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country report



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Will Nepal's New Government Break Old Patterns?

A Gender Analysis of the First 65 Days of the Shah Government

Sixty-five days into the Balen Shah government, the narrative dominating the agenda of gender inclusion is the representation of women in the executive – 37.5 percent women in a sixteen-member cabinet, a figure the government itself has been quick to call unprecedented [1]. There are currently five women ministers across Ministries of Law, Agriculture, General Administration, Health, and Women [2]. In the 275-seat House of Representatives, there are now 96 women [3]. Among these parliamentarians is Bhumika Shrestha, Nepal's first transgender parliamentarian who marks a historic milestone not only for Nepal but for LGBTQ+ representation across South Asia [4].

So, does Nepal's recent surge in women's representation in Parliament and the Cabinet, reflect a structural and institutional shift, or simply a reconfiguration of old patriarchal systems through selective implementation of the quota system?

The History of Exclusion

From the Rana resistance of the 1940s to democratic movements, people's uprisings, and insurgencies, Nepali women have been central to political change. Yet when the time comes to allocate leadership positions or decentralize decision-making, women have been consistently pushed to the margins. This has been the norm even with the new governance systems that have been introduced historically. This reveals a long-standing pattern in Nepali politics: patriarchal party hierarchies that reproduce Nepali society's existing prejudice against women as opposed to actually "advancing women's rights" as they proclaim.

Representation in the New Government

The Balen Shah government presents itself as the break from that history. Despite the numbers, at first glance, support the claim, there are deeper structural barriers that need to be addressed before claiming on an inclusive narrative.

The 96 women in parliament is a benchmark but does this mean that we have been successful to penetrate through the deep patriarchal layers of society and trust a woman in power and leadership?

Out of the 165 parliamentarians elected through the direct election on March 5, only 14 are women, just 8.5 percent. Within these 14 directly elected women parliamentarians, 13 of these victories came from Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) meaning they built an independent mandate with voters, on the other hand it has a correlational link with the unexpected political surge of the Rastra Swatantra Party (RSP). Out of 48 women elected through proportional representation from the RSP, 24 are Khas-Arya or Newa, 5 Janajati, 7 each Madhesi and Dalits, 3 Muslims, and 2 Tharus [5]. A majority of the PR seats are occupied by the Khas-Arya and Newa, historically dominant communities.

Furthermore, a significant share of PR seats is occupied by women with strong educational, economic, or political networks, business elites, and individuals connected to the party leadership.

Women in Parliament: Gatekeeping in Nepal

Election	Candidates		Elected	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
House of Representatives Elections 1991	1265	80	198	7
House of Representatives Elections 1994	1356	86	198	7
House of Representatives Elections 1999	2238	143	193	12
Constituent Assembly Election 2008	3578	368	210	30
Constituent Assembly Election 2013	5457	667	230	10
House of Representatives Elections 2017	1781	144	159	6
House of Representatives Elections 2022	2187	225	156	9
House of Representatives Elections 2026	3090	395	150	14

The problem of "winnability"

1 Parliamentarian representing 1,085,073 women

1 in 9 candidate is a woman





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Party Gatekeeping

Vidushi Rana, Executive Director of internationally exporting Goldstar Shoe Company was ranked second in the Khas-Arya women's cluster, and Anushka Shrestha, former Miss Nepal 2019 and confectionery entrepreneur, placed fourth in the indigenous women's cluster [6]. This reflects elite capture, where mechanisms intended for inclusion are mediated through existing networks of social and political capital. This is not unique to newer parties; established parties have long relied on similar practices [7].

The PR system meant to correct historical exclusion has become its own form of gatekeeping. The RSP's PR list favours business elites and media personalities over grassroots women, reproducing the same hierarchy the quota was designed to disrupt.

Welfare or Agency?

The RSP's reformist image raised expectations among younger voters for a more transformative and inclusive political culture. However, its electoral manifesto presented to voters ahead of the March 2026 elections reveals a familiar limitation within Nepali politics: women are primarily framed as subjects of protection rather than agents of political power [8]. The document contains genuine commitments to social protection that benefit women: universal health insurance, public education reform, integrated social security, and a formal state apology to Dalit and marginalized communities. These are not trivial but the core five priorities of this document doesn't address the 90% of the women who work in the informal sector and 66.8% earn below the minimum wage as a standalone priority [9].

While the manifesto addresses gender-based violence, discrimination, and social inclusion, it offers little structural commitment to women's leadership, internal party parity, or decision-making authority. This reflects a broader political pattern in Nepal, where women's inclusion is often treated as a question of welfare and representation, rather than one of institutional power and political agency.

The structural problem, however, runs deeper than portfolios and manifestos. A former MP and Foreign Minister, Bimala Rai Paudyal, drawing on her own conversations with deputy mayors across Nepal, recounted a pattern that cuts to the heart of the issue: women often find it harder to work with colleagues from their own party. Citing the experience of women deputy mayors, the former MP recalled how these local representatives often face more obstacles when the mayors are from their own parties. When a party places a man as mayor and a woman as deputy, it signals who it trusts with power, and that implication shapes every negotiation and decision that follows. A mayor from a rival party, ironically, creates more operational space as they are not beholden to the same party structure and do not compete for leadership roles.

This is the architecture of politics in Nepal today: party-facing rather than people-facing. This carries a significant penalty: the same party gatekeepers who control the PR list, assign portfolios, and manage internal promotions are the ones a politician must not alienate to survive. This is why even the most visible women, those who won direct seats and genuine public mandates, have increasingly found themselves accountable to party structures before they are accountable to the citizens who voted for them.

Conclusion

The new government has taken important steps for the advancement of women's representation in Nepali politics with the highest MPs and Ministers in the parliament and council of ministers. By renaming the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens to the Ministry of Women, Children, Gender and Sexual Minorities and Social Security, it has also institutionally acknowledged the presence of gender and sexual minorities and has pledged to work for their benefit.

But these are just beginnings; much remains to be done. The real test of this government will not just be the numbers but the precedents it sets in the months ahead.

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