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Gender Gap, Gender Trap: Negotiations of Intersectionality and Patriarchy amongst Women Elites in Nepal

Stefanie Lotter

Abstract

Transformation is apparent in Nepal, a country that underwent a decade of civil war 1996–2006, abolished the monarchy to become a republic in 2007, agreed on a new constitution in 2015 and is currently struggling to implement federalism. Decentralisation and minority representation are being put on the political agenda alongside efforts to rebuild infrastructure damaged through two major earthquakes. Beyond this, Nepal appears to have developed into South Asia's beacon of gender equality. Since 2016 Nepal has had a woman president, a woman chief justice and a woman speaker of parliament. Implementing a quota of 33 per cent women in politics, women politicians now come from a great variety of backgrounds reflecting Nepal's ethnic, cultural, regional and educational diversity. This study takes the entry of 197 female members into the constituent assembly of Nepal in 2008 as a baseline to study the transformation of "patriarchy" and its impact on the heterogeneous group of women politicians in high office in Nepal.

Keywords: Nepal, elites, women, gender, patriarchy, politics

Introduction

With the introduction of affirmative action in 2007 the number of women in decision-making positions has risen sharply in Nepal. New legislation guaranteed 33 per cent of all seats in the Constituent Assembly (CA) to women, and the inter-parliamentary Women's Caucus now forms a critical mass in the parliament (Dalerup 2006: 3). Nepal, it seems, has developed in recent years into South Asia's beacon of gender equality with a woman president, a woman chief justice as well as a woman speaker of Parliament since 2016.

While social transformation is no doubt taking place rapidly, persistent power imbalances should not be overlooked, as women continue to be subjected to institutional and non-institutional expressions of patriarchy. Patriarchy is here

Stefanie Lotter, South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, and Department of Languages and Cultures of South Asia, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; sl70@soas.ac.uk. I would like to thank both independent reviewers for their insightful and valuable comments on the paper.

understood as a form of social stratification which creates a set of privileges for men, establishing gendered power relations of superordination and subordination. Patriarchy ranks women's agency as inferior in a system of male dominance. This system transforms and adapts (see Walby 1990), affecting different women differently at all times. This is to say that in the example of Nepal, high caste Hindu women and women who belong to ethnic minority groups face different challenges in finding their political voice. Patriarchy frames agency consciously and unconsciously as it permeates the context of women's early socialisation as well as their adult cultural milieu (Kandiyoti 1988). For Nepal's women elites this raises the question of how patriarchy has adapted within the microcosm of high-level politics and how this impacts on the diverse group of women politicians. Deniz Kandiyoti argues that the analysis "of women's strategies and coping mechanisms can help to capture the nature of patriarchal systems in their cultural class-specific and temporal concreteness" (ibid.: 285).

The generalising category of "women" is used but is complicated throughout the paper, as gender is seen as only one dimension of diverse composite identities. As Urmila Pawar, Pradnya Lokhande, Ruth Manorama, Yoti Lanjewar and Pratima Pardeshi have discussed for India and Seira Tamang has discussed for Nepal, the homogenising category of "women" obscures difference, thereby precluding differentiated analysis. Gender is only one dimension of power struggle alongside caste, class, religion and location.

This study takes the entry of 197 female members into the constituent assembly of Nepal in 2008 as a baseline[1] to observe and comment upon not only the composition of the group of women politicians in the CA but also on the impact and transformation of "patriarchy" on the heterogeneity of women politicians in Nepal. It questions how both the system of patriarchy as well as attempts to counterbalance women's underrepresentation in high office through affirmative action influence the formation of women elites in politics. Women elites are defined, for the purposes of this study, in accordance with the notion of power elites, as women in decision-making positions. Hence, this is a study of women in high office in Nepal, no matter which intersectional components constitute their diverse identities beyond gender. To focus on women elites in politics at a specific time and place allows us to go beyond arbitrary difference. Historical processes and socio-cultural foundations of women's identities are mapped against self-representations to constitute three different categories of women politicians in Nepal. These are termed "old dynastic elites", "new dynastic elites" and "non-dynas-

1 The study relies largely on the extensive 900-page online publication in 2011 of individual biographies of all women CA members by the Women's Caucus, the Constituent Assembly Secretariat, the Nepal Law Society and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. I am aware that the biographies followed an interview guideline and represent information obtained verbatim as well as summaries of experiences. While the interviews have already been statistically analysed they remain a primary resource for qualitative studies.

tic elites". With an admittedly prescriptive categorisation that relates, links and divides women by revealing power and powerlessness amidst high office, this study aims to present a contemporary understanding of women elites in Nepal.

