshops were important to verify the respondents' understanding of gendered violence and to increase political ownership of the research findings. In total, 365 participants, including 146 males from different political parties, civil society, media, and the GSM community attended the workshops in Biratnagar, Janakpur, Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Nepalgunj.

²⁵ Nepali Congress, Nepal Communist Party United Marxist and Leninist (UML), Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) center, Janata Samajbadi Party (JASAPA)

3. WOMEN AND GSM'S PARTICIPATION IN NEPALI POLITICS

Nepal has a unique history of political and social transformation. From the end of the Rana regime and the restoration of the sovereignty of the country to the adoption of a multiparty constitution and the establishment of Nepal as a Republic, it has created a series of milestones. Despite many adverse situations, Nepali women have played key roles in every political movement in Nepal. Nepali women began their political activism during the Rana regime under the leadership of Yogmaya Neupane (1860-1941) and they continued advancing in politics after the country moved to a democratic state in the 1950s by engaging in both popular peaceful political movements to armed insurgency and parliamentary competition with their male political counterparts²⁶. The women's rights movement has advanced ever since, and it has been further visible after the restoration of democracy in 1992.

Over the seven decades, since 1950, Nepal has developed inclusive policies to include women in the political process and institutions. There are some noteworthy turning points regarding it, along with the political shifts in the country. The Constitution of 1990 made it compulsory for all participating political parties to nominate at least five percent of women candidates for the Parliamentary elections (Article 114). The Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007, (Article 63.4) mandated that political parties nominate first past the post (FPTP) candidacy based on the principle of inclusion. On the proportional side, provisions were made for political parties to prepare a list of the candidates representing proportionally from various minority groups, such as women, *Dalit*, *Janajati*, *Madhesi*, underprivileged regions, and others, as directed by the Election law²⁷. Similarly, Article 63(5) of the Interim Constitution guaranteed an overall representation of 33 percent of women from both - FPTP and proportional list. Thus, parties had to ensure 33 percent of women candidates for the Constituent Assembly. The Constituent Assembly Election Act, 2008 (Article 7) took a big step forward in making the Assembly an inclusive body. While the constitution mandated 33 percent represented in candidacy, the elections law ensured 50 percent proportional representation seats for women²⁸. As a result, in 2008, in the Constituent Assembly election, around 33 percent of women were elected to the Assembly²⁹. Combined with proportional representation, women achieved 40.4 percent representation. This level of representation played a critical role in the incorporation of the inclusive mandates in the Constitution of 2015.

Legally, the Constitution of Nepal 2015 has paved the way for women and

²⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340779432_Nepali_Women_in_Politics_Success_and_Challenges

²⁷ <https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Election-Commission-Act-2073-2017.pdf>

²⁸ <https://www.ndi.org/nepal-women-fight-to-maintain-seats-in-parliament>

²⁹ *ibid*

other minorities' advancement through provisions to ensure equal rights. Article 38 of the Constitution ensures the "rights of women", Article 40 "rights of *Dalits*", and Article 42 "right to social justice"³⁰. The Political Party Act 2017 reflects a commitment to developing inclusive leadership. Subsequently, the major political parties have made commitments to meet their legal obligations. The Constitution also elaborates on the excluded groups and specifies them. The constitution includes "socially backward women, *Dalits*, *Adibasi*, *Janajati*, *Madhesi*, *Tharu*, minority and marginalized groups, persons with disabilities, *Muslims*, backward classes³¹, GSM groups, youths, peasants, laborers, the oppressed and the citizens of backward regions, and economically poor *Khas Arya*" as the excluded groups so as to ensure their employment and inclusion. The Constitution also guarantees one-third representation of women to all elected bodies at all levels – Municipal, Provincial, and Federal.

Despite the changes in legal frameworks, the political parties in Nepal are still reluctant to include women, GSMs, and other minorities in leadership positions. The leadership roles within the decision-making positions of political parties, such as central committees, remain dominated by men from the so-called higher-caste, reflecting patriarchal dominance. The prevalence of this stereotypical culture continues to create obstacles for women and GSMs in their political participation. In addition, intersectional barriers, where gender intersects with other aspects of identity such as caste, class, ethnicity, education, religion, sexuality, disabilities, geographical locations, and any other relevant factors central to the experience a person's knowledge, power, agency and access further affect political representation and participation. The roles of women and GSMs have been undermined and confined to be secondary within the political parties, and social structures. A few women and GSMs, who hold decision-making positions, face public derision or hate from their male counterparts. Their public image is negatively presented in the media and other public spaces, making them more susceptible to dis/misinformation and hate speech.

GSM was never visible in Nepali politics. However, after signing the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) in 2006, aspiration and hope emerged within the GSM community allowing them to lobby and advocate for their rights and visibility. Although some impressive legal reforms took place, political parties, which are heavily dominated by patriarchal values and traditions, have shown little willingness to welcome them into politics. The legal reforms too did not necessarily cause a discernible change in the lives of GSMs³². Therefore, the representation of gender and sexual minorities in politics has been a continuous challenge.

³⁰ http://www.moljpa.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Constitution-of-Nepal-English-with-1st-Amendment_2.pdf

³¹ According to Nepal government, backward classes refers to Adhibasi, Indigenous, and Obsolescent groups which are economically and socially disadvantaged

³² <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/232737082.pdf>

Patriarchy dominates all aspects of life in Nepal³³. For example, the political inclusion issues are not well-reported in Nepali media which continues to overlook the issues of women and GSMs. Moreover, they portray women and sexual minorities as a 'weak' section of the population and portray men leaders in women's attire or body to defame or insult them. In addition, they use derogatory words and phrases against women and GSMs. Social media tends to be a platform that is flooded with degrading and often humiliating comments about women and GSMs. Gender stereotypes and assumptions are regularly used to delegitimize women and GSMs in politics. Moreover, the women and GSMs are continuously shamed and silenced for speaking in public about the inequality they face, a reason many women from different marginalized groups³⁴ and GSMs end their political careers³⁵.

To bring systemic changes, many actions have been taken globally and in Nepal to ensure the rights of women and other minorities. For instance, the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women³⁶ recognizes the urgent need for the universal application of the rights and principles of equality, security, liberty, integrity, and dignity of all human beings. The declaration is the first international human rights instrument to exclusively address the issue of violence against women. The declaration further states that gender-based violence takes many different forms and is experienced in a range of crisis and non-crisis situations. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Nepal is a state party to guarantees women's rights in the 'Public and Political life' in Article 7. The convention confirms gender inequality as the result of discrimination against women. Similarly, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment signed by the governments, which is seen as a fundamental prerequisite for equality, development, and peace. Nepal has accepted all of these and signed them as a party. Moreover, the Constitution of Nepal 2015 ensures the equal rights of women and minorities.

3.1. Status of participation

As Nepali society has been historically dominated by patriarchal values and norms, gendered violence is pervasive. For example, in 2017, 149 people were killed as a result of gender-based violence (GBV), 75 of whom were killed because of domestic violence. Out of 680 documented GBV cases, the main perpetrators were family members or relatives³⁷. A helpline launched by the National Women's Commission (NWC) in 2017 received 37,249 calls in a

³³ Tamang, Seira. "Legalizing state patriarchy in Nepal." *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 5, no. 1 (2000): 127-156

³⁴ Such as Dalits and Madhesi.

³⁵ <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/contesting-patriarchy-gender-gap-and-gender-based-violence-nepali-politics>

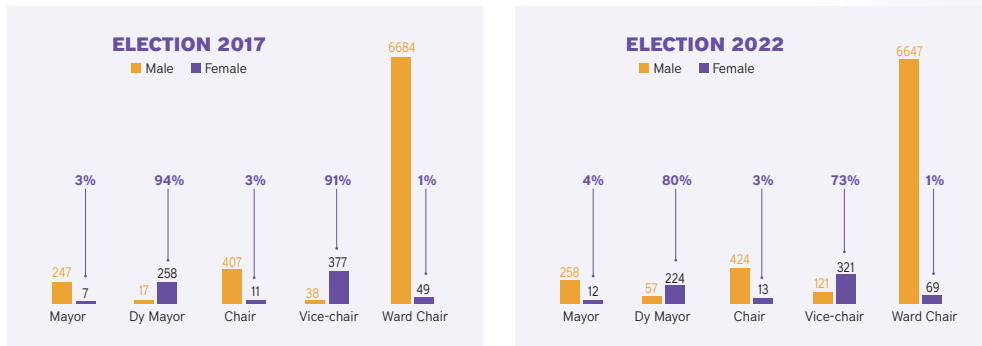
³⁶ Resolution 48/104.

³⁷ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/addressing-gender-based-violence-nepal#:~:text=In%202017%2C%20149%20people%20were,in%2016%20cases%20of%20them.>

seven-month period seeking help³⁸. However, the scale of GBV is likely to be much higher as there are many unreported cases.

After the promulgation of the inclusive constitution in 2015, Nepal completed two elections cycles in 2017 and 2022. The local level election results confirm that women's and GSM's participation in politics are still a big issue despite the political and policy changes in Nepal (Figure #2). The overall representation of women in the 2017 election was 9 percent of the total elected positions (i.e., 702 women out of 8,095 elected candidates), and it has gone down to 8 percent in 2022 (639 of 8146 elected). As given in the figure, women's representation in key decision-making positions such as Mayor of municipalities, Chairpersons of Local Municipalities, and Chairpersons of local units (Wards) is below 5 percent of the total elected positions. Whereas their representation in the positions, such as Deputy Mayor and Vice-Chairperson is about three-quarters of the elected positions. The Deputy Mayors and Vice-Chairpersons have secondary roles in the municipalities, as the Mayors and Chairpersons are responsible for overall decision-making.

Figure 2: Representation of women, men, and GSM at local government positions in 2017 & 2022



In all positions, there is no representation of GSM.

Although the constitution has a provision to ensure 33 percent of women's representation in the parliament and local bodies, the 2017 and 2022 election results do not confirm the adherence to the constitutional mandate. Moreover, there is no positive shift between the two elections confirming the increased leadership role of women. In 2017, a total of 9 percent of women were sitting in municipality positions, which went down to 8 percent in 2022.

³⁸ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/addressing-gender-based-violence-nepal>

3.2 Gendered violence against politically active women and GSMs

The gendered violence is a major challenge for women and GSMs in Nepal and South Asia. A study carried out in Nepal, India, and Pakistan in 2014 found more than 60 percent of women do not participate in politics due to fear of violence across all three countries³⁹. Similarly, a study on violence against women in politics, by *iknowpolitics*⁴⁰, outlines violence against women as a global issue limiting women's participation in politics, taking various forms, depending on the legal and political context, cultures, and traditions⁴¹. Assassinations and physical violence⁴² are used as tools to intimate, humiliate, and, worse, put an end to a woman's political career.

In Nepal, women and GSMs are deprived of education and economic opportunities, which limits their options to join politics. Being economically dependent on men, and confined to traditional household chores, women do not find equal opportunities to take part in the political processes. A few women leaders, who move forward by challenging social norms and expectations, have been attacked emotionally and physically. In addition to physical and sexual violence, character assassination has been used as a tool to damage the reputation and achievements of women and minorities in politics⁴³. There is a direct relationship between gendered violence and low political participation of women and GSMs, which creates a vicious circle by pushing back women and GSMs from public and political life, systematically. As politics is established to be a 'masculine space', women, GSM, or any other marginalized groups are further discouraged from pursuing a political career owing to a series of systematic attacks that damage their personal as well as political life. These all contribute to reinforcing the *status quo*, the masculine political dominance.

The misuse of power and money, and the male-dominated patronage in politics are the markers of the Nepali political process. Misuse of money and power have been the key factors that are always a challenge to women and marginalized GSMs. The existing legal provisions and regulations on election finance highly overlook these issues. The political parties and the election commission have failed to prevent the misuse of these.

In addition, there are gaps in democratic practices within political parties hindering 33 percent participation guaranteed to women at all levels of the party structure as there is a danger of being punished for raising the issue. There is a lack of 'gender audit' in political party structures which the political parties haven't paid any attention, to ensure equitable and gender-balanced representation.

³⁹ <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2014/Violence%20Against%20Women%20in%20Politics-Report.pdf>

⁴⁰ A joint project funded by International IDEA, Inter-Parliamentary Union, UNDP and UN Women. Retrieved from <https://www.iknowpolitics.org/en/discuss/e-discussions/closing-gender-gap-politics>.

⁴² Including rape and sexual harassment, sexist remarks, verbal abuse, and threats of reprisals.

⁴³ <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2014/Violence%20Against%20Women%20in%20Politics-Report.pdf>

The evolution of technology is an opportunity, but also comes with a cost for women and GSMs in politics. A UNDP report states, "On average, women's political representation globally has increased from 25.6 percent in 2020 to 26.2 percent in 2021"⁴⁴. However, with the advancement of technology, new threats and challenges have also been parallelly reported against the political and social engagement of women and marginalized groups. Technology has changed interpersonal interactions, communication patterns, and social and political discussions. The online space has been vital for any kind of discussion, particularly for political dialogs, as well as information dissemination and election campaigns. Politically active persons embrace social media or other digital platforms to interact with their constituents. Among the various social media, Facebook is one of the most used platforms with almost 2.8 billion monthly active users globally⁴⁵. However, the use of social media has also been a source of disinformation and manipulation, influencing public opinions⁴⁶. It is observed that misinformation, misogynistic content, and hate speech are being targeted towards women, and marginalized politicians and activists. Online attacks have been used to weaken representative governance, peace, inclusion, and development. In a global survey of women parliamentarians, 41.8 percent of the respondents reported having seen humiliating or sexual images of them spread through social media⁴⁷. Across Asia and the Pacific, women elected to parliament are being targeted with online hate speech, sexual harassment, and misogynistic contents.⁴⁸ However, countering online gendered violence is not considered an urgent issue, although it is supposed to be, as the head of UN Women, Sima Sami Bahaus says "violence silences women, renders them invisible, pushes them from public space".

