

**Decision-Making Practices at the Local Government:
An Inquiry Through Inclusive Decision-Making Framework**

**A Research Report
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Declaration:

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Abstract

Inclusive decision-making involves engaging the stakeholders and citizens in the decision-making process for collective ensuring collective decision-making practices, a basic principle of the democratic governance. The constitutionally mandated and protected Local Governments of Nepal are considered as the true leaders of inclusive democracy from the grassroots. The involvement and engagement of women and marginalized executive council members of the local governments in decision-making bring diverse perspectives, enhance decision quality, and foster inclusive governance. Against this backdrop, this study explores the practices of inclusive decision-making at the local government level, applying a qualitative case study approach. The studied local government acknowledges the significance of diverse perspectives and claims to actively involve executive council members, particularly women and marginalized executive council members, in decision-making. Leadership within the local government plays a vital role in cultivating an inclusive decision-making culture by creating a safe and supportive environment where women and marginalized council members can freely express their opinions. Recognizing the need to address skill gaps and build confidence in them, the local government has implemented various training programs and capacity development initiatives to empower them. Through active involvement, training, and support, the local government demonstrates its commitment to inclusive decision-making. However, persistent challenges require enduring and strategic efforts by the municipality to institutionalize the inclusive decision-making practices.

Keywords: Inclusive decision making, local government, women and marginalized executive council members

Chapter-1

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Inclusive decision-making is integral to the democratic process, whereby various actors from diverse backgrounds engage in the decision-making procedure on an equal footing. Inclusive decision-making entails not only involving different actors in the decision-making process, but also fostering ownership, co-responsibility, transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness. Therefore, inclusive decision-making must be equitable, fair, purposeful, and unbiased, particularly concerning personal attributes. Any inappropriate or unbalanced decision-making creates a barrier to attaining sustainable outcomes. Hence, all actors must be given an equal chance to participate and engage in the decision-making process. Inclusive decision-making is a cornerstone in translating democracy into practical action, which cannot be realized without the active involvement and engagement of diverse actors in the government decision-making process. The essence of democracy would be hollow and insubstantial without the significant involvement and engagement of actors in the decision-making processes of state affairs. Consequently, many countries worldwide, Nepal included, have implemented diverse policies to ensure inclusive decision-making practices in state institutions.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 places emphasis on inclusive decision-making in state affairs, by establishing Nepal as an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive, democratic, socialism-oriented federal democratic republican state (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2015). It further guarantees the right of women to participate in all state bodies based on the principle of proportional inclusion, as enshrined in Article 38, 4 of the constitution. Similarly, Article 42 outlines the inclusive principle that grants participation rights to socially disadvantaged women, Dalits, indigenous peoples, indigenous nationalities, Madhesi, Tharus, minorities, disabled people, marginalized communities, Muslims, backward classes, gender and sexual minorities, youth, peasants, workers, the oppressed, citizens of backward regions, and the Khas-Arya indigenous. The constitution also mandates 33% reservation of seats for women in parliaments and all other government functions, with alternate seats for men and women in the highest

positions, including president and vice president, head and deputy head of parliament, the mayor and deputy mayor, where at least two of one must be women. The constitutional provisions ensure inclusivity in all state structures (Upreti et al., 2020). The upshot of these provisions is the increased representation of women in political positions, with 41.8% of such positions held by women in the 2017/18 national and local elections (Upreti et al., 2020).

In accordance with the spirit of the constitution, the Local Level Election Act of 2017 has mandated the inclusion of a certain percentage of women and marginalized community candidates in local elections, thereby ensuring inclusive governance and decision-making practices. Article 17(4) of the act obligates political parties to nominate 50% of women candidates for mayor or deputy mayor, chairman or vice-chairman, and head and deputy's head of the district coordination committee, except in cases where only one candidate is nominated. Furthermore, Article 17(5) mandates political parties to nominate at least one Dalit woman candidate for the position of women ward member, unless only one woman is nominated for the post of ward member (Election Commission, 2017, p. 8). While this mandatory provision has led to an increase in the number of women and disadvantaged groups, including Dalits, in local government, effective participation in decision-making still poses significant challenges.

The local governments of Nepal have been working towards inclusivity, particularly in terms of the representation of women and disadvantaged groups in the decision-making process. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 contains several progressive provisions regarding the participation and representation of excluded groups, particularly women and Dalits, in decision-making. Rules and regulations related to local executive power and local legislation are set out in Parts 17 and 18 of the Constitution. Part 17 specifies that the village and municipality executive, which exercises the executive functions of the village and municipality body, shall comprise four and five women members, respectively, who are elected by the members of the village and municipal assembly from among themselves, as well as two members for the village assembly and three members for the municipal assembly from Dalit or minority communities (GoN, 2015). Part 18 states that the legislative power of local government lies with the village and municipal assembly, which comprises a head, a deputy head, and four members (at least two women) elected from each ward, as well as members of the village/municipal executive elected from Dalit or minority communities (GoN, 2015). These members have a legal obligation to make decisions on local affairs under schedules 8 and 9 of the Constitution of Nepal 2015.

It is undeniable that Nepal adheres to the legal principle of inclusive representation in the decision-making process at the local level. Nevertheless, it has been observed that legal provisions are often merely listed without adequate attention paid to their implementation, resulting in undesirable gaps in policy provisions and their effective execution (Mosse, 2005). The Baseline Survey (2021) conducted by the Provincial and Local Governance Support Programme (PLGSP) discovered that nine out of ten elected representatives from women and marginalized groups regularly participate in executive and assembly meetings. Approximately one-third of the elected representatives from women and excluded groups lead these meetings, and more than one-fourth claim to influence them. More than half of those who infrequently or never speak in meetings reported that they did not know what to say. Overall, four out of five representatives feel comfortable expressing their views during executive/assembly meetings. The two most common reasons for not feeling comfortable speaking up during these meetings were cited as being unsure of one's first responsibility and lack of confidence or feeling unheard. Despite these challenges, approximately nine-tenths of the representatives indicated that the mayor/president always or sometimes encourages them to express their opinions at meetings (Nepal Administrative Staff College, 2021). While these statistics demonstrate positive signs of inclusive decision-making, they do not reveal the hidden behavioral, political, and economic dynamics that may affect inclusive decision-making in local government. Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore the structure, behavior, practices, and challenges of inclusive decision-making in local government.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the practices of inclusive decision-making (IDM) at the local government level. The research will address the following research questions:

- What are the structures and behaviors involved in inclusive decision-making in local government?
- How is inclusive decision-making practiced in local affairs by the government?
- What are the challenges faced by executive council members from women and marginalized groups in the process of inclusive decision-making?

1.3 Rationale/Significance of the Study

The practice of inclusive decision-making in local affairs is crucial for local government to effectively fulfil the constitutional mandates of creating an inclusive state. Therefore, it is imperative to comprehend the practices of inclusive decision-making in local affairs within the dynamic socio-political and administrative context. This study aims to identify and analyze the structures, behaviors, practices, and challenges of inclusive decision-making in local affairs, which would assist local governments in identifying gaps in the adoption of inclusive decision-making practices. Furthermore, federal and provincial governments would benefit from recognizing the gaps and limitations of local governments in adopting inclusive decision-making practices in local affairs. This research builds on the theoretical literature on inclusive decision-making and provides theoretical evidence from local government practice, enabling a better understanding of the practical gaps in making inclusive decisions in federal countries such as Nepal. The results of this study serve as a warning and a call to action for concerned stakeholders to pay close attention to inclusive decision-making in local affairs. This study would be of interest to policy makers, politicians, practitioners, citizens, and academics concerned with decision-making, particularly inclusive decision-making in local affairs. Finally, this research product will serve as excellent reference material for inclusive decision-making training.