Women in high-level Nepali politics: a brief history

The history of women politicians in high office in Nepal is short. Before 1958, when Dwarikadevi Thakurani became the first elected woman in parliament (NDI 2010: 7), women had been entrusted with political power only at the discretion of their husband or father or as the representative of a minor son. Early women politicians acted within dynastic families as a substitute for men or in the role of background advisor. There is no doubt about the significant political influence of Prime Minister Juddha SJB Rana's fourth wife Gambir Kumari or King Rajendra Bikram Shah's wife Samrajya Devi; however, their influence is not recorded and hence beyond this study.[2] The beginning of a feminist civil society movement demanding political participation in Nepal can be attributed to Yogmaya Neupane (1860–1941), a pioneer women's rights activist and poet who petitioned Prime Minister Juddha SJB Rana in 1936. Her death by suicide left her as a revolutionary icon without ever having achieved a decision-making position within the state (see Hutt 2013).

Within state politics, only a few women became ministers or assistant ministers during the Panchayat period in Nepal (1962–1990) (Acharya 2010).[3] At the time, preferential proportional representation guaranteed a quota of three seats for the women's class organisation. Beyond this early quota, very few women competed in open elections or were appointed to high office. After the first pro-democratic people's movement (Jana Andolan) in 1990, a 5 per cent quota guaranteed women some participation in parliament (Kabir 2003: 11) but women politicians did not exceed 6 per cent at any time until 2007.

The end of tokenistic provisions in politics came when women's representation was raised to 33 per cent through the Constituent Assembly Act in 2007 (see details IDEA 2009). These changes would have been unthinkable without the armed conflict that lasted for 10 years between 1996 and 2006. In 2008, with a strong gender agenda, Nepal adopted a mixed system of direct election and party nomination in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. At least one-third of the candidates fielded through the first-past-the-post system, as well as half of all listed proportional representation candidates, now had to be

2 Women at the Rana court communicated amongst each other, writing notes on slates rather than paper, in order not to have a record of their influence. So far no private diaries have emerged and their legacy is only apparent through oral history, memories and fiction in the works of Greta Rana, Diamond Rana, Purushottam Rana and others.

3 These were Kamal Shah, Saraswati Rai, Kalpana Bista, Bhadrakumari Ghale, Bidyadevi Devkota, Sushila Thapa and Chanda Shah (NDI 2010: 7).

women. This resulted in the election of 30 directly elected women and 161 women nominated through the proportional representation system in 2008 (Yadav 2016: 62). Women politicians today come from a great variety of backgrounds reflected in diverse ethnicity, caste, origin and education. "Among the women CA members, 35% are Janajati/indigenous, 22.4% are Brahmin, 15.8% Madhesi, 10.7% Dalit, 10.7% Chhetri, 2.6% Muslim, and 2% are Kirant and others" (IDEA 2008: 4). Religious diversity is prominent and a surprising 26.5 per cent of all women CA members describe themselves as secular. The range of educational background extends from the 14 per cent of women who have completed their postgraduate studies to the 17.9 per cent of women who have received no formal education, but are usually literate (Women's Caucus 2011: 4).

Inclusive political representation

The striving towards inclusive politics to counterbalance established systems of power came as a direct result of three grassroots movements in Nepal – the Maoist, the Janajati[4] and the Madhesi[5] movements. As a fundamental declaration of intent, inclusion became state policy in the Interim Constitution 2007. The government then proposed "to enable Madhesi, Dalits, indigenous ethnic groups, women, labourers, farmers, the physically impaired, disadvantaged classes and disadvantaged regions to participate in all organs of the State on the basis of proportional inclusion" (Interim Constitution 2007, Article 63, Paragraph 1).

Gender was clearly identified as only one of several overlapping identity dimensions in need of affirmative action. It was immediately obvious that intersectionality had to be acknowledged and counteracted in various ways through a set of quotas. Power imbalances exist no doubt not only between men and women but also between women and women, and men and men, on the basis of class, religion and geographical origin, as well as caste or ethnicity. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term "intersectionality" specifically to describe women's experiences of oppression in varying configurations and degrees of intensity. She points out that experiences of oppression on the grounds of ethnicity, race, gender, class and ability are not only interrelated but bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Unsurprisingly in Nepal's Legislature Parliament, women's intersectionality results in temporary alliances across party lines voiced in the Women's Caucus – an institution internally criticised for mainstreaming feminism – and simul-

4 A movement promoting ethnic politics, i.e. a greater political participation of indigenous nationalities in all levels of politics.

5 A lowland movement promoting regional autonomy and proportional representation for the densely populated and diverse lowland of Nepal, the Madhes.

taneously results in disunity among women's voices when conforming to and influencing party lines.