In Nepal, according to the Nepal Telecommunications Authority's 2019 report, about 93 percent of the population (27.76 million out of 30 million) have access to the internet, and the 'data portal' reports that 90 percent of adults use Facebook or the internet on mobile phones⁴⁹. With increasing access to the internet and technology, a leading newspaper, My República writes that the risk of disinformation and hate speech has also increased and misleading information has been a recent concern on top of existing biases against women and GSMs⁵⁰. In the last few years, a series of hate speeches, misogynistic content, and misinformation, in social media have been observed against

⁴⁴ <https://www.undp.org/stories/why-we-must-work-parliaments-tackle-online-hate-speech-and-gender-based-violence>

⁴⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/06/hillary-clinton-guardian-disinformation-big-tech-facebook>

⁴⁶ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244019864484>

⁴⁷ <https://www.cfr.org/blog/gendered-disinformation-fake-news-and-women-politics>

⁴⁸ For example, Thai opposition member of parliament Pannika Wanich has experienced "all kinds of harassment" from online attacks to body shaming and hate speech. In the Philippines, opposition Senator Leila de Lima has been vilified and harassed on social media platforms, and thirty-year-old Sarah Elago, one of the youngest lawmakers in the Philippines, became the subject of a fake sex video that circulated on several websites in 2019 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-01487-w.pdf>

⁴⁹ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-nepal>

⁵⁰ <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/here-is-how-we-can-win-war-over-fake-news-in-nepal/>

senior women political leaders including the incumbent President. Furthermore, when the media promotes implausible news without fact-checking, it misleads public opinion. A growing trend toward misinformation promotion in news sites is going to deteriorate the trust in the media, one of the important pillars of democracy⁵¹. A 2022 media monitoring report by a Nepali NGO, Panos South Asia identified 243 cases of misogynistic content targeting women politicians of which 235 (97 percent) appeared on social media and others in print and news websites. The hate speech rate is high against the marginalized, such as *Dalits*, and the GSM community. Like the rest of the world, online violence targeted towards women is not limited to misinformation, but ranges from body shaming, trolling, bullying, and abusive and sexist comments, to disclosing personal messages and spreading private or photoshopped pictures. Sexual objectification of women and GSMs, threats of murder and rape, and online character assassination of women leaders are some examples of severe gendered violence in Nepal⁵². Continued caste and gender-based abuse, trolling and hate speech, and inadequate measures to hold abusers to account can leave online users with psychological stress and anxiety⁵³ silencing them from the online spaces.

⁵¹ <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/nepal-misinformation-sensation.html>

⁵² <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/nepali-women-need-everyone-to-cope-with-growing-online-violence-against-them.html>

⁵³ <https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Caste-hate-speech-report-IDSN-2021.pdf>

4. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 guarantees freedom of expression (FOE) and the opinion of an individual and the press as a fundamental right. It explicitly states that no publication and broadcasting or printing (including online) of any news items, articles, editorials, or other reading materials or audio-visual materials shall be subjected to censorship. However, it poses reasonable restrictions on FOE under the name of defamation of character or an act that may be contrary to public decency and morality. The constitution also ensures the right to privacy of an individual, and if violated, has the right to justice, rehabilitation, and compensation. It criminalizes any physical, mental, sexual, psychological, or another kind of violence against women and minors or any kind of oppression based on religious, social, and cultural traditions.

The Electronic Transaction Act (ETA)- 2008 is the only act that explicitly describes online violence and criminalizes it in Nepal. It prohibits the publication or display of any materials through a computer or the internet that “is contrary to public morality or decency” and “social harmony” or “spreads hate and jealousy”. It prohibits bullying, teasing, insults, or immoral activities, storing or recording of any content privately and deemed 'obscene' against women through electronic media, along with publishing and displaying material that “spreads hatred”. This has provisioned for a one hundred thousand rupees fine or imprisonment up to five years or both for any of the prohibited activities. However, this Act does not elaborate and specify what those terms cover and as a result it does not necessarily cover all forms of online gendered violence.

The Criminal Code, adopted in 2017, prohibits any activities promoting immorality and eroticism either privately or publicly, disclosing private information without permission, and defamation through any medium that harms the reputation of a living or deceased person or hurts the feelings of their family/relatives. However, exceptions are made for any expression supported with evidence, done for the public good, done to “caution the concerned person”, or to criticize those with authority, or as part of an investigation. It allows the authorities to conduct surveillance, if needed, of individuals in order to identify such behavior that compromises the privacy of people. It also prohibits photographing a person or disfiguring/manipulating their photographs without their consent.

The Privacy Act 2018 has been enacted to ensure the right to privacy relating to the body, residence, property, document, data, correspondence, and character of every person, to manage the protection and safe use of personal information remained in any public body or institution, and to prevent encroachment on the privacy of every person. As noted in sections 1, 2 & 3 of the Act, personal information includes “his/her caste, ethnicity, birth, origin, religion, color or marital status, education or academic qualification, address, telephone or address of electronic letter (email).” Section 3 & 4 of the Act stipulates that “every person shall have the right to maintain the privacy of the

matters such as biological or biometric identity, gender identity, sexuality, sexual relation, conception or abortion, virginity, potency, impotency or physical illness relation to his/her personal life". The act further ensures that no person shall publish, or cause to be published to affect, inflict or insult in the personal life of such a person, by writing, speaking, publishing, or using electronic means or any other manner. These provisions are instrumental to protect women, gender and sexual minorities, and marginalized communities against online gendered violence.

There are several provisions proposed under the *Information Technology (IT) Bill 2019* that are concerned with online violence and freedom of expression. It prohibits cyberbullying and defines it as "continually harassing, teasing, demeaning, discouraging, insulting, or scolding" someone. However, it is unclear what frame of time constitutes "continually". It also mentions banning social network sites if they are not registered by the Department of Information Technology. It has got provisions for the arbitrary removal of content on social sites by the Department of Information and Technology based on expansive terms such as "offensive content". While the law was made under the premise of safeguarding women and minorities from online violence, the lack of acknowledgment regarding consent backfires on victims even if their materials are created and published with consent.

The Election Commission of Nepal enacted the 'code of conduct-2022' during the local elections that prohibits disseminating misinformation on social media, operating fake accounts and sites, and producing and publicizing any content in any form in a way to defame anyone.

There are some other laws and policies such as the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Prevention Act (2071), Domestic Violence (Crime and Punishment Act (2009), and The Gender Equality Policy, 2077 which are relevant to address, protect and prevent gendered violence in political or non-political spaces.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Overall understanding and experience of gendered violence against women and GSMs active in politics

Gendered violence in politics is largely understood as physical, behavioral, and online acts, challenging women's and GSMs' existence and dignity.

In-depth interview participants state that gendered violence in politics is largely understood as physical, behavioral, and online acts that hinder women and GSMs from enjoying constitutional and fundamental human rights, challenging their existence and dignity. With the increased participation in politics, women politicians are exposed to increased discrimination, harassment and making them insecure. The research respondents confirmed that they have been facing multiple instances of violence at different levels, including household, community, and leadership roles. The participants shared that the violence they face is unique and different than what male politicians face. The women leaders express difficulty in overcoming the multiple barriers at the personal and household levels. However, they said they would not give up their efforts to step into politics.

Once in politics, women leaders start facing a set of challenges. Women politicians find that they are quite often viewed as lower than their male counterparts, and judged based on gender roles, appearance, and family background. Their leadership capacity and ability are overlooked, and as a result, they feel an 'existential' crisis many times. An in-depth interview respondent said, *"Because I am a woman, my party does not accept me as a leader."* A woman leader in parliament confirmed, *"We, women politicians are judged based on our appearance, sexuality, and family background, not by our leadership capacity and contribution, and this is an example of the political violence against us."*

The research finds that character assassination, restriction to their mobility, questioning their capabilities, not providing capacity-based responsibilities, mis/disinformation, hate speech, and not recognizing equal status are some of the ways violence is perpetuated against them. In addition, women and GSM in politics share that they get anonymous threats for physical attacks, sexual assaults, and murder on online platforms. These acts make women leaders feel ashamed, humiliated, insulted, unsecured, and less valued. The research participants define these acts as 'gendered violence in politics.'

The experience and understanding of violence differ among women from various backgrounds. *Dalit, Madheshi*, disabled, single women, GSM, and those from marginalized communities have different and more specific expressions about such violence. They share that their identity is not recognized, and they are humiliated in multiple ways and face layers of violence. They are discriminated against because of their gender, physical appearance as well as

caste. Confirming this, an in-depth respondent shares that *Dalit* women are discriminated against based on their gender as a woman and their caste. *"We are considered an untouchable caste. The so-called higher caste people believe that we destroy their luck if we pass by them. This is reflected in everyday life. For example, if a Dalit walks near a water tap, so-called upper caste people throw away the water they have collected and purify themselves"*.

Research participants share that the majority of *Dalits* and other marginalized castes are deprived of education, health, and economic opportunities, so they are already at a disadvantage when the same issues are 'excuses' for unequal treatment in politics. For example, *Dalit* representation is often "tokenistic" in the sense that they are limited to positions that do not have any decision-making role, and even these roles are created via the quota system enforced by the constitution. Beyond quotas, *Dalit* women have negligible roles in the current government structure. A *Dalit* in-depth research respondent says, *"Because of constitutional provisions, we have gained some political presence. However, we are discriminated against and deprived of equal opportunity and respect"*. Another *Dalit* participant adds, *"We are not included in the decision-making processes, and I have observed that Dalit and marginalized are not encouraged to participate in it"*.

Women active in politics in Madhesh share that they are harassed and less valued by society and political parties. *"Our status is already second class and when we join politics, we are considered 'weak' in every way, as we lack money and power to control political processes"*, says a young in-depth interview respondent from Madhesh province. Respondents from Madhesh shares that those women who do not have access to and control over property are subjected to economic violence. An in-depth interview respondent from Madhesh share that despite having every leadership capability, women leaders are deprived of candidacy and positions because they do not 'contribute' financially to the political parties. A participant from a focus group discussion in Madhesh Province says, *'Women do not have control over the property. Men, who hold money, and resources and misuse power and that is what today's politics needs.'* An in-depth interview respondent also shares similar experiences, *"My name was recommended for proportionate candidacy. The next day party asked for a five million rupees contribution to the party election. I sternly refused that. The other day, my name was dismissed from the list. Those who do not have money are not supposed to be in politics."*

Women active in politics feel strongly diminished because of their physical characteristics. *"We are discriminated against during our menstruation time, not allowed to enter a house. We contribute to a party equal to a male member, but when it comes to the selection of leadership positions, we are viewed as 'weak', 'less capable', and 'not fit for the position. This is another example of violence against us"*, says an in-depth interview respondent from Karnali Province. Another in-depth respondent from Sudurpashchim Province shares, *"Being active in politics, I do have countless responsibilities in society,*

but also at home as I have four children. When I have my period there was no one to cook food at home. My children would remain hungry, so I cooked food, but I was blamed for not following the tradition. Later, villagers started hating me. I think this is the violence I face being a woman active in politics."

Gendered violence in politics is largely prevalent and it is high among politicians from the minority communities

The research finds that there is gendered violence in politics, and it is high among women from marginalized groups, and GSMs. Among the survey respondents, as given in Figure 3, a large number (91 percent) state that gendered violence exists in politics. The majority, (two-thirds of study participants), share that they have faced one or other kind of violence in their political life (Figure 4). The experience of violence varies from person to person; however, the majority are facing a similar type of discrimination and violence, such as undermining their capacity, restrictions from family members, deprived responsible positions, insult, sexual abuse, the threat of rape or physical harm, and mobility restriction.

