

# ‘INVISIBLE’ VIOLENCE, VISIBLE HARMS

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN  
POLITICS IN NEPAL:  
THE EXPERIENCE OF LOCALLY  
ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This study would not have been possible without the participation of 648 locally elected women representatives who answered our survey and 39 women who took part in qualitative interviews. We are deeply grateful for their time and candour. We are also grateful to stakeholders from the government, political parties, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and women political activists who participated in qualitative interviews.

This study is part of UN Women's global initiative to develop harmonised survey tools that measure violence against women in politics (VAWP). The report contains original data, analysis and ideas contributed by numerous individuals. The overall study was initiated and overseen by a team from UN Women's Nepal country office, including Akseli Emil Lamminmaki and Navanita Sinha. A technical team based at UN Women's headquarters in New York, which included Ionica Berevoescu, Julie Ballington and Marta Val, provided indispensable inputs into designing this study, developing the survey questionnaire, analysing and structuring the findings and completing the quality control in line with UN Women's global research aims.

Dr. Theresa de Langis, an international consultant, coordinated the quantitative and qualitative components of this study and was the lead writer of this report. Pooja Koirala, Founder and Director of Progress Inc. and Priyanka Chand, Research Coordinator of Progress Inc., oversaw the piloting, administration, data analysis and presentation of results from the quantitative survey. A national research team based in Kathmandu, Nepal, which included national consultants Kalpana Jha and Kripa Basnyat, undertook the qualitative data collection. A reference team comprised of officials and stakeholders generously met twice to provide feedback and inputs into the design, preliminary findings and recommendations of the study. Without this comprehensive and holistic team, the study could not have reached its goal of providing the first evidence-based report on the challenges faced by locally elected women in Nepal and best ways forward to strengthen their substantive presence in local governance.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background: Challenges to Women's Political Participation in Nepal

Nepal's 2017 local elections were a watershed moment for increasing women's political participation and realising the government's goal of localising democracy. This first locally held election, which implemented a constitutional gender quota provision, resulted in women representing 41 per cent of those elected to Local Governmental Units (LGUs). That amounted to 14,353 women total, including 6,567 Dalit women. This gain in women's elected leadership is an unprecedented opportunity to deepen the commitment to democracy and gender-responsive inclusive governance enshrined in Nepal's 2015 Constitution.

However, the ability of these women to capitalise on their newfound political power is challenged by the prevalence of violence against women in politics (VAWP). Globally, there has been an increase in VAWP in recent years, which is distinct in that it seeks to suppress, punish and "correct" women for claiming public power and breaking traditional gender norms.<sup>1</sup> Although VAWP is a global concern, it is underreported, under-researched and too often neglected or minimised by governments and political parties alike. Nepal's patriarchal culture perpetuates the prevalence of violence against women generally<sup>2</sup> and that appears to be true in the political sphere as well.

VAWP in Nepal has been recorded as a problem as early as the 2008 Constituent Assembly election<sup>3</sup> and as recently as the 2017 local elections, in which women candidates reported harassment and intimidation as well as psychological, physical and sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup> Anecdotal evidence shared by stakeholders during consultations on women's political participation indicates that VAWP may be increasing in response to the surge in locally elected women representatives (LEWRs) since 2017.

Meanwhile, a review of Nepal's legislative and policy frameworks reveal that VAWP is not identified as a distinct offense, resulting in a convoluted and confusing pathway for survivors seeking justice. While a patchwork of laws and policies exist to report, investigate and resolve VAWP cases, they are rarely enforced and are underutilised by survivors, who may not be fully aware of what is covered and how to report abuse. This leaves LEWRs at greater risk for VAWP and impedes their ability to fulfil their mandated functions.

Against this backdrop, the UN Women Nepal Country Office undertook a national study to better understand the enabling and obstructive factors to women's political participation as elected officials. This study examines the violence LEWRs in Nepal face when holding public office at the local level. It focuses exclusively on women's time in office and does not cover campaign or election periods. This is the first study on VAWP in Nepal, and it is part of UN Women's global initiative to develop harmonised survey tools on VAWP.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women. 2017. *Violence against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report & Recommendations*.

<sup>2</sup> MOHP (Ministry of Health and Population). 2017. *Nepal Demographic Health Survey 2016*.

<sup>3</sup> Dhakal, R. 2015. *Contesting Patriarchy: The Gender Gap and Gender-Based Violence in Nepali Politics and the Constituent Assembly Election 2013*. International IDEA, Nepal Law Society and General Election Observation Committee Nepal.

<sup>4</sup> Election Commission Nepal (ECN). 2017. United Nations Theme Group-Nepal & Sajha Abhiyan (Women's Coalition), *Conference Report for Planet 50-50: Enabling Women's Leadership and Representation in Local Governance*.

The purpose of the study was to document the experiences of LEWRs, with a particular focus on assessing obstacles to their political participation, including their experiences with violence; the magnitude of this violence and its various forms; risks and protective factors; help-seeking behaviours; and the consequences this violence may have on women's health, well-being, political participation and leadership.

The study is national in scope, covering all seven provinces in Nepal, including both rural and urban municipalities. The respondents come from diverse ethnic and caste backgrounds and occupy different positions in local government. The study used mixed methods of data collection, including both qualitative and quantitative research. Thirty-eight qualitative interviews were conducted between October and December 2021. Additionally, 648 individual LEWRs participated in a telephone survey during that same time period. A total of 116 municipalities were selected and a list of elected women in these municipalities was compiled. Further stratification was carried out based on the women's ethnicities and positions in each municipality.

## Prevalence, Risk Factors and Triggers: One-Third of LEWRs Experience VAWP, with Women's Leadership Both a Risk Factor and a Trigger

Out of the 648 LEWRs surveyed across seven provinces, nearly one-third (30.9 per cent) report experiencing some form of violence related to their political activity during their term in office, with the effect of impeding or intending to impede their ability to fulfil their duties.

***RISK FACTORS: Dalit women and women from marginalised communities, deputy-level LEWRs and single LEWRs are at highest risk.***

While Dalit women elected officials report the same rates of violence as their non-Dalit counterparts, they experience intersectional violence, possess fewer resources for redress and experience less satisfactory outcomes. They simultaneously face inter- and intra-caste/ethnicity pressures and the indignities of caste discrimination. Other women from minority communities, particularly Muslim and Indigenous LEWRs, report similar challenges. This group is also subjected to sexualised comments and harassment as well as higher rates of threats of physical violence.

In total, 44 per cent of deputy-level LEWRs report experiencing some form of VAWP. This violence is most often perpetrated by Mayors, administrative leadership in the LGUs and/or community elders. Faced with constant interference, deputy-level survivors report being given no authority or mandate; they are expected to act as a 'rubber stamp' for Mayors and possess little *de facto* decision-making power of their own.

While very few of the study respondents were unmarried, single women and separated women report the highest levels of violence across all types, with single women reporting the highest rates of sexual harassment. These results suggest that there are deeply rooted cultural expectations for women to be married to men, making unmarried women more vulnerable to violence.

**TRIGGERS: Women taking up political leadership roles and succeeding.**

Indeed, among all respondents across all levels, simply exercising political power is itself a trigger for VAWP. The study shows that violence against LEWRs in Nepal is most often a form of backlash against women for occupying public political space. Among those who experienced any type of violence, nearly half (49.5 per cent) report that the violence became more frequent and severe after being appointed to a higher or new leadership role (for example, being appointed Chair of a committee or being appointed to a Judicial Committee).

LEWRs who are outspoken face retaliation through threats of violence as well as actual physical violence against themselves and their families. Dalit LEWRs are almost entirely shut out of leadership positions and more likely to face intersectional forms of violence. This finding suggests society's lack of acceptance towards women in leadership roles, especially Dalit women. The dynamic exists within a larger context of restrictive gendered social norms that are perpetuated across institutions, communities, families and the media, marginalising women's leadership and making them more vulnerable to VAWP.

## **Types, Contexts and Perpetrators of VAWP: A Hostile Work Environment Created by Men with Power**

***Psychological violence in institutional and community settings creates a hostile environment that prevents LEWRs from undertaking their duties.***

Nearly one-third of LEWRs (28.2 per cent) report psychological violence, often referred to as "invisible" violence, as the most common type they experience in their political roles. Survey respondents report a litany of behaviours intended to exclude, denigrate and marginalise LEWRs and prevent them from exercising their duties. Such violence includes and exceeds psychological violence and comes in the form of continual micro-aggressions. However, VAWP is not exclusively manifested in "invisible" forms. The respondents also report instances of physical attacks and violence, including sexual violence.

VAWP most commonly takes place in institutional settings, as reported by 19.8 per cent of the respondents. An institutional setting is the professional context in which LEWRs undertake their work in the political party and/or at their offices in the LGUs. This violence involves the use of tactics that aim to divest women of their political power. Political parties serve as gatekeepers, putting women up for quota seats at the lowest levels of government, despite those women's capabilities and established constituencies. Women are excluded from political financing networks and, when elected, they are treated as "dummies" — expected to remain silently compliant or face public humiliation.

In the LGUs, women are often obstructed from fulfilling their mandated duties. LEWRs report being ordered to shut up during public meetings, prevented from participating in decision-making and/or being made "defunct" by being given no duties or actively prevented from undertaking their responsibilities. In some cases, the exclusion of LEWRs is reported as being linked to corruption and abuse of power. Thwarted from undertaking even the most minimal tasks, LEWRs miss out on important learning and advancement opportunities. Women from minority communities are especially affected by this dynamic, becoming locked out of leadership roles and forced to endure racist slurs and caste indignities, which sometimes include sexualised comments.

Communities reinforce these restrictive social norms and the cultural exclusion of women in public life. In total, 15.3 per cent of LEWRs report that their experience with VAWP occurred in this context. Communities that practice *purdah* present severe obstacles to women's direct political participation, and the presence of male gatekeepers as advisors opens questions about whether some LEWRs serve as "political proxies" for male connections.

Dalit, Indigenous and other women from minority groups face unique problems in communities. LEWRs from one or more of these identity groups may face inter-ethnic and inter-caste tension, as well as intra-ethnic and intra-caste tensions within their own identity communities. Their political participation and exposure to community violence is complex, and they report experiencing mob violence against themselves and their family members.

### **PERPETRATORS: Men in leadership roles and community elders.**

Perpetrators of VAWP are men with power — in politics, the LGU bureaucracy and communities. Male Mayors are identified by LEWR survivors of violence as the most common offenders (43.8 per cent), with LGU professional staff coming in second (31.3 per cent). Male Ward Members were identified by 24.2 per cent of LEWRs, with LEWRs reporting that they are almost as likely to face VAWP from their own party members (20.3 per cent) as they are from opposition party members (21.9 per cent). However, Dalit women are more likely to identify their own party members as offenders (23.3 per cent) than non-Dalit LEWRs (9.3 per cent). LEWRs in deputy-level positions are more likely to identify Mayors (52 per cent) and LGU staff (52 per cent) as perpetrators than their Ward Member counterparts.

## **Reporting and Help-Seeking: Speaking Out, Speaking Softly and Strategic Silence**

Very few survivors (13.5 per cent) formally reported their experience of VAWP, with more non-Dalits (15.4 per cent) filing formal complaints than Dalits (10 per cent). There was little difference in reporting between deputy-level and ward-level LEWRs. Those LEWRs most likely to report were those experiencing physical violence (46.2 per cent) and sexual harassment (23.1 per cent). Notably, psychological violence was the least reported form of violence (14.4 per cent) but the most experienced, and none of the three LEWRs who experienced sexual violence filed a formal complaint. Among those reporting, slightly more than half (51.9 per cent) reported to police.

While LEWRs minimise the VAWP they experience or internalise it as normal, some LEWRs report being silenced when they came forward to complain; others expressed that they lacked trust in the complaint process, especially around confidentiality. Others, dealing with ongoing micro-aggressions, are unsure whether they can legally file a complaint or how to do so. It was found that complaints seem to have positive outcomes *only* when both the political party and the LGU are supportive – and even this support is short-lived or minimal, with inadequate apologies, small fines and short detentions being the norm ordered for "penalties". Most of the survivors who do report are not satisfied with the result (55.6 per cent) and Dalit women are especially dissatisfied (71.4 per cent).

Even if these survivors do not formally report, they find other avenues to address the challenges they face. More than three-quarters (76.5 per cent) of all survivors report having discussed their VAWP experience with family, friends or colleagues, with there being no difference between Dalit and non-Dalit respondents. Other strategies LEWRs report include speaking out during local government meetings (50.3 per cent), community meetings (35.3 per cent) and political party meetings (35.3

per cent). Notably, Dalit respondents were less likely to report speaking out publicly, foreclosing an important avenue for finding resolution and redress for VAWP. Younger women, including Dalit women, were more likely to speak out than older LEWRs, suggesting a generational divide.

While some LEWRs have attempted to band together in solidarity, these efforts have often been thwarted by political party interference. In general, the strategy taken up by most survivors is deflection, de-escalation, containment or minimising and “ignoring” violations, especially due to family pressure. Shut out from meetings and decision-making fora by male leadership, LEWRs describe turning their attention directly to communities to consult and problem solve. This has allowed them to build trust and relationships with their constituencies and protect their future election prospects.

## Impact and Consequences: “Fed Up” for Some, Strengthened Resolve for Others

The consequences of VAWP are detrimental to LEWRs and their engagement in politics. Among those who experienced VAWP, 39 per cent report that it damaged their psychological well-being, with Dalit members reporting even higher numbers at 43.1 per cent (compared with 31.4 per cent for non-Dalit respondents). At the same time, 20 per cent of respondents report that the violence impeded their ability to perform their official duties. A total of 14.4 per cent of LEWRs report they will not run again, and in interviews, survivors who reported not running again expressed frustration and anger at the continual obstruction to their exercise of power, often with the phrase, “I am tired and fed up!”

For other survivors, overcoming the experience of VAWP has reaffirmed their commitment to being politically engaged. When looking exclusively at survivors, 81 per cent report that they plan to run again. This is a higher rate than all respondents, including those who did not experience violence and plan to run again (76.7 per cent). Indeed, a full one-third (33 per cent) of all respondents report that they are looking to advance to a higher position in the next election (although this is lower for Dalit respondents at 25.3 per cent), putting to good use their hard-gained experience over the past several years of governance. Even those LEWRs who say they will not run again report that they intend to remain active in politics, with the goal of helping build a pipeline of women’s leadership.

## Recommendations: Ensure LEWRs Have the Authority, Skills and Networks Needed to Succeed

***Clarify, strengthen and enforce policies, laws and the roles of government entities to monitor and respond to VAWP complaints (through an intersectional approach).***

Given the prevalence of VAWP as shown in the study, an appropriate state response to VAWP is urgently needed to ensure access to justice for all survivors through a clear, confidential and accessible reporting mechanism and support system, including provisions for legal, psychosocial and health-related services. Both reporting mechanisms and support services should account for intersectional discrimination and obstacles, particularly based on caste, religion and language, and address this study’s findings showing poor outcomes for Dalit LEWRs who come forward as survivors of VAWP. Deputy-level LEWRs should also be a special focus and be given equitable and impartial reporting procedures.

VAWP must be specifically legislated against (through penalties) and consistently monitored and enforced, either by reforming existing laws or by creating new ones. These new legislative reforms and efforts should be linked to existing protections against caste-based discrimination and account for intersectional oppression.

The Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Act, which was formulated before the localisation of governance implemented during the 2017 local elections, should be reviewed for its applicability within Nepal's three tiers of government, ensuring accountability for VAWP at all levels and within LGUs. In line with the Act as it now stands, each LGU should develop a clear Code of Conduct explicitly prohibiting VAWP and clearly explain reporting procedures. Outcomes of complaints should be monitored for results, especially along caste lines.

Stronger enforcement of existing laws is needed. Gender-sensitivity trainings should also be conducted for police and the judiciary, outlining the nature and types of VAWP experienced by LEWRs. This could improve investigations and prosecutions of VAWP.

***Increase the accountability of political parties in promoting women's political leadership and addressing VAWP against LEWRs.***

To increase the number of women in politics and support their advancement, political parties will need to begin nominating women candidates for open seats rather than restricting them to quota seats. As this study shows, there is pent-up demand among LEWRs for higher seats and more responsibility, and political parties will need to address LEWRs' rising political expectations. Many LEWRs report that they would not run again if parties did not advance them up the political ladder. This was especially so for Deputy Mayors, who revealed this sentiment during qualitative interviews. Campaign and other party financing should be reviewed to ensure women receive their equitable share of financial support. This will help LEWRs remain politically active and prevent them from experiencing economic violence.

Political parties must review recruitment and accommodation for populations who have been left behind in politics, most notably disabled and gender non-binary women. Almost completely excluded in the current mandate, these populations lack self-representation and, in the case of disabled women, face additional challenges due to not receiving special accommodation.

Monitoring and responding to VAWP must be greatly strengthened within political parties. This should involve disseminating Codes of Conduct and complaint procedures for violations and supporting survivors who register formal complaints through official channels. A Code of Conduct explicitly defining and prohibiting anti-harassment/discrimination should be created in consultation with currently standing LEWRs. Intra-party violations, particularly against Dalit women, should be clearly addressed, along with the role of the party in supporting LEWRs who register formal complaints through the LGU or other official channels.

***Support the retention and advancement of current LEWRs.***

Key ministries at all levels of government should work in a coordinated manner to strengthen and empower LEWRs to fulfil their mandated duties and substantively contribute to democratisation. For example, a public awareness campaign on LEWR achievements in this first mandate could be linked to public messaging that counters the "muscle and money" emphasis in Nepal's political landscape and the social resistance to women's political leadership.

The LGUs, political parties and NGOs should provide a stronger foundation to LEWRs during their initial orientation on roles and responsibilities. This must also include a more intensive training on their duties as mandated by the law, which would encourage women to “speak back” with authority when they are sidelined, excluded and made “defunct.”

LEWRs are a heterogeneous group and a “one-size-fits-all” approach is insufficient to account for their distinct experiences based on caste, age, marital status, ethnicity and religious community practices. Consulting with specialised and targeted populations about their specific needs will help stakeholders design programmes that can have significant impact.

***Build a pipeline for women’s political leadership by promoting LEWR networks, especially across political party lines and ethnic/caste communities.***

Government institutions and other organisations could better support networks of LEWRs in a way that allows these women to share challenges and problem solve while fostering solidarity. Viable networks are needed to build the pipeline for women’s political leadership in the future across party lines and over time, and these networks should seek to bring LEWRs together across caste and ethnic communities. Young women should especially be tapped for this purpose, as they are already outspoken about the importance of women’s meaningful political participation.

The 2017 cohort of LEWRs should be leveraged to participate and support mentorship programmes for new LEWRs in the future. Exposure visits for LEWRs to meet and hear the strategies of elected officials from other countries should also be undertaken. This would help develop their perspectives and expand the repertoire of responses to VAWP in Nepal.

All network and mentorship programmes must account for the intersectional oppression, material realities and complex identity politics that many LEWRs face, especially Dalit, Muslim and Indigenous LEWRs.

1

**BACKGROUND**

# 1 | BACKGROUND

## 1.1 Challenges to Women's Political Participation in Nepal

Nepal's 2017 local elections were a watershed moment for increasing women's political participation and realising the government's goal of localising democracy. This first locally held election, which implemented a constitutional gender quota provision, resulted in women representing 41 per cent of those elected to LGUs. That amounted to 14,353 women total, including 6,567 Dalit women. This gain in women's elected leadership is an unprecedented opportunity to deepen the commitment to democracy and gender-responsive inclusive governance enshrined in Nepal's 2015 Constitution.