Affirmative action to counterbalance the acknowledged imbalance in power relations was not embraced by all. Prasant Jha (2008: 4) quotes a senior male Madhesi politician, who confided, "We have got a thirty three percent reservation for Madhesis but will have to give half to women. They don't know anything. What a waste." In order to counterbalance the interrelated facets of discrimination all at once, parties have to develop an awareness of the complexity of discrimination to become inclusive along several markers at once. The above example indicates that political activism is not necessarily inclusive beyond one line of discrimination. Of the political parties with only one delegate in the CA, none has chosen a woman as their only representative in 2008 and where political parties have sent uneven numbers of delegates to the CA none send more women than men (IDEA 2009: 4). Counterbalancing established intersectional power relations does not come naturally and each dimension – whether locality, caste or gender – has to be explicitly introduced in all discourses.

In future parliamentary elections, 60 per cent of the 275-member parliament are to be elected, using first-past-the-post for each single member constituency. The remaining 40 per cent of seats are to be filled by a system of proportional representation. This new rule will become effective in the local, regional and national elections in 2017 and 2018 respectively. It reduces the relative amount of proportional representation by 10 per cent compared to the earlier CA elections in 2008. As a result, while assuming that elected representatives do not show a higher percentage of diversity markers, it will be down to around 40 per cent of the members of parliament to counterbalance established elites and fulfil the criteria of all introduced quotas. In a simple example this means that should no woman be elected to the parliament, 33 per cent of the 40 per cent of seats reserved for quotas will have to be filled by women who at the same time will have to counterbalance all other underrepresented groups. As a direct result of this system it can be anticipated that compared to men, the group of women members of parliament will be significantly more diverse.

In addition, the quota system has become more complicated since 2008, as it now includes 18 different categories of underrepresentation. While the women's quota of 33 per cent remains intact, individual minority representation has de facto decreased. A contributing factor to this is for example the new minority category of "Khas Arya" (hill Hindus), which includes not only Hill Dalits but also Thakuri, an old hill high-caste group. "Khas Arya" delegates are likely to increase the absolute number of high-caste politicians, ironically through proportional minority representation.

Seira Tamang (2015) and others have criticised the fact that party lists for the proportional representation elections to the House of Representatives are processed through so-called "closed lists". Unlike in a transparent ranking system, list places in Nepal are decided upon by party elites, in a system highly susceptible to clientelism. List places thus become a further instrument of manipulation for powerful party elites.

Urmila Mahato Koiri of the Terai Madhes Loktantrik Party Nepal criticises the current system for yet another reason; in her opinion, any affirmative action that neglects socio-economic status is pointless:

> It is unfair to provide reservations to Janajatis/indigenous, Dalits, Madhesis without understanding the individual's actual socio-economic status. If the government wants to provide [a] reservation, it should be given to those who are in real need of such provisions (Women's Caucus 2011: 874).

She points out that not all quota criteria coincide with low socio-economic status. Both representatives of ethnic minorities as well as women politicians may come from elite backgrounds while qualifying for list places on the grounds of ethnicity or gender.

There are two conclusions we may draw from the above. Firstly, for as long as women are not competing and winning first-past-the-post seats, women politicians who enter parliament on list places are likely to have identities reflecting several of the 18 different quota criteria. Secondly, since gender is a quota criterion by itself, women MPs entering through the proportional representation lists can also come from highly privileged socio-economic backgrounds. In other words, the demography of women in high office is likely to be weighted towards either the upper or the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum.

While this polarisation prevails along the lines of dynastic and non-dynastic women elites, the following chapters will show that a further group of women elites can be identified in Nepali politics. These new dynastic elites share the economic strength of dynastic elites while positioning themselves ideologically in the realm of struggle, a characteristic of all new elites and opposition movements claiming the high moral ground as political victims.

Dynastic women politicians of the old elites

Nepal Congress lawmaker Nabindra Raj Joshi stated with reference to women's political participation in the Constituent Assembly: "When we don't seek the opinion of even mother and wife at home, do you think we should look for women's consent to make important decisions?" (quoted in UN Women / CSR 2014: 41). Joshi's statement is a reminder of a prevailing patriarchal view in which the location of women is not the public arena but the home. Women's

opinions are seen merely as an optional ingredient in male decision-making. Amongst the women who could, if felt necessary, be consulted by men, those related by kinship come first. With this logic it is not surprising that positions of public office occupied by women – especially before affirmative action was introduced in 2007 – were filled predominantly with female relatives of male politicians (IDEA 2008, UNDP 2009, Yadav 2016). Within South Asia and beyond, this is a common phenomenon, as prominent politicians such as Sonia Gandhi, Ambika Soni, Vasundhara Raje Scindia, Supriya Sule or Agatha Sangma demonstrate for India and Benazir Bhutto, Parveen Junejo, Shazia Marri, Sumaira Malik and Ayla Malik show for Pakistan. Frenkenberg (2012: 31) indicates that dynastic women politicians in Asia "show some strikingly similar patterns regarding their political and social biographies". She claims that they are not only well connected through their families but are also of high socio-economic status, highly educated and show a "lack of or low level of political experience". Richter (1991) adds that dynastic women politicians enter politics often in order to "fill a political void created by the death or imprisonment of a male family member". It may not be surprising that for example the first female president of Nepal, Bidhya Devi Bhandari, was married to the prominent politician Madan Bhandari who died prematurely in a mysterious car accident.