1.4 Scope of the Study

The study focuses on Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality in Dhading, which is one of the top 10 best local governments among the 753 local governments in the federal system of Nepal. The selection of this municipality was based on its high Local Government Institutional Capacity Self-Assessment (LISA) score, which was generated by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration. While decision-making has various dimensions, this study concentrates solely on the inclusive aspect. In local governments, appointed and elected officials play significant roles, but the focus of this study is primarily on elected officials, particularly women and marginalized executive council members. For data collection, this study relied primarily on primary sources, supplemented by secondary data obtained from previous studies such as the Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 and the PLGSP Baseline Survey 2021.

1.5 Structure of the Report

The research report has been divided into five discrete chapters. The initial chapter provides a comprehensive introduction to the study, including an overview of its purpose and research questions, rationale and significance, the scope of the study, and structure of the report. The subsequent chapter, chapter two, features an exhaustive review of related literature. Chapter three is dedicated to a thorough presentation of the methodology of the study, incorporating a detailed discussion of the philosophy of the study, strategies of inquiry, methods for locating research participants, data collection tools and procedures, data management, analysis and meaning-making and ethical considerations. The fourth chapter includes the analysis of the findings and discussion. Finally, chapter five concludes the report by highlighting the implications of the study and presenting the overall conclusion.

Chapter-II

Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Governance

When governance effectively serves and engages all people, takes into account gender and other facets of personal identity, and ensures that institutions, policies, processes, and services are accessible, accountable, and responsive to all members of society, it can be considered inclusive (Government of Canada, 2023). Inclusive governance is a decision-making approach that aims to enable all individuals in a society to access and participate equally. It acknowledges the significance of involving marginalized communities in policy-making to guarantee that their voices, preferences, and rights are recognized and taken into account. Inclusivity extends access to all members of society, irrespective of their ethnicity, gender, or social class, and facilitates the involvement of marginalized groups in expressing their opinions, especially regarding their rights, prosperity, and happiness (Fukuyama, 2004). Inclusive governance assures the fair participation of marginalized groups in state affairs and an equitable allocation of resources (Mahapatra, 2006). Inclusivity holds particular importance in society for combating prejudice, marginalization, and exclusion. To ensure that inclusivity is effectively addressed, representatives from all strata of society must be involved in the decision-making process to represent the needs and interests of the society. Although this diversity can create communication challenges and potential conflicts, it is crucial to establish channels for communication, consultation, and collaboration among stakeholders to achieve inclusiveness. Inclusive decision-making promotes social justice and equity by ensuring that all members of society, regardless of their background, have equal access to resources and opportunities. It is a crucial first step in establishing effective governance and resolving previous injustices.

2.2 Inclusiveness in the Constitution of Nepal

The constitution of Nepal 2015 envisions an inclusive state. The preamble of the constitution states its commitment to protect and promote social and cultural solidarity, tolerance, and harmony, as well as unity in diversity. This is achieved through the recognition of the country's multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-religious, multicultural, and diverse characteristics. The

Constitution is dedicated to establishing an egalitarian society that is built upon the principles of personal inclusivity and participation, and ensures economic equality, prosperity, and social justice by eliminating any form of discrimination. Article 18 of Part 3, which outlines the Right to Equality, explicitly prohibits discrimination based on various grounds, such as origin, religion, race, caste, tribe, sex, economic condition, language, region, ideology, or any other similar grounds. Additionally, it ensures that no discrimination is made based on gender concerning remuneration and social security for the same work. Article 24 of Part 3, which outlines the Right against Untouchability and Discrimination, prohibits any form of untouchability and discrimination in private and public places based on one's origin, caste, tribe, community, profession, occupation, or physical condition. Any act of untouchability and discrimination is punishable by law, and the victim has the right to obtain compensation according to the law.

Article 38 of the Constitution guarantees women's right to participate in all State bodies based on proportional inclusion, while Article 42 of Part 3, which outlines the Right to Social Justice, provides socially backward groups, including women, Dalit, indigenous people, indigenous nationalities, Madhesi, Tharu minorities, persons with disabilities, marginalized communities, Muslims, backward classes, gender and sexual minorities, youths, farmers, laborers, oppressed citizens of backward regions, and indigent Khas Arya with the right to participate in the State bodies based on inclusive principles. Part 8 Article 84, which outlines the Composition of the House of Representatives, mandates that political parties fielding candidates for the election to the House of Representatives under the proportional electoral system provide representation based on the closed list for women, Dalit, Indigenous people, Khas Arya, Madhesi, Tharu, Muslims, and backward regions, in proportion to their population. Geographical and territorial balance is also taken into consideration in this process. The Nepalese constitution mandates the reservation of 33% of seats for women in all government functions, including parliaments. Additionally, alternate seats must be provided for men and women in the highest positions such as president and vice president, head and deputy head of parliament, mayor and deputy mayor, with at least two seats occupied by women.

2.3 Legal Provisions of Women's Representation in Local Government

Following the promulgation of Nepal's 2015 Constitution, the country has adopted a three-tier system of government consisting of federal, provincial, and local levels. Each tier of government

has its own constitutional responsibility for the country's development. The local government, the third level of government in Nepal, plays a crucial role in decision-making on local affairs. Schedule 8 of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 assigns 22 powers to local levels, empowering them to formulate laws to implement these powers. In addition to these individual powers, Schedule 9 specifies 15 concurrent powers that can be implemented by all three levels of government through coordination, cooperation, and coexistence. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal also includes several progressive provisions aimed at increasing the participation and representation of historically marginalized groups, particularly women and Dalits, in local decision-making processes. Parts 17 and 18 of the Constitution outline rules and regulations of local executive power and legislation. Part 17 requires the village and municipality executive, which carries out the executive functions of the village and municipality body, to have four and five women members respectively, who are elected by the members of the village and municipal assembly from among themselves. In addition, two members of the village assembly and three members of the municipal assembly must come from Dalit or minority communities. Part 18 vests the legislative power of local government in the village and municipal assembly, which comprises a head, a deputy head, and four members (with at least two women) elected from each ward. Members of the village/municipal executive elected from Dalit or minority communities are also part of the assembly and have a legal responsibility to make decisions on local affairs as provided for in schedules 8 and 9 of the Constitution of Nepal 2015.

Ensuring an inclusive policy-making process is essential for promoting gender equality and social inclusion in municipal governance. The local government of Nepal has significant potential to develop systems and mechanisms that enable women, Dalits, and disadvantaged groups to participate in policy-making and contribute to the formulation of responsive policies as outlined in the Constitution. Nepal has taken strides towards inclusive decision-making processes at the local level, but as noted by Mosse (2005), there remain gaps in policy provisions that need to be addressed. As noted by Bhattarai and Pokharel (2022), the participation and representation of women and Dalits in the policy-making process of Kirtipur Municipality is currently limited due to a lack of understanding among elected representatives of the importance of an inclusive approach to social justice. While socio-cultural norms pose significant barriers to inclusion, the lack of operational guidance on inclusive governance practices and a reliable oversight mechanism for equal participation further hinder progress towards inclusion in policy-making.

According to the Baseline Survey (2021) conducted by the Provincial and Local Governance Support Programme (PLGSP), the attendance of elected representatives from women and excluded groups at Executive and Assembly meetings is regular and consistent, with about 90% attending. The most recent meeting was attended by over 80% of such representatives. However, household work and illness were found to be common reasons for absence. About one-third of elected representatives from these groups lead meetings, and over one-fourth claim to have influence over them. The survey found that more than half (55%) of those who reported not speaking or speaking rarely in meetings cited a lack of knowledge of what to say. Nonetheless, almost all (90%) of elected representatives from women and excluded groups felt comfortable expressing their opinions in the meetings. Additionally, consensus was reported as the preferred method for settling disagreements regarding decisions that favour women and excluded groups. Overall, the findings suggest that although attendance is high, there may be a need to provide further support to enable the elected representatives to effectively participate in these meetings.