Figure 3: Gendered Violence in Politics

Prevalence (N= 492)

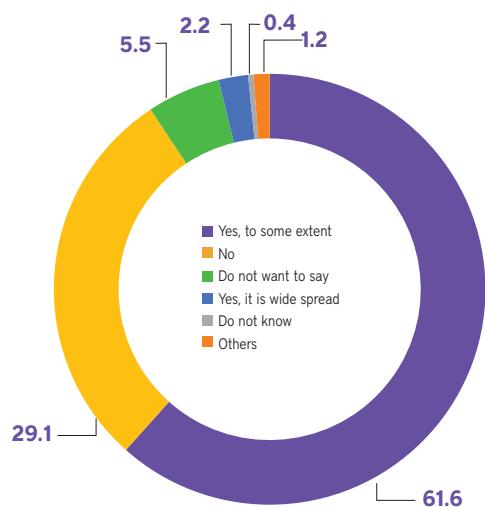
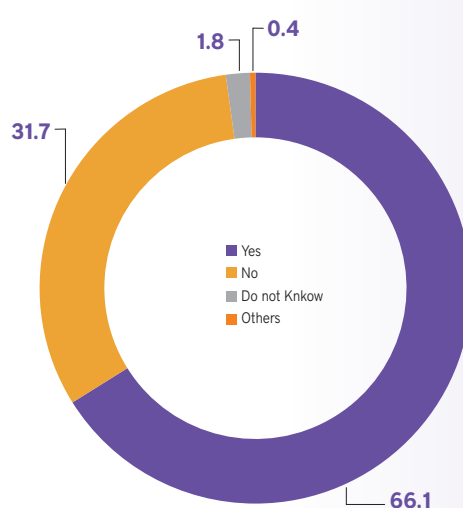


Figure 4: Gendered Violence in Politics

Experience (N=492)



The in-depth respondents confirm the survey data stating that they have faced one or multiple kinds of violence in their political life. The majority (>90 percent) of respondents from the marginalized community say that they face more specific gendered violence than others. Some politically active women in rural areas also face grave accusations of being a witch (*boksi*). Furthermore, they receive threats of murder and isolation when they are superstitiously blamed. These opinions seem to differ based on personal experience. *Dalits*,

people with disabilities, unmarried women, widows, and GSMs have different kinds of experiences based on their specific identities. The following are some testimonies:

- *I belong Dalit family and am economically weak, so, I feel I should rather do some job instead of being engaged in politics. We are not even consulted and notified about the decisions made. We are expected to support and clap for the decisions in meetings.*
- *When I visit to my leader's house, I am told not to disclose my caste-based identity and hide my so-called lower caste (Dalit) status.*
- *I am from a minority community. Our party does not count and value us.*
- *After marriage, my political opinion clashed with my family's. As a result, I had to go through multiple levels of violence at my own house.*
- *My husband does not allow me to go outside the home.*
- *I face extra violence in politics because I am a single woman. Once, when I joined a program organized by my political party, I had to travel on a motorbike with a male counterpart. After the incident, people assassinated my character associating me with the man.*
- *I am a person not accepted by family, society, and politics because of my gender identity as a GSM.*

Gendered violence in politics is linked with inter-caste marriage, differences in political ideologies, and male counterparts' roles in political parties. For example, some women respondents share that they face violence because of their inter-caste marriage. In addition, some women politicians share that their husbands dominate and physically attack them because they differ in their political ideology. Similarly, some respondents share those women politicians get secondary status in their own families when their husbands, fathers-in-law, or male family members are in political positions, limiting their engagement in political processes. An in-depth interview respondent shared that *"I am never recognized by my own name and work. My father is a leader, so people never see me as an independent political leader. They make comments against me by undermining my identity and capacity, which makes me feel low"*.

GSMs' representation in Nepali politics is very minimal and challenging

The research finds that GSM has almost no presence in politics. They are hardly recognized by political parties, provided membership, and instead humiliated if they try to join politics. They are discriminated against everywhere, and such discrimination starts at 'home'. *"GSMs face challenges in every step, forced to live in shame, hatred, and fear"*, says an in-depth respondent. Adding to that, a key informant says, *"Words like 'chakka', 'hijada', 'third gender' are used to insult opposition parties or leaders in Nepali politics"*. Very few from the GSM community, who are active in politics, share rare positive experiences. Respondents shared that they are hardly allowed to express their political views during meetings, and are invited for a consultation if there are any decisions to make. GSM participants share that they are considered a means

of entertainment, not a 'leader'. In an in-depth interview, a participant shares her experience saying, *"Some leaders approach us directly for sex work. Colleagues working in the same committee also tease us unnaturally and use us as their means of entertainment"*.

The research finds that GSMs are physically attacked, beaten, and harassed by family and society. *"I was gang raped"* a survey participant shared, *"it is difficult for us just to survive, being politically active is not an easy dream"*. Key informant respondent shares that by saying, *"many of GSM is killed by their own family members, many commit suicides, lots are forced to live hiding their identity because of fear. Several leave home and remain 'unidentified'⁵⁴ throughout life."* In an in-depth interview, a research respondent share experiences of violence saying, *"We are attacked physically. Our family and society do not accept our identity. We are discriminated against in our own families. Even the state does not protect us."* An in-depth interview respondent shared her harsh experience of being sexually assaulted while working in a political party. She says, *"the miserable part is that even the young political members approach us for sex instead of focusing on the political agenda."*

Bhumika Shrestha a GSM, active in politics shares her unpleasant political journey with this experience. *"I was born as a man, but I accepted myself as a woman. I changed my sex and became a woman. My citizenship name is Kailash, so I changed the name to a woman's name, 'Bhumika'. My current identity does not match my citizenship identity. This has been the reason that my name could not be included in a political candidacy. I cannot lodge a petition to change my name and sex, legally, in my citizenship. This barrier has deprived me of political participation and any candidacy. This is the violence I faced in politics."*

The research finds that the GSMs' representation in Nepali politics is very minimal and challenging. They face multiple layers of violence such as verbal, physical, and behavioral, including sexual assaults and rape. Those who made their journey to politics possible with hardship also face discrimination and harassment which makes them give up their political drive.

'Character assassination is the major 'weapon' used to demotivate politically active women and GSM, including many others

Almost two-thirds of the survey respondents i.e. 73 percent share that insult, low respect, and humiliation; 52 percent mention verbal; a total of 46 percent find dis/misinformation, and 14 percent of respondents find sexual abuse, rape, and threat to rape to be the major types of gendered violence they face in politics. The majority (95 percent) of in-depth interview respondents said 'character assassination is a major violence politically active women face. During the in-depth interviews, respondents confirmed this with a series of statements and

⁵⁴ Do not disclose their sexual identity

Case 1: A long way to go

Sunil Babu Pant (Annagarik Kasyap), Ex-Constituent Assembly Member/Gender and Sexual Minority

Political parties are not always warm and welcoming towards the GSM community including other oppressed groups, especially when it comes to claiming their rights. When we visited different political parties, the reactions we received were interesting. A leader from one of the political parties said that “there were no homosexuals in the communist Soviet Union and China. Communism got over after the Soviet Union collapsed so there might be some now. Homosexuality is a byproduct of capitalism”. However, of all, Nepal communist party Samyukta (united) was open and positive to us. As a result, I got selected as a Constituent Assembly member in the first CA election in 2008. After the first assembly was dissolved, we decided to expand our political influence strategically and join bigger political parties. As a result, five hundred members of GSM including me joined Nepal Communist Party UML. We were invited formally, and welcomed at the party central office in a ceremony by the party chair. A responsible party member was assigned as our contact focal person. However, after some time we found that there was high dissatisfaction within the party about GSM members joining the party. Leaders were not happy, and passed comments saying deformity ‘bikriti’ has entered the party. Those who took the initiative of bringing us into the political mainstream remained silent and could not take a stand. Slowly leaders ignored us and stopped entertaining our phone calls and visits. We were never given a membership. Similarly, other political parties also gave us assurance of constituent assembly candidacy, but never provided the opportunity. When we joined NCP UML, the party was heavily criticized saying, ‘UML is gender unidentified party’ and ‘third gender party’. We were taken as laughing stock, ‘hansoko patra’, by social and print media. When political parties needed to accuse others, they kept saying ‘sikhandi party’ or ‘third gender party’ which is an insult and humiliation to us (this exists now as well). This incident seriously affected GSM community, their political ambition and journey. Eventually, our members were disenchanted with party politics, demotivated to join active politics and very few sustained. From then to now not a single GSM member is formally elected in a state-owned position.

experiences. A respondent active in national national-level politics says, *“If they cannot push women back by any means, they use character assassination as the final weapon. Once a woman’s character is attacked, she can never stand back.”*. One of the senior women politicians says, *“it is very easy to blame someone’s character as you do not need to produce any evidence, and nobody asks for any evidence. Once you make any character-blaming statement, it spreads with the wind.”*

The key informant interview respondents verify the above statements saying that the women candidates or politicians are blamed for their character when they need to get rid of them. He says, *“in a recent election one woman who wanted to claim her candidacy had her character questioned, but a man who has three wives was easily accepted as an ideal candidate. This is how our political party and society function.”*

The research identifies various types of gender-based violence in politics. The research respondents share that physical violence, questioning of capacity, mobility restriction, low or no recognition as a leader, and economic violence as some of the major ones. The respondents also add that men active in politics also face violence, however, the nature and type of violence are different than what women face. Respondents argue that men are usually accused of 'corruption' which is considered 'normal' and easily gotten rid of and they do not need to carry the blame throughout their political life. While women are judged and blamed based on their sexuality. *"Politically active women need to travel out of home and attend public forums."* A senior woman leader adds, *"since women's representation is low in politics, such forums and gatherings are largely represented by males. So those low numbers of women have to face layers of violence. Our gender-specific needs are never prioritized, and our voices are not heard. This creates discomfort and demotivates us from participation."* A key informant interview respondent says, *"Although women's presence in politics is increasing, the infrastructure and physical setups are still traditional and gender unfriendly. This creates a lot of hindrances to politically active women. As a result, they are subjected to physical and mental violence at the workplace"*.

During an in-depth interview, a respondent points out that 'age' is another major reason women face severe violence in politics. Either being junior or senior in age is considered 'out of criteria' for women as opposed to men. For example, one of the respondents during the focus group discussion shared her experience *'I was recommended for the Mayor position in coalition. However, my own party members questioned me pointing out my age, and did not accept it.'* Research also finds that the women politicians' identities are associated with family background, their capacity is undermined and overlooked based on that. *'Despite of showing and proving my capabilities time and again I am always questioned about my capabilities and undermined by associating with my father' name'*, says a major post holding in-depth interview respondent.

Women's contribution to politics gets shadowed in front of male members. An in-depth respondent senior politician, Hisila Yami says, *"Entering into parliamentary politics after the people's war, a gender expert advised me to keep me away from politics. She said, 'it's fine you worked together during the war, but now once you enter parliamentary politics, no matter how hard you worked, all the credit will go to your husband, and you will remain in the background. So, it's better you take some other responsibility.' Now I feel the same, that people recognize me only as the wife of Baburam Bhattraï these days. However, I am on a mission of transformative politics - I know who I am and I do not have time to defend myself, I will continue working on my mission."*

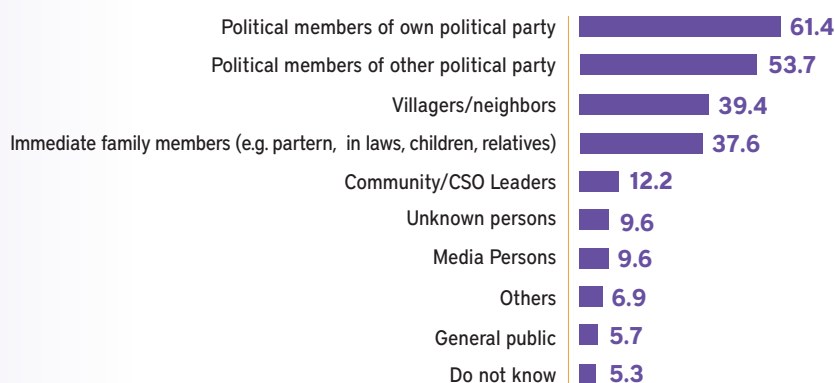
The research uncovers that politically active women and GSM are facing multiple types of violence based on their gender, caste, age, sexuality, identity, and family affiliation. The experience of violence is different at different levels,

geography, and caste. However, this makes politically women and GSM in politics inferior and undermined, creating barriers to active participation and contribution to the political mission.

The perpetrators are from own party

As given in Figure 5, most of the survey participants (61 percent) share that they face violence from their own political party members. In-depth interview respondents verify this fact with examples and shreds of evidence.

Figure 5: Perpetrators of gendered violence (N=492)



The research finds that many of the incidents occur within the political party and from political colleagues. However, the violence faced by the opposition is also equally significant (54 percent) as shown in Figure 5. More than one-third of survey respondents say they face violence from immediate family members mostly from husbands and in-laws as verified through the in-depth interviews. Whereas nine percent state that they face violence from the media. The in-depth interviews provide examples of fake news and misinformation faced by women politicians in social media, and online media.

The following are some statements from the in-depth interview participants to provide testimonies.