Dynastic families dominated Nepal for centuries, at times supporting or even controlling the former monarchy. Thakuri[6] families such as the Malla, Rana, Basnet, Pande or Thapa formed the landed nobility, combining positions in administration with a presence in high military ranks. The Rana for example, ruled the country for over one hundred years until 1951. They created large court families, regulating succession through an elaborate system of birthrights and proven ability. Male members of the family were taught early on to command, lead and assume responsibilities (Lotter 2004: 133).

Women amongst old elites were rarely perceived as independent agents but rather as instruments to create lasting political alliances through marriage. They were initially tutored only in music, French and drawing in contrast to their brothers, who were instructed in administration, political science and the military. Women from old elites who entered politics did so only if requested to do so. Janak RL Shah, daughter of Prime Minister Juddha SJB Rana, stood as a candidate in the 1981 elections at the behest of King Mahendra, to campaign against Rishikesh Shah, himself a member of the ruling nobility. Vir Sanghvi (2009) sees a danger in this narrow social stratification amongst political candidates, whereby "[s]lowly but surely, true democracy is replaced by a kind of feudalism in which the peasants are given the right to choose be-

6 Thakuri self-identify as a distinct group within the Chhetri caste, comprising less than half a million members according to the 2011 census of Nepal. Thakuri are counted as Pahadi. They generally identify as having Rajput descent and an ancestry that formed the ruling elites in the Nepali administration.

tween various aristocrats". While shifting from an oligarchy to the party politics of democracy, ruling dynasties were transformed into dynastic politicians. By combining the dynastic nature common throughout South Asia (cf. Bhaumik 2008, Weiner 1989) with the hierarchical structure of Nepali society (Pradhan 1991), old elites failed to enhance diversity within politics, except to a certain degree in the realm of gender, where they supported female relatives whom they trusted. Tamang (2015) states that it is indeed "largely unacknowledged thus far [...] that certain women reap the benefits of caste, class, region, language and other privileges". Tamang argues that not only are the disadvantages of double discriminations cumulative, but privileges accumulate as well, leading to political positions.

On her defeat in the 1981 elections, Janak RL Shah remarked retrospectively that if all women had supported her, she could have won. Women did not generally vote for Janak RL Shah, who was perceived as a member of the old elites and was not perceived as a women's rights activist in the first place. In a recent comparative study on violence against women in politics in South Asia, the authors state that "women who belong to political families were perceived as representatives of the elite and controlled by powerful males, which does not serve the purpose of women's empowerment" (UN Women / CSR 2014: 8). This is where women dynastic politicians are identified as "proxy women", a term signifying delegated power, applied exclusively to women. As such, high-caste women politicians have been seen in Nepal as reinforcing pre-existing socio-economic divides despite being women and despite being elected.

Regardless of their leadership skills, dynastic politicians face the dilemma of legitimation. Arzu Rana-Deuba is a dynastic politician related to the Malla dynasty through her maternal grandfather, who had been *aide de chambre*, or personal secretary, to King Mahendra. She is related to the Rana clan through her father Binod SJB Rana and she is married to Sher Bahdur Deuba, who was Prime Minister of Nepal four times: 1995–1997, 2001–2002, 2004–2005 and again since 7 June 2017. In Arzu Rana-Deuba's self-perception, being a woman politician is not about family relations, but about qualification and determination. She states that she earned her place in the CA "because of my hard work" (Women's Caucus 2011: 66). She does not see herself as disadvantaged through her gender: "I have never considered myself any less than a man and no man has ever treated me as less than equal in any of the sectors I have worked in" (Women's Caucus 2011: 67). Rana-Deuba argues that her family ties had been a hindrance to political acceptance, as many people are hesitant about her since she is a member of the Rana clan. And being the wife of a senior politician, people continuously compare her to partners of other leaders, much to her dislike.

Rana-Deuba does not fit the role of the politician's wife who gives up her own career to support her husband with voluntary charity work. Nor does she fall easily into the category of a traditional "proxy woman" who carries out a

delegated mandate. With a PhD in organisational Psychology, Rana-Deuba is amongst the most highly qualified women in the CA. It may be appropriate to refer to her as a true representative of dynastic rule who struggles to convincingly portrait herself as a feminist.

In conclusion, dynastic women in politics struggle with their public image much more than male politicians of similar background. They are seen either as "proxy women" without a political agenda of their own or as members of a privileged elite, unable to prioritise the needs of the people, let alone the needs of women. Among women political elites in Nepal, dynastic women used to be the only women who managed to gain enough political support to win seats. Today, they form a minority among all women representatives – one, however, with effective links outside the Women's Caucus. Mainstream feminism is a way for them to address solidarity with other women; however, this solidarity is rarely reciprocated.