In regards to citizen participation in local development planning and discussion, the Nepal National Governance Survey (2017/18) found that a significant proportion of citizens, approximately 70 percent, did not participate in such meetings. Notably, only 10 percent of citizens from Province 2 participated, whereas nearly 40 percent of citizens from Bagmati Province and 39 percent from Gandaki Province participated. Furthermore, the survey revealed that of the three ecological zones, Mountain citizens had the highest percentage of participation (37.8%), followed by Hill (35.2%) and Tarai (22.2%) citizens. In terms of gender, the survey found that men (40%) participated more than women (21.2%). The survey also identified that the lowest participation rates were among those aged 60 and above. However, the participation of citizens aged 25-59 years was around 5 percent higher than those below the age of 25, and almost 8 percent higher than those aged 60 and above.

The survey also found that there was no significant difference in participation based on the demarcation of urban/rural areas, despite citizens from urban areas (31%) showing slightly higher participation rates than those from rural areas (29.4%). Regarding caste/ethnicity, the participation of Muslims (11.6%), Tarai Caste (13.3%), Tarai Janajati (23.3%), and Dalit (25.2%) was comparatively lower than the participation of Hill Brahmin and Sanyasi (41.7%). The level of participation increased with higher education, with higher participation rates observed for citizens with higher education (52.7%) compared to those who were illiterate

(16.9%) or had no formal education (33%). In terms of occupation/usual activities, citizens engaged in household chores (19.9%), daily wage work (26.6%), and not working (20.4%) had lower participation rates compared to those in service (48.9%) or the agriculture sector (34.9%). The survey also identified a positive relationship between economic status and participation, with higher participation rates observed among the rich (36.7%) and the lowest participation rates among the poor (22.6%) (NASC, 2018).

In the context of citizen participation in local development planning and discussion, Gupta (2021) used data from the Nepal National Governance Survey (2017/18) to investigate the role of respondents' background characteristics in determining participation levels. The study found significant differences in participation across various provinces. Specifically, citizens from Province 2 were less likely to participate than those from Province 1, while citizens from Bagmati, Gandaki, Lumbini, and Sudurpashchim provinces were more likely to participate. Differences in participation were also observed across different ecological zones, with citizens in the Tarai and Hill regions being less likely to participate compared to those in the Mountain region. Women were less likely to participate than men, and older citizens were more likely to participate than younger ones. Educational attainment was found to be positively correlated with participation, with citizens who had higher levels of education being more likely to participate. Furthermore, citizens with higher economic status were more likely to participate than those with lower economic status. Overall, this evidence suggests that citizen participation in local development planning and discussion is influenced by a variety of factors related to respondents' background characteristics.

2.4 Inclusiveness in the Local Government

The participation of women in local-level decision-making processes in Nepal has seen a gradual increase. It began with the Local Self Governance Act of 1999, which mandated 20 percent representation of women in ward-level committees and village development councils. Since 2010, the government's Local Governance and Community Development Program and policy have contributed to the creation of inclusive structures. These structures require 33 percent female representation in ward citizen forums and community awareness centers involved in planning processes. However, in the current context, Nepal's electoral quota ensures 33 percent

of women's participation at the federal and provincial government levels, but 40 percent at the local government level.

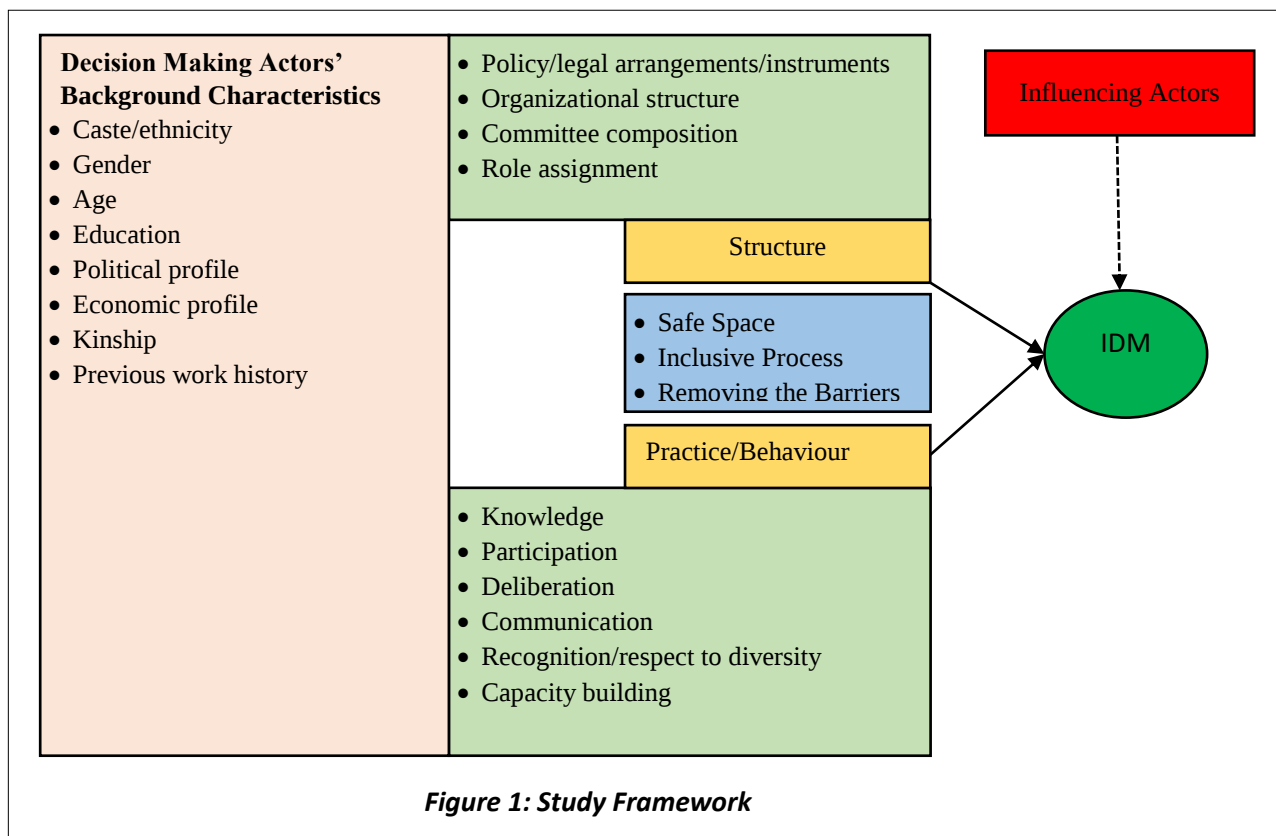
This policy has significantly increased women's participation in local-level decision-making processes and raised awareness among women about the importance of representation in local government. In 2017, Nepal held its first elections under the new Constitution adopted in 2015, marking a significant milestone. It was also a successful year for women's political empowerment and social inclusion, with higher representation of women and marginalized groups as voters and candidates compared to the past. At the local level, 41% of newly elected officials were women, and 34% of Provincial assembly seats were reserved for women (UNDP, 2019).