- *The perpetrators are from my own party*
- *Members of our own party and oppositions are the perpetrators*
- *Those who hold higher positions perpetuate violence against us*
- *Most of the men in our party act as 'good men' but I object to the way they treat us*
- *My party members want to shake hands with women, but they keep holding their hands for almost a minute. It makes me very uncomfortable, but they keep calling it a healthy flirt*
- *Many acts of our comrades are not healthy, instead awkward and embarrassing*

The research finds that print and online media, and public spaces are also where violence against women takes place. The respondents identified 'men' as the 'main' perpetrator of such violence, whereas a few mentions that it happens to anyone regardless of gender. A small number of respondents say women also face violence from women in politics. The research respondents say that the patriarchal mindset is a major cause to undermine women and their capacity, as a result, violence is very prevalent in every sphere. They also add that women also carry patriarchal values and continue such acts at family and party levels. More than one-third of study participants (38 percent) point out that they face violence from immediate family members which are also confirmed in the in-depth interviews. An in-depth interview respondent shares, *"My husband and my political opinion collided. Now, he is rigid, and stops me from going out. With this, I have been subject to gendered violence as my mobility is being restricted at my own home"*. Similar experiences are shared by others. The research points out that community leaders, media, the public, and unknown persons are also perpetrators of such violence. The workplace has been mentioned as one of the main spots of violence in the in-depth interviews. A deputy mayor shares her experience of facing violence at the workplace from her male counterpart. *"My tenure as Deputy Mayor was terrible as I faced a series of violence, including threats to murder by the Mayor. He did not let me do my assigned duties. I was vocal, took a stand for every legal authority I had, and confronted his monopoly in the decisions. This hurt his ego. As result, he created a lot of problems at every step and made my life miserable."*

Dalit respondents share that violence happens from so-called 'upper caste' people in society, party offices, meetings, and public spaces whereas a few 'upper caste' respondents say violence is not based on caste. They add, *"caste-based discrimination does not exist anymore."* The research shows that women politicians do face humiliation and insult by their own colleagues and media. An ex-Constituent assembly member, representing the agriculture bonded labor community says; *'we lived our life as bonded laborers. After emancipation, we contributed to democratic movements and fought for the country. However, we are always criticized for being called 'autha chhap' (uneducated) in public by the media and our own colleagues. This makes us humiliated, and disrespected"*.

The research says that the perpetrators of gendered violence against GSMs are not limited to 'men' or 'women', but are equally committed by everyone. It identifies that there is not any specific place they believe to be 'safe' or 'unsafe'. The respondents identify family members, community, media, public and political parties as perpetrators. A GSM participant in a focus group discussion elaborates on this saying *"when our own family and society do not accept our identity, being accepted by a political party is beyond our imagination."*

The research finds that politically active women and GSM faces gendered violence at all levels and layers such as family, community, political party, public spaces, and media. The research indicates the insecurity and unfavorable

environment that they face both in the private as well as public spheres. This corroborates the fact that gendered violence happens from own family members or close relatives. The majority of GSM are living in great fear and stigma in the family and society. When their identities are not accepted, it degrades them and makes them feel inferior, forces them to live a difficult life, and as a result, they are not able to live freely and fearlessly. The gendered violence is restricting and limiting politically active women and GSMs' social and political life.

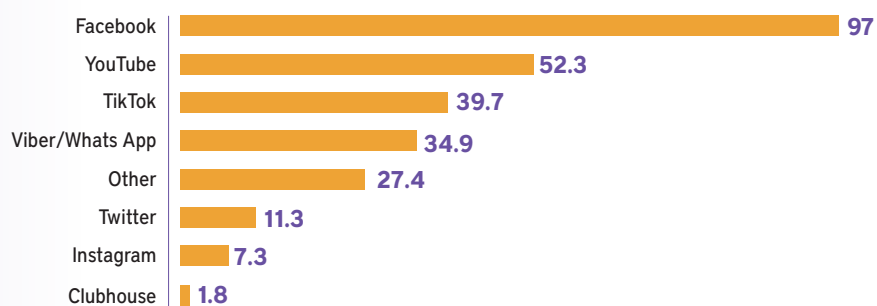
5.2 Online gendered violence in politics

Facebook is the major social media used by research respondents

The research finds that of the total survey respondents, a total of 81 percent is using one or more social media platforms whereas about 17 percent do not use any social media. Out of 81 percent, a total of 97 percent use Facebook, and more than half of the total respondents follow YouTube channels. The other popular platform is TikTok with 40 percent using it. As opposed to women leaders, gender and sexual minorities were found to use social media in a higher percentage (81 vs 100 percent). Those who use social media, use the platform to get news and information, share opinions, connect with people, and for entertainment. Respondents who were candidates for the election mentioned that they used social media to connect with their voters, promote election campaigns, and share their political vision.

Of the total participants using social media, as given in Figure 6, the study shows most participants use multiple platforms.

Figure 6: Use of social media among social media users



The research shows that the use of social media varied on caste, education, and age. Over 90 percent of women leaders from Khas/Arya and hill *Janajati* are using social media, while less than 30 percent of *Madhesi Dalits* use it. A total of 100% of respondents who have a master's degree, or a higher level of education are using social media, whereas only 20 percent of respondents with basic literacy skills are on platforms. Similarly, among respondents between

the age of 18 to 29 years, all use social media whereas only 52 percent of those aged 60+ are on social media. Those who are not using any social media platforms found multiple reasons for not using them, mainly a lack of access to the internet and smartphones. Out of 20 respondents from *Madhesi Dalit*, only 30% are using social media, and the remaining 70% say that either they do not have access to smartphones, do not have internet facilities or they lack the skills to use social media. Others share they do have smartphones and the internet, but do not have their devices under their own control to use them as and when they want to. Their 'husband' or 'son' operates for them. Similarly, a few respondents share that they do not use any social media platform because of the violence they have faced in past. In-depth interview respondents share that they have 'deactivated' their Facebook, or remained 'silent' and preferred not to be 'vocal' because of the abuse and derogatory comments they face in online spaces.

Here are some testimonies about social media use:

- *I used to be on Facebook. I came to know that I got connected with an unknown messenger group. But I was not sure how. Later, I started receiving vulgar messages, pictures, and content. I did not know how to stop those. So, I stopped using Facebook.*
- *I do have a Facebook account. I want to know the news and information. But I do not use it. Because I do not feel secure. It spreads misinformation and fake news. I have seen many negative comments and news about my friends when they post status. So, I never post anything.*
- *I had a Facebook account, but I deactivated it. I want to see news and information, but I use my husband's account*

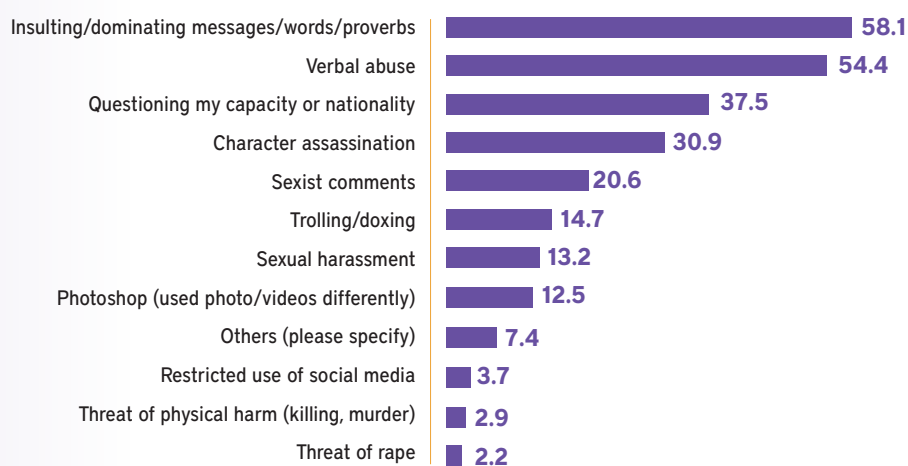
The research shows that social media is widely accepted and used by politically active women and GSM. This is found helpful to connect to the world and share and receive information. This brings the possibility of extending and using it for social and political benefits. However, this research also shows that politically active women and GSM feel insecure and are hesitant to use it because of the incidences of online abuse and violence. The research also points out that politically active women's access and control to use social media is hindered, which itself is violence against them. The research also indicates that economic status is one of the causes which deprives women of the use of social media and modern technology. Education is seen as another barrier as women without formal education were found less active on social media.

Online gendered violence varies based on a person's identity and access

The research finds that politically active women and GSM are facing significant online gendered violence. Out of 81 percent of survey respondents who are using social media, more than a quarter (28 percent) share that they have faced online gendered violence. The cases of online gendered violence are committed mostly on Facebook, followed by Twitter, messenger, and other platforms. The major types of online violence faced are insults and dominating

comments, sexist remarks about women politicians' bodies, dress, gender roles, questioning of women's capacity, use of abusive words, phrases, and character assassination. Twenty percent of respondents share that they have received sexist comments, whereas about 15 percent face trolling/doxing, and 13 percent have faced photoshop and video misuse. In-depth interviews and focus group participants share that they also face online violence on online media and the news posted or shared online. They share that fake news and misinformation are created against women politicians and shared on online platforms. Furthermore, people make very insensitive and derogative comments against women and GSMs after reading the fake news and dis/misinformation as they do not verify the source and reliability of the news.

Figure # 7: Types of online gendered violence



'Media uses women's body as a product', said a young focus group discussion participant. She argued that the print and online media portray women as an 'object', use misogynistic words, and publish images and quotes which undermine women leaders. Respondents say that the media also mock women leaders, create insensitive images, and portray them as 'fun' characters. The media influences a large number of people and their opinion about women politicians.

Case 2: Overcoming is difficult, but not impossible.

Bagmati Thagunna, NCP Maoist, Ex-vice chair, Murma Rural Municipality, Darchula

I belong to a simple family. I started my journey in politics in the election of 2017. Before entering politics, I was an active member of a mother's group (Aama Samuha). With the help of my community and the Maoist party, I entered politics, ran for the vice-chair election, and got elected. However, after winning the election, I had to face severe online gendered violence. There was a rumor spread in the community about a relationship between the Municipal chair and me. We used to go for various plans, programs, and campaigns together. However, some people started making social media posts, spreading false rumors about our relationship. Once a local person living in India made a Facebook post with a photo of the Chairperson and me wearing garlands, congratulating us and wishing us the best conjugal life. Before I came to know this, it was spread around the world, to my relatives, parties, and everyone. People started blaming me, seeing me in the wrong way which created a lot of problems. My honor and dignity were questioned, and people made a lot of negative comments. It made me ashamed and sad. I realized how difficult it is for a simple and ordinary woman like me to enter and sustain in politics. Not only I, but my family members also faced problems in society because of the incident.

I did not have much information about the reporting mechanism. I went to the police administration and came to know I had to go to Kathmandu to file a case with the cybercrime bureau. It took time. The chair went to Kathmandu, filed the case and the person was caught. He deleted the post. It made me happy, though, people did not stop gossiping and demeaning me. At least my party and family stood for me to help me overcome the circumstance and bring my self-confidence back.

The research shows that the respondents do have a variety of experiences of facing online gendered violence. However, they say that this is the continuation of offline violence that women and marginalized are facing for a long time. An in-depth interview respondent expresses her views saying *"online gendered violence is not new or surprising, instead this is the real mirror of society. The violence we, politically active women and minorities were facing, in reality, is reflected in the virtual space. As violence against women shifted to online platforms, it is more visual and noticeable. But it was always there."*

The experience and severity of online gendered violence are found different based on caste, education, political affiliation, geography, and age as it exists offline. The research evidence that online space is used as a weapon to 'harm' and 'silence' politically active women and minorities. It is evident that politically active women and GSMS from all levels, geographic areas, educational backgrounds, and castes are experiencing online gendered- violence in one or the other way in multiple platforms.

5.3 Factors affecting online gendered violence

Understanding how online gendered violence differs

The research finds that 'online gendered violence' is quite 'new' and 'confusing'. Respondents found difficulties to relate exactly to the experience of online gendered violence. For example, in Jajarkot and Humla, 19 and 25 percent of survey participants reported that they did not know if they faced online gendered violence. During the in-depth interviews, it was observed that respondents did not consider bullying, harassment, or misogynistic content received based on gender identity as gendered violence. Instead, they explained such acts as 'normal' reactions. Also, online space is mostly understood as a 'Facebook wall', not all respondents considered derogatory comments received in other online spaces such as messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, and other online platforms as 'online spaces' where 'gendered violence'. Those respondents who are not using smartphones, or do not have access to online space did not express any of their views on it.

Age

The research shows that young women active in politics (18 to 29 years) face a high percentage of online violence (43 percent) in comparison to 13 percent of those aged 60 and above. The nature of comments that young women face is based on their appearance, body parts, and outlook. Young respondents share that they are targeted mostly on their appearance instead of their capacity or political ideology. They add that they enter politics with high hopes of 'social change, however, once they face the sexiest comments, assaults, and derogatory behavior, particularly from their own colleagues, it makes them feel that the political space is an 'unsafe place'. During a focus group discussion, a young politically active woman shared, *"Sitting in a party meeting, I receive messages like 'your lips are looking sexy today, I love you, and 'your hair not looking fresh today, did not wash it?"* In the same discussion, another young lady shares her experience *"when we were together in the protests, A man from my own party said why did you cut your hair short? You look like a boy. He continuously harassed me based on my age and looks".* Another young woman adds to *"our own party leaders send me unnecessary sexist texts and makes me feel very uncomfortable."*

Socio-cultural factors are key

The research shows that the experience of online gendered violence is affected by caste, ethnicity, and cultural practices. For instance, politically active women in Madhesh reported less online violence in contrast to the high percentage of offline violence they face (19 percent online vs 68 percent in person). The reasons are elaborated on and evidenced by in-depth and key informant interviews which confirm that low access to devices (such as smartphones), devices controlled by male members (son or husband), and lack of skill to use devices as some of the reasons for this. Hence offline gendered violence is high in those groups. Only 9 percent of respondents from Mahottari report online gendered violence, unlike the 66 percent who face offline violence. Economic

status is also a key to this as those who are not able to access smartphones do not get exposure to the space itself. In Mustang, only 11 percent of survey respondents report facing online violence. Respondents from in-depth interviews provide an additional argument saying economic independence among women and cultural practice is key to resisting online or offline violence.