New dynastic women politicians

Unlike the first group of dynastic women politicians that emerged from the landed nobility, joining conservative parties, a second group of political dynasties began in opposition to the Rana regime. Amongst the anti-Rana movement we find in the first case predominantly high-caste men who had been educated abroad, finding political inspiration in the Indian Congress and the broader political changes that sought democratisation and self-governance in an emerging post-war and increasingly post-colonial era. In Nepal, where political parties were not allowed during the Rana regime, a group that called itself People's Council (Praja Parishad) started an underground movement planning a political alternative and publishing leaflets during the 1940s. This group was exposed and while several key members were executed, those who were imprisoned formed one cornerstone of the political elite of the coming years. Politicians of the anti-Rana movement that led to the revolution in 1950/51 formed the second cornerstone of the political elite in the years that followed. Initially the Nepali Congress occupied the position of political renewal in opposition to the Rana regime. Prominent here was the Koirala family, a political dynasty that has produced three prime ministers so far but has not yet had any prominent women politicians.

New dynastic politicians emerged at a further point of political friction, namely when the Communist Party of Nepal split and an initially small Maoist splinter group left politics to initiate the people's war in 1996. The political leaders of the revolution – Baburam Bhattarai, Hisila Yami and Pushpa Kamal Dahal – emerged post-conflict as new political elites who have now begun to

involve family members in politics. Dynastic politicians differ significantly from non-dynastic women elites, who entered high office from 2008 onwards without dynastic ties and without the established ability to pass political ownership and control from one generation to the next.

Kanak Mani Dixit (2008: 45) suggested that with the end of the Shah monarchy in 2008, a new political landscape should be envisioned. He claimed that a departure from dynastic politics could be within reach: "When dynasties become an anachronism, we will finally be on our way to true pluralism and inclusive democracy". Dynastic systems are relatively crisis-resistant, however, and have a surprising ability to regenerate if not recreate. The brand name of a dynastic family is easily recognised and trust is more easily extended to established elites than to newcomers. Shamus Rahman Khan explains that while all politicians are expected to aim for a dynastic reputation as well as stockpiling wealth, already established families appear less prone to corruption, as their finances are already secured. Khan terms this transition "from entitlement to privilege" (2014: 136)

In an interview with *The Telegraph* South Asia Editor Dean Nelson (2012) interviews former minister Pashupati SJB Rana,[7] owner of Nepal Gas and one of the richest men in Nepal. Rana observed that Pushpa Kamal Dahal,[8] a former revolutionary leader known also under his nom de guerre "Prachanda", had amassed disproportionate wealth. Rana reflects on Dahal's purchase of a luxury house:

> Comrade Prachanda has a war chest of more than a billion rupees (£8 million) and has achieved his own particular proletarian dream. It's just too bad for the rest of his supporters. The whole problem with the Maoist party is, that within it are the haves and the have-nots. The differences between them are quite remarkable (Nelson 2012).

For a politician for whom class struggle comes before all other struggles the accusation of accumulating wealth solely for personal gain is serious, even when it comes from the heart of Nepal's old elites.

Renu Dahal,[9] the daughter of Pushpa Kamal Dahal, became a member of the CA in 2008 through the proportional representation list. She stated that "becoming a CA member is not a big achievement in itself because what is more important is what one has contributed to the nation and achieved for the people" (Women's Caucus 2011: 642). She is aware that for her it is easy – in contrast to other young female politicians – to become a CA member as she can rely on powerful family relations. "Dynastic politics is a way of easing the otherwise difficult transfer of power from older generation to the younger.

7 Pashupati SJB Rana is a member of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, a centre right party in which many politicians of the old elites can be found.

8 Pushpa Kamal Dahal is the chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and was Prime Minister in 2008–2009 and again in 2016–17.

9 Renu Dahal is a member of the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

Older generations in powerful positions are often more amenable to stepping down if they are able to hand over power to their children or other relatives" (Chandra 2016: 51). Young male and female politicians benefit from dynastic ties, no matter whether these are old or relatively new political dynasties.

In conclusion, the new generation of dynastic politicians differs from those of the old elite with regard to the likelihood of their political affiliation arising from an opposition movement rather than established rule. They are able to rely on generational transfer of power as well as the valuable branding of a dynastic name and image while rejecting being perceived as protégés. New dynastic women politicians base the legitimacy of their office on the people who elected them and reject the association with privilege, an association they reserve for members of the old dynastic elites. Hisila Yami[10] stated, for example: "The people of Kathmandu voted for me because I am their daughter. They have faith in me" (Women's Caucus 2011: 299), indicating her position is legitimised not by her family ties but by the trust the electorate has in her.