Since the promulgation of Nepal's Constitution in 2015, two elections have taken place in 2017 and 2022 at the federal, provincial, and local levels. These elections demonstrate the differences in women's representation across all three tiers of government. In 2017, females won 14,352 out of a total of 35,221 seats at the local level, which increased to 14,467 in the 2022 election. The number of female mayors/chairpersons increased from 18 in 2017 to 25 in 2022, and the number of elected female ward chairs increased from 61 in 2017 to 69 in 2022. However, the number of female deputy mayors/vice-chairpersons decreased from 700 in 2017 to 500 in 2022. Additionally, 123 seats for Dalit female members remained vacant due to insufficient candidates. In the House of Representatives, out of a total of 550 seats, only 91 are occupied by females, with only nine elected through the FPTP system in the 2022 election. In the 2017 election, there were 90 female representatives, with only six elected through the FPTP system. The situation is slightly different in the Provincial Assembly, where out of 550 seats, 200 are secured by females, with 14 winning in the 2022 direct election.

2.5 Study Framework

Some analysts have also argued that the nature of the participatory process should be context-sensitive (e.g. Kochskämper et al., 2017; Plummer et al., 2017). The participatory process appears to be heavily influenced by contextual factors, such as the objectives of the decision-making process, socio-cultural factors, political governance factors, power dynamics, historical context, spatial context, and temporal context (Bell & Reed, 2021). Bell and Reed (2021) have developed the Tree of Participation (ToP) model, which suggests twelve factors for promoting

inclusive and effective participation processes, as well as seven contextual factors that drive this process. The ToP model portrays the participatory process as a tree that requires an appropriate environment (context), pruning and training (process design), and a final product that is greater than the sum of its parts (outcomes for marginalized participants). The pre-process is represented by the roots, the process itself is represented by the branches, and the post-processing is represented by leaves, while the context surrounds the tree. All components, including the context, are interconnected without any implied hierarchy. Hence, it can be concluded that inclusive decision-making depends on various interconnected components that are closely related to the structural and practical/behavioral aspects of local government. Within the structural aspects, factors such as policy/legal instruments, organizational structure, board composition, and role assignments support inclusive decision-making, while practical/behavioral aspects, such as knowledge of inclusive decision-making, meaningful participation in various meetings, deliberation, communication, and recognition of the voice, are also crucial in promoting inclusive decision-making. Furthermore, influential actors and demographic characteristics, such as age, caste/ethnicity, gender, education, kinship, employment background, political and economic profile, also play a role in determining inclusive decision-making in local government. The removal of barriers, a safe space, and inclusive processes underpin all of these components of inclusive decision-making, as depicted in Figure 1.



Chapter-III

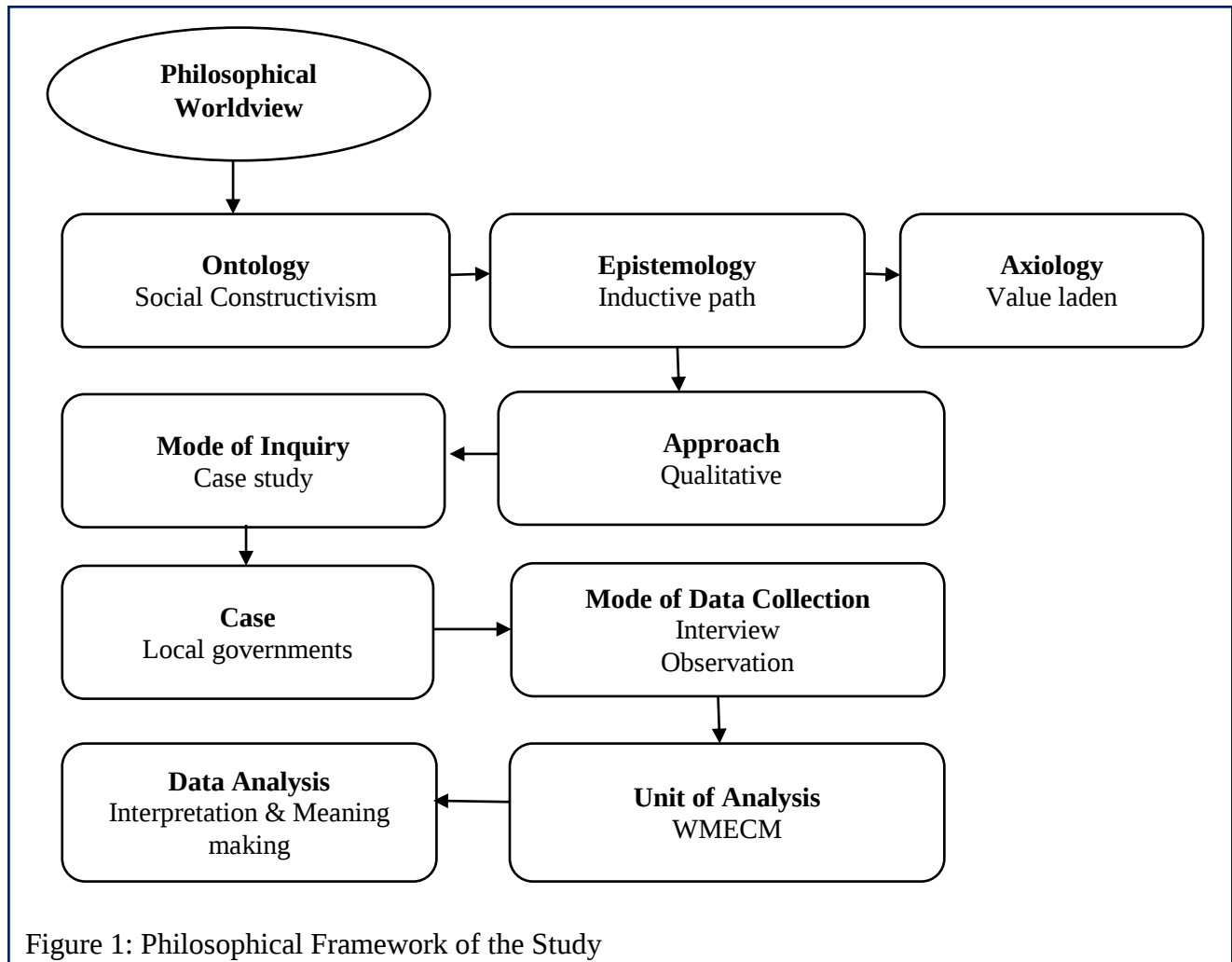
Study Methods

3.1 Philosophy of the Study

This study is grounded in the social constructivism paradigm, which posits that the reality surrounding the practices of inclusive decision-making at the local level is subjective and multifaceted. We developed subjective meanings of the experiences of women and marginalized executive council members of inclusive decision-making in local government, where they reside and work. We recognize that these meanings are diverse and complex, and therefore require a comprehensive exploration, rather than limiting the scope of inclusive decision-making (Creswell, 2009). Constructivism posits that human beings are born into a world of meaning that is bestowed upon us by our culture, which is constructed by human beings in and out of interaction with the human community (Crotty, 1998). In our case, we sought to elicit and refine the perspectives and practices of women and marginalized executive members around inclusive decision-making through interactions with research participants. We hold the view that inclusive decision-making involves not only statistical data but also the experiences and interpretations of women and marginalized executive council members in the context of local government.

We recognized that women and marginalized executives council members in each local government have distinct experiences regarding inclusive decision-making. Therefore, our research was premised on the ontological assumption of subjective realities, where the reality of inclusive decision-making exists "out there or somewhere else" within local governments. We engaged with women and marginalized executive council members, learning about them through their historical and social perspectives, gaining a comprehensive understanding of their context or situation by meeting with them in person, and shaping the interpretation of our findings, as they interpret them, using our experience and context (Crotty, 1998). We shaped the interpretation of our findings using our experience and context in conjunction with their interpretation. Epistemology, which explores researchers' assumptions about how reality is known and how knowledge is acquired and accepted, was also taken into account (Pathirage et al., 2008). To uncover the realities of inclusive decision-making, we primarily relied on inductive methods (Crotty, 1998) to generate subjective realities from diverse cases. Thus, we

maintained a value-loaded approach throughout the data collection and analysis process. The philosophical framework depicted in Figure 1 was employed to guide our study.