However, these women face a range of obstacles that prevent them from fully capitalising on their newfound political power. A recent rapid assessment found that newly elected women report feeling enthusiastic about their new skills (especially technical) but also face individual hurdles (lack of confidence); familial or household-level barriers (care burden); institutional obstacles (lack of networks and trust in women's political decision-making); and social exclusions (based on caste, age, ethnicity, geography, religion, sexual orientation and other hierarchies), especially as they execute their official duties at the deputy level.<sup>5</sup> The global COVID-19 pandemic has also added extreme pressure on women elected officials, many of whom are serving their first mandate. Finally, broader questions remain over whether numerical representation alone translates into mainstreaming gender in Nepal's political processes.<sup>6</sup>

Globally, there has been an increase in VAWP, which is distinct in that it seeks to suppress, punish and "correct" women for claiming public power and breaking traditional gender norms.<sup>7</sup> Nepal's patriarchal culture perpetuates the prevalence of violence against women generally,<sup>8</sup> which appears to be true in the political sphere as well. VAWP in Nepal has been recorded as a problem as early as the 2008 Constituent Assembly election<sup>9</sup> and as recently as 2017, during a meeting convened by the Election Commission Nepal (ECN) weeks before the local elections, where women candidates reported harassment and intimidation as well as psychological, physical and sexual abuse.<sup>10</sup> While no official data on VAWP in Nepal has been collected until now, anecdotal evidence shared by stakeholders during consultations on women's political participation indicates that VAWP may be increasing in response to the surge in LEWRs since 2017.

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<sup>5</sup> Nepal Research Institute & CARE Nepal (2020). *Rapid Gender Analysis Report on COVID-19 Nepal, 2020*.

<sup>6</sup> The Asia Foundation (2017) at <https://asiafoundation.org/2017/12/13/nepal-elections-women-seat-table-will-voice/>.

<sup>7</sup> UN Women. 2017. *Violence against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report & Recommendations*.

<sup>8</sup> MOHP (Ministry of Health and Population). 2017. *Nepal Demographic Health Survey 2016*.

<sup>9</sup> Dhakal, R. 2015. *Contesting Patriarchy: The Gender Gap and Gender-Based Violence in Nepali Politics and the Constituent Assembly Election 2013*. International IDEA, Nepal Law Society and General Election Observation Committee Nepal.

<sup>10</sup> Election Commission Nepal (ECN). 2017. United Nations Theme Group-Nepal & Sajha Abhiyan (Women's Coalition), *Conference Report for Planet 50-50: Enabling Women's Leadership and Representation in Local Governance*.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its catastrophic social impacts have increased the burden on women elected officials in both their personal lives and governance roles. While the pandemic has adversely affected the functioning of government generally, a recent report its gendered impacts in Nepal showed that women elected officials experienced disproportionate effects as their multiple responsibilities mounted, even as they were often locked out of important pandemic-related decision-making.<sup>11</sup> The same assessment showed the number of women not engaged in paid work increased by 337 per cent during the lockdown, with 83 per cent of employed women losing their jobs.<sup>12</sup> Women from marginalised communities and vulnerable groups were the hardest hit, as they found it difficult to access basic food and health services, including reproductive health services.<sup>13</sup>

Pandemic restrictions also triggered a global spike in domestic violence.<sup>14</sup> In Nepal, demand for domestic violence response services surged, with a reported doubling of calls to the National Women Commission's 24-hour helpline between April and June 2020 compared with the same period before lockdown.<sup>15</sup> Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons, most of whom are women, led the local response on this through the Judicial Committees. COVID-19 severely affected the functioning of these committees, however, with many handling cases involving violence against women (VAW) over the phone. Indeed, women Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons themselves are reported to have faced domestic violence.<sup>16</sup> And although they were responsible for monitoring COVID-19 relief and facilities, including visiting quarantine facilities (reportedly without personal protective equipment at times), their suggestions for providing gender-sensitive relief distribution may go ignored.<sup>17</sup>

Globally, women politicians are as likely to retreat from public life as they are to report cases of VAWP, fearing stigma and retaliation due to an unequal playing field where they possess weak political or social capital.<sup>18</sup> Global underreporting is exacerbated by weak institutional systems that fail to adequately document, investigate and monitor incidents.<sup>19</sup> Women also report experiencing violence within their political party but express that they are unaware of their party's internal rules of conduct or complaint mechanisms on gender-based violence.<sup>20</sup> Women in minority groups are at highest risk of violence, based on ethnicity, caste, age, disability and other factors, and also face intersectional forms of oppression that multiply impacts.<sup>21</sup> Governments are ultimately responsible for preventing, investigating and punishing acts of violence against women in public life. Yet as of 2020, only one

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<sup>11</sup> Nepal Research Institute & CARE Nepal (2020). *Rapid Gender Analysis Report on COVID-19 Nepal, 2020*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> UN Women. 2020. *Policy Brief No. 17: COVID-19 and Violence against Women and Girls: The Shadow Pandemic*.

<sup>15</sup> Dahal, M., Khanal, P., Maharjan, S. et al. Mitigating violence against women and young girls during COVID-19 induced lockdown in Nepal: a wake-up call. *Global Health* 16, 84 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-020-00616-w>.

<sup>16</sup> Ojha, A. Deputy Mayor frees husband detained for assaulting her, The Kathmandu Post, May 3 2018, Accessed at: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2018/05/03/deputy-mayor-frees-husband-detained-for-assaulting-her>

<sup>17</sup> Yadav, P, The challenges that Covid-19 has brought to the newly elected women leaders in Nepal, 22 June 2020, Accessed at: <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/irdr/2020/06/22/the-challenges-that-covid-19-has-brought-to-the-newly-elected-women-leaders-in-nepal/> and the interaction can be accessed at: <https://www.facebook.com/573912474/videos/10157440906092475/>

<sup>18</sup> UN Women and UNDP. 2017. *Preventing Violence Against Women in Elections: A Programming Guide*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> The Asia Foundation. 2018. *Nepal's Locally Elected Women Representatives: Exploratory Study of Needs and Capacity*.

<sup>21</sup> Dhakal, R. 2015. *Contesting Patriarchy: The Gender Gap and Gender-Based Violence in Nepali Politics and the Constituent Assembly Election 2013*. International IDEA, Nepal Law Society and General Election Observation Committee Nepal.

country had a stand-alone law criminalising VAWP while several others have advanced legal reforms to address acts of political violence in existing laws.<sup>22</sup>

Although VAWP is a global concern, it is underreported, under-researched and too often neglected or minimised by governments and political parties alike. Nepal has followed this trend, as this report is the first systematic study of VAWP in the country and reveals weaknesses in the ability of the government and political parties to monitor and respond to VAWP. Nepal's nascent federalised government cannot afford to lose its robust representation of women elected officials. To help these women reach their full potential as political leaders, it is essential to identify and eradicate violence against them, especially as they face added pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 1.2 Legislative and Policy Frameworks

Violence perpetrated against women in politics is a distinct offense that seeks to prevent women's political participation; however, despite its seriousness, it is not addressed as a distinct form of violence in Nepal's laws at the provincial and federal levels. Rather, it is subsumed under laws concerning violence against women, sexual harassment or prohibitions against caste discrimination. As a result, there is no single pathway for these survivors to access justice and redress for violations that take place in specific political contexts (like during elections or while serving as an elected official) or involve certain perpetrators (like an elected official, LGU staff member or a community member).

Nepal's 2015 Constitution includes **Article 18, Right to Equality**, which covers a wide range of groups and addresses special provisions for equity. The article has been widely criticised for neglecting to account for intersectional discrimination faced by women from marginalised groups and for limiting "special opportunities" to "socially and culturally backward women". The Constitution's **Article 40, Rights of Dalit**, includes prohibitions against untouchability and provisions on the right of Dalits to participate in all bodies of the state based on the principle of proportional inclusion, empowerment and representation. Dalit citizens are also protected under the **Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act (2011, amended 2018)**, which prohibits discrimination and treatment of individuals as "untouchable" in public and private spheres, establishes increased punishment for officials guilty of discrimination, criminalises incitement to caste-based discrimination and provides compensation to victims from perpetrators of biased acts.<sup>23</sup>

For those who experience VAWP, avenues for redress depend on where the offense happened and by whom. Survivors have recourse within the **National Penal (Code) Act (2017)**, which covers criminal offences, prohibits rape and assault and levies penalties for offenses that take place in public life. The Penal Code also covers prohibitions against slander and sexual harassment, with the latter stipulating up to three years of imprisonment and 30,000 rupees in fines. The **Domestic Violence (Crime and Punishment) Act of 2009** includes physical and psychological violence within the definition of domestic violence.

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<sup>22</sup> UN Commission on the Status of Women. 2021. "Report of the Secretary-General: Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls," available at <https://undocs.org/E/CN.6/2021/3>.

<sup>23</sup> UN News Centre (May 25, 2011), "UN Welcomes New Law on Caste-Based Discrimination," available at <https://news.un.org/en/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=38496&Cr=Nepal&Cr1>.

During the campaign and election period, the **Election Commission Act (2017)** grants the ECN the authority to conduct and manage elections, including the ability to promulgate and enforce a Code of Conduct. The election Code of Conduct applies to agencies of the government, including staff, police and the army; political parties; workers; candidates; state and private media companies; private organisations; and NGOs. The ECN is also given the power to monitor the enforcement of the Code of Conduct and can levy monetary fines or cancel candidacy altogether.<sup>24</sup> The Code of Conduct, however, does not cover political violence nor does it address VAWP.<sup>25</sup> In 2021, the ECN developed a policy on Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI), which prohibits misconduct, including sexual misconduct among stakeholders conducting the elections, and it has committed to setting up a complaint mechanism for misconduct during all future local elections. The GESI policy contains provisions for a zero-tolerance policy on discrimination, and it also bans any form of abuse and discrimination based on caste, class, gender or religion. However, there is no provision on VAWP specifically.<sup>26</sup> The GESI policy identifies Electoral Violence as a potential area of research but not as an immediate priority area.<sup>27</sup> While an ECN Code of Conduct was developed for the 2022 general election, it has not yet been approved, according to the undersecretary of the ECN, and no further details are available at the time of publishing this report.<sup>28</sup>

Once elected to office, LEWRs are covered by the **Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (Elimination) Act, 2015**. The law prohibits touching or trying to touch any parts of another person's body with a sexual motive; using or displaying words, pictures, papers, audio, visuals or any other information technology related to vulgar and sexual activities; expressing vulgar or sexual motives through writing, verbal or non-verbal means; propositioning a colleague for sexual favours; and flirting or harassing with a sexual motive. Both political parties and the LGU are professional workplaces for LEWRs as per the definition of "workplace" in the law, which includes any place used by government entities or entities owned (fully or partly) by the government. The law specifies that each workplace should establish a focal person for sexual harassment complaints as well as a complaint process. In the case of LGUs, that process begins at the most relevant local level (filing a complaint with the Ward Chairperson, for example) and if resolution is not found, the process moves up the ladder to the municipal LGU (filing a complaint with the Judicial Committee or the Mayor). If the complaint remains unresolved, it can be brought to the Chief District Officer (CDO) within 90 days of the incident. However, the law also allows those filing a complaint to send it directly to the CDO rather than going through local processes.

During preliminary interviews for this study, the respondents raised concerns over two loopholes in this law. First, the law specifies a relation between a person of authority and "a worker," which has led some to question its applicability in the context of LGUs and offenses that take place between elected officials. Further, the law makes an exception for all acts (i.e. violations) if any were done during "educational, informative, research oriented, treatment or [a] lifesaving activity." It stipulates

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<sup>24</sup> General Election Observation Committee (GEOC). 2018. Elections of Members of House of Representatives and Provincial Assembly 2018, Final Election Observation Report.

<sup>25</sup> Retrieved from: <https://election.gov.np/admin/public/storage/राष्ट्रियसभा%20सदस्य%20निर्वाचन%20निर्देशिका,%20२०७६%20नेत्रा%20संशोधन%20.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Retrieved from: [https://election.gov.np/uploads/content/1609994187\\_np.pdf](https://election.gov.np/uploads/content/1609994187_np.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Retrieved from: [https://www.np.undp.org/content/nepal/en/home/library/democratic\\_governance/gender-and-inclusion-strategy-2015-2020-ecn-2015.html](https://www.np.undp.org/content/nepal/en/home/library/democratic_governance/gender-and-inclusion-strategy-2015-2020-ecn-2015.html)

<sup>28</sup> Interview conducted with ECN undersecretary on 14 March 2022.

that such acts “shall not be considered to be a sexual harassment,”<sup>29</sup> which could potentially provide cover for offenders.

Access to justice has generally been a challenge for women in Nepal. The under-representation of women and lack of gender sensitivity in the **police** and **judiciary** has been noted elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> These enforcement arms are reported to have especially weak responses to what this study found to be the most common form of VAWP: recurring non-physical/psychological obstruction. Following Nepal’s national election in 2013, one study concluded: “The capacity of the Nepal Police (in terms of sensitisation, training, systems and human resources, particular female officers) to deal with violence against women in politics is limited, particularly in relation to invisible and psychological violence.”<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, when protections for survivors of VAWP in Nepal do exist and are enforced, they are limited and convoluted, posing multiple challenges for survivors to secure justice and redress.

## 1.3 Purpose and Objectives of the Study

This study’s **target group** is the 14,000-plus LEWRs who were elected to LGUs during Nepal’s 2017 elections and represent the vast majority of women elected for public office in the country. This cohort is also assumed to be the most diverse in terms of age, class, caste, ethnicity, location, religion, sexual preference and disability, thus enabling the study to take an intersectional approach to analyse multiple forms of oppression faced by women elected officials at the local level.

### **The purpose of the study is to:**

*Document the experiences of LEWRs, with a particular focus on assessing obstacles to their political participation, including their experiences with violence; the magnitude of this violence and its various forms; risks and protective factors; help-seeking behaviours; and the consequences of this violence on women’s health, well-being, political participation and leadership.*

### **The objectives of the study are:**

- 1) *To strengthen evidence on the most common barriers to women’s participation and leadership in Nepal’s local governments;*
- 2) *To contribute to the development of a global model for measuring and monitoring VAWP;*
- 3) *To generate knowledge on the legislative and policy frameworks that can enable women’s political participation and eliminate VAWP in Nepal; and*
- 4) *To identify entry points and provide recommendations for strengthening monitoring, prevention and response to VAWP in Nepal.*

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<sup>29</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Sexual-Harassment-at-Workplace-Prevention-Act-2014-2071.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Dubravka Šimonović (2019), *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences: Visit to Nepal* (A/HRC/41/42/Add.2), on underrepresentation of women and lack of gender sensitivity in the police and the judiciary.

<sup>31</sup> See *Contesting Patriarchy* (2018), p. 55.

# 2 | **METHODOLOGY**

# 2 | METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 Violence Against Women in Politics

This study examines the violence women elected officials in Nepal face when holding public political office at the local level. It focuses exclusively on women's time in office and does not cover campaign or election periods. VAWP is a specific form of violence experienced by women claiming public power, and it often co-exists with and is reinforced by other forms of violence rooted in bias and discrimination against women, as well as violence in politics. Nevertheless, this study views VAWP as *distinct from violence in politics*; the latter entails acts directed at female and male political actors for their political views while the former involves efforts to *exclude women as women from participating in public life*. While both phenomena may take gendered and non-gendered forms, VAWP is specifically motivated by biases against women who assume political roles.<sup>32</sup>

### 2.1.1 Definition of VAWP

***This study is guided by the definition adopted by UN Women and UNDP, which views VAWP as:***

*“Any act of, or threat of, gender-based violence, resulting in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women, that prevents them from exercising and realizing their political rights, whether in public or private spaces, including the right to vote and hold public office, to vote in secret and to freely campaign, to associate and assemble, and to enjoy freedom of opinion and expression. Such violence can be perpetrated by a family member, community member and or by the State.”<sup>33</sup>*

This violence has immediate and longer-term impacts on women's political participation and seeks to “silence women's voices in decision-making bodies by preventing them from exercising their political mandates, preventing them from seeking leadership positions...forcing them to resign before the end of a full term of office, discouraging attendance in [governmental] sessions, enforcing exclusion and marginalization...and compelling them to not seek re-election”<sup>34</sup>.

The broad definition of VAWP means it may take place at home or in public, in communities or online, or behind the closed doors of local government and party meetings. It could be against an individual or target an entire group of women elected officials. It could be experienced directly and structurally, as part of cultural or social norms or, increasingly, as part of cyberspace and the symbols used online to represent, celebrate or denigrate women in political decision-making roles. It is therefore the duty of governments to prevent and effectively respond to VAWP regardless of the perpetrator or type of perpetration.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22 and 31.

<sup>33</sup> UN Women and UNDP. 2017. *Preventing Violence against women in Elections: A Programming Guide*, p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

## 2.1.2 Types and Contexts

Following standard categories of violence against women, **five types of violence** were identified for data collection and analysis in this report: psychological, economic, sexual harassment, sexual violence and physical violence. More uniquely, and for the purpose of collecting data on VAWP, the study identifies **four contexts in which VAWP is most likely to take place**: institutional, which includes professional spaces such as government offices and political party activities; communities; families; and the media and social media. Within each context, sub-categories of specific behaviours were identified and linked to the five types of violence.

For example, psychological violence in an institutional setting might manifest as a LEWR being excluded from official meetings or events or being denied information needed to meaningfully participate (the time and place, the agenda, the briefing packet, etc.). Psychological violence in the community may appear as a LEWR being questioned about her capacity to make decisions and represent the community because she is a woman. In the family, psychological violence may manifest as a LEWR being belittled for her role in local government or told that women do not have a role in politics. In the media, LEWRs may find false information published about them or hateful, offensive or threatening comments on social media related to their gender, caste or ethnicity, which amounts to psychological violence.

## 2.2 Data Collection Methods

The study used mixed methods of data collection, combining a quantitative survey, in-depth interviews and focus groups. The study is national in scope, covering all seven provinces in Nepal, including both rural and urban municipalities, and respondents from diverse ethnic and caste backgrounds as well as different positions in local government. The study began with a review of administrative data, which is scant due to the fact that VAWP is not monitored or reported as a separate offense in Nepal. A literature review as well as preliminary interviews with key stakeholders and a small group of LEWRs informed the design of the study and development of the survey questionnaire, which in turn was refined through cognitive testing and piloting.

A total of 648 individual LEWRs participated in the survey. The survey used stratified sampling based on Nepal's different ecological regions, with a random selection of urban and rural municipalities from each stratum. A total of 116 municipalities were selected and a list of elected women in these municipalities was constructed. Further stratification was carried out based on ethnicity and position in the municipality, which are reflected in the analysis.

Additionally, 38 qualitative interviews were conducted, which included 13 in-depth interviews with respondents after they took the survey; seven in-depth interviews with LEWRs who did not take part in the survey but were involved in high-profile cases reported in the media; and five focus group discussions with a total of 18 LEWRs from minority and specialised communities (Dalit, Muslim, young women, Indigenous women and deputy-level LEWRs).

To make the study as relevant as possible, a reference group comprised of governmental officials, high-level representatives from development partners, women's organisations and I/NGOs was convened to validate the purpose and objectives of the study and contribute to recommendations that they can eventually implement.

