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RVWRMP III Study Report

on

Women as Municipality Vice Chairs

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FCG.



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1. Executive Summary

This report considers the backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints of elected women Vice Chairpersons (or Vice Chairs) of Rural Municipalities (RMs) in Sudurpaschim and Karnali Provinces. The focus is on the role of elected women politicians in the RM, and their gendered problems and possible solutions. The study also considers the role of RVWRMP activities in capacity development and empowering women. The scope of the study reflects the first four years after the first local elections in the country under the new Constitution. The report was comprised of in-depth semi-structured interviews of 24 Vice Chairs out of the 27 core working Rural Municipalities of RVWRMP. Data collection and the interviews were conducted in April-July 2021.

The findings are compared with a sample of three Vice Chairs representing non-core working areas (though still areas where RVWRMP has been active implementing some WASH schemes) to find out possible differences between the core and non-core areas. Regarding the Vice Chairs' background, experiences, problems and proposed solutions, no major differences were found. Some differences in the non-core in comparison with the core RMs were found in the following aspects: 1) Gender budgeting is worse in non-core RMs due to lack of 'Women as Decision-makers' Workshops - the budget contents are not prepared as well and there are more problems in the implementation, compared with the core areas; 2) non-core areas lack Menstruation Hygiene Management (MHM) and sanitation-related trainings that were often provided by RVWRMP in the core areas; 3) There is high demand for RVWRMP capacity building and policy development activities in non-core areas.

The main findings of the 24 respondents in the core RMs are summarised below.

Key Findings considering the experiences of Vice Chairs

Vice Chairs' background: More than one third of the respondents had political experience prior to the 2017 election, and the prior experience improved their chances for the Vice Chair position. This rate is relatively high, given that the elections were the first held at local level in the current democratic system. The initiation for candidature in the elections usually came top-down from the party to the female candidates, but some candidates entered politics of their own initiative.

Political role and skills: All Vice Chairs possessed significant political roles. The first priority is in field monitoring and the Judicial Committee. Much of the Vice Chairs' work was also related to gender and the disadvantaged, especially Dignified Menstrual Management (DMM), and work on behalf of disadvantaged groups. The most important skills for an elected woman were collecting ideas from constituents, strong literary and numeracy skills, and information on the governance system. Confidence, public speaking, and managing meetings were also seen as important abilities.

Key problems: Lack of familiarity with laws and policies and a lack of knowledge on legal and judicial processes were seen as the biggest problems for the Vice Chairs. This reflects the general lack of skills and low education of women. A majority of the respondents felt only semi-confident in the job. Gender-related problems involved male dominance and gender discrimination. Men demonstrated a lack of trust and appreciation for female politicians, resulting in partial exclusion from information, meetings and political processes, as well as in lack of support.

Solutions: According to the Vice Chairs, stronger writing and reading skills would be important, oral skills would help them to speak in public, and higher education levels would help to consider the ethics, rights, and the contents of the policies. The most important skills needed to do the job better were especially judicial and legal knowledge, leadership skills, and the ability to cope, communicate, and socialize with communities.

Representing gender: Vice Chairs are seen as the leaders of the elected women in the community, representing women and they are expected to trigger the other elected women to be active and spread information. The elected women have a strong gender identity among the politicians, and gender-related agenda. The Vice Chair is generally well-aware and informed about local women's issues. The Vice Chairs also represent all women at Provincial and National level.

Ways forward for local women. The findings emphasised the need to become more economically independent to be able to stand up for their rights and standing in the family as the foremost solution. The respondents highlighted the need for income generation and entrepreneurship trainings and support. Social security programmes and subsidies were mentioned more seldom and were considered to be a secondary solution, but still considered suitable especially for the disadvantaged groups (DAGs) and People with Disabilities (PWDs).

Key Findings considering the impact of RVWRMP

Impact of RVWRMP on Vice Chairs: The most important RVWRMP activities for the Vice Chairs were related to women, MHM, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), livelihoods, transparency of the project, good project modalities, participation, and sanitation. RVWRMP was seen to be more sustainable, beneficial, and apolitical than the activities organized by the RM or other organisations. Importantly, the trainings seem to provide very much needed skills for the elected women. All respondents felt they have gained useful skills from RVWRMP related to policy development and implementation, gender and DAGs related actions, awareness raising, facilitation and monitoring skills, general confidence and capacity building skills, and planning and budgeting skills. Additionally, many Vice Chairs have started using their own house as a model to demonstrate total sanitation issues and home gardening, based on the RVWRMP activities.

Impact of RVWRMP on Municipality: More generally, the Vice Chairs link RVWRMP with certain appreciated values, such as transparency, gender equity and social inclusion, sustainability, trust, and ownership. Related to the project result areas, they easily remember the achievements in the WASH and livelihood components of the project. A significant number of respondents explicitly mentioned project modalities in their list, such as the Step-by-Step implementation guidelines and the Procurement Guidelines. In general, the respondents highly appreciated the conduct of the project and team, especially the contribution to specific issues of women and DAGs, and the correct ways of working. Municipalities have also autonomously adopted RVWRMP guidelines and modalities in their WASH implementation outside the project support.

All respondents reported that RVWRMP has been involved in RM capacity building activities. Almost all respondents had participated in the Women as Decision-makers Workshop and Menstrual Hygiene Management trainings. The take-away from those events was the understanding of how to do gender-related planning and budgeting, and the identification of gender and MHM issues and solutions. The hands-on pad-making training was regarded as being particularly beneficial, as it enables school attendance during menstruation.

2. Introduction

Following the political and administrative restructuring of Nepal under the federalisation process, there were elections held at all local levels in 2017. New municipalities were established, giving the opportunity for local level democracy and management for the first time since 2002. The new Constitution (GoN, 2015) mandates that there must be at least 33% representation of women in the provincial governments, including one representative position for women as either the head or deputy head of local governments. Furthermore, it has ensured inclusive provisions in all state structures (reflecting caste and ethnicity). The Constitution also ensures maintenance and promotion of diversity, social and cultural solidarity, tolerance, and harmony and ensures financial equality, prosperity and social justice by ending class, ethnic, regional, linguistic, religious, gender discrimination and all types of racial discriminations. As a result, from the national and local elections of 2017-18, women have come to occupy 41.8% of political positions across the country (GoN, 2017). This was a moment of new opportunity for women.

RVWRMP has integrated and mainstreamed a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) approach in all its activities, both as a cross-cutting issue across every activity, and also via implementation of targeted activities as needed (for instance on specific issues linked to menstruation or disability). The project promotes social change by empowering rural women and disadvantaged groups through an inclusive and participatory development process. The target is to ensure at least 50% women and proportionate representation of minorities in the activities. Significant capacity building has been given to communities (individuals, groups and community-based organisations such as cooperatives) and to local government representatives. This has included topics such as administrative and financial management skills, committee management, monitoring and reporting, as well as policy development and more technical topics. The long-term objective is to build the local capacities to a level that they can take over the responsibility for effective and sustainable functioning of water and livelihoods activities.