3.2. Approach of the Study

This study is based on the social constructivism paradigm, which assumes that the reality of inclusive decision-making practices at the local level is subjective and multiple. Our research approach is guided by this paradigm, and we have chosen to adopt an inductive and naturalistic path that favors a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is concerned with exploring feelings, perceptions, and experiences through naturalistic inquiry in a real-world setting and inductively through human interactions (Limb & Dwyer, 2001). It seeks to develop explanations of social phenomena, which help us gain a deeper understanding of the world in which we live and why things are the way they are. Through qualitative research, we were able to gain insights

into the perspectives and practices of women and marginalized executive committee members towards inclusive decision-making and why they practice it in a certain way. Qualitative research provides ample opportunities to us for conducting exploratory and descriptive research that uses the context and setting to gain a deeper understanding of the person(s) being studied (Best & Khan, 2006). Therefore, we employed a qualitative research approach to explore the structure, behavior, practices, and challenges of inclusive decision-making in local government, as it allowed us to generate interpretations that revealed the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

3.3 Strategy of Inquiry

Qualitative research includes a range of methods, such as phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and case studies (Creswell, 2014). We have chosen to use the case study approach to investigate the details of inclusive decision-making in local government. This approach allows us to explore the structure, behavior, practices, and challenges of decision-making in-depth, using open-ended questions that address the 'how' and 'why' of the situation (Yin, 2003). Our decision to employ a case study approach was based on its suitability for our research purposes. In the case study research literature, two different logical directions have emerged, namely post-positivist and non-positivist (interpretivist/constructivist) (Bhattarai & Maharjan, 2017). Yin (2014), a prominent scholar of case study research, is positioned in a post-positivist alignment, while Merriam (1998) and Stake (2005) have taken a non-positivist alignment (Boblin et al., 2013; Brown, 2008). We have chosen to adopt a non-positivist (interpretivist/constructivist) approach, as it is adaptable, allowing us to gain insight into the diverse realities of inclusive decision-making in local government through subjective perspectives.

3.4 Locating the Research Participants

Choosing the right cases for a case study can be a challenging task and requires careful consideration to achieve the desired objectives. According to Boxter and Jack (2008), even experienced researchers can find it difficult to choose appropriate cases. To ensure that our case selection was appropriate, we took into account the relevance of our research questions, which is a critical criterion for selecting cases (Carson et al., 2001). The Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality in Dhading was chosen for this study using a purposive sampling method (Merriam, 1998). The selection was based on the municipality's high ranking within the top 10, determined by the

LISA score generated by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration. Our research primarily focused on women and marginalized executive council members in local government. In addition to them, we also sought the viewpoints of other key individuals within the local government structure, including the chairperson, vice-chairperson, ward chairpersons, and the chief administrative officer. These individuals hold influential positions and play an essential role in shaping and advancing inclusive decision-making practices within the local government. By considering their perspectives, we aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and factors influencing inclusive decision-making processes at the local level.

3.5 Data Collection Tools and Procedures

To gather detailed information from the selected cases, we utilized in-depth interviews as our primary data collection tool (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). We worked with subject experts to develop an interview checklist, focusing on the structure, behavior, practices, and challenges of inclusive decision-making in local affairs. Once we had finalized the interview theme, we formally invited local governments to participate in our research. Upon receiving approval, we arranged informal meetings with our participants to conduct interviews in Nepali, in their social settings. We encouraged our participants to share their experiences freely by using follow-up questions and creating a comfortable environment (Gupta et al., 2019). Our primary objective was to explore the involvement and influence of executive/council decision-making from the perspective of the participants. To achieve this objective, we asked participants about their expectations before becoming executive council members and their experiences during the decision-making process. We prioritized discussions of the situations they faced when making decisions, and asked how they tried to adjust these situations to influence the executive council's decisions. We also documented their relationships with the mayor/president and chief administrative officer. With the participants' consent, we recorded their voices, and when necessary, we kept a detailed field log.

3.6 Data Management, Analysis and Meaning Making

The quality of qualitative research heavily depends on the quality of the data analysis. The process of data analysis involves making sense from the field data. It requires preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, delving deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and interpreting the larger meaning of the data (Creswell, 2003). In our

study, the data we collected were transformed into transcriptions. Transcriptions included verbatim responses of informants to interviews, a running record of everything an individual said during a specific period of observation, and recorded stories, among others. We also recorded non-verbal behaviors and our own reflections. Transcriptions provide a detailed record of what research participants said. Following each interview, we transcribed the recordings in chronological order and reviewed and summarized our field notes. Throughout the transcription process, we recorded any interesting or surprising issues that came to mind, as the human mind is prone to forget quickly (Lofland & Lofland, 1999). We used MAXQDA software to edit, code, and categorize the transcribed information into themes and subthemes. We provided thick descriptions of the actual situation of women and marginalized executive members and interpreted it. We also examined participation from the perspective of influencers and analyzed themes using different contexts and philosophies. Our analysis focused on how women and marginalized executive members have influenced the decision-making process. We reflected on and generated meaning from the data through a reasoning process informed by interactions and engagement with our research participants. We also derived further meaning from the data by using relevant literature.

3.7 Ethical Standard

Research ethics refers to the guidelines that researchers must follow to ensure the accuracy and credibility of their studies. As pointed out by Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2001), it is critical to protect human subjects by adhering to ethical principles in all research endeavors, including ours. Conducting sound research is an ethical and moral responsibility (Halai, 2006). During in-depth interviews, participants may share personal and sensitive information, and the researcher has to safeguard their rights by following ethical principles. We strictly adhered to ethical considerations by informing participants about our research goals and procedures before conducting interviews. We respected participants' privacy and ensured the confidentiality of their information during the interviews. We conducted interviews at a convenient time for the participants, such as when they were free and ready, while also ensuring that our study did not interfere with the local government's regular service delivery schedule to protect the service users' rights. We analyzed and interpreted the data obtained from in-depth interviews and

observations while maintaining the anonymity of research participants to prevent their identification from the data.

Chapter-IV

Finding and Discussions

The following section provides a detailed discussion of inclusive decision-making practices within local government.

4.1 Awareness and Progress in Inclusiveness

It is crucial to value the perspectives of women and marginalized executive members when making decisions, as this promotes gender equality and creates a more balanced and representative society. Inclusive decision-making is essential for effective governance, as it enables the consideration of diverse voices, leading to decisions that benefit everyone involved. Jwalamukhi rural municipality serves as a notable example of inclusivity, actively engaging executive council members in the decision-making process and recognizing the importance of inclusiveness. The rural municipality emphasizes collective decision-making during executive meetings, ensuring that decisions are thoroughly discussed and made with the participation of all members. These decision-making procedures are characterized by active participation, as members openly express their concerns and issues.

The voices of all executive members are heard, and decisions are reached through participatory procedures, based on the consensus of all participants. The rural municipality also prioritizes the inclusion of marginalized individuals, providing them with opportunities to raise their concerns. The active participation of women and marginalized executive members in decision-making processes brings forth diverse perspectives, enhances the quality of decisions, and promotes inclusivity in governance. The rural municipality fosters an environment of open expression, where concerns and issues can be freely discussed. By embracing diverse perspectives and agendas, rural municipality enriches the decision-making process, promote social harmony, and ensure that governance reflects the pluralistic nature of society. One ward chairperson expressed the following regarding Dalit and women executive members' involvement in decision-making:

I am dedicated to ensuring that the voices of women and marginalized executive council members are given due importance. We have witnessed notable advancements in promoting inclusive decision-making within Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality compared to

the past. Previously, women and marginalized executive council members felt hesitant to share their concerns, sometimes preferring to work under the guidance of men. However, there has been a positive shift where they are now more willing to express their opinions, and their contributions are actively welcomed and incorporated into the decision-making process. As the ward chairperson, my primary focus is on fostering inclusive decision-making and finding effective ways to involve women and marginalized executive council members in various decision-making processes (Respondent 2, Ward Chairperson).