Due to pandemic restrictions, all data collection was conducted by phone, with interviews taking place in Nepali. Interviews with respondents from Madhesh Province were also conducted in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bajjika and Hindi. Answers to the survey were recorded on Kobo toolbox in Nepali and programmed alongside the English translation for data analysis. Data collection took place from October 2021 to the end of December 2021.

The non-response rate for the national survey was 6 per cent, overall. Table 1 provides a brief overview of this by province.

**Table 1** BREAKDOWN OF SAMPLED AND ACHIEVED NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS BY PROVINCE

Province	Sampled	Achieved	Non-Response
Province No. 1	118	112	6 (all DM/VC*)
Madhesh Province	136	130	6 (all DM/VC)
Bagmati Province	152	144	8 (all M/DM/VC)
Gandaki Province	66	59	7 (3 M/DM/VC)
Lumbini Province	112	108	4 (all DM/VC)
Karnali Province	40	36	4 (2 DM/VC)
Sudurpashchim Province	66	59	7 (6 DM/VC)
<b>Total</b>	<b>690</b>	<b>648</b>	<b>42 (36 DM/VC)</b>

*\*DM/VC refers to Deputy Mayor and Vice Chairperson.*

### 2.2.1 Ethical Considerations

The study adopted best practices according to UN Women and the World Health Organization's guidance on "Violence and women and girls data collection during COVID-19" (April 2020) and UNFPA's guidance on "COVID-19 and gender-based violence: Key considerations for including gender-based violence and gender-related questions in socio-economic impact surveys" (April 2020).

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic and concerns that mentioning violence could trigger traumatic responses from survivors and retaliatory violence by perpetrators, the researchers of this study referred to it publicly as "The Experiences of Locally Elected Women in Nepal". The qualitative interviewer and survey enumerators underwent specialised training on data collection with potential survivors of violence, and a psycho-social counsellor was on standby during the duration of the data collection period to support respondents if necessary and to periodically debrief with the research team. Follow-up calls to respondents (post-interview) monitored for any harm prompted by the study. The importance of confidentiality and privacy, though difficult to maintain by telephone, was a top priority and frequently repeated throughout the data collection interviews. Informed consent was administered to all respondents and their data, transcripts and personal contact information have been securely stored to prevent breaches.

### 2.2.2 Challenges

The key challenges that the researchers faced while carrying out this study involved its remote nature – conducting a phone-based survey and phone-based interviews due to pandemic restrictions. Non-response due to wrong phone numbers or network issues were obstacles for both the qualitative

and quantitative data collection, and while overcome, required time-consuming processes to find replacement respondents or correct contact information.<sup>35</sup> A challenge in preliminary calls to set survey interview appointments was that people other than the respondent (often men) would pick up the call and cross question the callers as to what the study was about. This was a challenge while contacting Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons, whose secretaries, husbands and/or sons would often pick up the phone instead. This occurred most notably among respondents from Madhesh Province, especially Madhesi Dalit and Muslim women; often, the phones belonged to their husbands or sons, or they would be in possession of the phone for most of the day. In such cases, confidentiality and safety protocols were followed and the purpose of the study was not disclosed to anyone other than the respondent.

Many respondents expressed their happiness at being contacted to participate in such a survey. However, the process was not without its challenges. Conducting these interviews remotely was one of the biggest challenges in the data collection process, despite the researchers having anticipated it. Technical problems, like the internet connection or phone call dropping due to network issues, affected the flow of conversation and caused frustration for both the respondents and enumerators/interviewers. The absence of visual cues made it difficult to ascertain whether the respondent was attentive during the interview and able to maintain privacy. Participating in the study was clearly a burden for some respondents, with one reportedly walking one hour to access internet service.

The qualitative interviewer and survey enumerators reported difficulties in building rapport with respondents due to technical disruptions and remote interviewing methods, which they felt made some respondents hesitant to speak more openly about their experiences of violence. This hesitation expressed itself as concerns, fears and being offended at the questions being asked. Two women dropped out of the survey interview for this reason, and it is hard to gauge how forthcoming respondents were in sharing their experiences openly and fully.

### 2.2.3 Capturing Intersectionality

Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society. There are more than 120 different caste and ethnic groups who speak over 120 different languages and practice more than 10 different religions. A full set of individual characteristics, including age, gender identity, marital status, province, caste/ethnicity and official title were included in the quantitative survey, and efforts were made to be inclusive during qualitative interviews to capture a diversity of experiences.

To reflect the ethnic diversity of the country, eleven caste, ethnicity and geographical categories were identified (See Annex 1 for a caste/ethnicity breakdown of VAWP prevalence). However, some groups of women were better represented in the quantitative survey due to the random sampling method employed, which could not use stratification for these characteristics. As such, the sample for some of the caste/ethnic groups was large, such as Hill Dalit (25.3 per cent), Janajati (16.2 per cent) and Hill Brahmin (13.8 per cent). Meanwhile, others were small, such as Muslims (4.4 per cent) and Madhesi (15.4 per cent), reflecting the composition of women in elected positions. Furthermore, the castes and ethnic groups were broadly categorised into Dalit and non-Dalit to allow the analysis of VAWP by type and context of violence. When statistical analysis was not possible, qualitative methods were used to explore the intersectional and unique experiences of women from groups less represented in the political sphere.

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<sup>35</sup> An average of 30 per cent of respondents (from each province) needed to be substituted due to non-response.

3

**WHO ARE  
THE WOMEN  
IN LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT?**

# 3 | WHO ARE THE WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

## 3.1 Demographic and Social Profile: Pathways to Power<sup>36</sup>

***The typical LEWR respondent is an abled-bodied, middle-aged, married, non-Dalit Hindu.***

The average age of all respondents is 44.9 years, with the vast majority of respondents (93.7 per cent) above the age of 30. The oldest respondent is 91 years old. Most (87.5 per cent) are married. The majority are non-Dalit (64.2 per cent) and follow Hinduism (86.1 per cent), with a small number of Christian (2.5 per cent), Muslim (1.5 per cent) and members of other religions. Only five respondents identified as disabled and no respondents identified as sexual minorities, an alarming finding that suggests it may be difficult to disclose such information or that certain women are not considered politically viable and are shut out from representational democratic processes.

***Most are new to governance but are not new to political and social activities.***

Most of the respondents are new to governance (i.e., serving as elected officials), but most were not new to politics or other community activism and service. While more than half of respondents report having been engaged in politics for ten years or less (55.5 per cent), close to a quarter report being politically active for 11 to 20 years (22.6 per cent). A few report 30 years or more (5.5 per cent), dating their political and social activity to the 1990's First People's Movement of Nepal (*Jana Andolan-I*).

***They are well connected – politically and professionally.***

Overall, the LEWRs who took part in this study are well connected. The overwhelming number ran as party candidates (94 per cent), and among these party candidates, 95.2 per cent report being active members of their political party before standing for office on the party ticket. Most LEWRs also had some previous professional experience (in social work, volunteering for community projects or working in professional trades and public administration) before running, and 72.5 per cent report being affiliated with a women's group or network.

***Support for their political life comes from a variety of sources, especially family.***

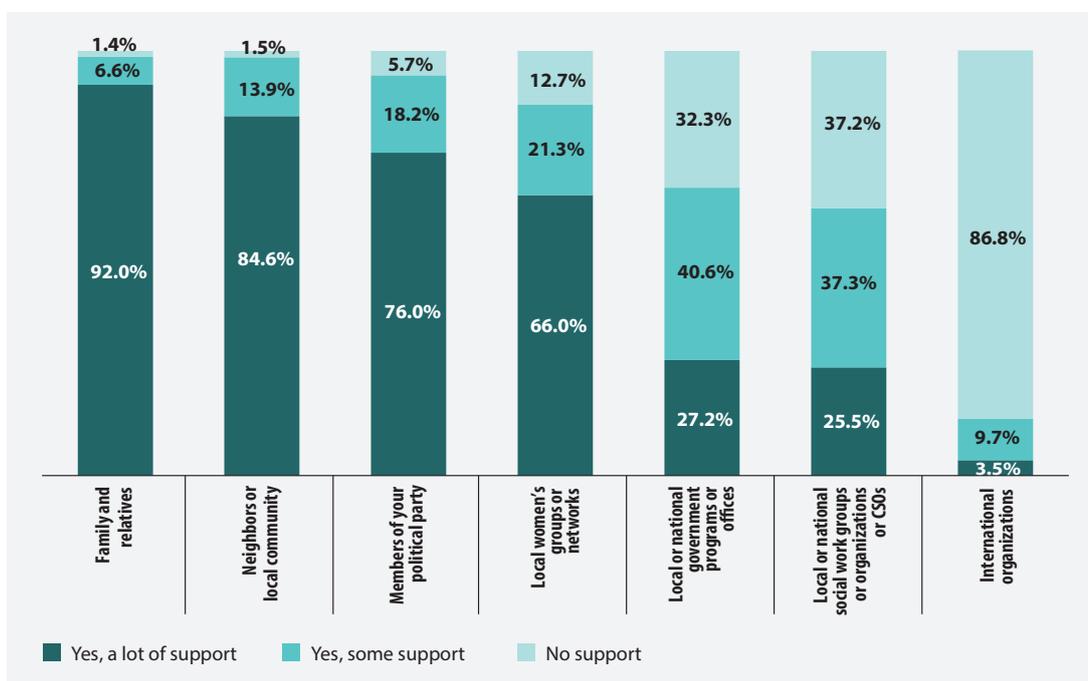
Respondents report a variety of sources of support for their political careers. Overwhelmingly, respondents report receiving the highest level of support from family and relatives (92 per cent), followed by their neighbours and local community members (84.6 per cent). These first two "gateways" into political life are indispensable for easing the women's care burden and validating her constituency.<sup>37</sup> Most LEWRs (71.5 per cent) also identified their political parties as another important gateway into politics, especially in terms of campaign financing. The next highest level of support came from women's groups and networks (66 per cent), which suggests that LEWRs, especially those connected to women's groups before standing for office as discussed above, may come to the

<sup>36</sup> What follows is a summary of the demographic profile of all respondents to the national survey, which was sampled to reflect the general population of Nepal. Please see Annex 2: Demographic Overview of Respondents for full results.

<sup>37</sup> In addition, 60.3 per cent of respondents report being part of a family with a political background, which is discussed further in the 'Family' section.

campaign with a ready-made constituency and base for moral and strategic support. Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents who receive support from different sources.

**Figure 1 SUPPORT FROM SOCIAL GROUPS (percentage of women)**



## SPOTLIGHT Political Families

A full 60.3 per cent of respondents report having families with political backgrounds, with deputy-level LEWRs reporting the highest percentage of political family connections. In qualitative interviews, it was revealed how such connections may come from either maternal families or in-laws.<sup>38</sup> A political family brings the advantage of political connections and protection,<sup>39</sup> as well as a source of trusted confidants, mentors and sounding boards.<sup>40</sup> In a few cases, LEWRs appear more proxy to male family members than independent political actors. Of note, LEWRs often referred to their political mentors, even when not related by blood, in affectionate family terms, such as “grandfather” and “uncle”.

## 3.2 Categories for Analysis: Leadership and Caste/Ethnicity

Preliminary research and a review of existing literature for this study indicated that certain LEWRs face distinct and/or intersectional forms of VAWP. Two major categories – leadership roles and caste/ethnicity – were used for systematic analysis, as explained below. These two groups comprised a large enough number of respondents to allow for meaningful VAWP data disaggregation, which showed systematic, significant statistical differences in the survey results. These results are incorporated throughout the report.

<sup>38</sup> Interview T2.4, October 21, 2021; Interview T1B2.1, November 15, 2021; Interview T1B2.3, November 13, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Interview T2.2, September 16, 2021; Interview T2.5, September 17, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Interview T1B1.1.1, November 25, 2021; Interview T1B1.1.6, November 29, 2021; Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021.

### 3.2.1 Women in Leadership

Preliminary qualitative interviews and the literature review suggested that women in leadership positions, especially Deputy Mayors, may experience more violence, different forms of violence and interference related to their political duties compared with women Ward Members. To better understand and analyse this distinction, survey results were grouped into two categories: a) leadership (Deputy Mayors, Chairpersons, Vice Chairpersons, and Ward Chairpersons) and b) Ward Members. In total, four per cent (91) of the respondents serve as the head of their LGU, such as Deputy Mayor, Chairperson, Vice Chairperson or Ward Chairperson of the municipalities. The remaining respondents – a total of 86 per cent (557) – were elected as Ward Members. In line with very small numbers nationally, no respondent identified as a Mayor and only three respondents (.5 per cent) identified as a Ward Chairperson. Dalit women are particularly shut out of leadership positions: only 4.7 per cent (five in the total sample) reported serving at the deputy-level and a mere 5.25 per cent report chairing one or more LGU committees (as compared with 24.1 per cent of non-Dalit respondents).

### 3.2.2 Caste/Ethnicity

The constitutional quota provision specifies one “woman” and one “Dalit woman” for each ward. While these two broad categories are homogenizing, given that caste is one of the most defining features of Nepali society, the survey results were grouped for analysis as Dalit and non-Dalit. In following the quota provision, the focus in the report attempts to discern differences in the experiences of VAWP between Dalit and their non-Dalit counterparts overall, as part of the first cohort to benefit from the constitutional quota.

Among the total number surveyed, 35.8 per cent (232) were Dalit (Hill Dalits and Terai/Madhese Dalits) and 64.2 per cent (416) were non-Dalit (all Brahmins/Chhetris, Janajatis, Muslims and other groups). The findings related to the Dalit grouping are fully integrated within the report. See Annex 1 for data on VAWP disaggregated by caste/ethnicity.

4

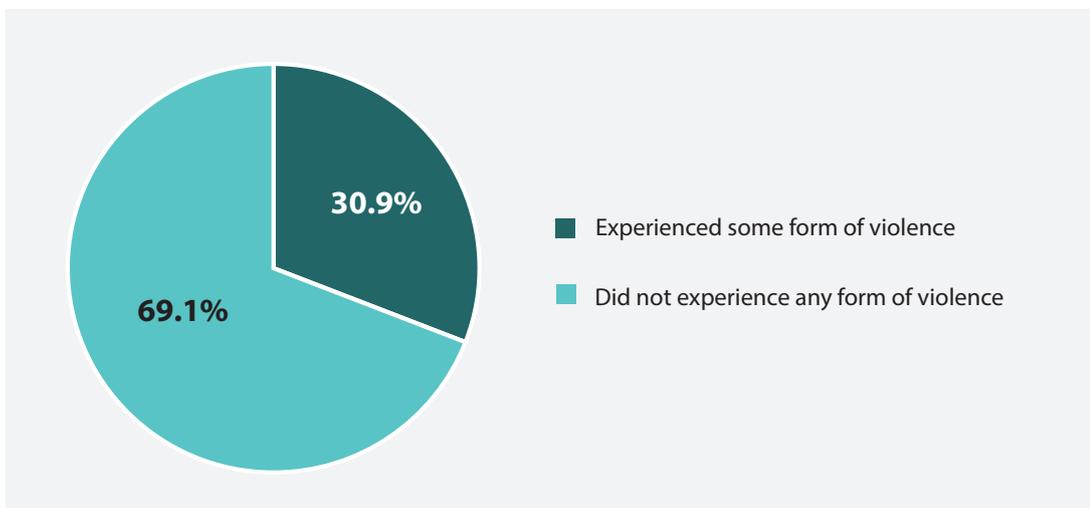
**PREVALENCE,  
RISK FACTORS  
AND TYPES  
OF VAWP**

# 4 | PREVALENCE, RISK FACTORS AND TYPES OF VAWP

## 4.1 Prevalence

Out of the 648 elected women representatives surveyed across seven provinces, nearly one-third (30.9 per cent or 200) report experiencing at least one form of violence related to their political role. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2** PREVALENCE OF VAWP (percentage of women who experienced violence during their office term)



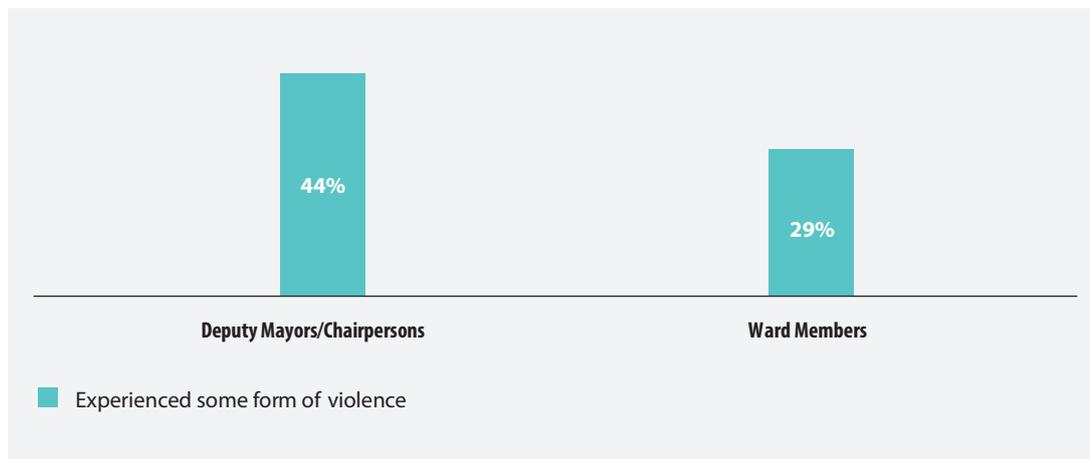
## 4.2 Risk Factors

From the results, a profile emerges of LEWRs who are more likely to experience VAWP. This includes women in deputy-level positions, unmarried and divorced women and disabled women. While Dalit women may experience similar levels of VAWP, they are exposed to different forms of violence and have worse outcomes than their non-Dalit counterparts in trying to resolve the issue, as discussed elsewhere in this report. Intersectional forms of violence against women from minority communities is an element of VAWP in Nepal, along with deep-seated cultural codes around women’s “proper” place in society — attached to a man, in the domestic sphere, perhaps able to influence decision-making but seldom able to exercise direct power. The study suggests that those who venture beyond social strictures concerning propriety, especially those seeking political leadership roles, face backlash and reprisals,

### ***Women in leadership roles experience higher rates of VAWP.***

A full 44 per cent of LEWRs in deputy-level positions (Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons) report having experienced some type of VAWP compared with 28.7 per cent of Ward Members. See Figure 3.