In this report we analyse and summarise the findings of the RVWRMP Phase III so-called “Elected Women Survey”, which was carried out in April-July 2021. The survey included 24 elected women from 10 districts in Sudurpaschim and Karnali provinces, in western Nepal. The survey respondents were selected from RV working RMs with female Vice Chairs only. Three RMs are not included (Namkha and Sarkegad RMs of Humla, and Bhageshwor RM of Dadeldhura) because the RM Vice Chairs are male. The survey covered the life journeys of the Vice Chairs, including how they were selected and how they are supporting the development of other women in the RM. The study also considered how RVWRMP is promoting rural women to become involved in development activities and empower the decision-making power of women at grassroots level. Overall, the study asked “Has RVWRMP made a difference in the lives of women and disadvantaged groups in the RMs?”

In this report, we are particularly looking for answers to the following key questions (addressed in Section 7):

- A. Are there any cultural or institutional barriers for women to become politically active in the RMs?
- B. What are the motivations and capabilities of the elected women to do their job?
- C. What is the perceived space for participation and opportunities to influence in local councils?
- D. How do the elected women represent the concerns of women in general? Does having more women in local governments lead to the creation of more gender sensitive programmes and legislation as well as empowering other women in local communities?
- E. How could the elected and local women's standing be improved in the future?
- F. Has RVWRMP made a difference in the lives of women and disadvantaged group members (DAGs) in the RMs?

Furthermore, we have analysed the questionnaire responses question by question in Section 5, and recorded eight personal stories from the interviewed Vice Chairs for further insights in Section 6.

3. Background: Women in local elections in Nepal

There has been limited representation of women in politics in Nepal. In the parliament of the Kingdom of Nepal 1959-1962, In the first Parliamentary elections of 1959, the entire 6 women candidate lost the election. As a result of the compulsory provision of the 1990 Constitution that requires at least five percent women's candidature in the election for House of Representatives, Similarly, in the 1986 Rastiyat Panchayat 1986 (Legislative Election), out of a total of 140 members, only three women were elected (Upreti et al., 2020). In the parliamentary election of 1991, out of 205 members, three women were elected (Upreti et al., 2020). In elections for parliamentary and local bodies in 1999, only 12 women were elected out of 205 members of parliament, and 806 of 4146 local elected representatives (Upreti et al., 2020.).

The interim constitution of Nepal 2063 (2007) under clause (3) of sub-clause (b) included the requirement that political parties should ensure proportional representation of women, Dalit (so-called "untouchables" outside the caste system), oppressed communities/indigenous peoples, "backward regions", Madhesi and other classes. In addition, it mentions that at least one-third of the total number of candidates nominated should be women (GoN, 2007). The reinstated legislature Parliament of 2007 saw participation of approximately 17.3% women from the major political parties.

Historical data demonstrates that women's participation in politics is gradually increasing. The Constituent Assembly (CA) Election was held in 2008 and the Nepali women's representation in the legislative body (Legislature-Parliament) increased to 32.8%. In the election, 191 women leaders were elected out of 575 seats (33.2%), and Cabinet nominated 6 women out of 26 seats, resulting to 197 women members (32.8%) in the Legislative parliament. The reason behind the drastic increase in the women's representation was due

to the reservation of seats provided through the Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007. (Wikipedia, 2021: Women's representation in parliament of Nepal 2017). The Federal Parliament of Nepal, elected in 2015, has total 334 members, with 112 (33.5%) women members.

In mid-2017, Rural Municipalities (RMs) and municipalities replaced the previous structures of Village Development Committees and Districts in Nepal. The 2017 elections were the first local level election since the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution. Voters elected a chairperson and a Vice Chair at RM level, and a ward chairperson plus four members (two of which should be women), representing each ward of the RM (as defined in the Constitution, 2015). 40% female representation was achieved at the local governance level thanks to the proportional inclusion quotas in the constitution.

Unfortunately, the representation of women and disadvantaged groups is not even, with men tending to hold the higher-level positions of each level. The Rural Village Water Resources Management Project (RVWRMP) working area has only one elected female chair of a Rural Municipality (RM). In the whole of the two provinces where RVWRMP operates - Sudurpaschim and Karnali provinces - there are only one mayor and one RM chair out of out of 167 local level governments. This is demonstrated clearly in the tables below demonstrating the leadership disaggregated in the working RMs of RVWRMP.

Table 1: Gender and ethnicity statistics of RVWRMP core working Rural Municipalities.

Chair				Vice Chair			
By Ethnicity/Caste		By Sex		By Ethnicity/Caste		By Sex	
Dalit	0	Female	1	Dalit	1	Female	24
Janajati	4	Male	26	Janajati	2	Male	3
Other	23	Total	27	Other	24	Total	27
Total	27			Total	27		

Chair and Vice Chair (Both)			
By Ethnicity/Caste		By Sex	
Dalit	1	Female	25
Janajati	6	Male	29
Other	47	Total	54
Total	54		

4. Methods and sample

The survey was carried out through individual phone interviews with the elected women. Originally the interviews were planned to be conducted in person, but due to the increase in COVID-19 cases in Nepal in 2021 the plan was changed.

The sample consisted of 24 elected women working as Vice Chairs in the project's core Rural Municipalities (RMs) in 10 districts (see picture below). The average age of the respondents was 40 (min: 32, max: 65), with four (17 %) still having dependent children living with them. Additionally, we interviewed three Vice Chairs from non-core RMs as a control group in the same manner to compare the responses with the others. In the core RMs, the full range of scheme implementation and capacity building is provided; while non-core municipalities make a proposal for support for specific WASH schemes, with a greater financial contribution from the municipality and less technical assistance and training.

17 respondents (71 %) were members of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), four (17 %) were members of the Nepali Congress and three (12%) were members of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). One respondent was from the Dalit caste, one from the Janajati caste and the rest (22) from 'others' (Brahmin and Chhetri).

Regarding education, six of the respondents have reached HSEB level (Higher Secondary Education Board) and four have reached higher education. Six respondents have obtained a School Leaving Certificate (SLC), while eight were under SLC level.