He strongly believes in promoting inclusivity and ensuring diverse perspectives are incorporated into the decision-making processes within the executive council meetings. This sentiment is echoed by the deputy chairperson, who also emphasizes the importance of giving everyone a voice in these meetings:

The decision-making process within the executive council meetings is characterized by inclusivity, as members actively emphasize their concerns and express their issues openly. Every individual's voice is heard, and special attention is given to women and marginalized executive members to ensure their issues are effectively addressed. Initially, we had limited experience with inclusive decision-making, but over the past year, we have gained valuable insights and recognized the significance of providing equal opportunities for everyone to contribute. In the early stages of our tenure, women and marginalized executive members may have been overshadowed, but we have witnessed gradual progress. There has been a notable increase in the participation of women and marginalized groups in our decision-making processes, leading to a reduction in conflicts that arise from such processes. We have actively encouraged them to speak up and amplify their voices. While we have achieved some progress, there is still more work to be done (Respondent 1, Deputy Chairperson).

The deputy chairperson further contends that they perceive a growing awareness among women and marginalized executive council members regarding their roles, leading to increased vocalization of their concerns. This positive development instils confidence in them that further advancements will be made in this domain.

Similarly, a women executive member from the Dalit community expressed her perspective. She stated,

I am glad to share that the chairman and vice chairman of the executive council duly recognize the voices of women and marginalized groups during our meetings. They display progressive attitudes and actively listen to the attendees. The decisions made in these meetings are participatory and inclusive, although there is still room for improvement. I believe that having a female chairman or vice chairman would further enhance opportunities for women and marginalized groups to voice their concerns. I am also pleased to note that the meetings are harmonious, with a cohesive relationship among all council members (Respondent 3, Dalit Women Executive Council Member).

She believes that this positive progress signifies a promising future for inclusive decision-making in Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality. She strongly advocates for inclusive decision-making, emphasizing the importance of representing and valuing everyone's opinions. Moreover, she recognizes the obstacles faced by women and marginalized groups when expressing themselves and is dedicated to addressing these challenges through her work.

The Chief Administrative Officer shared their perspective, highlighting that the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson are attentive to the voices of the members and cultivate an environment that encourages the expression of opinions. He expressed satisfaction with the advancements made in promoting inclusive decision-making within Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality. However, he acknowledged the need to continue working towards further improvements in this area.

The chairperson expressed their encouraging viewpoint, stating,

I firmly believe that Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality embraces inclusivity by openly welcoming and addressing the voices of women and marginalized groups. The decision-making process is also participatory, involving all members of the executive council. I take pride in the progress we have achieved in promoting inclusive decision-making within Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality. However, we are aware that there is still more work to be done. Our commitment lies in establishing an inclusive local government that genuinely represents the people (Respondent 7, Chairperson).

Women executive council member expressed her viewpoint as follows:

I firmly believe that Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality demonstrates inclusivity in both its structural and behavioral aspects. The chairman and vice chairman actively encourage

every member to voice their concerns, creating an environment that facilitates open communication. Over time, it has become comparatively easier for us to express our needs. One commendable aspect of the chairperson is that every meeting begins with the presence of all available members (Respondent 5, Women Executive Council Member).

She strongly advocates for inclusive decision-making, recognizing that it goes beyond mere representation and emphasizes meaningful participation. Another female executive council member expressed her satisfaction, stating,

I am pleased that the voices of women and marginalized groups are being heard in the executive council meeting. However, I believe that there is still potential for further improvement (Respondent 4, Women Executive Council Member).

These quotations highlight the increasing recognition of the significance of inclusiveness in decision-making within Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality. However, there is still progress to be made in fully achieving inclusivity. The municipality is committed to establishing a government that genuinely represents its people, ensuring that every individual has a voice in the decision-making process. Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality firmly believes in the necessity of participatory decision-making for inclusiveness. They prioritize hearing from and involving everyone in the decision-making process.

The municipality strives to ensure that the voices of women and marginalized groups are heard and valued. Various participatory methods, including open forums, stakeholder consultations, and consensus building, are employed in Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality to foster inclusive decision-making. These methods aim to ensure that everyone's perspective is considered, and decisions are made in the best interest of the community. Although the constitution provides commendable provisions, there is still a gap between the ideal behavior and its practical implementation. Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality acknowledges the strides made in securing women's rights, but acknowledges the need for continued efforts to realize these rights in practice. To ensure the success of inclusive decision-making, creating a safe and supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable expressing their opinions is crucial. This can be achieved through inclusive decision-making training and fostering a culture of respect and trust.

4.2 Skill Gaps and Confidence Building

Skill gaps and a lack of confidence can pose obstacles to effective participation in decision-making processes. To address this, it is essential to provide training, mentorship, and communication support to women and marginalized executive council members, enabling them to bridge these gaps and express their ideas confidently. Active engagement in decision-making requires both confidence and capabilities. However, the absence of confidence and capabilities hinders the full involvement of women and marginalized executive council members in decision-making processes. Overcoming this barrier can be achieved by fostering self-confidence through mentorship, training, and supportive networks.

The development of confidence and capabilities in them is crucial for effective inclusive governance. When women and marginalized executive council members feel empowered and self-assured, they are more inclined to take initiative, make independent decisions, and advocate for the interests of their constituents. Dalit women executive council members emphasized the significance of providing training and opportunities to enhance skills and competencies. They highlighted the existence of an inclusive atmosphere that encourages the expression of opinions. However, they also acknowledged a persistent challenge of confidence when it comes to effectively formulate and articulating concerns during executive council meetings. A women executive member from the Dalit community shared her view, stating,

We have received several skill-based trainings, such as anchoring, that have helped us express our agendas more effectively during meetings. These trainings have boosted our confidence and improved our ability to articulate concerns (Respondents 3, Dalit Women Executive Council Member).

Similarly, a women executive council member emphasized the need for expanding training opportunities for women and marginalized groups, intending to foster greater confidence in expressing their opinions.

The Jwalamuki Rural Municipality places significant emphasis on enhancing the capacity of women and marginalized members. They have conducted various capacity development training tailored specifically for this purpose, aiming to build confidence, bridge skill gaps, and improve articulation skills. The Chief Administrative Officer, Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, and Ward

Chairperson all share a positive perspective regarding capacity development. The Chief Administrative Officer expresses a unified viewpoint, stating:

We have organized anchoring and presentation skill training specifically for women and marginalized members, enabling them to confidently express their opinions during meetings. These training are designed to address skill gaps and enhance their ability to effectively articulate their viewpoints (Respondent 9, Chief Administrative Officer).

Similarly, the Vice Chairperson expressed a belief in the indispensable nature of skills and competencies for fostering inclusive decision-making. He emphasized the importance of providing training and skill development opportunities to women and marginalized executive council members, as this elevates their confidence and enhances their engagement in decision-making processes. The Vice Chairperson personally observed the positive outcomes that arise from such training. Within their municipality, extensive training programs have been implemented, covering a range of topics including leadership, public speaking, and conflict resolution. These initiatives have played a pivotal role in empowering these groups and markedly improving their effectiveness as participants in decision-making processes.

The Ward Chairperson expressed their observation:

Women and marginalized executive council members confidently voice their concerns during meetings. They show no hesitation in questioning or expressing disagreement. However, they also encounter difficulties in effectively communicating their needs due to skill and competency gaps (Respondent 6, Ward Chairperson).