**Figure 3 DEPUTY MAYORS/CHAIRPERSONS VS. WARD MEMBERS AND PREVALENCE OF VAWP**

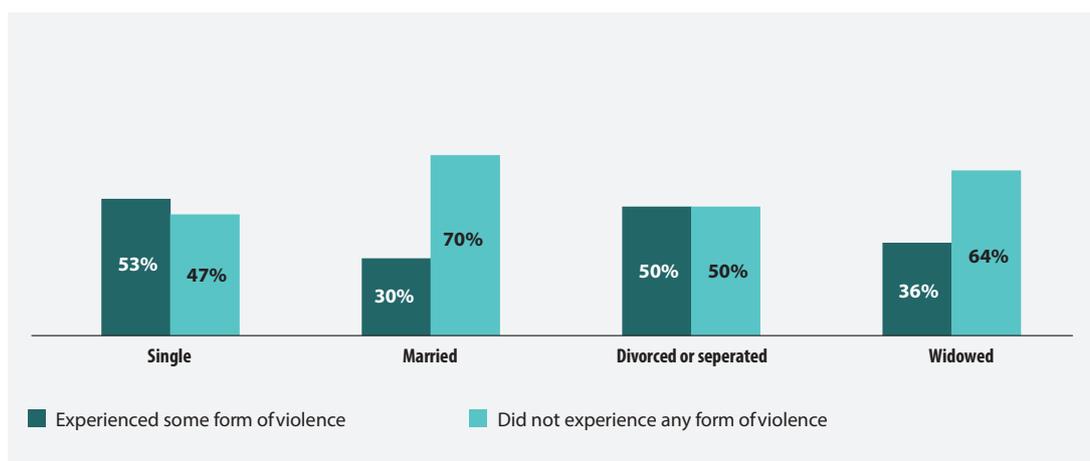


**Young women and single, separated or divorced women are at highest risk.**

Women below the age of 30 report slightly higher rates (36.6 per cent) of violence than their older counterparts (30.5 per cent). Nevertheless, young LEWRs in qualitative interviews revealed that their views are often discounted due to their age.<sup>41</sup> One young LEWR shared how her fellow Judicial Committee members excluded her from participating in a case related to sexual violence. They allegedly told her, “An unmarried woman cannot solve this.”<sup>42</sup>

More striking is the prevalence of VAWP among the LEWRs who are single, divorced or separated. More than half (52.6 per cent) of single women respondents report some experience of violence, followed by 50 per cent of divorced or separated women (compared with 35.7 per cent of widowed and 29.5 per cent of married respondents). These results suggest that there are deeply rooted cultural expectations for women to be married to men, making unmarried women more vulnerable to violence. See Figure 4.

**Figure 4 MARITAL STATUS AND PREVALENCE OF VAWP**



<sup>41</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021; Interview T1B1.17, 14 December 2021; Interview T1B2.8, October 29, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Interview T2.2, September 16, 2021.

**Disabled women, though extremely low in number, are most likely to experience VAWP.**

Only four respondents identify as disabled, and yet three of them (75 per cent) report experiencing some form of VAWP. This suggests that disabled women may not feel comfortable self-disclosing or are not considered viable candidates to put forward for seats and that once elected, they face multiple barriers to fully participating. In one qualitative interview, a LEWR with impeded mobility shared how she was not provided provisions to undertake her duties or attend meetings, leaving her further dependent on others to assist her in fulfilling her responsibilities, including visiting constituents in need during the pandemic.<sup>43</sup>

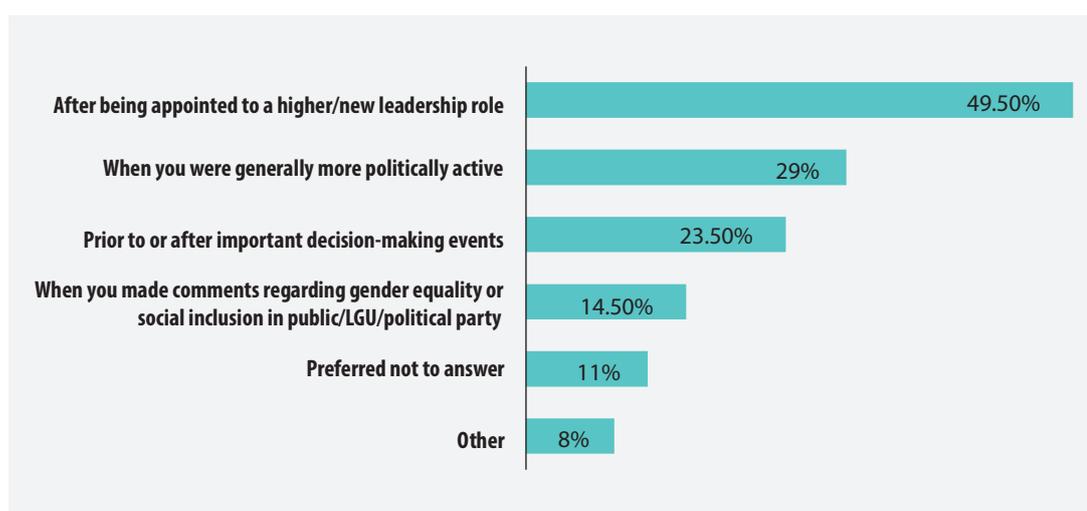
**VAWP occurs in the context of intersectional oppression based on gender, caste, ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic factors.**

While both Dalit (30 per cent) and non-Dalit respondents (31.3 per cent) report similar levels of violence, other categories of analysis reveal that there are factors that put certain LEWRs at high risk of experiencing violence due to other forms of discrimination they experience based on their caste, ethnicity and religion as well as socioeconomic factors (education, economic class and geographic residency).

**The study shows that VAWP in Nepal is most often a form of backlash against women for occupying public political space.**

Of all those who experienced some type of violence, nearly half (49.5 per cent) report that the violence became more frequent and severe after being appointed to a higher or new leadership role (for example, being appointed Chair for a committee or being appointed to the Judicial Committee). Others report that violence is also related to their political activity, with 29 per cent reporting that VAWP occurred when they were more politically active (such as starting an initiative or appearing in the media) and nearly one-quarter (23.5 per cent) reporting that VAWP occurred just prior to an important decision-making event (such as a vote or party caucus). Further, 14.5 per cent report that VAWP happened after they made public comments about gender equality or social inclusion at the LGU or within their respective political party. See Figure 5.

**Figure 5 WHEN VAWP IS MORE SEVERE/FREQUENT**



<sup>43</sup> Interview T1B1.12, December 11, 2021.

When breaking down for caste/ethnicity, the results were the same, except that a higher proportion of Dalit respondents report the trigger “when you were more politically active” than non-Dalit women (34.3 per cent versus 26.2 per cent), and a higher proportion of non-Dalit respondents report the trigger “prior to or after important decision-making” (18.6 per cent versus 26.2 per cent). This might be explained by the fact that non-Dalit women occupy higher leadership roles (i.e. have more decision-making opportunities) and that Dalit LEWRs face more generalised violence due to caste-based discrimination.

In qualitative interviews, some women shared that they faced violence simply for winning the election. Others shared that their superiors attacked them for succeeding at their duties and doing “too good” of a job.<sup>44</sup> Some LEWRs shared that they were deemed “troublemakers” for speaking up and speaking out.<sup>45</sup>

“It’s mostly because I raise questions over corruption in the system. They do not want to give any answers, and that is why they don’t like me. I want development to go to the people. They should get what is coming to them, but the inherent corruption does not let that happen. When I question, I become the bad person, the troublemaker.”<sup>46</sup>

### 4.3 Types of Violence Against Locally Elected Women in Nepal

Psychological violence (28.2 per cent) was the most reported type of violence experienced by all the respondents surveyed, followed by economic violence (6 per cent), sexual harassment (4 per cent), physical violence (2.2 per cent) and sexual violence (0.5 per cent). When two types of violence were reported, it was most likely that psychological and economic violence were reported together. See Table 2.

**Table 2** PREVALENCE OF VAWP BY TYPE (percentage of women who experienced any type of violence)

Types of Violence	Total	
	Count	% (Out of 648 Respondents)
Psychological Violence	183	28.2%
Economic Violence	39	6.0%
Sexual Harassment	26	4.0%
Physical Violence	14	2.2%
Sexual Violence	3	0.5%
Other Violence	2	0.3%

LEWRs in high-level leadership roles (Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons) report psychological violence (43.8 per cent versus 26.4 per cent) and sexual harassment (12.3 per cent versus 3.0 per cent) in much higher numbers than Ward Members, suggesting once again that this group is at particular risk of experiencing VAWP.

<sup>44</sup> Interview T1B1.3.13, December 11, 2021; Interview T1B1.3.12, December 11, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Interview T1B2.3, November 13, 2021; Interview T1B1.3.13, December 11, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Interview T1B1.1.4, December 1, 2021.

When compared with their married counterparts, divorced and single women reported facing higher rates of all forms of violence, except for sexual violence, which was reported highest among single respondents. One-half (50 per cent) of all divorced or separated respondents report experiencing some form of psychological violence versus 26.5 per cent of married respondents, as well as much higher rates of economic violence (16.7 per cent versus 5.8 per cent), sexual harassment (16.7 per cent versus 3.5 per cent) and physical violence (33.3 per cent versus 1.4 per cent). It should be noted that these extrapolations are based on a very small data set; only six respondents report being divorced or separated, underscoring the idea that this group occupies a vulnerable, minority status.

## **SPOTLIGHT** 'Invisible' Violence, Psychological Violence and Micro-Aggressions

Psychological violence is the most prevalent type of VAWP experienced by LEWRs (Table 2). In qualitative interviews, this type of violence was often expressed as a constant questioning of the respondents' capabilities, authority and legitimacy as elected officials, which in turn erodes their confidence and limits their ability to fulfil their duties. Often dispensed through continual micro-aggressions, psychological violence is as effective as other types of violence in preventing LEWRs from exercising their vested political powers and is therefore a significant form of VAWP.

In qualitative interviews, such violence was often described as "invisible" violence. Often occurring without physical evidence or proof, it is harder to identify and report and is therefore most often discounted, minimised and brushed aside by both authorities and survivors alike. Although these discrete actions may seem small, its cumulative impact is not. It speaks volumes about the precarity of women's elected leadership.

"Equality has come in relative terms, but indirect discrimination is the problem now," reported one Ward Member respondent.<sup>47</sup> Dalit Ward Members experience both gender and caste discrimination as LEWRs, as described by one Dalit LEWR:

“*The forms of discrimination have changed with time. I do not think discrimination has ended because now people do not explicitly practice untouchability due to the existence of laws and the police and the fact that action can be taken against such practices. Yet, currently, if you go and check the minutes of the ward meetings you will see that irrespective of your post, the Dalit women's names appear at the end of the minutes. This is discrimination.*”<sup>48</sup>

LEWRs report that, "Everywhere women are tested more than men and need to keep proving their capabilities all the time."<sup>49</sup> Their leadership is continually doubted and their legitimacy challenged on any grounds, especially against a backdrop of restrictive traditional and cultural mores about women's roles and abilities. According to one LEWR:

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<sup>47</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Interview T2.2, September 16, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Interview T2.1, October 21, 2021.

“ *The law has changed, but the patriarchal mindset and values haven’t. They still function in the same manner. My Chairperson has made allegations against me to portray me as weak and unable to carry out my responsibilities. He doesn’t accept me and continually brings up the fact that I am staying in my maternal home even after being married — he never fails to play that against me.*”<sup>50</sup>

This constant undermining of women’s leadership not only has a personal impact on the LEWRs serving but also affects the government’s efforts to devolve governance to the local levels. During qualitative interviews, Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons were the LEWRs most likely to discuss the interference they face in executing their duties – a situation in which power remains centralised among the male political elite, *de facto* excluding women:

“ *We have been given a lot of responsibilities, but at the implementation level, there are just so many loopholes and gaps, and you don’t know what to do about it. There is no oversight mechanism to ensure that we are actually given the authority and ability to carry out our mandated duties.*”<sup>51</sup>

The LEWRs who participated in qualitative interviews made clear that the psychological violence they experienced while serving as elected officials is directly tied to their gender and compounded by other forms of discrimination based on caste/ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic status. A refrain was repeated in the interviews, across identity categories: “I can tell you for sure that, if there was a man in my place, this would not have happened [how they questioned and challenged me]. They all would have listened to him.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Interview T1B1.1.5, November 30, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Interview T1.B1.1.9, December 6, 2021.

5

**CONTEXTS AND  
PERPETRATORS  
OF VAWP**

# 5 | CONTEXTS AND PERPETRATORS OF VAWP

The study found that VAWP is more likely to happen in institutional and community spaces, where politicians most often carry out their responsibilities, such as official meetings, community and political gatherings and exchanges with LGU staff, their elected peers and party members. These findings suggest that this violence happened to women elected officials because they are women and because they have a role in local decision-making.

Out of all 648 elected women representatives surveyed, 19.8 per cent reported experiencing some form of VAWP in an institutional context, followed by their communities (15.3 per cent), families (5.9 per cent), media (4.8 per cent) and social media (4.3 per cent) (See Table 3). When comparing Dalit and non-Dalit respondents, Dalit respondents are more likely to experience violence on social media (6.25 per cent) compared with non-Dalit respondents (3.6 per cent), while a higher proportion of non-Dalit respondents (6.7 per cent) report that they have experienced violence in the media as compared with 1.3 per cent of Dalit LEWRs.

**Table 3** PREVALENCE OF VAWP BY CONTEXT (percentage of women who experienced violence in any context)

Context	Count	% (Out of 648 Respondents)
Institutional Level	128	19.8%
Community Level	99	15.3%
Family	38	5.9%
Media	31	4.8%
Social Media	16	4.3%*

\*Out of those who use social media, which is 57.7 per cent of all respondents.

LEWRs in deputy-level positions report experiencing more violence than Ward Members across all contexts, excluding the community level, where Ward Members (15.6 per cent) report slightly higher rates than deputy-level LEWRs (13.2 per cent). This finding could be attributed to their increased exposure in communities. In contrast, deputy-level LEWRs (31.9 per cent) report institutional-level VAWP at nearly twice the rate of Ward Members (17.8 per cent) and much higher rates of VAWP in the media (18.7 per cent versus 2.5 per cent) and on social media (11.8 per cent versus 2.3 per cent). This could be due to their higher visibility in those contexts.

## 5.1 Institutions

In total, 19.8 per cent of all 648 respondents report having experienced at least one type of violence at the institutional level.

“Institutional context” is defined as governmental, professional and political settings where LEWRs undertake their duties as elected officials and political actors. It includes the LGUs and political party activities — attending official meetings, serving on committees and interacting with the bureaucracy. In the LGU setting, it is the workplace of LEWRs and is covered by applicable laws, including the Sexual Harassment in the Workplace (Elimination) Act (2014).

### 5.1.1 LEWRs are Excluded and Marginalised

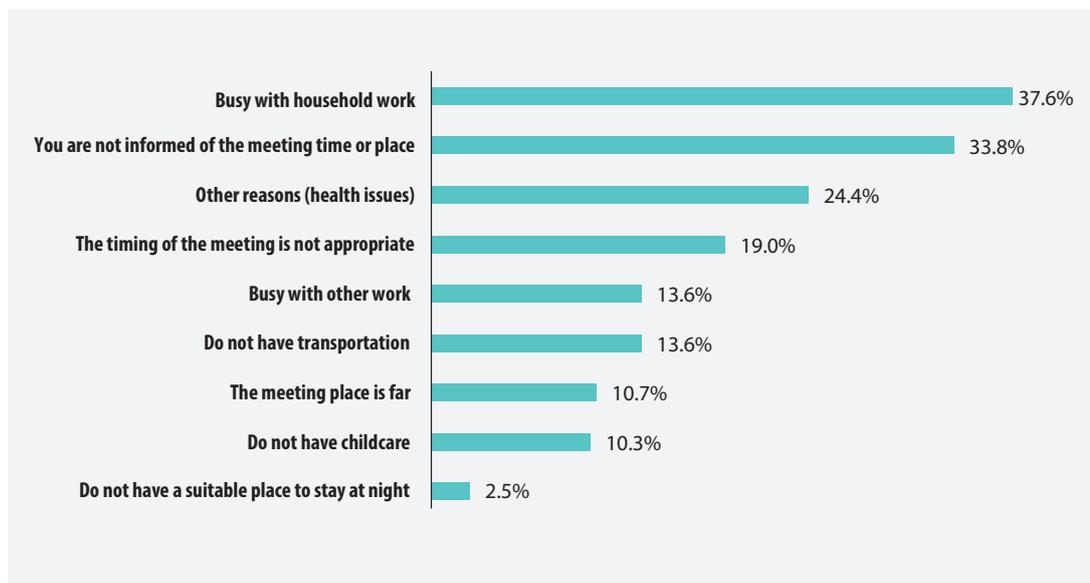
Psychological violence was the most common form of violence reported in the institutional setting by respondents. LEWRs reported a litany of behaviours intended to exclude, denigrate, and marginalise them, such as being excluded from official meetings and events or being denied the information needed to meaningfully attend those meetings (10.3 per cent). Some report being made to sign documents they were not familiar with or having to show support for decisions they were not comfortable with (7.9 per cent). Women report being told they had no place in the local assembly, that they were there only because of the quota and that their voices didn’t matter. Some were subject to rumours about their capacity to do their jobs (6.9 per cent). Others were insulted with negative, derogatory comments or insults regarding their gender, ethnicity, appearance or religion (4.6 per cent). Another 4.6 per cent of LEWRs report having been threatened with harm because of their role as a woman in elected office.

Economic violence was the next most common form of institutional-level violence identified by the respondents (4.5 per cent), with LEWRs being denied or prevented from accessing resources they were entitled to in their official role, including salaries, office space and computer and communication equipment.

The respondents also report having experienced sexual harassment, including being subject to offensive sexual comments; humiliating, degrading jokes; and rumours about their sexual lives (1.4 per cent). Five respondents (.8 per cent) report having been physically attacked at an official meeting or prevented from attending. Three women (.5 per cent) report having experienced sexual violence on the job – being touched, kissed or forced to do other sexual acts against their will.

A similar question on the survey related to attendance at official meetings revealed how LEWRs are excluded through gender inequality tactics. In response to that question, most LEWRs shared how they are dedicated to their service, with 62.7 per cent reporting that they attend all official meetings. For those who report not attending official meetings, household work was the most common response, while other reasons point to exclusionary tactics. For example, 33.8 per cent of LEWRs report they were not informed of the meeting place or time, and 19 per cent report that the meeting timing was not appropriate (interfering with family meals and other family duties, according to qualitative interviews). See Figure 6, below and Section 5.3 on ‘Family’ for more discussion of these results.

**Figure 6 REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING IN-PERSON OFFICIAL MEETINGS (percentage who did not attend meetings)**



During qualitative interviews, LEWRs shared stories of exclusion, even after being duly elected as representatives, as well as the daily hostile work environment they face while exercising their powers. LEWRs shared how meetings were held outside normal business hours and in informal settings (at restaurants, cocktail lounges and members' houses), *de facto* excluding LEWRs. In one instance, a Madhesi Vice Chairperson was prevented from attending meetings, since her Chair chose to hold them late at night in his home. When she requested the minutes for these meetings, she was denied access to them. As a result, she took her case to a higher authority:

“ I am a woman, and I cannot go to all the [same] places that he can go to. He can eat and drink with people, which I cannot do. I filed a Right to Information (RTI) request when he refused to provide me with a copy of the minutes of the village council meeting, which he claims took place, but no one – including me – knows anything about it. I filed through the Chief District Office (CDO) to be provided a copy of the minutes, and I have received it!”<sup>53</sup>

The LEWRs report that when they do attend meetings, they are ignored, sidelined and manipulated. One LEWR reported that, having been repeatedly asked to sign papers she could not read, she stopped attending meetings altogether. LEWRs reported being continually treated as “dummies,” elected simply to fill quota seats — assumed to lack skills or expertise and expected to be quiet and maintain the *status quo*.<sup>54</sup> In one case, an LEWR was denied the entire budget allocated to her for her committee, which prevented her from delivering results.<sup>55</sup>

In some cases, LEWRs seemed to be serving as proxies for men. One woman shared how she was escorted to all meetings by her husband whom she said also assists her with decision-making related to her duties.<sup>56</sup> The same LEWR shared:

<sup>53</sup> Interview T1B2.3, November 13, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Interview T1B1.1.2, November 24, 2021; Interview T1B1.1.6, November 29, 2021; T1B1.2.10, December 6, 2021; Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021; Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Interview T1B2.3, November 13, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021.