Rounaq Jahan claimed in the 1980s that all South Asian women leaders are dynastic politicians:

> [Women politicians] were all politicised within their family environment, and gained entry into leadership through family connections. They all fall into the category of leaders whose assumption of power was "mediated" by a male relative, as opposed to those whose careers were shaped from the beginning by their own choices, attributes and efforts, grounded in a strong sense of their own political efficacy (Jahan 1987: 850).

Looking at current politics in Nepal, we can confirm that family connections are still pivotal to women politicians of old and new dynasties even if members of new dynasties may not choose to acknowledge the importance of these ties. However, Jahan's claim that all women's careers in politics have been mediated through male relatives can no longer hold in the context of Nepal. Reclaiming women's agency, we shall now discuss women whose family context did not enable their career choice. Rounaq Jahan calls this a career according to "their own choices", implying, in the above quote, that this has been a career path reserved for men.

Non-dynastic women politicians

In 2008, the vast majority of women in the CA were there for the first time and entered high office without the help of family ties – as, for example, Gauri

10 Hisila Yami comes from a political family with a father who has been deputy minister. She is a Central Committee member of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and was president of the All Nepal Women's Association (Revolutionary). Her husband Baburam Bhattarai has been Prime Minister and she has served in several governments as minister.

Mahato Kauri.[11] Kauri was orphaned and her extended birth family did not support her. Her cousins plotted to deprive her of her ancestral land – which she eventually lost when her abusive husband bought himself a motorbike with the proceeds of the sale of the land. Her husband left after the birth of their fourth child to live with his second family, and her father-in-law also did not support her (see Women's Caucus 2011: 267). Such experiences of the hardships of gender and social inequality definitely bring non-dynastic women closer to the realities of their voters, in a way their privileged colleagues from political dynasties will never be. Chandra argues that "dynasts are in fact less qualified when it comes to grassroots political experience" (2016: 47). Understanding and fighting social inequality, campaigning door to door, putting up posters, hosting house meetings, organising demonstrations and gathering signatures for petitions is not what dynastic politicians are known for. Women politicians who entered politics through minority representation or election and dynastic strategists represent different poles within the political and the socio-economic field. Non-dynastic politicians earn expertise, credibility and support through active grassroots participation and the adoption of responsibilities, whereas dynastic women politicians enter politics at the top.

Suffering for political ideals has a long tradition in Nepal, where politicians of the opposition are often punished and imprisoned during their political career. Suffering (*dukha*) for political ideals and even becoming a political prisoner indicates personal strength and determination, unfaltering idealism and the ability to focus on long-term political goals.[12] As such, imprisonment and suffering for a political cause has become a qualification in itself, indicating the serious commitment of a politician. Nilam KC has worked as a political activist for the Communist Party Nepal (Marxist-Leninist). She sees struggle as an integral part of social transformation: "It will take some time for change to come. Change demands a lot more struggle" (Women's Caucus 2011: 531).

The experience of personal hardship runs like a common thread through the biographies of women CA members who joined the CA from 2008 onwards. They were forced to live underground during the war, experienced violence, had to abandon their children to work as "full-timers" during the war, lost their husbands or endured imprisonment. In Jun Kumari Roka's[13] biography, the connection between suffering and her political career was even more evident, when after enduring torture in jail, she was "given a ticket" to fight for the CA elections "in recognition of her struggle" (Women's Caucus 2011:

11 Gauri Mahato Kauri is a member of the Sadbhavana Party, a socialist party promoting federalism and participatory democracy.

12 Fisher (1987) argues that in Nepal suffering (*dukha*) conceptually forgoes well-being and prosperity (*sukha*).

13 Jun Kumari Roka is a member of the United Communist Party Nepal (Maoist) who won her seat in the election in Rokum and has been involved in politics since 1989.

338). The overwhelming majority of non-dynastic women politicians share the experience of hardship and struggle in their lives. This indivisible part of their personal narrative functions as both legitimation and motivation to join party politics, often quite explicitly against family expectations.

It is beyond this study to describe in which ways the experience of individual hardship effects subsequent political decision-making. However it should be noted that non-dynastic women politicians have come to see their personal experience of hardship and suffering as an essential part of their political biography, if not a qualification for political office. Within the larger literature on women politicians and with reference to Corazon Aquino in the Philippines and Wan Azizah in Malaysia, one sees that victimisation has been used as political capital (Derichs / Thompson 2003: 31). Without belittling hardship and suffering, it should be noted that the legitimation of a politician on these grounds is directly related to political crisis and/or grassroots movements.

Whether women politicians in Nepal will continue to evoke struggle credentials to morally justify their seat in parliament beyond Nepal's transformative years will remain to be seen.[14] It is, however, abundantly clear that without a constitutional commitment to inclusive politics and the resulting quota provisions, non-dynastic women would not have entered high office in such large numbers as they did. Due to the nature of party lists that are ranked by party elites who favour clientelism, it is unlikely that non-dynastic elites will in the future transform into dynastic elites. Relying on quota nominations rather than elections, their individual future careers in politics are not secure.