The Ward Chairperson emphasized the importance of providing training and support to empower women and marginalized executive council members, enabling them to develop the necessary skills and competencies for effective inclusive decision-making.

The municipality seems committed to providing training and skills development opportunities to women and marginalized executive council members. Their primary focus is on enhancing their capacities through targeted skills training programs, which boosts their confidence in various fields. The municipality firmly believes in the importance of training for women and marginalized executive council members, as it enables them to actively participate in decision-making processes. Investing in skill development through such targeted training is crucial for

empowering these individuals and promoting inclusive governance. These skill development initiatives not only enhance their capabilities but also contribute to establishing a more competent and inclusive government. Continuous skill development plays a vital role in enabling women and marginalized executive council members to actively participate in decision-making and effectively navigate complex governance challenges.

4.3 Leadership Support for Inclusive Voices

Inclusive leadership plays a crucial role in fostering an inclusive decision-making culture at the local level. It entails creating a safe and supportive environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing their opinions. Chairpersons, vice chairpersons, ward chairpersons, and chief executive officers have a responsibility beyond their administrative duties. They are tasked with establishing a culture of inclusivity within local government. The leaders in Jawalamukhi rural municipality serve as excellent examples of inclusive leadership by actively encouraging and amplifying the voices of women and marginalized executive council members. They empower these individuals to speak up, ensuring that a diverse range of perspectives shapes inclusive decision-making processes. Their positive attitudes towards inclusiveness inspire others to embrace diversity, thus creating a culture characterized by understanding, respect, and collaboration. These leaders created spaces where women and marginalized executive committee members feel valued and respected, regardless of their background or identity. The chief administrative officer expressed:

We are actively striving to establish a more supportive environment for women and marginalized executive council members within our municipality. We aim to create a work environment where everyone feels at ease expressing their thoughts and contributing their ideas (Respondent 9, Chief Administrative Officer).

He appears to be a considerate and dedicated leader who is actively striving to establish a local government that is more inclusive and equitable. His efforts are focused on creating a supportive environment for women and marginalized groups within his municipality.

The chairperson's leadership role is highly commendable, as he strongly believes in the importance of empowering women and marginalized executive council members by equipping them to handle challenges. He has granted these individuals complete autonomy in mobilizing specific small-scale budgets and has set expectations for desired outcomes. According to the

chairperson, this approach has significantly bolstered the confidence of women in a positive manner. Additionally, he shows a steadfast belief in inclusive decision-making, emphasizing the value of hearing everyone's voice. He is cognizant of the unique obstacles faced by women and marginalized executive council members when expressing themselves, and he is dedicated to addressing these challenges. The chairperson's leadership style fosters a safe and enabling environment that encourages the active involvement of women and marginalized executive council members in decision-making processes, which is admirable. He has created an inclusive environment where the views of all individuals are valued, which is truly commendable. The chairperson exhibits a genuine commitment to ensuring that every individual has a voice in the decision-making process and receives the necessary resources and support for their success. Additionally, a ward chairperson has shared their view on this matter:

The presence of supportive leadership that fosters and motivates women and marginalized executive council members to voice their opinions is of utmost importance. We must empower women and marginalized executive council members, enabling them to actively engage in decision-making processes. As a ward chairperson, I firmly believe that it is our responsibility to encourage and motivate them to actively engage and contribute to decision-making (Respondent 6, Ward Chairperson).

A women executive committee member expressed her views as follows:

I am grateful for the inclusive culture established by the chairman and vice chairman of Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality, as they actively encourage every member to voice their concerns and foster an environment that is conducive to open communication. Over time, it has become relatively easier to express our needs and opinions compared to when we first started (Respondent 5, Women Executive Council Member).

A women executive council member from the Dalit community expressed her perspective as follows:

I firmly believe that the chairperson plays a crucial role in encouraging and motivating women and marginalized executive council members to actively engage in decision-making processes. The Jwalamukhi rural municipality exhibits inclusivity and has a commendable chairperson who not only attentively listens to our voices during executive

meetings but also encourages us to raise our concerns (Respondent 8, Dalit Women Executive Council Member).

Another women executive council member from the Dalit community shares her voice as follows:

During the executive council meetings, the voices of women and marginalized executive council members are valued and acknowledged by the chairman and vice chairman. Although there is no evident caste discrimination in our municipal meetings, discrimination still persists in society. The chairman and vice chairman are committed to addressing and tackling such discriminatory practices. I would like to provide an example: during a dinner event, a member of the local government was invited, and unfortunately, the host exhibited discrimination by offering a separate meal to the Dalit executive member. Our chairperson took prompt measures to prevent such practices from occurring in the future (Respondent 3, Dalit Women Executive Council Member).

Overcoming societal restrictions and beliefs is imperative. It requires courageous leadership that challenges deep-seated biases, dismantles stereotypes, and establishes a fair and equitable environment for all. This type of leadership actively works to dismantle societal barriers, enabling individuals to surpass limitations and realize their full potential. Addressing discrimination requires a united effort involving education, awareness, and legal reforms. The fight against discrimination is not only a moral obligation but also a pathway to a more just and prosperous society.

4.4 Pre-Meeting Agenda Sharing

It is crucial to share the meeting agenda in advance to facilitate effective discussions during the executive council meeting. When the agenda is shared early, participants have the opportunity to prepare and contribute meaningfully to the discussions. However, in Jawalamukhi Rural Municipality, there is often a lack of timely agenda sharing, which hinders the expression of opinions. Timely and easily accessible information plays a pivotal role in making well-informed decisions. Therefore, efforts should be made to ensure that information is promptly shared with all members of the executive council. Regarding the issue of agenda sharing, a ward chairperson expressed:

One challenge we encounter is the delayed distribution of meeting agendas. Sometimes, we have to attend executive council meetings without prior discussion of the agendas (Respondent 2, Ward Chairperson).

Similarly, a women executive council member expressed her viewpoint:

I believe it would be beneficial if meeting agendas were distributed before the meeting, allowing us more time to adequately prepare" (Respondent 4, women Member).

Likewise, a Dalit women executive council member shared her view:

The delayed information regarding the agendas for discussion hampers our ability to plan beforehand (Respondent 3, Dalit Women Executive Committee Member).

However, the chairperson and chief administrative officer hold a different opinion. They acknowledge the issue of delayed agenda sharing and argue that sometimes they have to conduct meetings immediately, making it difficult to share agendas beforehand. They mentioned that they make every effort to distribute agendas before meetings. Having access to pre-meeting agendas greatly facilitates preparation and contributes to lively discussions. However, in the absence of pre-meeting agendas, it becomes challenging to adequately and effectively discuss the issues at hand.

4.5 Challenges Faced by Women in Political Career

Career development holds immense significance for women and marginalized executive council members. They employ various strategies to enhance their knowledge and skills for advancing their careers. However, political career development presents greater challenges for them compared to men. Gender bias, stereotypes, and systemic barriers often hinder the progress of women and marginalized executive council members in politics. Overcoming these challenges requires collective efforts from society. It is crucial to create supportive environments, implement gender-sensitive policies, and promote mentorship and leadership development programs to address the obstacles they face in their political careers. The majority of women and marginalized executive council members express dissatisfaction with their career development opportunities. Almost all of them believe that their future in political careers appears uncertain. They demonstrate a lack of willingness to pursue career development in politics. A women executive council member from the Dalit community shared her view:

Upon completing the tenure, I have not envisaged pursuing a future career in politics (Respondent 3, Dalit Women Executive Council Member).