“ I sign the documents as per the number of meetings I attend. I only sign for the number of meetings I have attended. They pay me an allowance to attend the meetings. I do not do any work at all. There is no support in terms of understanding my duties and responsibilities or about anything else. There is no need as I am not required to do any work”.

Most typically, LEWRs report being given no responsibilities at all, despite their mandate as elected officials. When one Ward Member asked why she was given no work, her male Chair told her that she’s a woman and not to worry about her work – that it’s being taken care of by others.<sup>57</sup> LEWRs in this position seemed well aware that, because they were excluded, they could not acquire new skills nor perform their duties, meaning they would have no advancement and were unlikely to be re-elected again. A Madhesi LEWR shared: “I have felt defunct all this while, honestly. I’ve been given no work, even when I’ve requested it”.<sup>58</sup>

This exclusion can have far-reaching impacts in preventing women from continuing to be engaged in politics and advancing their careers, and it often reflects a radical snag in Nepal’s efforts to localise governance and decentralise power and decision-making. One Dalit LEWR shared:

“ But you tell me: How will I learn if I do not do any work? I will learn by doing, but I am never given any work to do. Also, people in the community do not see me do any work, so how will they trust me for the next election, that I can work for development?”<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, although duly elected, women members are explicitly told to *not* participate. They are publicly humiliated, their views shut down and experiences trivialised across the spectrum of positions held by the respondents. In one focus group discussion that included a young Dalit woman new to politics and a former Indigenous female combatant of the People’s Liberation Movement who is politically well connected, this conversation unfolded:

Young Dalit woman:

“ I am a member of the Judicial Committee, and while conducting a hearing session, a male colleague asked me to keep quiet and told me, ‘You should not speak when you have no knowledge about things.’ This happened in front of everyone during an ongoing session of the hearing”.

Indigenous women and former combatant:

“ I’ve had no problems. But I do have experiences of being shut down in front of people and told that I speak without understanding things. So that has happened to me as well.”<sup>60</sup>

Rather than explicit, the violence and harassment are subtle and structural; such “invisible” violence, as it was often referred to in qualitative interviews, prevents women from fulfilling their mandates and exercising their powers. In case after case, the authority of LEWRs is entirely bypassed during decision-making processes. In qualitative interviews, LEWRs themselves recognised the steep learning curve of serving during their first year or two, without prior governance experience. Like all members,

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<sup>57</sup> Interview T1B1.1.4, December 1, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Interview T1.B1.1.1, November 25, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021.

they adapted quickly, but they also found themselves facing barriers rather than advancement. One Madhesi Vice Chairperson explains how her powers and authority were bypassed in areas where she should play a central role:

“ When I was initially elected, I did not know much about the job, so that was a challenge. It took me a while to grasp my duties and responsibilities. But I learnt quickly. Yet, I have continuously been bypassed in the decision-making process. I am the coordinator of the Monitoring Committee, but I am never needed to monitor anything. Everything gets a go-ahead and I am never even told about it – forget about getting my approval!”<sup>61</sup>

These exclusions are intersectional, with compounded and multiplying effects. Women from the Dalit community report being especially marginalised and reminded of their precarity in office: “We are specifically categorised as Dalit women, and one senior member told me that, had I not been categorised as a Dalit woman, I would not be here.”<sup>62</sup> Untouchability is expressed both directly and symbolically. One young Dalit Ward Member shared:

“ If you go and check the minutes of the ward meetings, you will see that irrespective of your post, the Dalit women’s names appear at the end of the minutes. This is discrimination.”<sup>63</sup>

Dalit women are not a homogenous group, and different Dalit women report facing different oppressions, with some reporting that they experience “triple jeopardy” – marginalisation due to their socioeconomic status and discrimination based on their caste and ethnicity.<sup>64</sup> Young Dalit women in particular articulated how they have three “strikes” against them — as young, Dalit and a woman. One younger Dalit LEWR shared how her leadership is continually invalidated, with people even sceptical if her signature is valid for official documents.<sup>65</sup> Another younger Dalit LEWR shared:

“ One of the first things I noticed is that often they would refer to people in a similar position as mine as ‘tapai’ [a higher order of respect while referring to someone in Nepali], but I am referred to as ‘timi’ [a rather lower order of respect]. I don’t know if it is because I am young, a Dalit or a woman or if it is the culmination of everything together.”<sup>66</sup>

Ethnic minorities are singled out for public reprimand and face near total exclusion. In qualitative interviews, Terai and Hill Indigenous women shared how they were ridiculed for their indigenous identity, being uneducated and not fitting into the dominant culture. “Anyone can say anything to the Tharu [Indigenous population] community and get away with it,” shared one LEWR from an Indigenous community.<sup>67</sup> Another Madheshi [Indigenous population] shared how she had not been assigned to any committees. When she requested to be assigned to one, she was addressed in insulting language by her chair then asked to keep quiet: “I was being told, ‘Shut up! You can’t understand’.”<sup>68</sup> Explicit ethnic slurs are apparently common:

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<sup>61</sup> Interview T1.B1.1.1, November 25, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Interview T2.2, September 16, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Interview T1B1.3.14, December 12, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Interview T2.2, September 16, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Interview T1B1.2.9, December 6, 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021.

“As an elected official, I have done good work, and yet to compliment me, people use phrases like, ‘The Tharuni [a disrespectful way to address women in relation of the Tharu community] has done good work!’ So, while I understand they are complimenting me, they do so disrespectfully.”<sup>69</sup>

She continued, discussing the hierarchy of identity-based exclusions and solidarity among marginalised LEWRs:

“We share a very cordial relationship. I feel bad for the women from Madhesi community around here, as they do not have a say in anything...so they are made defunct in their role. We meet in some programmes and share these things. There is no division among us — Tharu, Madhesi, Muslim, all our issues are the same, and we have an understanding. We are all marginalised, and that is clear.”

Structurally, it is deputy-level LEWRs and Deputy Mayors in particular who face the biggest obstacles while exercising their leadership roles. Positioned as an incumbency in the wings, they are most often treated as competition to their immediate seniors and therefore locked out of both decision-making and accomplishments. One Deputy Mayor shared how the structural imbalance is codified in policy:

“The municipal Mayor sits in a position equivalent to a chief secretary of state. But the Deputy Mayor position? It is equivalent to the Vice Chairperson of the rural municipality. Such policy is only implemented to keep women down — there are mostly women holding the position of Deputy Mayor, and they want to keep them in this subordinate position.”<sup>70</sup>

Like Ward Members, deputy-level LEWRs are made defunct simply by being given no power, authority or responsibilities, and they are expected to rubber stamp pre-determined decisions. “The Deputy [Mayor] is considered the equivalent to silence [*up bhaneko chup*],” shared one Deputy Mayor LEWR.<sup>71</sup> When a major political party split in 2020, LEWRs also felt the brunt of its reorganisation process, which pushed them into further insignificance in some instances. A Madhesi Deputy Mayor shared:

“Yes, as I said earlier, I am sidelined in all official meetings. The Mayor and I were from the same party, but the party fragmented and we are now part of different factions. So, disagreements are to be expected. But he blocks me from carrying out any of my responsibilities. As I said, I am never asked or even informed before decisions happen. I am made to feel that I am not required. They do not say anything explicit, but it is apparent by the way they behave that they want to render me insignificant.”<sup>72</sup>

In interview after interview, deputy-level LEWRs describe constant harassment – being treated as a competitive threat, especially when they do the job well, and being pressured to do no work at all. The psychological pressure is real. One Deputy Mayor LEWR shared in a sequential interview:

“I have seen Deputy Mayors crying in the meetings of the Municipal Association (MUAN) because of the harassment they have faced and their inability to do anything about it. So, I think this is the same for all Deputy Mayors, and I am not an exception.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Interview T1B2.8, October 29, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Interview T2.1, October 1, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Interview T1B1.1.1), November 25, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Interview T1B1.1.5, November 30, 2021.

## 5.1.2 As Women Succeed, Violence Against Them Escalates

“Invisible” violence is far from silent, and it can escalate to more severe forms quickly. LEWRs are not immune to physical intimidation, and those in leadership positions shared some of their experiences frankly during qualitative interviews. After a tragic car accident in the community, a mob of women from the opposition party converged in one Vice Chairperson’s office, vandalising it and verbally attacking her.<sup>74</sup> According to one Deputy Mayor, an argument erupted during a municipal council meeting and became so heated that some members picked up chairs as if they were about to throw them at other members.<sup>75</sup> Another Deputy Mayor reported being confronted in her office by men screaming at her and banging on her desk.<sup>76</sup>

Although Dalit LEWRs report similar levels of VAWP as other groups, they face harsher conditions while exercising their roles, as they are subjected to the added indignities of “untouchability”. Often, this harassment is sexualised. In qualitative interviews, some Dalit LEWRs describe being constantly policed by both men and women from higher castes. One Dalit LEWR was told by a non-Dalit woman of a higher political rank and caste to wear better clothes to official meetings. “Perhaps because I am from the Dalit community, she thinks we do not ever change our clothes or know how to dress properly,” the LEWR told interviewers. Later, the same woman singled her out again for wearing jewellery to meetings: “If I wear a bit of gold, she also makes remarks like, ‘Today you are wearing a lot of gold!’ It makes things uncomfortable, but I am not sure what I can do about it.”<sup>77</sup>

The harassment may seem so subtle and mixed with other forms of discrimination that it may be difficult to define, but its impact is clear. Young Dalit women appear most at risk for experiencing sexualised harassment, according to qualitative interviews. The same Dalit LEWR quoted above continued:

“ If I wear good clothes and carry myself well, they make remarks like, ‘Are you actually a Dalit? It does not seem so.’ When I wear lipstick, it highlights the mole on my chin. My male colleagues never fail to make remarks like, ‘You look so beautiful with that lipstick and your mole is so beautiful!’ They say it lightly, like it’s a joke, but it makes one feel awkward. I tell them immediately I do not like that type of talk. I don’t know if it’s actually a form of sexual harassment under the law, but I feel harassed by such remarks”.

One respondent experienced more than verbal harassment. An unmarried Hill Indigenous LEWR Ward Member shared how an opposition member attempted to sexually assault her at a hotel. It was a man she trusted even though he was in the opposition party, and he had been mentoring her through processes she did not yet fully understand.<sup>78</sup> She attributes the attempted assault to her young age and single marital status as a woman.

Women from minority communities are exposed to continual indignities based on caste- and ethnic-based discrimination, which is intended to humiliate them. One Dalit Ward Member shared:

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<sup>74</sup> Interview T2.1, October 1, 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Interview T1B1.1.5, November 30, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Interview T1B1.2.10, December 6, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Interview T1B1.1.17, December 14, 2021.

“ I thought caste-based discrimination would lessen after I was elected Ward Member, but it has continued. After I was elected, an upper-caste person invited me over to have tea. I drank my tea and was about to leave when he stopped me and asked me to wash my cup before leaving. I was humiliated, but what could I do?”<sup>79</sup>

### 5.1.3 Male Elected Officials and Bureaucratic Staff are Common Perpetrators

The study found that 43.8 per cent of the VAWP survivors interviewed identified perpetrators of violence in institutional settings as elected male members in leadership positions — municipal Mayors and Deputy Mayors, rural municipal Chairpersons and Vice Chairpersons and Ward Chairs. This was followed by 31.3 per cent of survivors identifying professional staff at the LGU (employees of the bureaucracy) as perpetrators and 24.2 per cent identifying male Ward Members. When it came to perpetrators from political parties, LEWRs were almost just as likely to face VAWP from their own party members (20.3 per cent) as they were from opposition party members (21.9 per cent). See Table 4 below.

**Table 4 PERPETRATORS AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL (percentage of women who experienced violence)**

Perpetrators	Count	% of Women who Experienced Violence
Male Mayors, Deputy Mayors, Chairpersons, Vice Chairpersons	56	43.8%
LGU Staff Members	40	31.3%
Male Ward Members	31	24.2%
Opposition Party Members	28	21.9%
Own Party Members	26	20.3%
Female Ward Members	8	6.3%
Female Mayors, Deputy Mayors, Chairpersons and Vice Chairpersons	3	2.3%
Other Person (Specify)	3	2.3%
Unknown	2	1.6%
Undisclosed	2	1.6%

The results change slightly when examining the responses of Dalit women, who more often identify perpetrators as their own party members (23.3 per cent) and female Ward Members (9.3 per cent) than non-Dalit respondents. In addition, “untouchability” and caste discrimination are deeply tied to perpetration against Dalit LEWRs, with 83.7 per cent reporting that their perpetrator was from a different caste or ethnicity.

LEWRs in leadership positions also report significant differences from Ward Members in identifying perpetrators. They are much more likely to identify male elected leadership (52 per cent) and LGU staff (52 per cent) as the most common offenders, and they identify opposition party members (32 per cent) in higher numbers than Ward Members. These figures make sense when one considers the increased work exposure that Deputy Mayors have in relation to Mayors and high-level bureaucrats. It also suggests that LEWRs in leadership positions are at higher risk of being targeted by powerful male political leaders.

<sup>79</sup> Interview T1B2.6, November 11, 2021.

### 5.1.3.1 Male Leadership

Across the board – from Deputy Mayors to Ward Members – the LEWRs interviewed for this study identified elected men with power as the most common perpetrators of VAWP. As discussed earlier, LEWRs in deputy-level positions are most likely to experience institutional violence, and they are the most likely to experience it from their immediate political superiors — Chairs and Mayors who view their Deputy role as a rivalry, no matter the party. One Vice Chairperson, who reports being sidelined from nearly all her duties, shared the following:

“The interesting thing is that the Chair and I are in the same party, but he sees me as his competitor. He always puts me down. It has been three years now and I still have not been invited to a single meeting. I am never even informed about meetings. I don’t know how the budget is approved or who approves it”<sup>80</sup>

### 5.1.3.2 LGU Staff

One-third of survivors of institutional-level VAWP identified LGU staff as perpetrators. These unelected bureaucratic officers play an instrumental role in the success of LEWRs, as they help them implement projects and negotiate bureaucracy. Without their assistance, little to no development is possible and achievements for constituencies cannot take place.

Indeed, complaints against LGU staff for obstructing and excluding LEWRs from participating were shared across the board — from rank-and-file Ward Members to Vice Chairpersons and Deputy Mayors. One Ward Member shared that LGU staff “do not want to listen” and that they do not offer help or support to Ward Members, despite it being their role to do so: “Especially when you are a woman, they do not want to listen to you”<sup>81</sup> LEWRs often described LGU staff as usurping their duties. When LGU staff members made mistakes, it was the LEWRs who were assumed incompetent and received the blame.<sup>82</sup>

### 5.1.4 Corruption and Abuse of Power is Linked to Exclusion

In qualitative interviews, LEWRs cited administrative officers (AO) as being the most obstructionist staff members in LGUs, but there were no instances in which they worked without the cooperation and direction of the Mayor. Indeed, the AO was often described in interviews as an extension of the Mayor or Chair, some of whom were described as governing like “feudal lords”. If LGU staff received an order to obstruct, they followed the order. In some cases, LEWRs implicated corruption as playing a strong role in why their oversight is resisted.<sup>83</sup> In other cases, they report that the Mayor and Chair abuse their power, controlling the bureaucracy through hiring and firing. One LEWR shared how administrative staff members are kept on short-term contracts so as to keep them fully aligned with the will of the Mayor, which further entrenches caste and ethnic hierarchies:

“ *The administrative staff are all re-hired every four months at the favour of the Mayor. Even if they wanted to support me, they cannot, as they’ll be fired. They are scared, and the administrative staff reflect the Mayor and the Administrative Officer — if the admin head is a Brahmin and the Chairperson is Rajput, then you will see that the staff is either Brahmin or Rajput*”<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Interview (T2.1), October 1, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Interview T1B2.8, October 29, 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Interview T1B2.5, October 20, 2021.

<sup>83</sup> Interview T1B1.1.5, November 30, 2021; T1B1.1.6, November 29, 2021; Interview T1B2.3, November 12, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Interview T1B1.1.1, November 25, 2021.

Another Vice Chairperson, who was excluded from all decision-making during her entire mandate by the Mayor and AO, shared:

“*The administrative staff never come to the office. All the decisions are made in private at the Chairperson’s house. [I spoke with the Administrative Officer] and I told him it was not his duty to get involved in politics between myself and my Chairperson and that he should maintain a balance, especially because the Chair and I are from opposite parties. He shared that he fears the Chairperson might freeze his salary or take some other action against him. That is how the Chairperson abuses his powers*”<sup>85</sup>

The result is a culture of harassment that is deeply entrenched in leadership and bureaucratic structures, a culture in which authorities overstep and at times abuse their power, marginalising LEWRs into irrelevancy.

## **SPOTLIGHT** The Political Party

Political parties play less of a central role in the careers of LEWRs once they are elected, but they do assist in suppressing women’s political leadership. It was reported that political parties steered women almost exclusively to quota seats and suppressed their leadership to deputy-level posts during the 2017 elections. The vast majority of this study’s respondents (94 per cent) were elected as political party candidates and most of them (95.2 per cent) considered themselves active members of the party before they ran. Qualitative interviews revealed a complex story in which LEWRs contested the 2017 election via a variety of avenues and with different levels of experience yet were still treated as “quota women” by their respective political parties.

Some LEWRs report that the political party approached them to run due to their previous involvement in social work and community activism.<sup>86</sup> Others, confident in their professional experience and community support, approached the party to run.<sup>87</sup> Meanwhile, others report that community supporters put their names forward to the party due to their track record of getting things done.<sup>88</sup> A few LEWRs were obvious ‘lame duck candidates,’ chosen by the party to simply fill a quota seat, detracting from their general wealth of expertise and commitment. One LEWR had no knowledge that a political party nominated her for a position; when she won the seat, she did not know party’s name and that other Ward Members were elected.<sup>89</sup> Another respondent had never voted in an election before running herself. Some had last been active during the People’s Liberation Movement in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>90</sup>

Yet, despite these women’s diverse professional and political backgrounds, the political parties universally treat many as “women’s quota seats”. Many respondents report that both the political party and the election quota focused too much on quantity and not on the quality of participation, with another highly experienced LEWR complaining that the quota was like a “lottery” that required no skill to win.<sup>91</sup> A younger Dalit LEWR explained how she felt that Dalit women were only being

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<sup>85</sup> Interview T1B2.3, November 13, 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Interview T1B2.5, October 20, 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Interview T1B2.7, November 1, 2021. More than a few of the LEWRs we spoke to in qualitative interviews were previously journalists, suggesting that media work may be a pathway for women into politics.

<sup>88</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021.