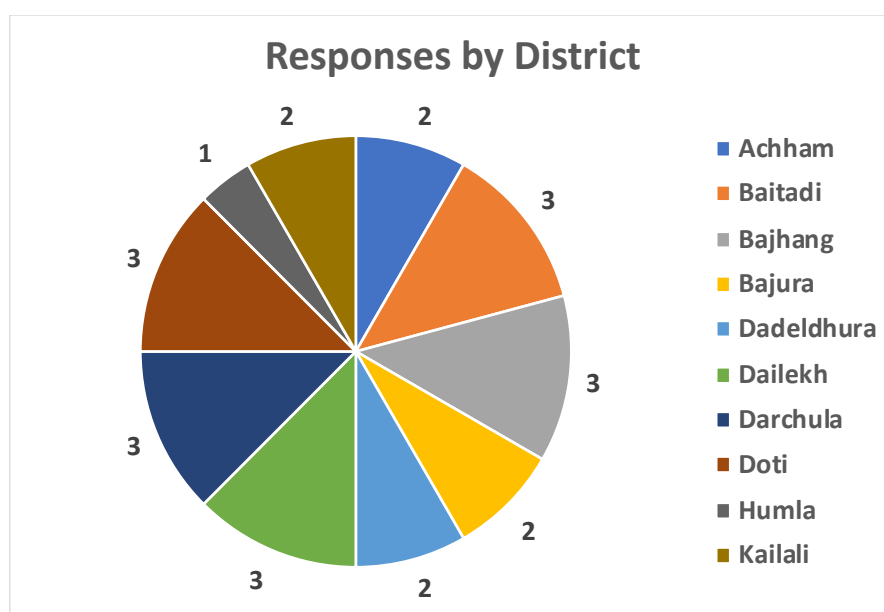


Figure 1: Responses by district.

5. Analysis of Questionnaire Answers

Regarding the Vice Chairs' background, experiences, problems, proposed solutions, no major differences were found, but some differences in comparison with the core areas were found in the following aspects:

- 1) Gender budgeting is worse in non-core areas due to lack of Women as Decision-makers Workshops - there are more problems in the implementation, and the budget contents is not prepared as adequately as in the core areas;
- 2) non-core areas lack MHM and sanitation-related trainings that were often provided by RVWRMP in the core areas;
- 3) There is high demand for RVWRMP capacity building and policy development activities in non-core areas.

Question 1: Did you have political experience prior to the elections of 2017?

The first question considered political experience prior to the elections of 2017. 15 respondents (62.5%) reported that they did not have any prior political experience, whereas nine (37.5%) responded that they had previous political experience.

The second part of the question developed the first one, by asking about the type of previous experience, if any. Ten respondents (42%) reported having been a party member, six respondents (25%) having been involved as a political cadre, and two respondents (8%) reported having been a union leader.

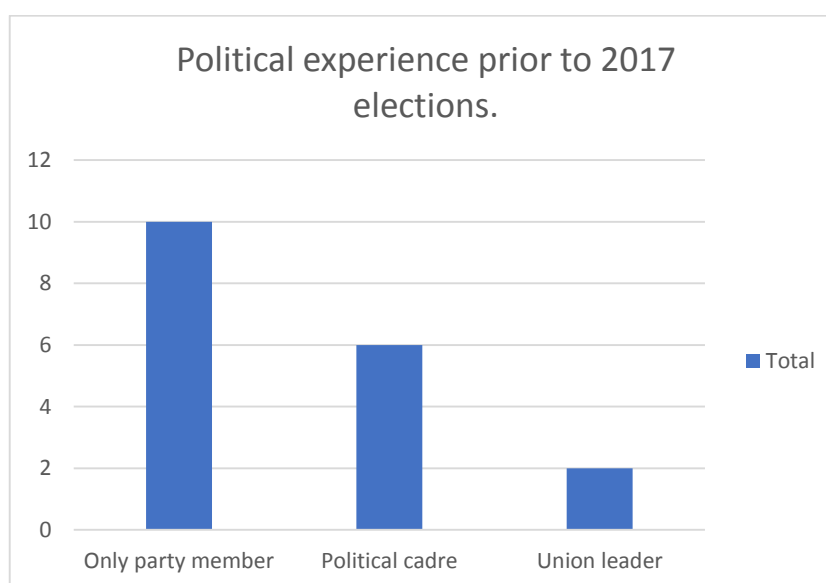


Figure 2: Political experience prior to 2017 elections.

Nine of the ten respondents reporting party membership did not count it as political experience. This is in line with the general notion that majority of adult citizens in Nepal seem to have some kind of basic political affiliation, and that does not necessarily mean experience in actual politics.

Fifteen respondents reported having political experience prior to the 2017 election (37.5%). The rate can be seen to be relatively high, given that the elections were the first at local level held in the current democratic system. On the other hand, it is more likely that long-term involvement furthers the chances of getting selected to leadership positions. This indicates that women who already were involved in politics before the elections had a relatively good chance of being elected and getting selected as Vice Chairs.

Question 2: Did you have civil or administrative experience prior to 2017 elections?

Out of 24 respondents, 16 (67%) reported having prior administrative experience, while eight respondents (33%) reported not having any administrative experience prior to the 2017 elections. This means that most of the respondents had at least some administrative experience, and that may have positively influenced their political career.

The second part of the question specified the responses by asking of the type of administrative experience, if any. This was a multiple-choice question. Eight respondents (25%) disclosed a membership in different types of community groups and organisations, five (21%) had been involved in social mobilizing or NGOs, and the same number of respondents reported having been a public servant (teacher, health worker, admin or accountant staff etc.). Three Vice Chairs (13%) reported having been Female Community Health Volunteers, and four respondents (17%) reported other types of civil or administrative involvements.