Political affiliation

The research shows that those who hold the position at the province or federal level are facing a high level of online gendered violence (52 percent) as opposed to the ward-level politicians (16 percent). In in-depth interviews, key informant interview respondents provided additional argument to this saying at the local (village) level, people do have limited social media friends, know each other personally, and easily recognize the person making comments which limits the possible online hazards. However, the research also recognizes that local-level politicians are less active on social media platforms and share limited opinions in comparison to higher levels.

Education

The research finds that politically active women who hold higher education face a higher level of online gendered violence as opposed to those who have lower level education. It shows that a total of 55 percent of women leaders with higher education face online violence, whereas only 16 percent of respondents with basic education (up to class 8) face it. The access and use of online platforms are also some of the reasons. Provincial or federal-level women leaders, who found having high educational degrees, frequently share their political opinions on social media, and have a larger outreach, therefore, also face a higher level of violence. However, this is one of the areas that need further investigation.

GSMs are found to face a high level of online gendered violence in comparison to women politicians. Research shows that a total of 28 percent of politically active women face online gendered violence, whereas 83 percent of GSMs experience it. This shows that the GSMs are at a higher risk of online gendered violence than others.

Expressing a political opinion is 'harmful'

Those who experience online gendered violence are found facing it when they express their political opinion and views on the media. Specifically, those women leaders who put their views on national issues, claim any positions, or speak about women's rights are mostly targeted, and derogatory, misogynistic comments are made against them. A total of 51 percent of women respondents receive abusive comments when they post a political opinion, 49 percent receive abusive comments when they post any news or information, 45 percent do so when they post personal information or photo, 44 percent receive hate when they post or share political news, and 32 percent when they claim any position. The research uncovers that putting political opinions publicly for women leaders is harmful.

Acceptance as a 'leader' is hard

The research shows that acceptance of a 'woman' is still a challenge for political parties and society. Most of the gendered violence occurs from their own colleagues and known people. This demonstrates a big challenge for women and minority politicians to get established in the political process as they are not safe from the people around them.

"The competitors from our own political party, who do not want women to grow or are afraid of losing their leadership position, do not want to accept us as a leader," an in-depth interview respondent said. Another in-depth interview participant responded that *"when they cannot win us in any way, they start questioning our character. Because they believe once they destroy a women's character she can never rise again. This happened to me and it was online"*.

Case 3: Never give up

Deputy Mayor Candidate of the year 2017

I have been engaged in politics for the past 20 years. After being nominated for Deputy Mayor, various Facebook posts were made against me questioning and affecting my personal dignity. There were abusive comments. During the local level election of 2017, a photo was posted against me on Facebook while contesting for the position of Deputy Mayor because I was challenging male domination in politics. I filed a complaint at the local police station, although there was a lot of pressure on me to not file the complaint. After the complaint, a discussion was held between both parties, me and the perpetrator but no other action was taken. I faced online violence through the people participating in the election. There was violence from the contestants who participated in the election. I even had to face the violence from my husband because of all these incidents. My husband scolded, beat, and injured me badly. After that, we got divorced. However, my political career is still going on. I have not given up.

"The perpetrator of online violence can be your close friend or comrade or anyone about whom you have never thought of," one in-depth interview respondent shared. Respondents said that those who are at a higher level in politics commit such violence 'intentionally' to push women leaders back, while some point out this happens from the lower level because they do not want to accept women's leadership. Respondents also shared that they do such acts by creating fake IDs and being anonymous on online platforms. Focus groups and key informant respondents strongly verified the above statements. They say that *"as many women and minorities are getting the leadership positions, the patriarchal society has difficulties accepting them as 'leaders'. Online gendered violence is the reflection of such mentality"*.

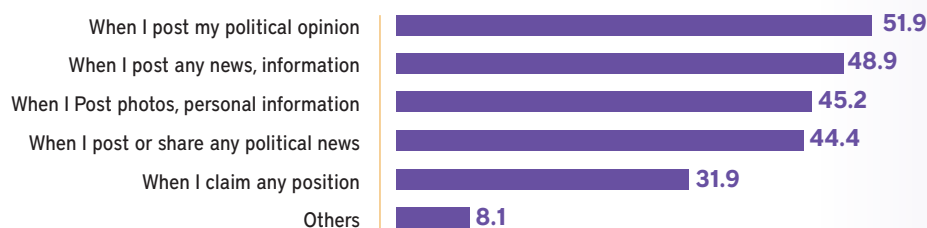
Claiming the rights is 'risky'

The research identifies that politically active women are harassed or undermined when they start advocating for gender-based rights which are

generally not in the interest of men. It shows that if a woman silently participates in her political mission and does not voice concern about her own dignity and identity, she is accepted as 'equal' however when she starts raising her voice for her existence and equal status, she starts facing unpredicted behaviors from her own colleagues. This opinion is articulated by in-depth and key informant interviewees throughout the research. One of the respondents from Sudurpaschim province, Indu Tharu, shares her experience, *"I have been advocating for our ethnic rights for a long time. I wrote articles and delivered speeches, and I was accepted as a leader. However, when I started raising issues of gender disparity in our own movement and raising questions, I was accused of destroying the movement and getting criticized. It was very sad to see that the leaders did not want to bring women's agenda into the political mainstream, instead, they wanted to boycott those who dare to question them. After that, I faced online and offline violence by my own party members."*

Similarly, as 32% of survey respondents say they face online violence when they claim any position, a senior leader, in-depth interview respondent says that *"I use all of the social media platforms. I have my own blog too. A few months back when there was a rape case, I stand for victims' rights. But my social media posts were full of abusive comments and hatred"*.

Figure# 8: Types of issues that women receive derogatory and sexist comments



Media 'objectifies' as a 'product'

The research points out that the media is one of the perpetrators of gendered violence. A total of 10 percent of survey respondents say that violence occurs from both online and offline media. *"Online media affiliated with a political party spreads fake news and misinformation against those from other parties,"* shared a respondent. An in-depth interview respondent said, *"Journalists take revenge through newspapers if we do not work in favor of them. When I was elected as Mayor, I found that municipality property was misused, and the rent was not paid for a long time. Therefore, I took legal action. This resulted in spreading misinformation about me in online and print media, it went viral all over the country"*.

In-depth and key informant respondents say that the media is mostly in favor of 'power holders' which is not the case for women, GSMs, and the marginalized. When they need to mock male leaders, they bring women and minorities into the picture. Respondents harmonize their views on online media as one of the most powerful tools against them. They add that the media has a strong power to influence the wider population with the one news, however, the media not being sensitive is unfavorable to politically active women and GSMs. Respondents also worry about online media not following any guidelines, spreading news without fact-checking, and just being concerned about increasing their 'viewers' or 'readers'.

Case 4: Who to believe? An experience with media...

A key informant interview respondent (anonymous)

Many years back, a famous national weekly magazine interviewed me. It was about couple's healthy sex life. Interestingly, the headline of the article was written very differently without my consent, making it sexualized and sensational, putting my version in a different way which was said in a different context.

Later the article was translated in English. Through time, the article was shared more than 75 thousand times, but the content or context was changed. I found my name and photo was used and made a question answer section too by various online and print media. My photo was taken from Facebook and used without my information and consent. After that I stopped posting my photographs or any information on Facebook or any social media platform, and deleted previous posts. I received uncounted messages and comments which were extremely sexist and abusive. That affected me negatively for a long time, however, slowly, I stopped reading such comments started ignoring. I even talked with the newspaper team, but got a response such as 'it is helping you to get publicity so why bother'. Till now my friends send some fake articles quoting or putting up my news, but I just ignore those for my well-being.

5.4 Online gendered violence during elections

The prevalence of online gendered violence is high during elections than at the normal time

The research finds an increase in online gendered violence against politically active women during elections. This is not a surprise because the candidates get active in election campaigns and reach out to the public more often. Women candidates also get more vigilant in online and offline spaces during elections. In recent years election campaigns have also been widely run on social media. A total of 63 percent of the survey respondents said that gendered violence (which includes disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech) is higher against women candidates during elections. Though a

total of 19 percent say that the gendered violence does not differ during the election or other times, as it is always there. Research respondents running for election share their 'on-hand' experiences of online and offline gendered violence during the election.

"During the election, we need to go for campaigns, door to door, need to travel with male colleagues, sit for long meetings. There are a lot of barriers for women candidates in doing so. We are questioned about our mobility either in-person or virtually, by family members, and society. It is very challenging for us to run a similar level of the campaign as our male counterparts." shared a deputy mayor candidate.

Another candidate running for local election added, *"Elections are normally led by money and alcohol. We women cannot distribute money or feed meat and alcohol to the cadres and gather a crowd. We cannot organize late-night*

Case 5: They want us to be silent, but we will not let it happen!

Manju Bhandari, Mayor candidate, 2079 local election, UML, Dharan Municipality

I have been active in party politics since my student life. I have taken various responsibilities at various levels - from junior to senior. In the meantime, I have been facing a series of violence, from my own party and opposition multiple times. Social media is one of the key platforms committing gendered violence by spreading false news, shaming, humiliating, and assassinating the character of women politicians. I have a series of such incidents. When I was a Deputy Mayor, one online media spread false information accusing me of corruption saying I spent 6.5 million rupees on alcohol and meat.

Similarly, when the party nominated me for the Mayor's candidate in the recent local election, an edited video of my speech was uploaded online and spread wrong information. The video surfaced online with the intention of targeting my dignity and damaging my social reputation. That misinformation created animosity toward me, and it was very hard for me and my party to dispute the false information. Besides that, the comments section was extremely defaming, attacking my sexuality and character.

After facing such severe online violence, I informed and submitted a petition to the Police Administration, Cyber Cell, Press Council, and within my own party against the newspaper which published that news saying if I found guilty, I am ready to face any legal action. But there is no control of online violence. It was sad to see that the party did not take any action except denying the allegations against me. I did not see any action being taken by the Police Administration and Press Council. This all affected me very negatively, personally and politically. I think my own party could have provided support, which, however, unfortunately, did not happen. I have been wishing this would be controlled and taken care of soon by the state and political parties. And this is not limited to me as it happens to many women politicians when it related to claiming rights or position. They want to keep us aside and silent. But we will not let it happen!

parties, sit, and get drunk. Our followers do not enjoy working with us and spread online and offline rumors blaming our characters This disqualifies us from being a candidate or prevents us from winning the elections."

The research shows that spreading misinformation, character assassination, and making false accusations on social media are some of the examples women candidates face all over the country. Before they take any legal action, it gets viral. By the time the women get justice, they already face a lot of damage to their political and social life. A national-level leader and former minister said, *'after the 2017 election, online violence against me increased surprisingly. I got attacks from some known and many unknown people using their known or fake accounts. The comments made against me attacked my sexuality, dignity, honor, and character.'*

Belonging to a 'marginalized' community or GSM is an additional challenge

The research recognizes that *Dalit*, marginalized, and GSM face an extra level of online gendered violence during elections. The in-depth interview and focus group discussion respondents share that politically active women from *Dalit* or other marginalized groups always face gendered violence. And when it comes to election time, as a result of their low economic status or less power over media and other resources, they are automatically a lesser priority. A *Dalit* in-depth interview respondent shared, *"Since we are already deprived of access and control over resources, we are totally neglected by the political parties. Our agendas and candidacy are never in priority. Media do not give us coverage as we lack access to them"*. An in-depth respondent who said *'the comments I received during my election campaigns is 'Why should I vote for a Dalit? I cannot greet her if she gets elected.*

Case 6: The caste-based violence reflects on social media

Aastha Nepali, Janata Samajbadi Party

I joined politics at an early age because I believe politics is the only way to bring socio, political and economic changes, aggressively. I was 20 years old when I was first jailed for my political beliefs and since then I have been jailed a couple of times. I was accused of being not patriotic. I was arrested, transferred, released, and again arrested many times, though I took it easy as I was motivated by the cause. However, it did not last long because my own party did not care about it and I felt left out. In a few years, I got sidelined from active politics, stopped using any social media, and started taking vocational training. But it did not last long, because I was addicted to being politically active. After meeting Baburam Bhattarai in Pokhara, I joined the Janta Samajbadi Party and am now working as the Province Secretary. I rejoined social media and my followers also encouraged me to do so.

In the recent local election, I was a candidate for the Deputy Mayor of Putalibazar Municipality. During election time, I used social media and online portals much more than before. I used social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok to promote my election agenda, communicate with people, and exchange thoughts and information. However, I faced both online gendered violence and offline. Besides other comments, one way of violence was based on my caste and physical attributes. Many people said, 'how come you got a ticket being a young Dalit girl?'. One of the comments was - 'you are beautiful but dalit'. People do have very negative attitudes against the Dalit community, especially toward Dalit women. They continuously question Dalit women's capacity. They think Dalits are just confined at the ward level and do not deserve to go beyond ward positions. Some leaders objectify us and indirectly propose saying 'if you go with me, you will get this position. Young females who are active in politics face sexist comments and sexual violence quite often both online and in person. Such harassment demotivates and affects mental, and physical health and political participation.