<sup>89</sup> Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Interview T2.1, October 1, 2021; Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021; and Interview T1B1.1.5, November 30, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021; Interview T1.B2.5, October 20, 2021.

used by the party to fill quota seats and then given no power to do their job:

“ I sometimes feel that they are using me for political opportunism because I am a Dalit woman and they need me to fill the quota. When the time comes to contest for a better post, they will take someone else and render me into a disposable object.”<sup>92</sup>

During qualitative interviews, many LEWRs expressed deep resentment about having their political potential suppressed by being seen as instruments to fulfil quota numbers, instead of meaningful participants. LEWRs report being forced to run for a quota seat despite having a base of support from previous social activities and confidence that they could win an open seat. One LEWR expressed frustration that her leadership potential was suppressed and discussed the role of campaign financing in a context where — to use a common phrase in Nepal — “muscle and money” largely define power:

“ I was a contender for the Chairperson of a rural municipality, but I was given the position of Vice Chairperson. It was only because I am a woman, and clearly my leadership was doubted. I was also directly asked how much I could pay for the seat of the Chairperson. Men in the party give financing to other men who support the party [through ‘old boy networks’]. Women don’t have access to the kind of money elections require. I said I couldn’t pay, and they gave me the position of Vice Chairperson. My competency didn’t matter.”<sup>93</sup>

In light of the upcoming elections, many LEWRs highlighted their party’s role in putting them forward to contest but also making them financially dependent upon the party to run a viable campaign. They also expressed that political parties will need to change their attitude towards women’s political leadership as weak and ineffectual, since successful LEWR incumbents expect to advance their political status in the next election.

## 5.2 Communities

Outside of the institutional context, 15.3 per cent of LEWRs identified their communities as the second most likely context in which they experience VAWP. Again, LEWRs report psychological violence as the most common type of VAWP in communities. These behaviours included being questioned about their capacity to make decisions or represent the community because they are woman (8.6 per cent), thus obstructing them from fulfilling their duties. Others report being spoken to with offensive or indecent language because of their leadership roles or for decisions they made (5.7 per cent), and some report threats of physical harm against them or their family members due to their elected role (2.8 per cent).

Economic violence was the next most reported type of violence in communities (1.9 per cent), with LEWRs reporting that they have received threats and interference to their livelihood or employment because of their role or decisions in local government. Five respondents (0.8 per cent) report that their personal or family property had been destroyed or interfered with for this same reason.

Sexual harassment in the form of offensive sexual comments or jokes based on one’s gender or about one’s appearance or clothing was reported by 1.1 per cent of LEWRs.

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<sup>92</sup> Interview T2.2, September 16, 2021.

<sup>93</sup> Interview T2.1, October 1, 2021.

Qualitative interviews revealed how community-based violence served to reinforce restrictive and degrading cultural myths about women's roles in society — the very mores that make the institutional violence discussed earlier possible. Society sets the norms of acceptance around women's leadership, which then permeates the attitudes of political parties and institutions. Even more than the family, which will be discussed later, community members serve as stewards of culture and tradition, keeping surveillance on women and policing their public lives. Indeed, looking at the community's role in perpetuating VAWP, it becomes clear that VAWP in Nepal is most likely to occur in public spaces (as opposed to private spaces, as in intimate partner violence). This is the context in which LEWRs are most likely to be exercising their authority and fulfilling their responsibilities.

During one focus group, LEWRs shared how community members “refused to extend their cooperation” to them simply because they are women.<sup>94</sup> Others brought up how community gossip undermines women's legitimacy and ability, given that it is rooted in traditional beliefs that women cannot effectively lead and should be controlled by men. One focus group participant shared:

“ After I was elected, community members made comments like, ‘She is out of hand now, and she will go completely out of control!’ They questioned my ability and asked, ‘She is a woman so what can she really accomplish?’”<sup>95</sup>

Across interviews, public comments were described as intending to shame women for their political activity and push them back into the domestic sphere. Many times, these comments were of a sexualised nature. As shared by one Ward Member who was demeaned for coming out of the house to serve in public office, “People do and say things like, ‘Hey, look at her! There she goes, all dressed up’”.<sup>96</sup>

However, LEWRs not only face gossip and verbal harassment in communities. In fact, it is most often in the community that many encounter situations that escalate into dangerous threats and physical attacks. Indeed, numerous LEWRs identified the Judicial Committee, which is chaired by Deputy Mayors to resolve local-level disputes, as the site of many instances of VAWP involving attacks against themselves and their families. The respondents felt that it was because women chair these bodies, i.e. the Deputy Mayors, that conflict and intimidation were so easily provoked.

For example, one LEWR discussed a violent attack that she faced while investigating a case in the community as Chair of the Judicial Committee. A gang of young men in the neighbourhood surrounded her, stole her phone and physically attacked her. Police had to escort her out of the area for her own safety. “Otherwise, the gang would have caused severe harm to me,” she said. The gang was comprised of members of the community familiar to her and associated with the opposition party: “These people were all from the local community, and I know all of them. Not a single person was unknown to me.”<sup>97</sup>

Dalit women were more likely to bring up community violence than other women during qualitative interviews. A Dalit LEWR shared how a mob came to her home to protest her appointment to the Judicial Committee. As in the incident cited above, her family members were affected by the mob attack. In this incident, caste- and gender-based discrimination and violence are inextricably linked.

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<sup>94</sup> Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Interview T2.5, September 17, 2021.

<sup>97</sup> Interview T1B1.3.13, December 11, 2021.

“ They came at night, and they were all people known to me. They were from the opposition party. First, they started verbally abusing my husband and me. They demanded my husband come out of the house and hurled dirty insults against me. They said, ‘You are a woman! Stay inside your house and do not come outside to shame yourself! How dare you become a member of the Judicial Committee as a Dalit woman!’ My relatives in the area came out and helped chase them away. But they came back again with weapons.”<sup>98</sup>

## 5.2.1 The General Public and Village Elders are Common Perpetrators

Among those who report experiencing VAWP in communities, 79.8 per cent identified the perpetrator as someone from the general public, with 23.2 per cent specifically identifying a community or village elder. This was reported by both Dalit and non-Dalit respondents.

Responses diverged more among Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons, who more often identified perpetrators as village elders (54.5 per cent) and community activists (27.3 per cent) than Ward Members. During qualitative interviews, deputy-level LEWRs who reported having community support or deferring to elders seemed more successful in avoiding community conflict, even when problems arise. According to one: “I consult with people who are here in the community, more senior and experienced than me, and that’s allowed me to resolve the issues locally.”<sup>99</sup>

As the examples in the previous section indicate, community-based violence is often committed by the general public in the form of mobs. In many cases, these mobs were politicised, with political parties inflating small community problems. This causes ward-level LEWRs to become caught in the middle, becoming the local punching bag for irate citizens.<sup>100</sup>

## 5.2.2 Minority Communities Face Unique Challenges

Dalit, Indigenous and other women from minority groups face unique problems in communities. They must deal with inter-ethnic and inter-caste discrimination. LEWRs from one or more of these identities groups must also deal with intra-ethnic and intra-caste tensions within their own identity communities. Their political participation and exposure to community violence is complex.

Caste and ethnicity may intersect in myriad ways with identity, social status and political participation. One Ward Member who is Pahadi Dalit shared: “Not even people from the Dalit community support me. Rather, they question my character and assassinate my reputation whenever they have the opportunity”.<sup>101</sup> A Madhesi Vice Chairperson shared how inter-ethnic tensions, rather than caste, relate to her treatment by LGU staff:

“ The reason why the LGU staff treats me this way is because I am a Madhesi. They’re all Pahadis. They make fun of my language and pronunciation, and whenever I speak, they begin to laugh. It’s not right. I need to ask questions to learn, and it’s not good that they make fun of me each time. My caste does not play a role here; it is my Madhesi identity. I think they would do this to a man as well!”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Interview T1B2.7, December 2, 2021.

<sup>99</sup> Interview T1B1.2.10, December 6, 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Interview T1B2.9, December 6, 2021.

<sup>101</sup> Interview T1B2.6, November 11, 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Interview T1B1.1.2, November 24, 2021.

If, as one LEWR shared, “the older generations are the guardians of such practices,” then intergenerational differences may also be part of this fissure.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, in qualitative interviews, the intergenerational divide seems to cut deepest around the practice of *purdah* [segregating women to stay inside their homes], which cuts across ethnic, caste and religious groups.

In locales that practice *purdah*, the community plays a central role in enforcing traditional practices, according to the respondents. One LEWR from such a community shared:

*“I would take women to meetings with me so they could learn and follow my footsteps, but they stay in the house, and if they come out, they must wear a burqa and have a male escort. We are stopped from showing our faces and opening our mouths. If we disobey, we can be beaten [by the husband]”*<sup>104</sup>

The demands on LEWRs from minority communities are severe, as they described how their communities lack even the most basic of infrastructure. Muslim women were especially forthcoming, sharing how some areas lack schools and clinics as well as significant religious resources, like graveyards, mosques and madrasas. This points to added challenges for LEWRs in governing these communities.

### 5.3 Families

Because violence against women is about domination and control, the study also explored how women active in public leadership fare when it comes to household and family abuse, particularly as it relates to their political duties. The study revealed that families are a central gateway and support system for women to succeed in elections, particularly in Nepal’s patriarchal society, where males serve as gatekeepers. To be actively engaged in the political process in Nepal, LEWRs report having to navigate and negotiate various expectations and responsibilities, often with conflicting and competing demands in their families, communities and political life.

A total of 38 respondents (5.9 per cent) report experiencing violence in their families that was provoked by their political duties or had the result of impeding those duties. Among different types of violence, almost all of these respondents (31) most frequently report psychological violence in the form of verbal abuse – being criticised for being too independent, belittled for not keeping up with household duties and threatened or insulted for their political roles. Almost all of these respondents (34) report that a family member has tried to prevent her from running as a candidate.

Most survivors of VAWP in the family context report their spouse as the primary perpetrator (60.5 per cent), followed by nearly equal numbers of survivors identifying female in-laws (28.9 per cent) or male in-laws (26.3 per cent) as perpetrators. Of note, although there was no significant difference based on the caste of respondents, Dalit respondents were much less likely to identify a male in-law as an offender (16.7 per cent) than non-Dalit respondents (30.8 per cent).

During qualitative interviews, LEWRs discussed the bullying and intimidation they face from abusive spouses for undertaking their official duties — which, at times, eerily echoed their treatment in the institutional context:

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<sup>103</sup> Interview T1.B2.6, November 11, 2021.

<sup>104</sup> Interview T2.5, September 17, 2021.

“ He’s a man, and I think all men are like this. He says I’m too outspoken, and why do I have to talk so much? He’ll say, ‘You think you are big person now [that you’re elected]?’ So, it’s not easy to manage. There are good days and bad days, and I have to navigate both. Because of this I cannot make it to too many meetings.”<sup>105</sup>

In-laws were frequently mentioned as being involved in abuse, with extended family serving as a bridge to the larger community in perpetuating gender stereotypes about women’s roles and leadership. In the words of one younger LEWR: “Women live in constant fear of, ‘What will the in-laws say? What will society think?’” In a focus group discussion with Hill and Madhesi Indigenous women from Province 1, Madhesh Province and Lumbini Province, one participant described how she balances competing demands:

“ There are so many challenges that women [in elected roles] must face. There are the family-related challenges and then the challenges in the community. When you live in a joint family, especially, you have to be able to manage family first, before anything else. I come from a joint family. In the beginning, I was confronted with questions like, why am I always going outside? What is the point of my work when there is nothing to gain from it?”<sup>106</sup>

Across identity categories, the respondents identified household and family responsibilities as being the primary role of the “ideal woman” in Nepal. LEWRs expressed how this idea does not necessarily change when they take up an elected role:

“ They cannot give up or spoil their household responsibilities nor can they compromise their duty toward the people. They must balance both. They must think long and hard about this before standing for election. It can be done; we’ve learned a lot these past four years.”<sup>107</sup>

LEWRs report care burdens as the greatest reason for not attending official meetings, with 37.6 per cent reporting being busy with housework and 10.3 per cent reporting not having childcare as reasons they do not attend official meetings (see Figure 6). Logistical impediments (13.6 per cent report not having transportation and 10.7 per cent report the meeting was too far) can also be acute when LEWRs do not have access to family resources, such as telephones, motorbikes and disposable cash. Qualitative interviews also revealed that some impediments affect Dalit women in particular, including not having a suitable place to stay at night when attendance at a meeting requires an overnight stay or not having a gender-friendly toilet or access to other facilities due to caste (the kitchen, for example).

These challenges were brought to life during qualitative interviews. One woman walked for an hour to access internet and electricity to participate in the study. She shared her daily balancing act, which is at the crossroads of her family responsibilities and political life:

“ Despite my children being very small, I did not miss a single meeting, and I carried my baby in my arms with me at all times. In some cases, women who were only taking on household responsibilities before now need to adjust to going to the office and attending meetings, which are not in convenient locations or at convenient times — then, difficulties arise.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Interview T1B1.1.4, December 1, 2021.

<sup>106</sup> Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Interview T2.2, September 16, 2021.

Of course, families in Nepal are as diverse as its many ethnic and religious populations. Some Muslim respondents, though comprising a small number in the study sample, shared that their son or husband accompanies them to all meetings outside the house. According to Islamic custom, husbands can perform triple *talaq* at any time [divorce with immediate effect under Islamic law] to punish wives who “step over the line” or have received condemnation in the community.<sup>109</sup> The custom is not banned or criminalised in Nepal.

The customs of Madhesi women leaders were also frequently mentioned across interviews. One Madhesi LEWR complained that other Madhesi women leaders are “always accompanied by their husbands to meetings, and all the work is done by their husbands and the wife only gives the signature. With such a lack of capacity, we will always be subordinate to men, even if we are elected”.<sup>110</sup>

The experiences of Dalit women across other identity categories are also complex, reminding us that no one concept of family and women’s roles within them is sufficient. One respondent shared with us:

“*When talking about Dalit women, Madhesi Dalit women still lag far behind when compared with Pahadi Dalit. We are less educated, we have less exposure, we are still guided by men and our mobility is controlled. We must first carefully consider, what will the family say? The mother-in-law, the brother-in-law, anyone and everyone around. We are still not as free as the Pahadi. They don’t need to think about these things, but we do. We are much more controlled*”<sup>111</sup>

## 5.4 Media and Social Media

Media and social media were reported as the least common contexts in which VAWP takes place. Among the respondents, 4.8 per cent report having experienced violence in the media, including being misquoted and having false information about them published.

The respondents report high levels of social media usage (57.7 per cent). Among those who use social media, 4.3 per cent report being the brunt of offensive, hateful or threatening comments or posts in regard to their gender, caste or ethnicity. Dalit respondents report being more likely to experience violence on social media (6.25 per cent) compared with non-Dalit respondents (3.6 per cent). Single (unmarried) respondents report higher levels of violence in the context of social media.

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<sup>109</sup> Interview T2.5, September 17, 2021.

<sup>110</sup> Interview T2.1, October 1, 2021.

<sup>111</sup> Interview T1B2.4, November 12, 2021.

6

**REPORTING AND  
HELP-SEEKING  
BEHAVIORS**

# 6

## REPORTING AND HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIORS

### **SPOTLIGHT** Awareness and Perceptions of Violence

As described in interviews, the political arena in Nepal is aggressive and violent, often explained as favouring those with “muscle and money”. Violence is the norm, and being the target of threats, intimidation and harassment is assumed as the price one has to pay for being in politics.

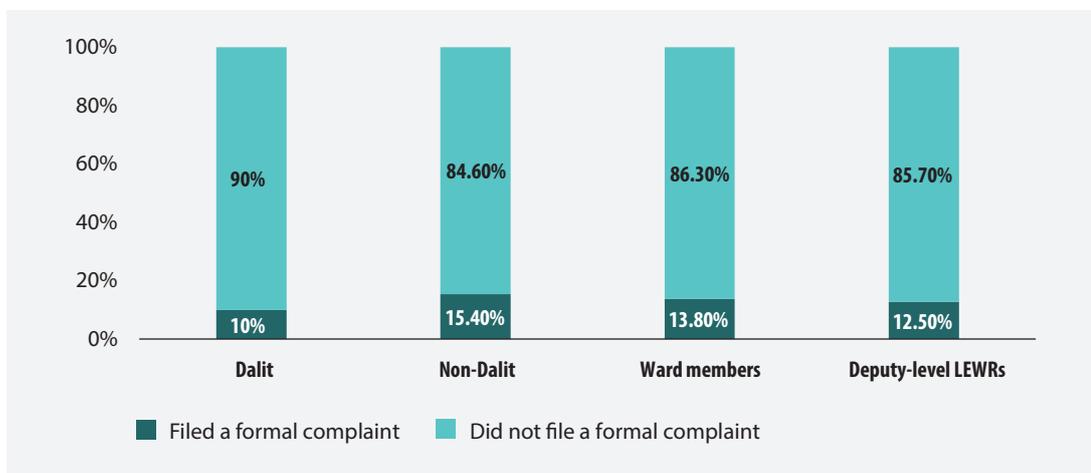
When asked about their own attitudes towards violence in politics, many LEWRs indicated they had normalised and internalised violence as part of their political experience. However, slightly more than half of all respondents (51.5 per cent) believed such violence is *not* normal, and 92 per cent believe something should be done to address it. While Dalit respondents were slightly more likely to view violence in politics as normal than non-Dalit respondents (50.4 per cent compared with 44.6 per cent), they agreed in equal numbers that something could be done to prevent it.

Out of all 648 LEWRs surveyed, one-third of them (32.6 per cent) are aware of the Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Act (2015). This is the most relevant law in Nepal covering acts of violence against elected women, especially acts that impede women for undertaking their elected duties (this very study has found that VAWP most frequently takes place in the LGU context). Awareness was higher among deputy-level LEWRs (60.4 per cent) than Ward Members (28 per cent). It was also lower among Dalit respondents (24.9 per cent) than non-Dalit (36.9 per cent).

### 6.1 Very Few LEWRs Formally Report

Out of all respondents who report experiencing VAWP, only 13.5 per cent filed a formal complaint, with more non-Dalits (15.4 per cent) than Dalits (10 per cent) doing so. There was little difference in reporting between deputy-level LEWRs and Ward Members. See Figure 7 below.

**Figure 7** PROPORTION FILING A COMPLAINT, DALIT AND NON-DALIT, DEPUTY-LEVEL AND WARD MEMBERS



Among those who reported violence, slightly more than half (51.9 per cent) reported to the police and 22 per cent filed a complaint to the Chairperson or Vice Chairperson of their ward. A smaller number (14.8 per cent) reported to the (municipal) Judicial Committee and 11.1 per cent reported to the Mayor or Deputy Mayor.

Those who experienced physical violence were most likely to report (46.2 per cent), followed by those who experienced sexual harassment (23.1 per cent). Economic violence (17.9 per cent) and psychological violence (14.4 per cent) were the least reported. None of the three LEWRs who report experiencing sexual violence filed a formal complaint. See Table 5.

**Table 5** PROPORTION OF FILING A FORMAL COMPLAINT ACCORDING TO TYPES OF VIOLENCE

Type of Violence	Filed a Formal Complaint		Did Not File a Formal Complaint	
	Count	%	Count	%
Physical Violence	6	46.2%	7	53.8%
Sexual Harassment	6	23.1%	20	76.9%
Economic Violence	7	17.9%	32	82.1%
Psychological Violence	26	14.4%	155	85.6%
Sexual Violence	0	0%	3	100%
Other Violence	0	0%	2	100%

These findings suggest that violence perceived as more severe (physical violence) is most frequently reported, while violence perceived as “normal” (or normalised) is less reported. The result is that the most common type of VAWP experienced by LEWRs — psychological violence in the institutional, community and family contexts — is the least reported. Qualitative interviews suggest that LEWRs thought their experiences would be discounted or disbelieved and that the reporting process would also expose them to further psychological trauma, with little to gain in the end and their confidentiality left in the balance.