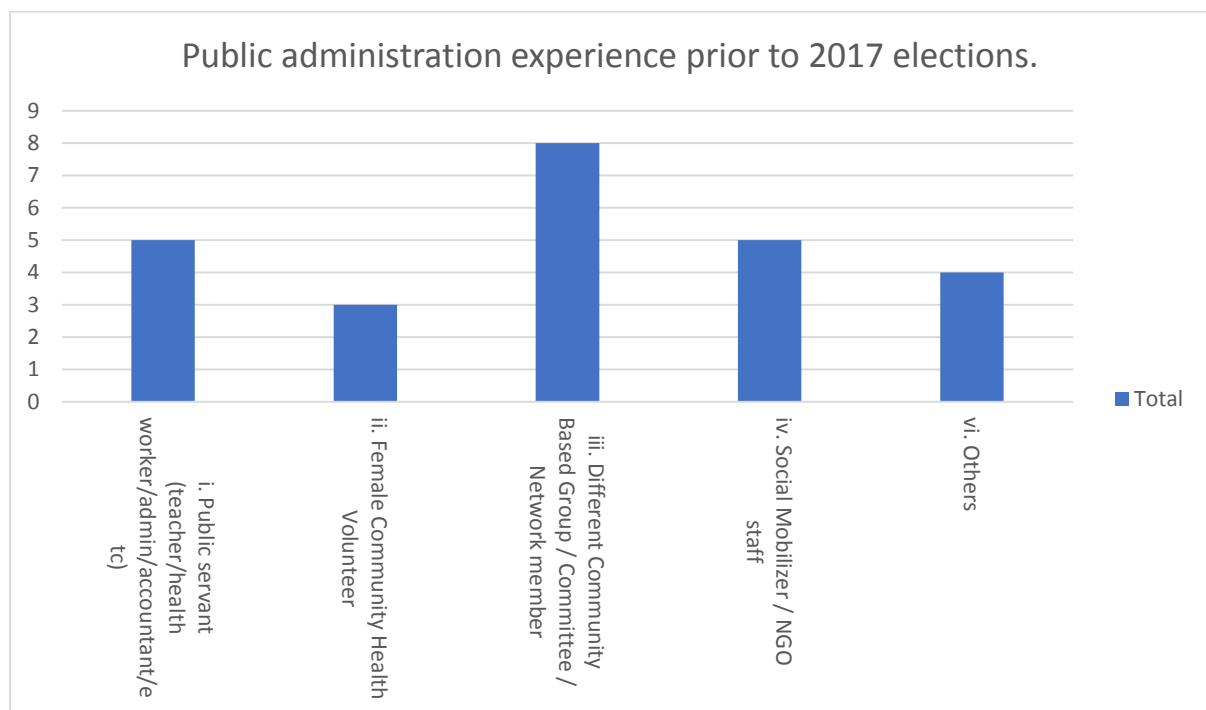


Figure 3: Public administration experience prior to 2017 elections.

Public servant and/or health background (eight respondents, or 33%) is relatively common among the Vice Chairs. Activity in community organisations or NGOs may have also helped in getting selected to leadership positions. Teachers, health workers and other status workers are often well-appreciated members in the communities. They may also have better education and skills to enable them to get involved in politics, compared to the local

population. All types of previous civil and administrative activity may help the persons to become more appreciated and well-known locally, improving their chances of getting selected to leadership positions.

Question 3: How were you chosen as a candidate?

Regarding the ways in which the respondents got chosen as candidates, all except for one respondent (96%) reported that their party approached them to stand as a candidate. This reflects that the initiation is coming top-down from a higher level, and the candidate only accepts the proposal from the party. The other, less answered, options emphasize more self-initiation by the candidate. Six responses (25%) emphasized bottom-up self-initiation, where the candidate struggled to get selected, or had family-support. The small number of answers with those options tell that most of women did not have strong self-initiation towards political career, but they were influenced by the exciting political party and hierarchy. Two women (8%) reported struggles with the party to get selected as a candidate, meaning that sometimes the political hierarchy may prevent women's will to get involved in political careers, but also that there is some self-initiation for a political career among women. Some families have strong political affiliation, and in those cases the women were often requested to be candidates in the election, sometimes even forcefully.

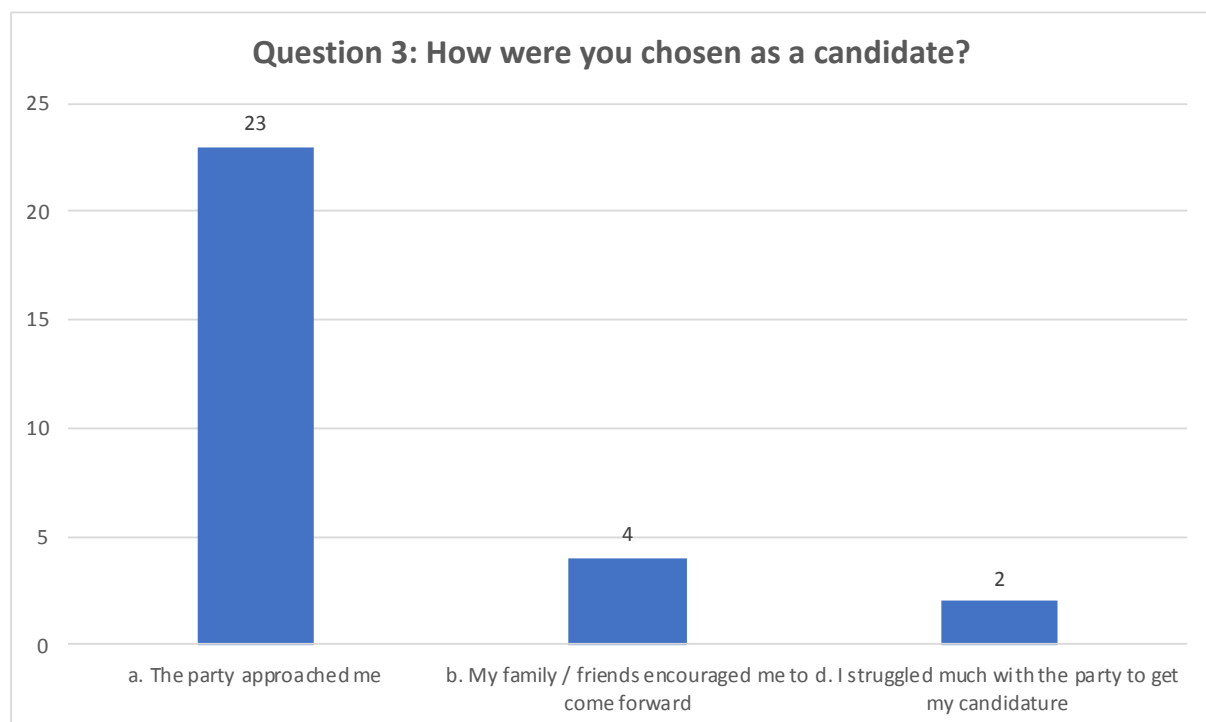


Figure 4: How were you chosen as a candidate?

Question 4a: What were your initial experiences as RM official: Did the elected men support you and ask your opinions? Did you get any briefing on the work you should do? Did anyone give you any advice and who?

This question tested how much support the elected women got from the others during their tenure, especially the elected men. Nine respondents (38%) told they got support all the time, and a further five respondents (21%) got support during the first year when they needed it most and the support gradually decreased as the person took more responsibility and

leadership by herself. They reported that they are now capable for the job. Two respondents (8%) reported that in the initial period they did not get support but gradually they were able to establish good ways of cooperation with the RM chair and others. They started getting good support by the end of the tenure. On the most clearly negative side, eight respondents (33%) did not get support, and 15 (63%) also reported that men ignored or talked over them. In total, the number of positive responses was thus 14 (58%); a first negative but improving trend was shown by 2 respondents (8%); and negative responses came from 8 respondents (33%). As this work does not consider elected men representatives, we lack a point of comparison.