Economic status is 'key' during elections

The respondents highlight economic violence as one of the major ones during elections. In-depth interviews and focus group discussion participants elaborate on this by saying that women having less access and control over property and resources makes them 'weaker' candidates during elections. Having low access to social media and print media makes them less heard by the public, says key informant respondents. They add that having limited access to the property often results in them not being able to take independent decisions or spending money in elections which causes hindrances to participation in elections. *"Male members can spend money. If they do not have enough, they can sell the land or property to spend in elections, but we cannot do so. This makes us weaker candidates for our political party. So, the party also finds various excuses to exclude us. Other male members of the party who are less qualified get tickets,"* says an in-depth interview respondent.

6. INFORMATION AND ACCESS TO THE RESPONDING MECHANISMS

The cases of online gendered violence are not reported

The research finds that a large number of the survey and in-depth interview respondents know or have heard of the cyber law (the electronic transaction act). As given in Figure 7.1, the majority of the participants (43%) have either heard or known that the government has made provisions to prevent online or offline violence against anyone. Women in politics are aware of various types of violence against them, however, who have heard of the law, do not know about the provisions, however, about one-third of the survey respondents know that the law addresses the online gendered violence (Figure 7.1).

The survey finds a low number of reporting online gendered violence cases (Figure #7.2). The survey finds that only 24 percent have reported the cases they have faced online, whereas 76 percent did not report the case anywhere. Respondents selected multiple agencies to report the cases, and some reported their cases to more than one agency. (Figure 7.3). Out of the total respondents who reported the case, two-thirds have gone to the police. At the same time, some (about one-third) of them have reported the case to their own political party, 15 percent to the local government, and only 12 percent reached out to the Cyber Bureau. Some others reported the cases to the Press Council, and some approached the Election Commission of Nepal.

Figure 7.1: Awareness about legal provisions (N= 492)

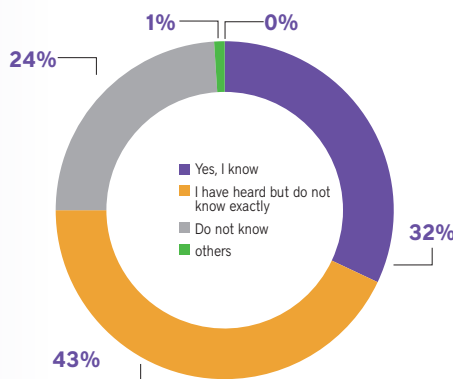


Figure 7.2: Reporting of cases (N =139)

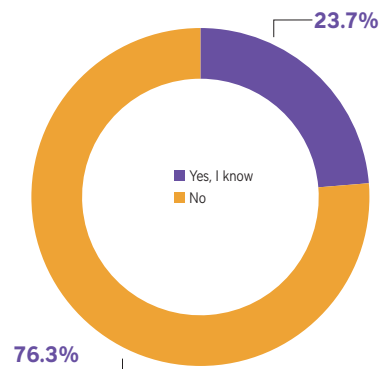
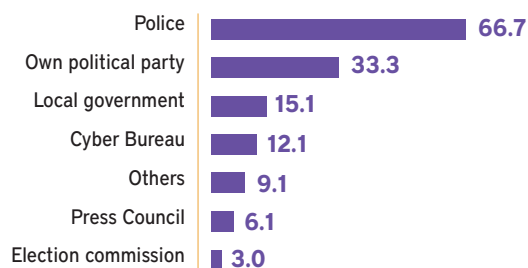


Figure 7.3: Agencies contacted for reporting the online GBV cases



The in-depth interview respondents also make similar responses as most of them have heard that there is cyber law, but they do not know the provisions and procedures. The study team found a few respondents who were unsuccessful in filing the cases with the cyber bureau because the bureau is located in Kathmandu, and the procedure is complex. The research finds key informant interview respondents also facing online gendered violence and trying to reach out to the cyber bureau for legal action.

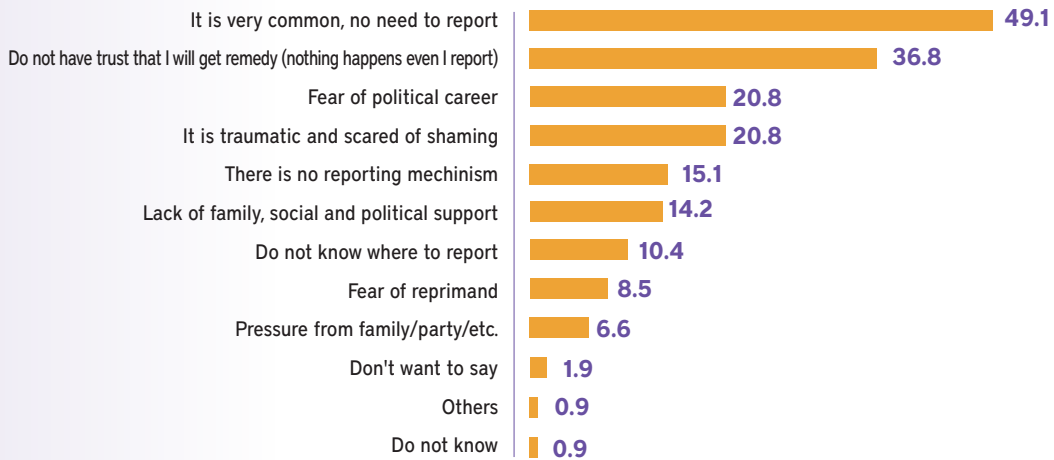
Authorities are losing trust

The research finds various reasons for not reporting online GBV cases (Figure 8). About half of the respondents (49 percent) share that online gendered violence is common and therefore reporting is not necessary. Violence has been 'part of life for women politicians, and they do not feel that they need to report the case. They also do not have hope that they would get justice by reporting the cases. Many women keep them 'silent' and accept the injustice against them. During an in-depth interview, a senior leader said, "*we grew up in a society where women are subject to violence throughout their lives, in different forms. I never saw our senior women leaders confronting any allegations against them. This has shaped my psychology and nurtured a culture of silence. I have taken online abuses as a part of my political journey and do not think of opposing it, although I know that my approach is injurious.*"

The in-depth and key informant interview respondents confirm that women politicians do not trust the law implementing authority about getting any remedy after filing the cases. They have seriously questioned the reliability of the existing legal system. They share a feeling that the case does not go anywhere after it is registered, and the perpetrator is not going to be held accountable for their actions. Respondents also fear a 'counterattack' if they report their cases. In the survey result, 21 percent of the participants shared that their political careers will be at risk if they report and speak about gendered violence (Figure 8). An equal number of respondents (21 percent) felt that reporting a gendered violence case is a traumatic experience and shameful. They do not want to present themselves as a 'victim', as society tends to 'blame the victim' not the perpetrator. The research finds that the lack of a safe reporting mechanism in place, lack of confidentiality, and an absence of support from

family and political parties are other reasons respondents do not want to report their cases. In addition, the research finds that 10 percent of respondents do not know where to report. Respondents are also afraid of reprimand, and about 7 percent of respondents receive pressure to 'not to report' from family or their political parties.

Figure 8: Reasons for not reporting online gendered violence (N =106)



The above data is largely supported and verified by in-depth and key informant interviews as well as focus group discussions, and validation workshops. The absence of easy and accessible authority at a local level is found to be one of the major obstacles when dealing with cyber-related cases. Having a centralized cyber bureau in Kathmandu and the need to travel to Kathmandu to file a legal complaint is a major barrier for the survivors. In addition, there is a victim-blaming/shaming culture within the authorities, a lack of a survivor-friendly environment and services, and victim-blaming culture within the government authorities and a very difficult procedure in which the victim has to provide proof as opposed to getting authorities to help to find them a few areas respondents shares as the reasons not to report the case.

In a key informant interview, a respondent who had faced serious life-threatening online violence shared her story of an unsuccessful attempt at reporting a case, *“After receiving uncouneted online abuse, and extreme criminal threats such as murder and rape, I went to the cyber bureau to report it. But after going there I felt more stress, violence, trauma, and insult. I had faced threats and violence in the local language, the Cyber Bureau officials said that they did not have a translation service, and they asked me to provide translated documents. I translated the text myself but had to share it with different officers at different times. I felt humiliated and re-victimized. At last, an officer from the cyber bureau said that since all the*

messages came to my inbox or personal messages, therefore, they do not fulfill the requirement of a case.'

She added, 'Also, police said that receiving such kinds of messages and threats was 'my fault. After many unsuccessful visits to the Cyber Bureau, I realized that it was damaging my mental health instead of providing any justice. My family members and friends circle were also affected very badly by the whole incident. At last, I gave up the idea of filing the case. My case remains unregistered'."

The research shows that not only politically active women, the women, GSMs, and marginalized but all those who are vocal about their rights and oppose patriarchy are subjected to online gendered violence from state and non-state actors but they are keeping themselves silent because of the other layers of violence they are likely to face. This is restricting women's public life and is reflected in political leadership. In-depth interview respondents share that when they face online or offline gendered violence from within their political party, they are suggested to resolve it 'within the party' and not make it 'public'. The research shows lack of trust in the system, difficult and insensitive procedures, lack of local responding mechanism, fear of escalation of the issue, trauma and "victim blaming and shaming" culture, and lack of information and awareness are the main reasons for not reporting such cases. The research findings of low or no reporting of the cases raise a question for law enforcement agencies, political parties as well as other actors responsible for maintaining rule of law.

Case 7: Poor governance is the key to unreported cases.

Sushila Rokaya, Candidate, Deputy Chair, Nepali Congress

I started my political career when I was a student as a member of the Nepal Students Union in 1990. I feel that it is very challenging to sustain active politics as a woman is still viewed as a second-class citizen, confined to the household role, and facing a lot of cultural/social discrimination, such as Chhaupadi⁵⁵ in rural areas. Women face physical and geographical barriers to participating as actively as males in politics, but these aspects are never considered. A few women who are active in politics, in addition to these existing barriers, face various types of violence in politics, and so do I. Undermining and questioning my capacity, not assigning any responsibilities, exclusion from the decision-making level, passing negative comments, and spreading misinformation during elections are some of the examples that I have been continuously facing in my political career.

⁵⁵ Chhaupadi is a malpractice in Nepal, where women are considered 'impure' during their menstruation cycle, and are separated from others in many spheres of normal, daily life.

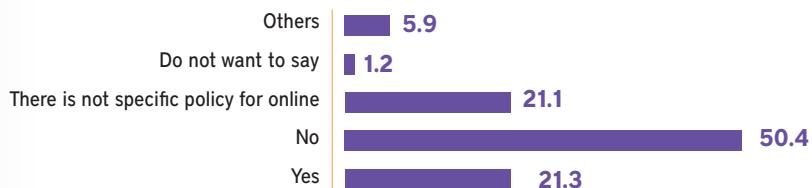
In recent years, we have been using social media platforms in Humla significantly. It is easy to disseminate or receive information and news and connect with the outer world. I use Facebook, TikTok, Viber, Instagram. However, I have been subjected to a lot of online gendered violence too. When I was contesting for the post of vice-chair in 2017, a series of misinformation, rumors, and misleading news spread about me on online platforms. People raised questions about my capabilities to contest as a vice-chair, and even my own party's male members agreed. Most of such acts were placed on Facebook as it is the most used social media in Humla. Even election slogans had derogatory and demeaning elements towards women candidates.

However, I did not report the case because I did not have trust in the police administration to take legal action as per the complaint lodged, especially by women. In addition, there were negative comments circulated against some victims after they lodged their cases. This example discouraged me from moving forward with legal action. I think it is the same for other women too. No one takes GBV cases seriously. The biggest culprit for violence against women politicians is poor governance - in political parties and governments. This causes a lot of psychological suffering and trauma for politically active women.

Political parties lack responding mechanisms

The research finds that the political parties in Nepal do not have gendered violence-responding mechanisms within the party structures. In response to a research question about the internal mechanism within political parties to address online or offline gendered violence, only 21 percent replied that their party had a responding system in place. As presented in Figure 9, more than half of the respondents say that their party does not have such a system in place. Among those who said there is a 'system' in place, during the in-depth interview they referred to the 'discipline committee' and 'code of conduct' as major policies addressing any cases related to gendered violence. However, they further shared that even those committees that exist to look after the cases do not 'entertain' such complaints and prefer to solve them 'secretly' rather discussing them in committees or making them 'public'. Respondents also share that they experience another level of humiliation and harassment when they report the case and make it public. Respondents add these practices have disempowered them and made them feel insecure within their political party.

Figure #9: Intra-political party mechanism to address online gendered violence (N = 492)



The in-depth interview participants have additional insights about the inter-party online gendered violence response mechanisms.

- *I did report to my party. But I was abused more for speaking up. My party did not listen to me.*
- *I am from a village. I do not know about any policies in my party to respond to any kind of gendered violence. I am sure it exists in the manifesto, but not in practice.*
- *We are discriminated against while eating the food. So, how do I know what policies exist about online gendered violence in parties? Everything is just in the paper (a Dalit respondent).*

These statements provide support to the data presented above and confirm that the political parties are failing to respond to the gendered cases at the party level and they lack seriousness and proper mechanisms to address the issues. So, there are only a few examples where the party has taken actions to hold the perpetrator accountable for the act. *"My party issued a notice, later the perpetrator apologized and deleted the post,"* a woman leader shares her experience. A few say that they reported the case 'verbally' and in some cases, their party leaders invited both parties together for in-house discussion.