Formal reporting came with mixed and even weak results. Indeed, out of 27 formal complaints filed, the most common outcomes were either no punishment (33.3 per cent) or the perpetrator being ordered to apologise and/or change their behaviour (33.3 per cent). In four cases the perpetrator was arrested, in two cases the perpetrator was reprimanded (suspended, demoted, a note made to permanent record, etc.) and in only one single case was the perpetrator ordered to pay compensation. Four complaints are recorded as still pending, while the remaining five respondents report other outcomes in their cases, including being made to settle the case and cooperate with the perpetrator.

Non-Dalit respondents are more likely to receive a positive outcome than Dalit respondents when filing a formal complaint. Indeed, Dalit respondents report that not a single case led to arrests, reprimands or compensation. Dalit complaints resulted more commonly in an ordered apology or no punishment at all. Dalit respondents also report higher rates of complaints still pending (28.6 per cent for Dalit LEWRs compared with 10 per cent for non-Dalits), suggesting a weak follow-through process for these cases. These weak results exist, despite caste-based discrimination being categorised as a criminal and punishable offence.

With such outcomes, it is not surprising to see that most of those who filed a formal complaint report not being satisfied with the results (55.6 per cent). That number climbs to 71.4 per cent among Dalit

complainants. Ward Members (63.6 per cent) also report higher rates of dissatisfaction than deputy-level respondents (20 per cent), suggesting that authority figures may trivialise the cases of LEWRs in lower positions.

### **6.1.2 Many Minimise VAWP as “Normal”**

The remaining 86.5 per cent of respondents who experienced violence report that they did not file a formal complaint.

Many respondents (46.8 per cent) said that the issue was too minor or not serious enough to warrant a complaint and 21.4 per cent of respondents believed that the incident needed to be addressed politically and not legally, a finding that suggests they minimised its significance as a potential crime. Both findings reinforce the idea that LEWRs should regard abuse in the political sphere as normal and that LEWRs are “better seen than heard,” so to speak. In the words of one Ward Member:

“*What can I report? There is nothing explicit; everything is implicit. I don’t even know how to put these things in words. I can feel it, but I cannot say it. I am telling you about these things, but I have actually not shared this with anyone else*”<sup>112</sup>

Responses reveal a lack of confidence in the reporting system, with 7.5 per cent reporting they did not think the existing justice system would help or feared they would not be believed (2.9 per cent). Results also show that LEWRs were somehow obstructed from reporting, either through inaction, active obstruction or confusion over the reporting process. LEWRs report that the LGU did not provide them with support or the help they requested (5.8 per cent), the reporting process was too complicated (4.0 per cent), they were stopped or discouraged from filing the complaint (3.5 per cent), they were unaware of formal measures against this behaviour (2.9 per cent) or they were stopped by the offender (2.3 per cent). Their responses further revealed that concerns about privacy, stigma and shame kept them from filing a formal report, and many feared their confidentiality might not be protected (3.5 per cent).

Twenty-three per cent of respondents report various “other” reasons for not reporting. Out of 40 other reasons for not filing a formal complaint, 11 said that they resolved the issue informally; seven said it was because their husbands, relatives or neighbours were the perpetrator; and two report that the perpetrator apologised. Their other reasons included not wanting to make the issue bigger by filing a formal complaint, that the perpetrator was a person of power or that they thought the perpetrator “wouldn’t change,” so a complaint felt pointless.

Qualitative interviews added more layers and context to the survey responses, revealing a pattern in which LEWRs are incentivised to *not* formally report lest they face reprisals and intensified political exclusion. During an interview, one respondent refused to discuss her case until “after my term is over;”<sup>113</sup> seemingly fearing political retaliation. LEWR respondents described filing VAWP complaints as an instance in which they shouldn’t “rock the boat,” so to speak. They described it as something better to reconcile quietly, within their own ranks.

Respondents also report that, rather than address their complaints, the police and other authorities minimised their experiences. Fearing this scenario, others chose not to report at all. According to a

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<sup>112</sup> Interview T1B1.2.9, December 6, 2021.

<sup>113</sup> Interview T1.B1.3.12, December 11, 2021.

respondent who faced attempted sexual assault: “Yes, my case should have been reported. But what is the point when I know the police will do nothing? I am sure the police would have made fun of me and done nothing”.<sup>114</sup>

In a case where an attempted attack against a LEWR was reported to police and arrests were made, the LEWR shared that “the police could have done better:”

“ I was not even informed that they [the perpetrators] were being released. I still face threats from these people today. We are a family of four — two children, my husband and me. They say things like, ‘Out of the four, one will be taken away soon.’ This is a fear that I live with.”<sup>115</sup>

Those from minority communities described their trust in the police as especially low – that calling authorities could be tantamount to betrayal, exposing the community’s problems to “outsiders.” During the interviews, Muslim respondents frequently expressed this sentiment, with one noting:

“ The first place we go is to the Maulana [chief priest of the mosque]. We [the Muslim community] like to solve problems amongst ourselves as a first resort. Going to the police means a loss of prestige for the family and community.”<sup>116</sup>

A Dalit LEWR sardonically shared the plight of her community when calling authorities against powerful people: “There’s no use going to the police; it’s more likely I’ll be punished instead”.<sup>117</sup> The lack of such recourse highlights the precarity of LEWRs from these communities and the challenges they face in accessing justice.

More than a few LEWRs shared how, even if complaint mechanisms exist, it is not clear to them what is covered under the law, especially since so much of the aggression they face seems intentionally implicit. This was particularly true for Deputy Mayors, who are effectively barred from filing complaints with the Judicial Committee, which they chair, due to the conflict of interest.<sup>118</sup> One LEWR in leadership was jettisoned between the LGU and the political party and while she was eventually able to file a complaint in the District Office, no action was taken. Another LEWR, who was subject to lewd comments by male Ward Members, shared:

“ I don’t know if it is a form of sexual harassment, but I feel harassed by such remarks. See, this is the worst part: we cannot even tell clearly whether what is being said or done actually falls under sexual harassment.”<sup>119</sup>

The power and influence of perpetrators also informed LEWR’s reluctance to formally report. Respondents shared how the “court favours only those with money and power.” A Vice Chairperson, who had filed a formal complaint in the District Court against her Chair, did not expect much of a result. She shared: “[He] holds influence everywhere. He has the money to buy everyone off, and hence no action is ever taken against him”.<sup>120</sup> In her case, the perpetrator was from the opposition

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<sup>114</sup> Interview T1.B1.1.17, December 14, 2021.

<sup>115</sup> Interview T1B1.3.13, December 11, 2021.

<sup>116</sup> Interview T2.5, September 17, 2021.

<sup>117</sup> Interview T1B2.6, November 11, 2021.

<sup>118</sup> Interview T1B1.3.13, December 11, 2021.

<sup>119</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021.

<sup>120</sup> Interview T1B1.3.13, December 11, 2021.

party. However, the respondent also pointed out the following: “For others who have a Mayor or Chairperson from the same party, they do not even get to openly oppose this treatment because they are suppressed by the party as well”.

Indeed, the political party, when mentioned in interviews related to reporting complaints, was most often described as neither helpful nor obstructionist. One respondent who had reported her case to the party stated:

“ No, the party is not helpful in these matters. They have the attitude of, ‘It’s your problem, so you sort it out.’ They did not stop me in my complaint, but they also did not provide any kind of support.”<sup>121</sup>

When the party does become involved, it was more often to encourage reconciliation and downplay formal reporting. One LEWR shared:

“ The party initially did not even want me to file a case. They asked me to take a compromise. But I denied the offer, saying [the perpetrators] needed to learn their lesson. They cannot treat women like this and get away with it. I stood my ground, and I filed a First Information Report. I think if the party had supported me, I would have had better results.”<sup>122</sup>

Other respondents shared how even approaching the LGU through the proper, formal channels resulted in no action being taken. In contrast, others report that, with the support of the party, the LGU or both, positive outcomes seem almost guaranteed:

“ The party has been very supportive. How do you think I would have managed to lodge a complaint, and they also acted on it? If I had acted alone, who would have listened? No one.”<sup>123</sup>

In contrast, another LEWR – a Madhesi Vice Chairperson who made several complaints to multiple bodies and even convened public meetings with community members and officials about her VAWP experience – worked through the formal governmental administration, with little result. Again, rather than explicit resistance, she faced a tripartite of stonewalling from male political leaders, bureaucratic administrators and the political party.

“ No, I did not formally report because I knew it would not yield any result. I filed a [First Information Report] request, and I have not been able to avail myself of that either. Each time I ask, they say they will provide it, but they never do. So I am thinking I will wait a month before taking it up with the higher authorities. I voiced my problems, but they only listened. No action has been taken. I haven’t faced retaliation for being outspoken, but I also haven’t received any support.”<sup>124</sup>

## 6.2 Most Survivors Informally Report

Many LEWRs may not formally report their VAWP experiences, but they report undertaking other coping strategies that involve their colleagues, friends and family — in short, informal reporting. More than three-quarters (76.5 per cent) of survivors report having discussed their VAWP experience informally. See Figure 8.

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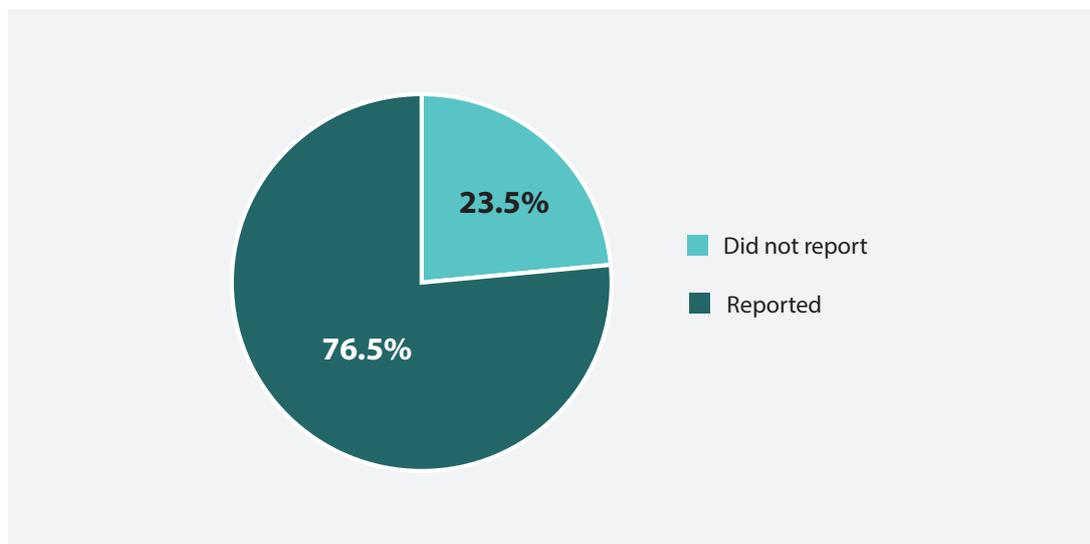
<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Interview T1B1.2.10, December 6, 2021.

<sup>123</sup> Interview T1B2.4, November 12, 2021.

<sup>124</sup> Interview T1B1.1.1, November 25, 2021.

**Figure 8** PREVALENCE OF INFORMAL REPORTING (percentage of VAWP survivors)



### 6.2.1 Most Informally Report to Family Members and Close Friends

More than half of the survivors interviewed (56.5 per cent) identified family members as their main confidants, again revealing the importance of families as a source of support for LEWRs. This was followed by the survivors' friends (51 per cent), colleagues in the LGU (43 per cent) and colleagues in their political parties (43 per cent). There was no significant statistical difference when these results were examined for Dalit and deputy-level LEWRs.

### 6.2.2 Many LEWRs Speak Out Publicly About VAWP

Outside of confiding in friends, family and colleagues, LEWRs also aired their grievances and spoke out publicly about their VAWP experiences at local government meetings (50.3 per cent of survivors), public community meetings (35.3 per cent) and political party meetings (35.3 per cent). LEWRs also report speaking out through local NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) (9.2 per cent of survivors) and through the media or on social media (7.2 per cent). Here, there was a difference along caste/ethnic lines, with Dalit respondents less likely to speak out publicly. This finding suggests that Dalit LEWRs feel unsafe while occupying public spaces and that they operate in a hostile political environment, foreclosing an important avenue to find resolution and redress for VAWP.

Qualitative interviews suggest an intergenerational shift, with younger Dalit and other women from minority communities being more vocal. One interviewee compared herself with her elder counterparts:

“ There are so many things that will persist in our society when you are a woman and a Dalit woman at that. We are led by men with a patriarchal mindset, but I have the ability to answer them back.”<sup>125</sup>

Some LEWRs report that they had success once they pointed out their authority to carry out their elected obligations under the law. Indeed, one way that LEWRs described how they “answered back”

<sup>125</sup> Interview T2.2, September 16, 2021

was by assuming their full responsibilities and duties, despite facing resistance and obstacles. One Deputy Mayor from a minority community shared:

“ We are not as physically powerful as men, so we cannot take up physical fights in politics like they do and we have to use our brains a lot more. We need to be smarter and more strategic. That is the only way we can win. For instance, when the LGU administrative staff tried to override my decisions, I took up self-study of all the policies and rules on the books. We need to find our way through the existing regulations and law. That is the way I got them to let me do my work and penetrated my way through.”<sup>126</sup>

Some LEWRs used social change strategies from their pre-election professional lives as community activists to effect change in their LGU, while others described how, the more they learned about the processes of the LGU, the more confident they became to speak out about their exclusion and VAWP experiences. Some women have banded together to stage protests in their municipal councils. Others have taken dramatic actions that attracted media and greater exposure.

Yet, in many cases, there is doubt over how successful these efforts were in providing change and positive outcomes. One complainant explained:

*“I had organised a public meeting in the community after the incident happened. There was everyone from the LGU staff, the community and the political party. But that meeting was just a meeting, and nothing came out of it. It went in one ear and out the other.”*<sup>127</sup>

### 6.2.3 The Most Common Response to VAWP is Silence and De-Escalation

As has already been suggested, a common strategy undertaken by LEWRs is to deflect and de-escalate incidents related to VAWP. To do otherwise is to expose oneself to retaliation and further exclusion. Containment strategies seem especially important in a context where violence is the norm. One Deputy Mayor, who experienced VAWP from a LGU colleague, shared: “Whatever he says, whatever happens, I simply smile. I am a woman, fighting with grace. If I was a man, a physical fight would have taken place by now.”<sup>128</sup>

One LEWR compared this strategy to the travails of Sita, the heroine of the Hindu epic poem, *Ramayana*:

“ Of course, I have been under tremendous stress. But I know that things are not easy for women, and I must put up a strong fight. It is like in the *Ramayana*. Sita was taken to the jungle by her brother-in-law to be killed, but he had pity on her and let her live. She then had to raise her children, alone in the jungle, for all those years. The moral of the story is that it has never been easy for women, and I have to move on under any circumstances.”<sup>129</sup>

The idea of steadfast Sita keeping her eye on the goal, even while minimising or ignoring her own suffering, was a continual theme during qualitative interviews. Having a basis of support, such as

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<sup>126</sup> Interview T1B2.8, October 29, 2021.

<sup>127</sup> Interview T1B1.2.10, December 6, 2021.

<sup>128</sup> Interview T1B2.3, September 24, 2021.

<sup>129</sup> Interview T1B1.3.13, December 11, 2021.

family, makes ignoring slights and insults easier and perhaps safer. One Muslim Ward Member shared:

“ *In the community, there will always be some people who support you and others who will oppose you, gossiping that you are a woman who is out of control. My own community gossiped that I was going out shamelessly [when I started working outside home in different organisations]. They are going to say that I am shameless no matter what I do, so you just have to ignore them and move ahead. That is what my husband and I have chosen to do — ignore those people.*<sup>130</sup>

To recall a quote about deputy-level LEWRs, and one that can be extended to the general expectation of women LEWRs: “You know, the Deputy is the equivalent to silence [*up = chup*; deputy = silence]. I am only supposed to nod my head in agreement. I cannot contest or resist.”<sup>131</sup>

In interview after interview, LEWRs shared how adopting a stance of strategic silence, much like Sita, allowed them to achieve their goals. In the midst of resistance to their leadership, LEWRs describe distributing COVID-19 vaccines, funding schools and teachers, expanding citizenship enrolment for Dalit women and providing women with reproductive healthcare, among other accomplishments.

But these achievements may have come at the cost of repressing their own trauma. After being deeply offended by caste-based discrimination, one Dalit respondent said: “I felt humiliated, but I did not do anything about it as it would have only escalated things, and nothing good would come out of it.”<sup>132</sup>

## 6.2.4

### VAWP Provokes Both Divisions and Solidarity Among LEWRs

Some of the study’s oldest respondents were politically active during the 1990 People’s Movement (*Jana Andolan*), which replaced absolute monarchy with constitutional monarchy and was marked by unity among political parties. Some of the respondents remember that unity and note the complexity of today’s political landscape. That complexity has made women’s solidarity — including around VAWP — difficult at best and nearly impossible when challenged with political interference. While some vocal women did not adopt Sita’s quiet fortitude, they also felt vulnerable when their sister LEWRs were silent. According to one active Ward Member:

“ *Women in the wards are mostly docile. They will approve everything and anything without question, which creates problems for me when I do ask questions. If they were a bit more vocal, it would have made things much easier for me.*<sup>133</sup>

A Madhesi Vice Chairperson who serves on the executive committee shared:

“ *The other women on the committee don’t seem to understand anything. They come to the meetings and do not speak a word, and then they sign whatever they are asked to sign. They feel shy in front of men, and they always have their heads covered. This is actually very problematic. If they spoke up in meetings, it would be great support for me.*<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Interview T2.5, September 17, 2021.

<sup>131</sup> Interview T1B2.1, November 15, 2021.

<sup>132</sup> Interview T1B2.6, November 11, 2021.

<sup>133</sup> Interview T1B1.1.1, November 30, 2021.

<sup>134</sup> Interview T1B2.1.1, November 15, 2021.

The divide may be attributed in part to a generational shift, with younger women more likely to challenge the “old guard.” One young Ward Member shared:

“*That is what I hear from everyone — I am too extroverted. Well, I can’t tolerate when I see an injustice, and I speak up when I see things are wrong, and people don’t like that. I won’t feel guilty about being outspoken or taking a stand. But because I am young and I am woman, even the other women Ward Members do not approve — they are very introverted and do whatever is asked by the male leaders. They are also quite old, and there is no way they are going to speak up*”<sup>135</sup>

Because so few women do speak out against their exclusion, those who do are framed as “trouble-makers,” putting them at higher risk of VAWP, as discussed earlier. Women in deputy-level leadership roles, closest to the higher rings of power, were most likely to speak up, especially around the misuse of political power. When one Deputy Mayor began to probe irregularities in the municipality, she found herself harassed and stonewalled by the Mayor and AO:

“*When I question [about possible corruption], I become the bad person and marked as the troublemaker. Yes, I have been branded the troublemaker only for wanting to do my work properly*”<sup>136</sup>

During qualitative interviews, stories emerged of women banding together to demand access to information and their authority, but, generally, women were divided on political and ideological grounds, which prove hard to surmount. As shown throughout the study, deputy-level LEWRs face the greatest obstacles when it comes to VAWP preventing them from undertaking their duties. They have the greatest incentive to network for solidarity, but such efforts have not been successful. One Deputy Mayor explained:

“*We tried to form a group of all of the women Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons so that we could support each other when difficulties arise. We could form a strong support system for one another. But we never managed the required effort. We exchanged numbers and contact information, but nothing ever came of it. So, there is a lack of unity, I guess, and that is a problem*”<sup>137</sup>

When asked about the best way forward to improve the situation of VAWP against LEWRs in Nepal, one Vice Chairperson answered simply:

“*Women need to start speaking up for themselves, and they need to support each other. I think that is the only way things will get better*”<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Interview T1B1.1.4, November 12, 2021.