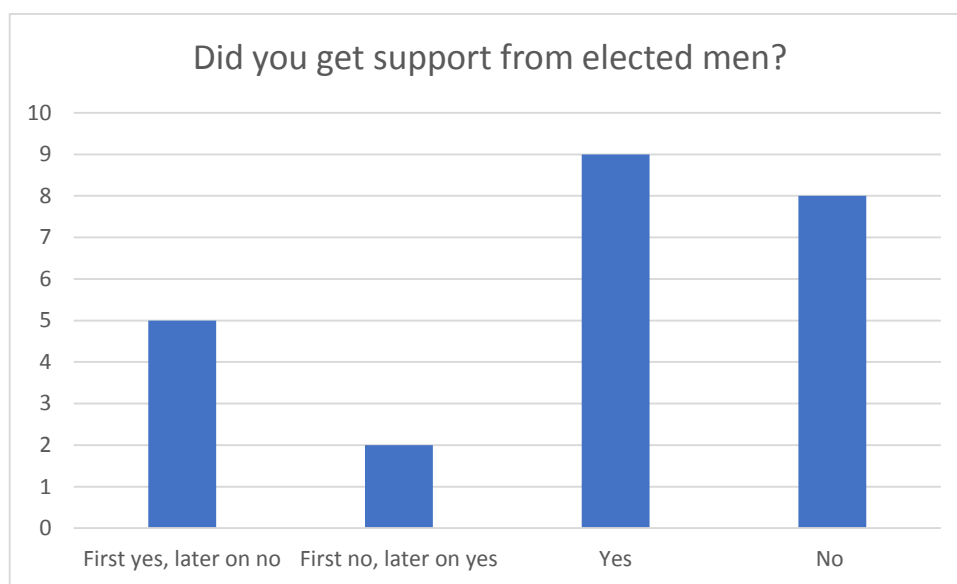


Figure 5: Did you get support from elected men?

The third part asked if the respondents have got any briefing for their job to start with. The responses divided rather equally, 13 (54%) elected women saying 'yes' and 11 (46%) 'no'. It has to be accounted for that this was the first communal election for the Municipalities ever, meaning that there were no staff, office facilities, institutional memory, or standard ways of working in place at the beginning. Reflecting this, the number of positive answers remains relatively good. As this work does not consider elected men representatives, we lack a point of comparison on gender.

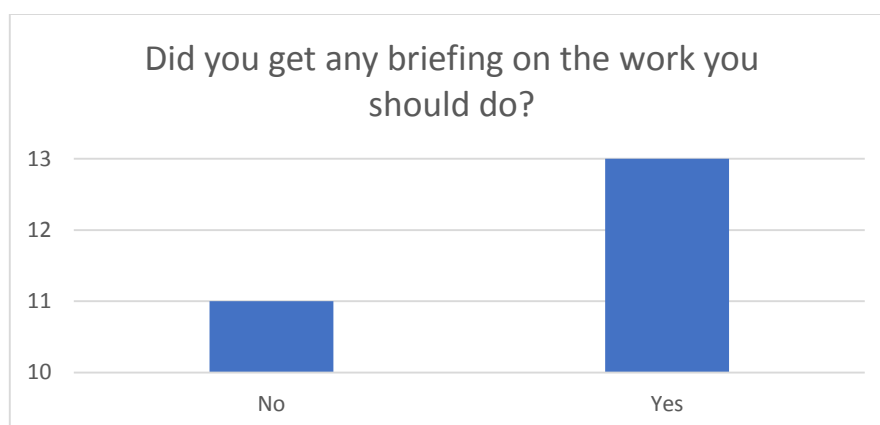


Figure 6: Did you get briefing on the work you should do?

Question 4b: Did your family support you? Did you feel confident or were you anxious about the new tasks?

All respondents (100%) confirmed their family supported them. 19 respondents (79%) reported having been anxious, which is natural in the face of a new, challenging task. Dominance by men and the lack of focus on gender made the women more anxious.

Question 5: What skills do you think you should have had when first elected?

The fifth question considered the most important skills for an elected woman. The respondents foremost considered collecting ideas from constituents as the most important single skill (20 responses), reflecting a strong need to align with the citizens' will in politics. The second most remarkable skills were strong literary and numeracy skills (16), and information on the governance system (16). Also, confidence (10), public speaking (8), and managing meetings (8) were seen important abilities. Many of the respondent emphasised how strong literary and oral skills would help them to speak in public, and having higher education would help to consider the ethics, rights, policies etc. Even now, some women ask men's opinion about ethical and legal issues as they are not confident enough to consider these issues alone.

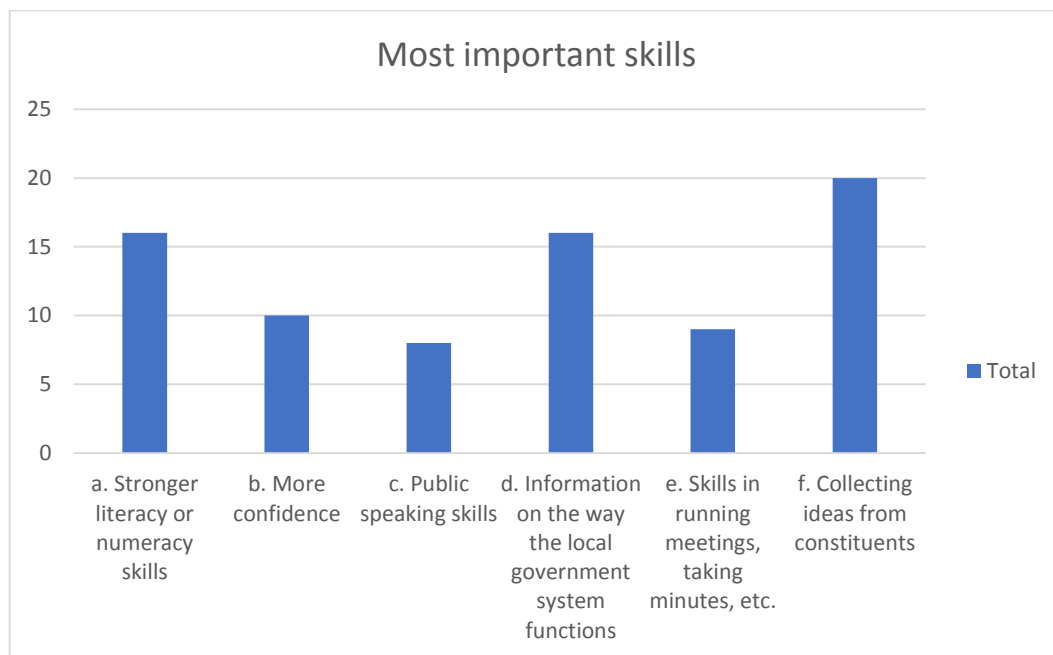


Figure 7: Most important skills.

Question 6: How many RM Council meetings have you attended annually?

This question was to check the elected women's involvement in official municipality business through number of meetings. Nineteen respondents had been involved in the official meetings 12 times a year, and five respondents had had them 24 times a year. All respondents furthermore specified that they also meet on need basis. The results reflect that the Vice Chairs are frequently involved in the official meetings and they are not left out. Formally, Vice Chair has to attend to the meetings compulsorily.

Question 7: Does anything stop you from participating official meetings as an elected representative?