Agency as governed by intersectionality and patriarchy

Arzu Rana-Deuba has stated that she was not treated differently from her male colleagues (Women's Caucus 2011: 121), suggesting that the CA is a fairly women-friendly workplace, a place where no glass ceiling exists. Linda K. Richter (1991) contradicts Deuba's impression, stating that dynastic descent is the key factor contributing to women such as Deuba breaking the political glass ceiling. To dismiss this factor and claim self-reliance means to deny privilege. Deuba is a stout but increasingly isolated promoter of mainstream feminism in Nepal. It seems that she fails to comprehend that female solidarity is not extended freely to her on the grounds of her specific intersectionality. Hisila Yami's earlier example, where she refers to herself as the daughter of the people, takes yet a different stance. She advocates an egalitar-

14 Struggle credentials related to the 1951 Anti-Rana movement remained prominent among male politicians such as the Koirala brothers until the generation of those directly involved in this political struggle had died out.

ian position, dissociating from inherited privileges to gain political credibility. Both Hisila Yami as well as Renu Dhakal were actively involved in the civil war and their struggle credentials are beyond doubt. This provides both of them the legitimacy typical of new dynastic politicians. When comparing dynastic and non-dynastic women in politics, one difference lies in the networks to which each group has access.

Punam Yadav observes that during breaks at the CA "women who had been in politics for a long time were sitting separately, either with other women leaders (senior) or with their male colleagues, who were perceived to have similar status in terms of seniority in the leadership" (Yadav 2016: 69). It appears that within politics, a segregation between established women politicians and new women politicians exists. While dynastic women politicians are able to rely on networks beyond gender, new women politicians cannot take political networks for granted. Political networks grow with the length of political engagement and most notably, networks can also be inherited. Dynastic politicians take these alliances for granted; non-dynastic politicians struggle to build them. Members of the dynastic elites who have been in politics for some time are treated as insiders regardless of their gender. Newcomers without pre-existing networks are not.

Moreover, where the intersectionality of women politicians includes further markers of disadvantage other than gender, women's agency as politicians declines. Most noticeably, young women, women with limited formal education or women who are from any form of disadvantaged background have been sidelined or sabotaged and left without support from within and beyond their own party lines. This is particularly significant, as Meena Vaidya Malla (2011) has found that more young women then old women participate in Nepali politics.

Shanti Devi Chamar left the Nepali Congress when she was barred from sitting with upper caste people on the committee on the grounds of being a Dalit. She joined instead the CPN (UML) in the hope of entering a less discriminatory environment there. Laxmi Pariyar NC experienced similar discrimination when asked to sleep outside and not inside the house with the other delegates during a visit to a rural area (Women's Caucus 2011: 774, 450). Discrimination in politics is not limited to women, but women's intersectionality makes them particularly vulnerable. Lalita Kumari Sah, UCPN (Maoist), states that being a single woman from an underprivileged background has marginalised her, limiting her, as she perceives it, to the less prestigious position of working in the society of disappeared people. Mina Pandey of the Nepali Congress is, on the other hand, angry that without networks women are not only unable to reach significant positions but they are also exposed to accusations of incapability: "The practice of keeping women afar for [sic!] significant participation because they supposedly lack knowledge,

skill and experience is a poor psychological perception" (Women's Caucus 2011: 509). Calling discrimination a perception reveals a fascinating analytical scope, as perception relates sensory stimuli to interpretation. One of the prime locations where this process is made apparent is the media.

When the media features women politicians, interest has not primarily focused on the political statements of the women as politicians. Arzu Rana-Deuba detests being asked "irrelevant questions" about her hairdresser and wardrobe by the media rather than being invited to focus on her political agenda. She states that journalists ask "questions like those that they would ask in a fan club" (Women's Caucus 2011: 68). In the early days of the CA, articles surfaced describing CA members selling bangles, washing dishes and styling hair (Women's Caucus 2011: 15). The media limited the role of a women politician to the society pages or questioned women's professional experience by relating it to domestic or unskilled work. Both approaches undermine the authority of women politicians, whose political agenda should be central – not their domestic responsibilities or part-time jobs.

Yet the damage to women's public image is greatest where they are described as apparent traditionalists or proxy women. Prasant Jha describes in an article in the *Nepali Times* the arrival of two women CA members from the Madhes in 2008. They "came with their husbands who began doing most of the talking. The women had their heads covered. One of them asked for the day's Kantipur[15] and said shyly, 'I will return it in a minute. I just want to look at the horoscope.'" Jha introduces two women politicians in a submissive pose; they are covering their heads observing *ghumto pratha*, the appropriate traditional gesture required of respectable married women from the Terai in public.

Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) and Valentine Moghadam (2002) have both shown how the representation of Muslim women as oppressed, backward and traditional has been deployed to emphasise difference and a superior moral position. However, constructing the image of oppressed Muslim women who disregard the ideal of a secular republic not only by being visibly Muslim but further by showing an interest in the pseudoscience of astrology goes a step further. It undermines the complexity of gender relations by visualising assumed irrationality and subordination, directing the reader to the perception of dependence in decision-making. The description undermines both the independent agency of Muslim women and their ability to make rational decisions in governance.

However, by observing the tradition of veiling, the two women conform to expected cultural codes and thereby avoid criticism from within their own community. Character assassination is a malicious tool to damage achievements and reputations by relating information to a person with the intent of

15 Name of a Nepali language daily newspaper with a circulation of 350,000.

damaging their credibility or reputation. In the above example Jha judges the two politicians at a distance, observing and overhearing without engaging directly. Jha also reports in his article that the two women politicians behaved very differently when at their workplace, discussing politics inside the CA. However, regardless of the later positive endorsement of their work, it is the description as a first impression that damages the reputation of the two women politicians. The image of a traditional and submissive – as well as irrational – Muslim woman remains with the reader. The attempt to disqualify women by ignoring their work and focusing on their dress should not be acceptable, especially not when it is an identity marker such as a veil.

Denize Kandiyoti explains that when patriarchy comes into crisis, the patriarchal bargain between husband and wife will be asserted. She observes that modesty markers such as veiling intensify where women leave their familiar environment and explains, "they are working outside their home and are thus 'exposed'; they must now use every symbolic means at their disposal to signify that they continue to be worthy of protection" (1988: 283). From a traditional perspective the two women had every reason to wear the veil precisely at their workplace, where their reputation is at risk. Netra Prasad Panthi, ex-CA Member from Rupandehi confirms that "when men fail to find fault in women's activities or progress, they raise questions on women's chastity" (UN 2014: 41).

Where both the observation of traditional behaviour as well as the nonconformity with tradition is sanctioned by the press, women have little chance to emerge as powerful independent agents but are required to react to given expectations and accusations. We do not know if the husbands in Jha's narration came along for protection, reassurance, because they were proud of their wives or because they themselves wanted to walk the corridors of the CA. Neither do we know why the two women decided to wear a veil on this particular day. Sylvia Walby (1990: 173) has argued that patriarchy transforms from private patriarchy – a system in which men control kin women with the promise of protection – to public patriarchy – a system in which society controls and sanctions women's behaviour. When the press sanctions women's behaviour without listening to them the press becomes an institution of public patriarchy. Affirmative action will be needed for as long as a politician's dress is more important to the press than her ideas and statements.

Conclusion: Gender gap, gender trap

Within the intersectionality of women Linda K. Richter identifies key variables affecting women's political leadership: "an ideology of patriarchy, family ties, martyrdom, social class, female lifestyles, historical context, prison

experiences, and electoral arrangements as well as the perpetuation of the public-private sphere and its concept of female purity and family honour" (Richter 1991: 525–526). Women in Nepal have reached high-level politics through different means and despite being negatively affected by a number of the above variables. Whether they were elected, benefited from family relations or gained political credibility through political struggle, they would probably not have exceeded 6 per cent in parliament if inclusive politics had not guaranteed a quota of 33 per cent.

Unlike most women in Nepal, political elites stand in the limelight and are scrutinised by their peers and the media. In Nepal women politicians are particularly vulnerable to attempts at character assassination. They are blamed for being too strong and dominant, or too traditional and submissive and they are also said to have no opinion of their own as they are uneducated, or well-educated but still suspected of acting on the instruction of their male relatives. Unlike their male counterparts they are usually not portrayed as having exceptional leadership qualities and firm political standpoints. Instead they are expected to be mere gender advocates and are assigned so-called "typical women's portfolios", regardless of their larger political interests and their position towards gender and gender mainstreaming.

Parties in Nepal have not yet fully utilised the potential of women politicians. Non-dynastic women politicians, in particular, describe being sidelined by established male politicians, even of their own party. Like all women, women politicians have to negotiate patriarchal norms upheld by society. As the gender gap closes in parliament through affirmative action, private patriarchy transforms into public patriarchy. The relation of private and public patriarchy is complex and women politicians face varied forms of gender inequality at home, when entering public space as well as their workplace. Ang Dawa Sherpa UCPN (Maoist) a prominent politician, journalist and human rights activist sees the need to address private patriarchy first of all. She confronted her husband, who actively sabotaged her political aspirations: "I thought that if I could not change my husband, how I could [sic!] change the society" (Women's Caucus 2011: 118).

It remains to be seen whether women's voices amongst Nepal's politicians will gain increasing weight. Andrea Fleschenberg (2012) postulates that women gain only temporary influence in post-crisis societies. With a constitutional right to substantial representation in parliament, Nepal stands a reasonable chance of becoming an exception to this rule.

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