<sup>136</sup> Interview T1B1.1.5, November 30, 2021.

<sup>137</sup> Interview T1B2.1.1, November 15, 2021.

<sup>138</sup> Interview (T1.B1.3.12, December 11, 2021.

# 7 | IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

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VAWP may manifest most commonly in the form of micro-aggressions, yet its consequences and impact can be huge. Among those who experienced VAWP, 39 per cent indicate that it damaged their psychological well-being, with Dalit members reporting even higher numbers at 43.1 per cent (compared with 31.4 per cent for non-Dalit respondents). At the same time, 20 per cent of respondents report that it damaged their ability to perform their official duties.

Yet even while facing such obstacles, LEWRs proved generally resilient. Many of them have improved their skills and strengthened their constituencies as a response to counteract VAWP. Rather than be deterred, many report a strengthened commitment to continuing their political careers.

## 7.1 “Fed Up” and Will Not Run Again

A total of 14.4 per cent of respondents will not run again, with slightly higher numbers among Dalit LEWRs (15.9 per cent). During qualitative interviews, those stepping aside overwhelmingly discussed their plans to remain politically active and support other women running next election. In surveys, advancing age and wanting to give other women a chance to contest were identified as the most common reasons for not running again.

During qualitative interviews, finances and political party support loomed large over the respondents’ decisions to run. Many accused political parties of favouring male candidates for open competition, which they described as protecting male privilege. One LEWR explains:

“*Our elections are very costly, and [most] women don’t have access to the kinds of resources that I do. That discourages women from contesting elections, despite their capabilities. There needs to be changes made around this so that women can contest with confidence and without having to depend so much on their families or party’s finances*”<sup>139</sup>

LEWRs who experienced obstruction, VAWP and plan to not run again expressed disgust, frustration and exhaustion. A common expression of this sentiment: “I am tired and fed up!” Deputy-level LEWRs, who have faced the greatest interference in accomplishing their duties, were the most likely to connect their “lame duck” status with their choice to not run for re-election: “I do not feel like I will run again because what is the point of contesting an election when I am not allowed to do anything if I win?”<sup>140</sup>

These LEWRs were also the most likely to say they will only run again if they stand for a higher position, where their authority will not be under constant restrictions. One Deputy Mayor LEWR, who is still weighing her options, said:

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<sup>139</sup> Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021.

<sup>140</sup> Interview T1B1.2.9, December 6, 2021.

“No, I do not plan to contest again. I am so done with this. There are too many problems. Especially if the party offers me the position of Deputy Mayor [again], I will not contest. I will only contest if I am offered the position of Mayor. The Deputy Mayor faces nothing but interference and not being able to do your work. Now, I will only contest for Mayor or higher.”<sup>141</sup>

## 7.2 Strengthened Resolve and Commitment to Politically Advance

One-third of the respondents (31 per cent) report that their experience with VAWP strengthened their resolve to stay in office (compared with 8.6 per cent reporting that it damaged their prospects and 58 per cent reporting no impact). There was little difference among Dalit respondents, who reported that their prospects had improved (30 per cent). The majority of all survey respondents (76.7 per cent) report they will run again in the upcoming election, with one-third (33 per cent) looking to advance to a higher position (although this was lower among Dalit respondents, at 25.3 per cent). Deputy-level LEWRs (46.6 per cent) are much more likely to run again as compared with their ward-level counterparts (22.1 per cent). When looking exclusively at survivors, that number rises to 81 per cent, who report that they plan to run again, suggesting a strengthened resolve. See Table 6.

**Table 6 VICTIM/NON-VICTIM BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS RUNNING AGAIN FOR ELECTIONS**

Do you plan to run again in the upcoming local elections?	Victims		Non-Victims		Total	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
No/Not Sure	38	19%	113	25.3%	151	23.4%
Yes (for a higher position, for the same seat or not sure which position)	162	81%	335	74.7%	497	76.6%

One distinct way in which LEWRs transformed their exclusion from political life into success was to turn towards their communities and dedicate themselves to governance through consultations. When one Vice Chairperson found herself repeatedly excluded from formal meetings and therefore decision-making, she stopped trying to be included in the meetings and instead gained trust in her constituency by assisting with mediation and dispute resolution. She soon garnered respect and recognition. “People listen to me,” she said. “They see me accomplishing my duties.”<sup>142</sup> When locked out of formal venues, LEWRs repeatedly discussed how they refocused on their local community, wanting to garner the community’s confidence in their ability to deliver results and solidify electoral support.

While mentioning a sharp learning curve, LEWRs were genuinely proud of what they were able to deliver to communities. Even those who might serve as proxy seats report real gains, such as now being able to get to and attend official meetings without an escort. One Ward Member shared:

“You must have heard that there are many representatives who were only just brought in and told they must be a local representative. I am one of those. The first year was the most difficult. But slowly I learned, and people began to trust me to deliver services to them.”<sup>143</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Interview T1B1.3.13, December 11, 2021.

<sup>142</sup> Interview T2.5, September 17, 2021.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

Optimism was expressed across the spectrum of respondents, especially among Ward Members. For some LEWRs, the opportunity to serve as an elected representative has entailed a seismic shift in their lives, with these last four years serving as a learning investment for future mandates. One Muslim LEWR shared:

“ I definitely plan to contest the next election. I have already moved out of the house [purdah], and I cannot go back to staying home again. I was a naïve person when I first started this position, but now I have handled a budget. I have learned so much in these four years, and in my next mandate I will be using those learnings. I have done good work, and the community trusts me and will support me.”<sup>144</sup>

Many LEWRs mentioned “trust” during interviews, particularly in relation to gaining the public’s confidence that women are not corrupt, like some of their male counterparts. A fair share of LEWRs mentioned that they want to run again so that they can use their new capabilities to advance women’s status and conditions in particular. Many LEWRs, even those not planning to run again, expressed a commitment to pay forward the opportunities they themselves have enjoyed.

“ I am a model for others to follow now. I have laid so much groundwork, and now other women can follow in my footsteps. If we don’t move ahead today, women will continue to be oppressed tomorrow.”<sup>145</sup>

Even those with great challenges (low education, poverty and geographic remoteness) expressed optimism. Using a community-centric approach to governance-through-consultation, LEWRs report being able to overcome a myriad of obstacles, changing the face of governance and politics from confrontational to cooperative. One LEWR, who allocates the school budget by consulting with teachers, shared:

“ I cannot read or write, but I seek help from everyone I can approach. I am not educated, but I think the most important skill is being aware and conscious about what is happening in the community by talking to people. I build relationships, and I make space for women from other communities as well, and they reciprocate by including me.”<sup>146</sup>

Another LEWR described how she takes whatever opportunity she can to learn more: “I seek advice from the other Ward Members, from my seniors in the party and in the administrative staff, even from my juniors.”<sup>147</sup> That way, she explains, she ensures buy-in and avoids “backlash”. In being able to deliver for her constituents, even while negotiating the resistance she experiences to her leadership, she gains community respect and prestige: “It is also a matter of pride to be elected and involved in politics”.

The increase in status and prestige conferred to LEWRs by virtue of being public officials may also inform family relations and help improve abusive situations. Of those who experienced violence in the family before being elected, 78 per cent report that the abuse decreased after they took up their elected role. One such situation is included below and deserves an extended quotation for the complexities it highlights. The respondent describes the intersection of the personal and political

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<sup>144</sup> Interview T2.3, September 24, 2021.

<sup>145</sup> Interview 2.5, September 17, 2021.

<sup>146</sup> Interview T1B2.7, November 1, 2021.

<sup>147</sup> Interview T2.4, October 8, 2021.

in how LEWRs experience abuse as well the role of other elected women in providing support. She shared:

“ Before I was elected, I was a [profession]. If by any chance I was late coming home from work, my husband would verbally abuse me. He never used physical abuse, but the verbal abuse was extreme... My name was finalised for the position of Ward Member by the political party, and the Ward Chair [candidate] and others first went to inform my husband, saying, ‘Your wife has been selected by the party to contest election for the position of Ward Member.’ My husband approved, and so they came to inform me. He is the one who knew first and agreed to it.

*After I was elected, he accompanied me everywhere, to every meeting, waiting for me outside the meeting hall for hours. One day, a friend of mine who is my fellow Ward Member and party member, came to my husband and explained to him that he could trust me and should change his behaviour towards me. She must have spent an hour explaining things to him. First, he had come to all those meetings, so he understood the nature of my work. Second, she helped him understand that he could change his behaviour. Both things helped improve the situation”<sup>148</sup>*

# 8

# RECOMMENDATIONS



## RECOMMENDATIONS

***Clarify, strengthen and enforce policies, laws and the roles of government entities to monitor and respond to VAWP complaints (through an intersectional approach).***

Given the prevalence of VAWP as shown in the study, an appropriate government response to VAWP is urgently needed to ensure access to justice for all survivors through a clear, confidential and accessible reporting mechanism and related support system, including provisions for legal, psychosocial and health-related services. Both reporting mechanisms and support services should account for intersectional discrimination and obstacles, particularly based on caste, religion and language, and address the study's finding that suggests poor outcomes for Dalit LEWRs who come forward as survivors of VAWP.

No law explicitly addresses VAWP as distinct from other forms of violence in Nepal. VAWP and violence against women in public life should be explicitly legislated against and must cover voters, aspirants and candidates, elected officials, activists and other public life actors. An entirely new law could be developed through an intersectional approach that explicitly addresses multiple forms of discrimination faced by women in minority communities. Existing laws could also be reformed to include violence perpetrated against women in political activities and linked to both domestic violence legislation and laws related to caste-based discrimination.

During research for this study, it was pointed out that the Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Act is ambiguous in what it covers and how it is worded, raising questions over whether the law covers VAWP among elected officials, since it describes a relation between a person of "authority" and a "worker". The law, formulated before the localisation of governance implemented during the 2017 elections, should be reviewed for its applicability within the three tiers of government. Such a review should highlight accountability for VAWP; emphasise violence against women in public life, direct and indirect discrimination and intersecting forms of discrimination based on caste and ethnicity; and outline effective remedies for survivors.

A review of the Local Governance Act is needed to ensure LEWRs at all levels are able to exercise their power and authority and fulfil their mandated functions, including in relation to the roles and responsibilities of LGU bureaucratic staff. The Act should be reformed to better distinguish the powers and authorities of Deputy Mayors and Vice Chairpersons from Mayors and Chairs, so as to keep the duties of these positions in alignment with, yet distinct, from each other. This would allow deputy-level LEWRs to better exercise their political powers.

Ministries and relevant agencies mandated to oversee local government should work to strengthen reporting and investigation mechanisms within LGUs. Codes of Conduct for each LGU specifically addressing VAWP should be developed and widely promulgated, reporting mechanisms clearly explained and investigations and outcomes consistently monitored.

Better enforcement of existing laws is needed, along with gender-sensitivity trainings for the police and judiciary on the nature and types of VAWP experienced by LEWRs in Nepal. This could improve investigations and prosecutions of VAWP.

Although campaign financing and the election period were topics beyond the purview of this study, they were frequently brought up during interviews. For all future elections, the ECN should use the power of the Code of Conduct to explicitly define and prohibit VAWP, enforce penalties for it during elections and track incidents for further action and response. In addition, monitoring campaign financing is urgently needed to provide an enabling environment in which LEWRs can continue to strengthen gains in their governance capabilities. Indeed, campaign financing is one of the key barriers that LEWRs identified as preventing them from seeking re-election. When campaign financing is distributed unequally, based on gender biases, it contributes to direct and structural economic violence against women political actors.

***Increase accountability of political parties in promoting women's political leadership and addressing VAWP against LEWRs.***

Despite the ECN's rules, regulations and authority to levy penalties, no political party in Nepal has fulfilled the requirement of having women represent one-third of its party leadership, as of the time of publishing this report. Regulations should be enforced and parties who do not meet requirements should be de-certified until corrections are made.

Political parties will need to begin standing women candidates for open seats rather than restricting them to quota seats, as this will help grow women's numbers and support their advancement. As this study shows, demand for higher seats and more responsibility from LEWRs is prevalent, and those who will not advance on the political ladder report a greater unwillingness to run again, representing a loss of hard-gained experience. To ensure that women receive their equitable share of financial support, which would allow them to remain politically active and prevent economic violence against them, campaign and other party financing must be reviewed.

It is also essential that political parties review their recruitment strategies and means of accommodation for populations who are being left behind in the political arena, most notably disabled and gender non-binary women. Almost completely excluded in the current mandate, these populations lack self-representation and, in the case of disabled women, face additional challenges when they do not receive special accommodation.

Monitoring and responding to VAWP must be greatly strengthened within political parties. This should involve disseminating Codes of Conduct and complaint procedures for violations and supporting survivors who register formal complaints through official channels. A Code of Conduct explicitly defining and prohibiting anti-harassment/discrimination should be created in consultation with currently standing LEWRs. Intra-party violations, particularly against Dalit women, should be clearly addressed, along with the role of the party in supporting LEWRs who register formal complaints through the LGU or another official channel.

***Support the retention and advancement of LEWRs.***

Key ministries at all levels of government should work in a coordinated manner to strengthen and empower LEWRs to fulfil their mandated duties and substantively contribute to democratisation. For example, a public awareness campaign on LEWR achievements in this first mandate could be linked to public messaging that counters the "muscle and money" emphasis in Nepal's political landscape and the social resistance to women's political leadership.

The LGUs, political parties and NGOs should provide a stronger foundation to LEWRs during their initial orientation on roles and responsibilities. This must also include a more intensive training on their duties as mandated by the law, which would encourage women to “speak back” with authority when they are sidelined, excluded and made “defunct”. LEWRs express appreciation and interest in training targeting political skills, such as public speaking, strategic communications, leadership and time management. These programmes should be coordinated and sequenced to build upon LEWRs’ strengths.

LEWRs are a heterogeneous group and a “one-size-fits-all” approach is insufficient to account for their distinct experiences based on caste, age, marital status, ethnicity and religious community practices. Consulting with specialised and targeted populations about their specific needs will help stakeholders design programmes that can have significant impact. Dalit LEWRs in particular are subject to continual and insidious caste-discrimination, including offenses deemed criminal under the law, which must be addressed during any capacity or skill-building intervention.

***Build a pipeline of women’s leadership by promoting LEWR networks, especially across political party lines and ethnic/caste communities.***

Government institutions and other organisations could better support networks of LEWRs in a way that allows the women to share challenges and problem solve while fostering solidarity. Viable networks are needed to build the pipeline for women’s political leadership in the future across party lines and over time, and these networks should seek to bring LEWRs together across caste and ethnic communities. Young women should especially be tapped for this purpose, as they are already outspoken about the importance of women’s meaningful political participation.

The 2017 cohort of LEWRs should be leveraged to participate and support mentorship programmes for newly elected LEWRs in the future. LEWRs currently in office have accomplished a steep learning curve as the first class of locally elected officials in 20 years, and they express great interest in serving as “guides” for women who come after them.

All network and mentorship programmes must account for the intersectional oppression, material realities and complex identity politics that many LEWRs face, especially Dalit, Muslim and Indigenous LEWRs. In particular, building a pipeline of qualified candidates from underrepresented groups may entail addressing the materials deficits in their communities, including lack of formal education, sustainable livelihoods and harmful traditional practices.

Finally, exposure visits for LEWRs to meet and hear the strategies of elected officials from other countries should also be undertaken. This would help develop their perspectives and expand the repertoire of responses to VAWP in Nepal.

# ANNEXES

## Annex 1 CASTE/ETHNICITY BREAKDOWN OF VAWP PREVALENCE

Grouping	Caste/Ethnicity	General Population Composition	Sample		Victim of VAWP
Dalit	Hill Dalit	8.12%	25.30%	164	30.9%
Janajati	Terai Janajati	8.60%	11.10%	72	23%
Janajati	Hill/Mountain Janajati	22.10%	16.20%	105	28.6%
Brahmin/Chhetri	Hill Brahmin	12.18%	13.80%	90	41.1%
Brahmin/Chhetri	Hill Chhetri	19.07%	11.90%	77	32.9%
Madhesi	Terai/Madhesi Dalit	4.40%	10.50%	68	27.9%
Madhesi	Terai/Madhesi Brahmin/Chhetri	0.83%	2.80%	18	44.4%
Madhesi	Terai/Madhesi Other Caste	13.70%	2.60%	17	35.3%
Muslim	Muslim	4.40%	2.50%	16	6.3%
Janajati	Newar	4.90%	2.20%	14	28.6%
Other	Other (Specify)	1.7%	1.10%	7	25.0%

**Annex 2 DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW OF RESPONDENTS**

	Categories Count Count		Demographic Overview of Respondents		Demographic Overview of Victims		Prevalence of VAWP
			Count	%	Count	%	%
Caste/Ethnicity	Dalit	Hill Dalit	164	25.3%	70	35%	30%
		Terai/Madhesi Dalit	68	10.5%			
	Non-Dalit	Hill/Mountain Janajati	105	16.2%	130	65%	31.3%
		Hill Brahmin	90	13.9%			
		Hill Chhetri	77	11.9%			
		Terai Janajati	72	11.1%			
		Terai/Madhesi Brahmin/ Chhetri	18	2.8%			
		Terai/Madhesi/ Other Caste	17	2.6%			
		Muslim	16	2.5%			
		Newar	14	2.2%			
	Other (Specify)	7	1.1%				
Total		<b>648</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100%</b>	-	
Province	Province No. 1		112	17.3%	42	21%	37.5%
	Province No. 2		130	20.1%	27	13.5%	20.8%
	Bagmati Province		144	22.2%	37	18.5%	25.7%
	Gandaki Province		59	9.1%	16	8%	27.1%
	Lumbini Province		108	16.7%	43	21.5%	39.8%
	Karnali Province		36	5.6%	13	6.5%	36.1%
	Sudurpashchim Province		59	9.1%	22	11%	37.3%
	Total		<b>648</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100%</b>	-

Official Title	Ward Members	Ward Member (Women's Quota Seat)	297	45.8%	160	80%	28.7%
		Ward Member (Dalit Women's Quota Seat)	191	29.5%			
		Ward Member (General Seat)	69	10.6%			
	Deputy Mayors/ Chairpersons	Deputy Mayor (Municipality)	43	6.6%	40	20%	44%
		Chairperson/ Vice Chairperson (Rural Municipality)	30	4.7%			
		Ward Chairperson	18	2.8%			
		Mayor (Municipality)	0	0.0%			
	<b>Total</b>			<b>648</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100%</b>
Marital status	Married	567	87.5%	167	83.5%	29.5%	
	Widowed	56	8.6%	20	10%	35.7%	
	Single	19	2.9%	10	5%	52.6%	
	Divorced or Separated	6	0.9%	3	1.5%	50%	
	Living Together and Not Married	0	0.0 %	0	0%	0%	
	Prefer Not to Answer	0	0.0%	0	0%	0%	
	<b>Total</b>			<b>648</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100%</b>
Age	Above 30	622	96.0%	185	92.5%	30.5%	
	30 and Below	26	4.0%	15	7.5%	36.6%	
	<b>Total</b>			<b>648</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100%</b>

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