This question aimed to check if there are any types of barriers for elected women's participation in official meetings. Two respondents (8%) reported such difficulties. They both emphasised the lack of timely information as the reason – for instance, the invitation to the meeting did not reach the respondent in time as she lived a distance from the RM office and needed time for walking, or she was totally ignored. The other also emphasised her lack of credibility in the other politicians' eyes.

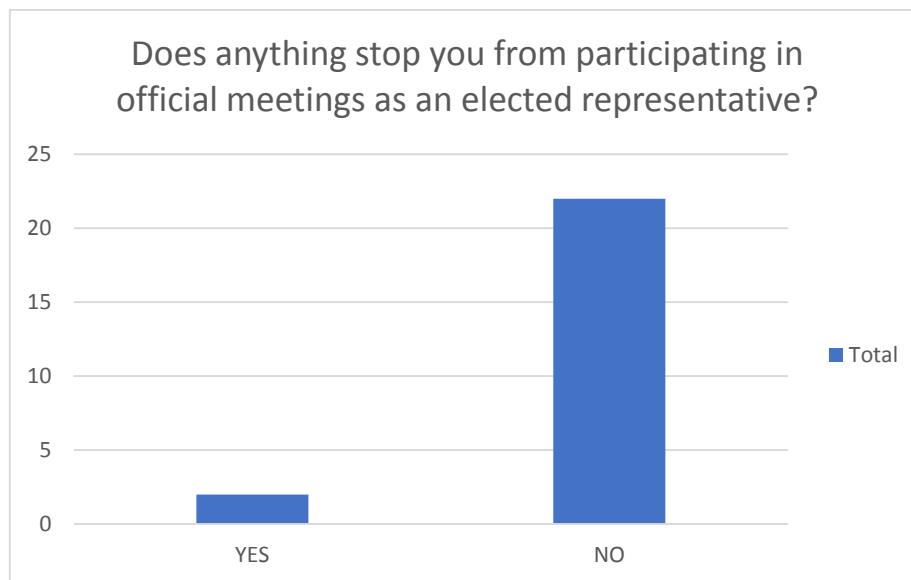


Figure 8: Does anything stop you from participating in official meetings as an elected representative?

Question 8: Is being an elected official too much work?

This question tests the opinions regarding the amount of work required in the position. All except one respondent stated that it is too much work, while one respondent did not say her opinion. Their first priority is field monitoring and the Judicial Committee, and these roles take a lot of their time. There are many judicial cases and the respondents' capacity to address them is limited. Moreover, the field work is generally time consuming. The respondents also frequently participate different meetings and are involved in planning, and they need to take the lead when the Chair is out of the Municipality. Given the local cultural practices, the women may also have many domestic tasks at home that their male counterparts don't need to deal with.

Question 9: What are the most important issues in your eyes as an elected official?

The ninth question analysed the most important issues nominated by the respondents in their work. The three most important issues were the work on Dignified Menstrual Management (23 responses), monitoring and observation activities (21), and the work with the judicial committee (19). The moderately important issues were the work on behalf of the disadvantaged groups (15), ensuring that women's issues get attention (12), infrastructure (12), and good planning (8). They also need to coordinate with non-governmental organisations. In particular, the Vice Chairs have worked closely with RVWRMP on the Dignified Menstrual Management and the monitoring activities.

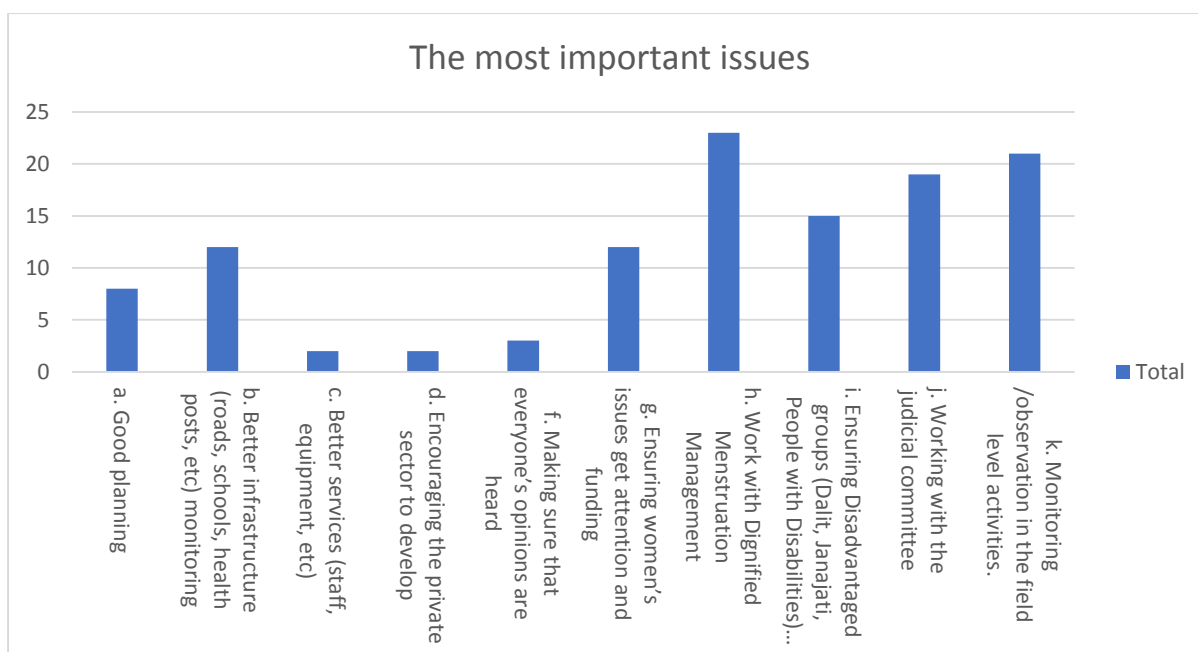


Figure 9: The most important issues at work for the respondents.

The respondents felt that ensuring that everyone is heard was relatively less important (3). This may reflect the relatively low status of the women respondents in the hierarchy that does not allow them to take a role in supporting others to be heard. Also encouraging the private sector (2), and having better services (2) were seen less important, probably reflecting that the Vice Chairs are less involved in those sector activities than in the mentioned judicial works, monitoring, and health and social inclusion related work.

Question 10: Is it important that you represent women in particular?

This question tested the importance of the gender for the respondents as politicians. All twenty-four respondents replied 'yes', stating it is important for them to represent women in particular. This means the elected women feel they have been selected to represent all women – they have a strong gender identity among the politicians, and a gender related agenda. Local women contact the Vice Chair with their concerns in a wide range of topics, and the Vice Chair is therefore well-aware and informed about women's issues in the Municipality. The Vice Chair also represents all women at Province and National level.

Question 11: As a Vice Chair, do you have significant tasks?

All respondents replied 'yes', they have significant tasks. It means all Vice Chairs feel they have significant roles in the municipality office, and that they are needed.