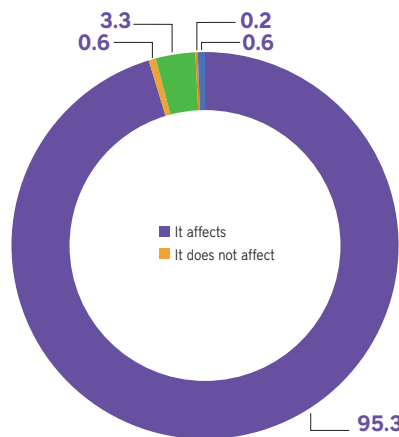
In contradiction, the research participants also share that politically active women and GSMS themselves are responsible for receiving such online gendered violence. An in-depth interview respondent expressed, *"Women have to be careful by not giving hints."* The research respondent emphasized that women themselves should be aware and careful about 'not exposing' themselves on social media platforms and they should be set a limitation. These statements were seconded by some male participants during validation workshops. A male workshop participant put his views saying, *"the online violence a woman faces is based on her social media post. They should learn to remain in limitation while posting any photos. Women themselves are responsible for such acts."* Similar statements came from a few man and woman leaders during validation workshops.

7. THE EFFECTS OF GENDERED VIOLENCE IN POLITICS

Gendered violence in politics: A serious, but ignored and unaddressed issue

The research shows that gendered violence against politically active women and GSMs is a harmful practice. As presented in Figure 10, a total of 95 percent of survey respondents confirm it by agreeing that it affects them at a personal and leadership level. The in-depth and key informant interview as well as the focus group discussion participants confirm this by providing additional insights. Gendered violence seems to be a serious issue in politics but is heavily ignored and unaddressed.

Figure#10: Effect of online gendered violence on political participation and leadership (N = 492)



Respondents state that any kind of gendered violence, either that is online or offline, affects a person’s well-being, confidence, psychology, and state of mind. The research respondent adds that the marginalized community and minorities can have extra and more harmful impacts than others. They also say that politically active women lose their motivation to keep themselves active in politics when they get ashamed and feel helpless after facing gendered violence. In-depth interviews and key informants share that, it can break family relations, cause dropout from politics, lead to isolation, depression/anxiety, and even committing suicide. The following are some testimonies from the in-depth interview participants:

- *Gendered violence affects a person’s dignity and respect*
- *Family life is disrupted*
- *It affects socialization and decreases motivation, self-confidence, participation, and leadership capabilities*

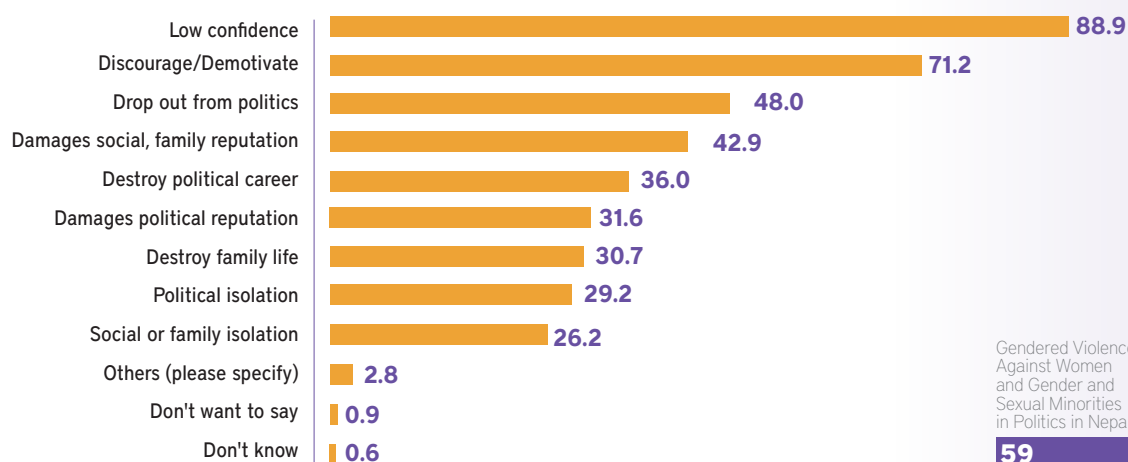
- *Dreams are obstructed, the energy, joy, and excitement that the politically active person may have is pushed back, and it leads to dissatisfaction and frustration*
- *Because of violence, a person loses hope and morale, and it ultimately impacts participation*
- *It makes us physically and emotionally tired and vulnerable*

The research finds that gendered violence severely impacts politically active women and GSMs. It impacts them physically, mentally, and emotionally which is linked with their political will, career, and leadership opportunities and capabilities.

Gendered violence is pushing women and GSMs back from political space

The research finds that gendered violence in politics is affecting the mental and physical health of politically active women and GSMs. The research demonstrates a very deep relationship between a person’s mental health and leadership capacity, quality, enthusiasm, and energy. The research provides the awfully sad fact that it is often pushing politically active women and minorities to severe depression, and consequences thereafter, include low confidence, demotivation, discouragement, and even self-harm. About half of the respondents (48 percent) say that gendered violence causes a politically active person to drop out of politics. Whereas 43 percent say that it damages social, and family reputation and 36 percent say it destroys political career. About one-third of survey participants share that gendered violence in politics destroys women’s family lives. These findings are verified by key informants, in-depth interview respondents, focus group respondents, and later by validation workshop participants.

Figure 11: Impacts of Gendered Violence on women and GSM politicians



Many of the in-depth interview respondents share that the gendered violence in politics even led them towards severe depression and suicidal attempts. An in-depth interview participant shared her experience to verify these sayings. *'I used to consider myself a strong and confident woman, but I am proved wrong. After being elected as the Deputy Mayor, I had to face a series of violence from my political counterpart. One day I tried to kill myself by hanging in my office room. Many times, I questioned why I joined politics? ... But, I did not give up and am still alive!'* A key informant interview respondent says, *"People lose their ability to work. They get ashamed of themselves because of gendered violence, and some have committed suicide".*

"The serious nature of gendered violence has a long-term effect on a survivor's life". A key informant respondent senior psychologist, Ms. Karuna Kunwar said; *"Violence has a severe and long-term effect on a person. Many times, especially a survivor of sexual violence feel guilty, ashamed, and blames themselves for the incident. They feel that there is something wrong with them. This is very serious and affects a person's mental health."*

The key informant and in-depth interview respondents confirm that online or offline gendered violence not only affects a person but adversely affects the whole family and their psychology. They share that the threat and attack go beyond individuals to family and friends, which causes extreme concern, and trauma among the surroundings and bring discouragement in continuing politics. Respondents share that when their voices are not heard and they are ashamed, they are abused by the people around them, which makes them guilty. When they start developing a feeling of guilt, this harms them further. Psychologist Karuna adds that *"the feeling of guilt does not allow the survivors to seek for help or share the incident with the next person, which directly impacts a person's well-being, later it impacts the enthusiasm to contribute the best in whatever they are engaged in".*

A key informant experience provided additional support to what Ms. Kunwar said. She said *"When it was happening to me, I kept wondering what was wrong, it was coming from everywhere. I thought that I was speaking my mind and exercising my right to speak. I was just expressing myself poetically, but the reaction I got was completely different, and the uproar affected me emotionally. I kept thinking, while there were threats and hate to me, that maybe I was wrong to have done what I did. My own family and friends were also getting threats and so I felt that maybe I was responsible for this. I felt guilty for what I had done. Fortunately, my family supported me a lot at that time."*

Psychologist Karuna adds, *"It has been seen that the person starts feeling 'self-doubt' about their capacity and start questioning themselves. They start considering themselves 'bad'. Suicidal tendency is found in survivors who have been through sexual abuse and assault. Depression, sadness, panic attacks, anxiety, lack of self-respect, development of fear, difficulty in going to*

a certain place, trust issues, and low self-confidence are some of the major impacts seen on the survivors of violence”.

The research finds that women active in politics from marginalized communities have additional negative impacts than others. *“The Dalit community and leaders do not find social respect,”*. A key informant interview respondent said, *“Victims are lonely and depressed, and they are subjected to violence from society and politics which causes them to feel guilty and despise their good acts themselves”*. A large number of key informant interview respondents support this saying by stating that this is keeping them away not only from active politics but also from other public life. Hence, the research finds some contradictions too, for example, a small number of respondents say that they did not face any consequences of gendered violence. One in-depth interview respondent says, *“It does not affect me. I do not care what people say and write about me. My focus is to achieve my political goal.”* They tend to keep themselves ‘indifferent’ to such acts. Respondents providing such remarks are particularly from privileged castes and classes and hold power in comparison to others.

The research demonstrates that gendered violence has a serious impact on politically active women and GSMs. It is impacting them in many ways, such as physically and mentally. Sometimes they silently suffer, because the legal mechanisms are either not accessible or not functional, the political parties are ignorant and unresponsive, and most of them lack an intra-party responding mechanism. This results in serious mental and physical health hazards, directly and indirectly, affecting leadership opportunities and capabilities.

A barrier to democratic exercise

The research evidence shows that gendered violence against politically active women and minorities is interconnected with democratic exercise. Respondents put their views that in a democracy everyone is different but equal. However, when two persons are treated differently, it becomes ugly. All research respondents (both survey and in-depth interview) agree that gendered violence is an ugly side of inclusive democracy as it hinders the equal participation of certain groups. Respondents add that when women or minorities in politics do not feel safe and respected, and their representation is not the same as guaranteed by the constitution and laws, it has a major impact on inclusive leadership. The following are some testimonies from the research respondents:

- *Democracy means every individual is equal. Why are minorities, women, and differently-abled are always excluded? When people are not able to move forward, how is this supposed to be an inclusion?*
- *Inclusive democracy means equal participation of women and the marginalized in politics. However, online and offline gendered violence affects women in politics. They may quit politics, leaving a discouraging message to aspiring women politicians. The young will develop a negative outlook toward politics. Women will be discouraged to participate.*

Research respondents provide overwhelming remarks supporting the statement that online and offline gendered violence is a challenge to inclusive democracy. Here are some of the testimonies:

- *Violence affects women, GSM, and other disadvantaged groups. Online gendered violence has been demotivating women, Dalits, and other minorities group to move ahead in leadership every day. Since inclusive democracy means the right to live with dignity, equality, and freedom, gendered violence is depriving people of these.*
- *Violence against anyone is an attack on their dignity. It is a serious violation of human rights.*
- *It firstly affects a person's dignity, which is a fundamental right under Nepal's Constitution. If political parties and leaders do not respect each other, serious human rights issues will arise. I believe that no country's democracy can be strong until the political parties obey the laws and policies.*

The research participants agree that democracy is a system where political power is shared equally among all citizens and they have equal rights to exercise their power. The continuous violence against a certain gender or caste or community is a major barrier to democracy as it hinders the exercise of socio-political rights. In the absence of rule of law and good governance, inclusive democracy loses its fundamental character. Society will function in chaos leading to impunity, injustice, and inequality. As a result, political and social conflict will arise. When women, *Dalits*, or any marginalized community members are not in a position to exercise their rights equally, there will be societal disruption instead of steady growth.

8. KEY FINDINGS

This section brings key highlights of the research building on the research results and analysis section.

Serious violation of human rights

Freedom from violence is a basic human right. The research identifies that gender-based violence in politics is undermining the dignity and self-respect of politically active women and minorities. The advancement of technology has enabled today's population to connect to the world fast and effectively and this has offered women and GSM in politics an opportunity to share information and opinion and amplify their voices for equality and justice. Many politically active women and minorities are utilizing this opportunity. However, it has also created fertile grounds for technology-facilitated violence, normalized by society. The instances of violence are found to be deliberately targeted at women and GSMs, who are seriously and adversely impacted and pushed back from their active political careers. They are forced to remain 'silent' by society, their party leaders, and family members. Online gendered based violence has also curtailed the rights of women and GSM in politics to freely express themselves, as it has been causing them to 'self-censorship', limiting their online interactions. The online hate and misinformation are violating constitutional, and legal rights, although, the Constitution of Nepal has stated that freedom from violence is a basic human right.

The narrative of a 'leader' is outdated

Leadership is understood as 'masculinity'. It is relying on 'hype leaders' rather than skills and abilities. A patriarchal society believes that 'male' leaders are better because they are believed to have more 'strength', 'competitiveness', 'risk-taking tendency', and 'assertiveness'. Although with an increasing number of women in Nepali politics, there is a shift in traditional gender roles, yet, the power struggle remains. This has also created a challenging environment as people with a patriarchal mindset find it difficult to accept this transformation. For example, 73 percent of survey respondents shared that they face insult, humiliation, and low respect. This is evidence of resisting women as a leader. The research findings indicate that a changed narrative of 'leadership' is needed in Nepali politics and society. A wide debate and discussions are needed to transform the understanding and perception of leaders. With a continuation of gendered violence in politics, the state is going to fail to establish an inclusive democracy leading to an unequal society. Collective feminist leadership is essential to building an inclusive democracy and just society.