The self-perception and attitudes of women and marginalized executive council members can act as barriers to their advancement in political careers. Achieving a balance between family responsibilities and work, receiving mentorship, and obtaining training are among the factors that impact the career development of these individuals in politics. Often, they face challenges due to their family obligations. The traditional roles of women, including their reproductive duties and household responsibilities, hinder their ability to effectively focus on a political career. Similarly, these roles and responsibilities impose greater social costs on them compared to their male counterparts, ultimately leading to their careers being sidelined or even sacrificed entirely. Nepali culture tends to prioritize men in social, political, and institutional life, while women are consistently marginalized with limited freedoms. Women and marginalized executive council members frequently encounter limited opportunities for mentoring, which is crucial for effectively fulfilling their defined roles. Insufficient access to the desired mentorship adversely affects their career development in politics. They should be granted equal opportunities as men, without any constraints, to foster their career advancement.

4.6 Patriarchal Mindset

Traditionally, women have been subjected to the stereotypical perception that their role is to support and be subservient to men as wives, mothers, and daughters (Tompkins, 1988). This social and culturally constructed gender hierarchy places men in superior positions while women are relegated to subordinate roles in politics. Women and marginalized executive council members encounter various forms of gender-related behaviors in their surroundings, both subtle and overt. Patriarchal mindsets and societal restrictions pose significant challenges to achieving gender equality and inclusive governance. Overcoming these obstacles requires challenging traditional norms, promoting gender-sensitive education, and fostering inclusive dialogues. This involves dismantling gender stereotypes, advocating for gender equality, and empowering individuals to challenge discriminatory norms. Addressing patriarchal mindsets and societal restrictions calls for collective efforts from individuals, communities, and institutions to confront gender biases, uphold women's rights, and create opportunities for marginalized groups to thrive. Despite the progress made in inclusive decision-making, traces of patriarchal thinking persist.

Local governments' decision-making is somewhat influenced by patriarchal mindsets. Despite the structural inclusion of women in local government, their actions are often guided by patriarchal norms. As one ward chairperson shared:

I strongly believe that the patriarchal mindset poses a significant barrier to achieving inclusive decision-making. It is crucial to address this mindset to enable women to fully participate in decision-making processes (Respondent 6, Ward Chairperson).

A women executive member expressed the following viewpoint:

I am aware that there are still challenges to be overcome. One of these challenges is the prevailing patriarchal belief that burdens women with primary household responsibilities, thereby hindering their participation in decision-making. I firmly believe that we can overcome this challenge by changing people's mindsets and providing greater support to women involved in politics (Respondent 5, Women Executive Council Member).

The influence of patriarchy is evident in Nepali society, resulting in injustice, underprivileged conditions, and underrepresentation across all spheres of society. The practice of patriarchal culture in Nepal has led to discrimination (Gupta et al., 2021). Completely eradicating the patriarchal mindset overnight is challenging, but it is possible with time and collective action.

4.7 Responsibility Burden on Women

The work environment and family are two significant institutions in life (Sundaresan, 2014). Balancing family and work responsibilities has long been a challenge for women and marginalized executive council members. They face a serious struggle in achieving a balance between family and work life due to their triple roles: reproductive, productive, and managerial, as expected by society. Traditionally, women have been assigned greater responsibilities in maintaining and managing a family compared to men. Women serving as executive council members are expected to handle domestic chores, raise children, care for adults and the elderly, entertain guests, manage household tasks such as water and fuel, and attend to various other family matters. Failing to fulfil these obligations while serving in local government and meeting the needs of the local community can result in conflicts within their families. Unseen sociocultural norms and values significantly influence the balance between family and work life for women and marginalized executive council members. Therefore, managing a successful

career and maintaining a happy family life is not easy for them. In terms of family and work-life balance, women executive members expressed:

As a woman executive member, I face challenges in maintaining a balance between my family and work life. I am expected to complete all the household chores before attending to my responsibilities in local government. If I fail to fulfill these household responsibilities, it sometimes leads to conflicts within my family (Respondent 5, Women Executive Council Member).

Promoting a fair distribution of responsibilities within households and workplaces is crucial for empowering women and fostering their active participation in governance. Efforts aimed at alleviating this burden enable women to fully engage in decision-making while fulfilling their personal and family obligations. Increasingly, women and marginalized executive council members recognize the significance of balancing their family and work life. Two key factors greatly influence their ability to achieve this balance: family support and the local government environment. When families are supportive and cooperative, it becomes easier for women to manage both their family and work responsibilities, thereby facilitating their career advancement in politics (Gupta et al., 2020). Similarly, a gender-sensitive working culture within the local government, along with access to facilities such as motivation, manageable assignments, maternity leave, and transportation assistance (Gupta et al., 2020), plays a vital role in helping them maintain a healthy equilibrium between their family and work life.

Chapter V

Conclusion and Implication

5.1 Conclusion

This study explores the inclusive decision-making practices at the local government level, focusing on the case of Jwalamukhi Rural Municipality. The rural municipality places a strong emphasis on collective decision-making during executive meetings, where all executive council members actively participate in thorough discussions to reach decisions. Every executive member, including women and marginalized groups, has a voice, and decisions are made through participatory processes based on consensus. The rural municipality promotes an environment that encourages open expression and free discussion of concerns and issues. It provides training, mentorship, and communication support to help bridge gaps and enable individuals to confidently express their ideas. The leaders of the rural municipality exemplify inclusive leadership by actively encouraging and amplifying the voices of women and marginalized executive council members. They foster a safe and supportive environment that welcomes everyone's opinions. They act as catalysts for change, inspiring others to embrace diversity and establishing a culture characterized by understanding, respect, and collaboration. The rural municipality is committed to establishing a truly inclusive local government that represents its people.

Through skill development initiatives, supportive leadership, and an inclusive culture, the rural municipality strives to ensure that everyone's voice is heard and valued. However, it acknowledges the need to continue bridging skill gaps, enhancing confidence, and improving the practical implementation of inclusive decision-making. The rural municipality enriches the decision-making process, promotes social harmony, and ensures that governance reflects the pluralistic nature of society. Although significant progress has been made, the study's findings suggest that inclusive decision-making requires both structural and behavioral changes. Structural changes, such as employing participatory methods, can guarantee the inclusion of every voice. Behavioral changes, such as cultivating a culture of respect and trust, can create an environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing their opinions.

5.2 Implication of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for inclusive governance, particularly to decision-making practices at the local government level. The results emphasize the significance of inclusive decision-making in promoting gender equality, achieving a balanced and representative society, and ensuring inclusive governance. One key implication is the active involvement and motivation of all executive council members, including women and marginalized groups, in the decision-making process. By ensuring their active participation, local governments can create a more inclusive and representative decision-making environment. To achieve this, local governments should establish a comfortable atmosphere where individuals feel free to express their opinions, irrespective of their gender, social status, or other factors. Furthermore, local governments should provide targeted training and support to empower women and marginalized groups, enabling them to develop the necessary skills and confidence to effectively engage in decision-making.

The study also highlights the importance of leadership support for inclusive voices, as inclusive leaders create a safe and supportive environment where everyone feels encouraged to express their opinions. Additionally, the study emphasizes the value of sharing meeting agendas in advance to facilitate effective discussions during executive council meetings. Early agenda-sharing allows participants ample time to prepare and contribute meaningfully to the discussions, resulting in well-informed and robust decision-making outcomes. Lastly, the study sheds light on the challenges faced by women and marginalized executive council members in their political careers, including gender bias, stereotypes, and systemic barriers. Overcoming these challenges requires collective efforts from local governments, who should strive to eliminate these barriers through targeted interventions, policy reforms, and awareness campaigns. Overall, the implications derived from this study underscore the significance of inclusive decision-making in local government and highlight the need for active inclusion of all executive council members, particularly women and marginalized groups, in the decision-making process.

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