Question 12: What committees or tasks are you involved in?

This question seeks to find out which types of activities the elected women work with. All respondents except for one were involved in various committees and tasks. The most frequent answer considered work in different types of women groups or networks, and gender budgeting (7 mentions), followed by work with widowed women and the elderly (6), and work on violence on women and child marriage issues (6). Also work on women livelihoods development and income generation (5), tasks in Judicial Committee and work on women's rights (3), as well as work with adolescent girls, Dignified Menstrual Hygiene, and chhaupadi eradication related tasks (3) were mentioned multiple times. Remarkably, most of

the responses were related to gender issues, and very few on issues such as WASH or sanitation and health, or political work more generally.

In the second part of the question, they were asked to name the committee or task where they feel they are most effective. The responses highlighted three aspects in particular:

- 1) Women skills development and income generation activities were seen to be particularly successful (13 mentions).
- 2) Getting justice for women, for instance in terms of child marriage, women victims of violence, etc. (9 mentions)
- 3) Women's groups, mothers' groups, women's networks, child clubs, etc. seem to empower women and make them better networked (8 mentions).

Question 13: How do you collect or share information / opinions from the constituents?

The thirteenth question regarded the ways the elected women interact with their constituents. The most typical ways of interaction are travelling to meet the citizens (18), social media and phone talks (18), and having a reception to allow people to come to them (18). The less used ways involved online tools such as Skype or Zoom (10), use of Water Use Master Plan information (7), talking to different groups and households (4), and speaking in public gatherings (2).

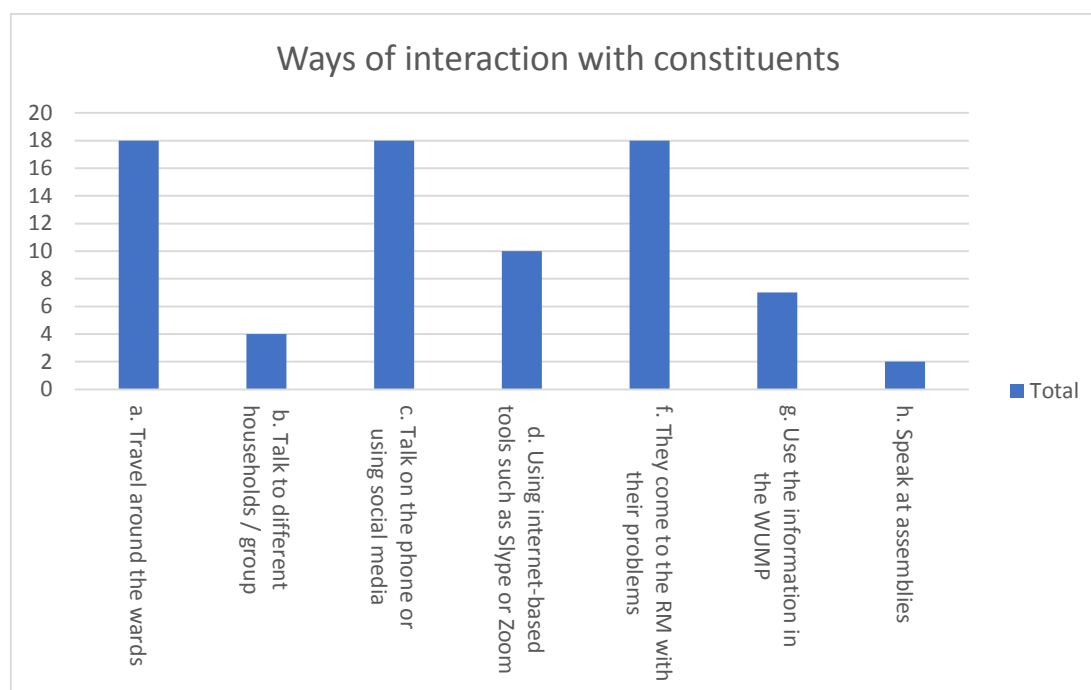


Figure 10: Ways of interaction with constituents.

The data suggests that the respondents prefer equal face-to-face interaction methods, but do not prefer unilateral top-down ways of interaction, such as public speeches (perhaps also reflecting the lack of confidence that some had in public speaking to groups). Surprisingly, as many as 42% of the respondents (10) used online meeting and interaction tools, and 75% used social media or phone. This may partially reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ways of interacting (and this is something that has been introduced and encouraged by RVWRMP), but also that most of the women elected representatives are capable of using, and have access to, the internet and online applications and tools.

Question 14: What are the biggest problems you are facing in your role?

The respondents elaborated a lot about the problems. There were four main categories of problems raised through an analysis:

- 1) Limited understanding of legislation – either in understanding of legal matters, processes, and language, or problems in implementing the decisions that are not male leaders’ priorities. Lack of knowledge in the Judicial Committee and non-useful or absent legal advisors were seen to be an issue.
- 2) Dominance by men and gender discrimination – the respondents mentioned problems such as: Men’s lack of trust and appreciation of women politicians; men giving priority to other male politicians; and not being aware of or giving consideration to the female Vice Chairs’ recommendations; men diminishing the Vice Chair’s role in practice; and general lack of implementation support to women politicians’ ideas and plans.
- 3) Women-focused activities are not always implemented or are not sustainable – specifically, a lack of budget for women’s issues, and lack of support and willingness to implement women-focused activities (despite commitment of the Council to implement). Behaviour-change activities are often not sustainable due lack of support or resources to follow-up.
- 4) Lack of knowledge and experience – the respondents noted their lack of familiarity with laws and policies, and lack of knowledge on legal and judicial processes. The use of formal legal language makes it difficult to read and write decision, and they suffer a from a lack of legal assistance and other advice.

Question 15: Have you been asked to sign minutes when you did not attend the meeting or did not receive a thorough explanation of the contents?

This question collects Vice Chairs’ experiences on the signing practices. 75% (18) respondents responded that they have not been asked to sign minutes without having attended the meeting, or received a thorough explanation of the meeting contents; while 6 (25%) said ‘yes’, two of whom are illiterate. RVWRMP had heard of this practice occurring soon after the elections, while the elected officials settled into their roles and responsibilities, and there was a tendency in some locations for male officials to bypass the women (White and Haapala, 2018).

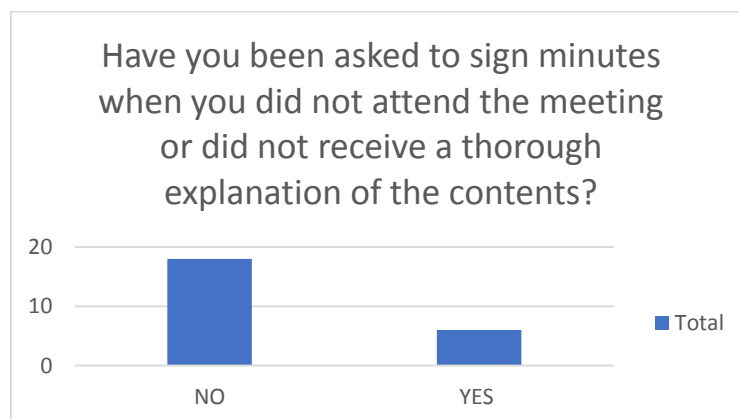


Figure 11: Have you asked to sign minutes without explanation of the contents?