Relearning and reconstructing social norms and values are fundamental

Patriarchy gives absolute priority to 'men' and dominates women in both the public and private spheres. It treats women and GSMs as subordinates, and it determines the social relation between different gender, class, and caste. Within patriarchal relations, women and minorities are collectively and systematically excluded from full participation in social, political, and economic

life. Discriminatory values, norms, beliefs, and practices are continuously reinstated and imposed on women and GSMs, systematically pushing them back. As patriarchy operates through inequalities, the results are reflected at various levels, from household to state structure. Having above 60 percent male perpetrators within their political party (Figure 5) and about 54 percent perpetrators from other competitor political parties, confirms that there is a big push to maintain the status quo. These all are reflected as high rates of offline and online violence, attacks against politically active women, and GSMs. As a result, women's and minorities' presence, and participation in social and political debates on online mediums media are severely restricted.

Intersectional intervention is a precondition

All inequalities are not the same. Various forms of inequalities often operate together and exacerbate each other as evidenced by the research findings. Individual identity can overlap creating compounding experiences and discriminations. For instance, an educated *Dalit* woman faces the second layer of violence because of her caste than an equally educated brahmin woman. A GSM person or a *Dalit* woman with disabilities faces the next level of violence than a *Dalit* woman. This phenomenon is reflected in the research findings and is present in both online and offline spaces. It is very important to understand the voices of those experiencing intersectional identities to understand the depths of inequalities. This also means recognizing the historical background. Violence and abuses intersect with each other. The same action or decision may affect someone even more harshly due to their caste or sexuality. Speaking out against the root causes of inequalities with the intersectional feminist lens and taking critical actions are vital to addressing violence against women in politics. This applies to the online and digital worlds equally as it applies to the offline world, as the gendered violence in politics in offline space is faced by 66 percent of study participants (Figure 4) whereas it is higher in online space with the majority facing insults, hate, questioning of women's capacity, and character assassination. Research has shown that people from GSM and marginalized communities seem to have faced more online violence, which must be addressed through intersectional interventions.

Undermines the good governance and rule of law

Inclusive leadership is crucial to a democratic system. Homogeneous leadership reflects the status quo and a male-dominated policy environment. Inclusive and accountable good governance is measured by participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, equity, inclusiveness, and effectiveness. However, the continuity of male-dominated leadership reinforces the status quo and patriarchy, undermining the participation of women and other minorities. Unequal participation and lack of access to justice weaken good governance and destabilize the rule of law. For example, there is no representation of GSM in elected positions, and women's representation in decision-making positions (such as Mayors, Chairpersons, etc.) is about 3 percent of the total number of women elected representatives, as a result of the poor stand of the major political parties for on the implementation of inclusive policies. Hence, a

functional law enforcement system with effective and necessary policies and mechanisms in place is key to preventing gender-based violence, which is a pervasive violation of the fundamental rights of women and minorities. The high rate of online and offline gendered violence and its relation to unequal leadership is evidence of undermining the character of good governance and an absence of rule of law.

A threat to inclusive democracy

Every citizen has an equal right to live in a world that respects their dignity, security, and socio-political rights. The digital world is no exception. Online gendered violence against women and minorities encompasses all forms of aggression, intimidation, and extortion. This seeks to exclude women and minorities from politics and other public spheres. The online and offline gendered violence against women and minorities is a structural, systematic, intentional, and politically motivated tactic, which is a barrier to women in politics and threatens inclusive democracy. Combating gendered violence against politically active women, and GSMs is key to strengthening the democratic process.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the Purple Foundation developed recommendations for various stakeholder groups – government bodies at all tiers, political parties, technology companies, and media to combat online and offline gendered violence against women and gender and sexual minorities in Nepali politics and strengthen inclusive democracy by promoting political participation of underrepresented groups in Nepal.

The Federal government of Nepal is recommended to:

- Ensure that women, marginalized, and GSMs enjoy the rights in the Constitution of Nepal. Review and amend the existing laws that contradict the Constitutional rights and international treaties that protect the socio-political rights of women and minorities, and signed by the Government of Nepal.
- Amend the 'Electronic Transaction Act 2063 (2008)' with clear definitions and provisions for online gendered violence including cyber security. In addition, decentralize the Cyber Bureau currently housed in Kathmandu to Province level.
- Train Cyber Bureau personnel to be fully functional to deal with the complaints with a gender sensitive lens and ensure the provision of a trauma counselor to engage with survivors.
- Develop a policy to enable social media companies to register in Nepal, making it mandatory.

The local government bodies are recommended to:

- Modify the school curricula by integrating digital safety measures and, online and offline gendered violence against women and GSMs from primary grade onwards in coordination with the Cyber Bureau, Gender experts, and the Ministry of Education.
- Design and implement awareness-raising programs on gendered violence on women and GSMs, and expand digital education and safety at the local level.

Political parties are recommended to:

- Amend the party manifesto, and internal party policies from a feminist lens, and revise the internal system, and training curricula, accordingly. Establish an effective case-reporting mechanism to address online and offline gendered violence in the party structure. Prepare a training package to train party cadres on diversity, inclusion, and, gender equality and its linkage to inclusive democracy.
- Acknowledge the social agenda as a political agenda, and put women, marginalized, and minorities first in taking the lead for social transformation and justice.
- Establish a parliamentary caucus to raise voices against gendered violence in politics and other related issues. This should also create a 'safety net' to support the survivors of severe gendered violence in the short and long run.

The Election Commission is recommended to:

- Regulate and monitor the political parties to ensure inclusive participation as guaranteed by the Constitution of Nepal. Update election code of conduct and related policies regularly in favor of women and GSMS, and guarantee the specific needs and rights of them, as a candidate or voters.
- Effectively monitor social media, online, print media, and election campaigns during elections. Establish an easy and effective case reporting system in case of violation of the election code of conduct.

Technology companies (mainly social media platforms) are recommended to:

- Establish a country office, and create a stronger, easy, and more accessible online complaint reporting mechanism in coordination with the Government of Nepal, and the cyber bureau.
- Develop in-house expertise to better deal with Nepali language materials in their content moderation.

Media—including online, print, and television are recommended to:

- Promote and deliver gender-responsive and gender-inclusive content, images, and language and create editorial guidelines regarding fact-checking. Follow ethical journalism and ensure that there are actions against the populist, sexualized, sensational content.

Civil society, family/society, and self are recommended to:

- Promote and deliver digital rights education, awareness raising activities to better educate the wider public, also to conduct further research on various dimensions of gendered violence, its linkage, and impact on inclusive leadership and governance.
- Stop looking upon women and gender and sexual minorities and marginalized politicians low, endorsing patriarchal values and norms on them, and end 'victim blaming and shaming' and judging them based on appearance, sexuality, and background.
- Report the cases of gendered violence in politics against them and 'shout out' for assistance by politically active women and gender and sexual minorities.

Annex A:

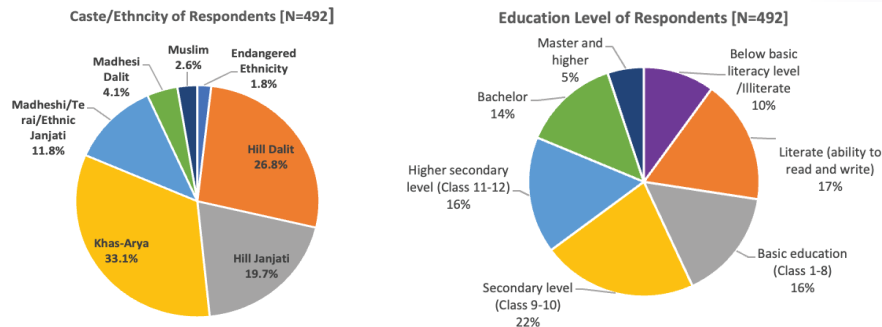
Lexicon / Words used for women and gender and sexual minorities

Words or Phrases	Roman	English Translation
पोथी बासेको सुहाउँदैन	Pothi baseko suhaudaina	Woman who speaks is not considered good
सेवसी	Sexy	Sexually suggestive/ Stimulative
नक्कली	Nakkali	Fake
नकचरी	Nakachari	Bitch, having multiple partners
कुकुर्नी	Kukurni	Bitch
वेश्या	Weshya	Whore
गुण्डिनी	Gundini	Hooligan
चुरीफुरी गर्ने	Churifuri garne	Arrogant/ Showing arrogance
जाठिनी	Jathini	Woman with pubic hair
चोथाले	Chothale	Woman who speaks aggressively or reacts fast
गतिछाडा	Gatichada	Wildness
भालु	Bhalu	Literal meaning is bear but here it is whore or prostitute
बौलाही	Boulahi	Crazy
पागलनी	Pagalni	Crazy
आइमाई	Aimai	Word used to demean women
डायन	Dayan	Witch: one who does the black magic
चरित्रहिन	Charitrahin	Characterless
रन्डी	Randi	Whore
बोवसी	Boksi	Witch
महारानी	Maharani	Who behaves almighty and like queen
चोरनी	Chorni	Thief
नौटंकी	Nautanki	Gimmick
अलिछनी	Alchhini	Unlucky one
गोबर गणेश	Gobar Ganesh	Who does not have a brain

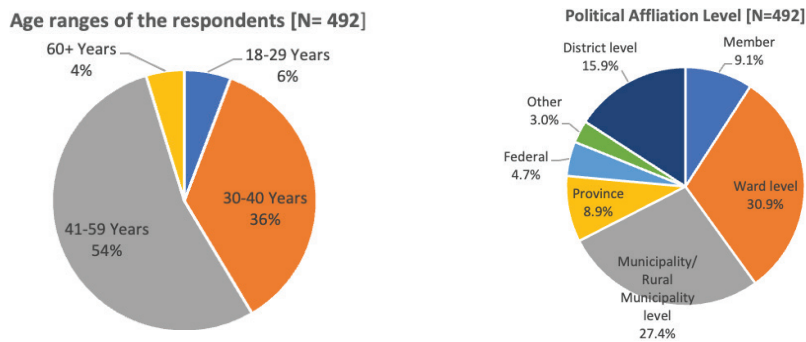
Annex B:

Distribution of survey respondents

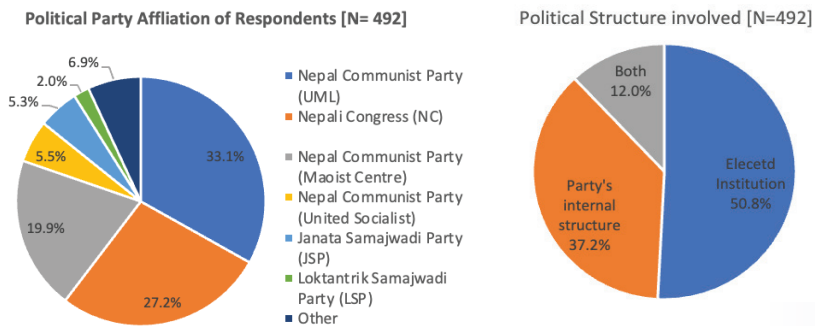
B.1 Distribution of the Survey Respondents by caste/ethnicity and education



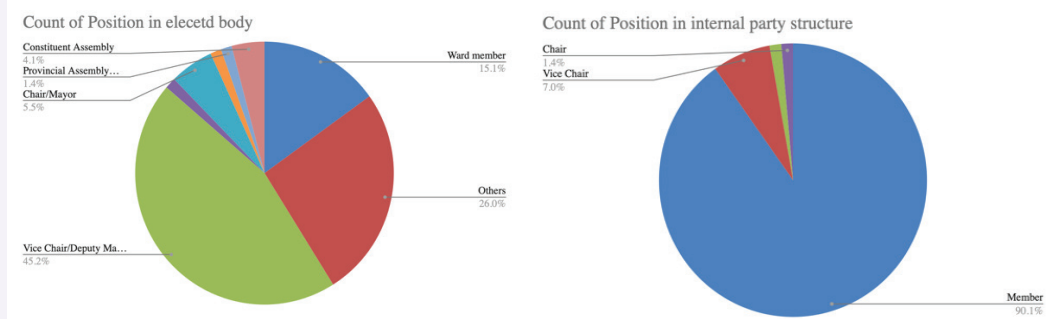
B.2 Distribution of survey respondents by age and political party affiliation



B.3 Distribution of survey respondents by political affiliation level and political structure involved



B.4 Distribution of survey respondents by position in elected body and internal party structure



Annex C: Photo Gallery



Research findings sharing and validation workshop in Nepalganj on 8th July 2022



Research findings sharing and validation workshop in Biratnagar on 11th July 2022.



Advisory Committee Meeting held in Lalitpur on 23rd July 2022



Research findings sharing and validation workshop held in Janakpur on 16th September 2022.



Research findings sharing and validation workshop in Kathmandu 15 July 2020



Research findings sharing and validation workshop in Kathmandu 15 July 2020



Research findings sharing and validation workshop held in Pokhara on 23rd September 2022



Deputy Mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City, Sunita Dangol, during a consultation workshop organized at the Park Village Resort on 4th November, 2022.



Group photo taken during the consultation workshop on violence against women and gender and sexual minorities in Nepali Politics held at the Park Village Resort on 4th November, 2022.

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