Question 16: Are you fully aware of RM plans and decisions?

This question seeks to find out if the respondents feel that they are informed about the topical matters in the Municipality. Most of the respondents (18, or 75%) reported that they are fully aware of the plans and decisions, but as many as one out of four respondents (6, or 25%) reported that they are not fully kept updated. This is a relatively high rate, given that this study focuses on the Vice Chairs, who typically are the highest-ranking female representatives in the Municipality. Therefore, it is safe to assume the other elected women are worse informed than the Vice Chairs. The data thus indicates that elected women are not well-enough informed about the matters they should know about.

The second part of the question asked the reasons for being not fully aware. The most common answer was that the others do not take the respondent seriously or men are ignoring her. Other reasons involved the respondent's experience of their own lack of capacity to understand the decisions, and problems in communication.

Question 17: Do you have the authority to check documents or budgets?

This question seeks to find information on the actual authority and capability of the respondents regarding checking documents and budgets. Fourteen respondents (58%) felt that they do have the authority to check it if needed (but not necessarily to approve or not approve it), whereas ten respondents (42%) claimed that they have no such authority. In the follow up question regarding whether they have the ability to actually check documents or budgets, eleven (46%) answered affirmatively. In other words, a particularly high number of respondents claim that they are not at all involved with checking documents and budgets. This is alarming as influencing the budgets and document contents is a significant way of making political influence and impact on the Municipality development.

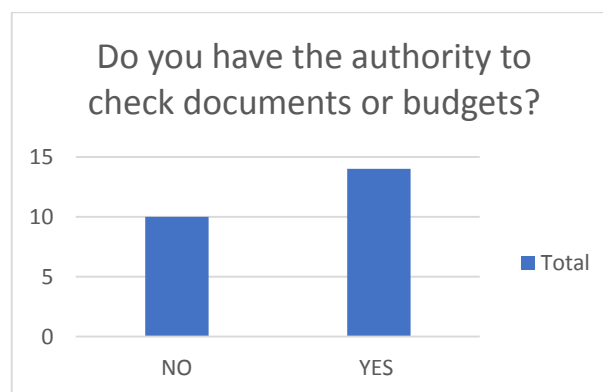


Figure 12: Do you have the authority to check documents and budgets?

Question 18: Are earmarked funds for women and DAGs used for this purpose?

This question aimed to capture the actual ways of using the earmarked funds. Seventeen respondents (71%) considered the funds were used for the right intended purposes. However, seven respondents (29%) reported problems in the actual allocation of the earmarked funds. This is a significantly high amount of total responses, meaning that potentially 29% of the Municipalities are mismanaging the funds aimed for women and DAGs.

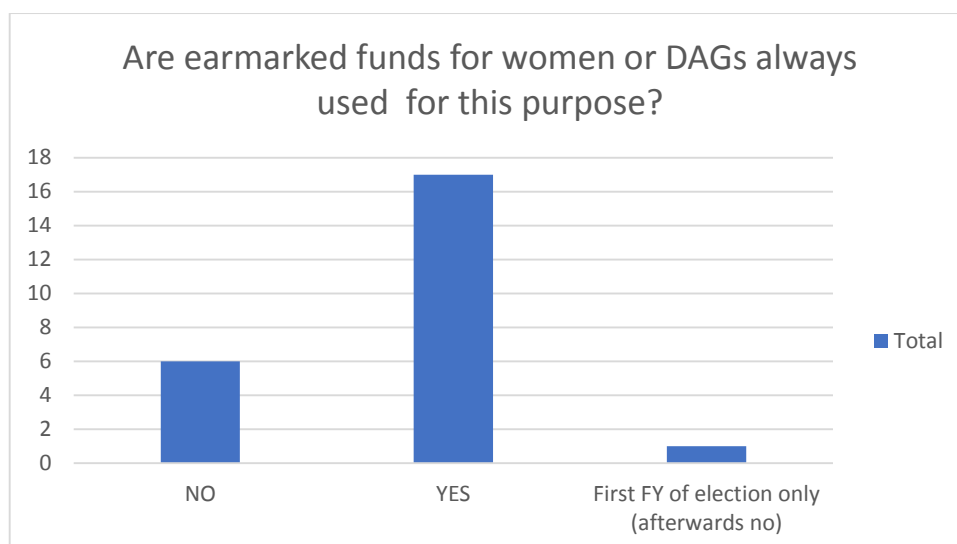


Figure 13: Are the earmarked funds for DAGs and women always used for this purpose?

The second part of the question asked what the funds are used for, if not used for the budgeted gender purpose. The majority of the respondents mentioned COVID-19 as the primary reason not spending the allocated budget for gender and DAGs (12 mentions). Four respondents (17%) complained about various problems with the gender budget. These problems included: the gender budget is too small; the women's section in the RM is still too undeveloped to be able to manage it; or expending the allocated budget has been difficult. Two respondents (8%) mentioned that the gender funds have been reallocated later on to infrastructure such as roads.

The third part of the question aimed to clarify whether the respondents agree with the decided reallocations of the gender budget. Eleven respondents (46%) agreed or accepted the decision, whereas six respondents (25%) did not agree. This may reflect that if the funds are used well, for instance for fighting COVID-19, the reallocation was more acceptable than if the funds were reallocated for roads.

The fourth part of the question asked if elected women are supportive about using funds for women and DAGs. Fourteen respondents (58%) described the other elected women as being supportive, whereas seven (29%) considered them not very supportive. In the first case the situation is often that the other elected women do not have capability to form their own opinion, but they follow the Vice Chair's stance. Five respondents (21%) raised women politicians' lack of skills and capability to influence decisions and lack of knowledge about budgets and planning to be able to influence and have an opinion. Only one respondent (4%) referred to dominating men directly influencing the women. This reflects the general lack of skills and low education of women that cause problems and decrease their influence in politics, as well as their somewhat low political credibility inside the RM offices.

The fifth part of the question asked about the allocation of the gender and DAG funds, and the respondents mentioned capacity building and awareness raising in general, and the reallocation to COVID-19 and roads. Only one woman specified that the earmarked budget is in practice used for postpartum women, nutrition for women, adolescent girls, DHM program, and total sanitation (however, it is possible that further prompting might have raised these issues with others).

Question 19: Have you been involved in RVWRMP activities? Which?

The question seeks to check the involvement of Vice Chairs with RVWRMP activities. All the 24 respondents (100%) reported having been involved with RVWRMP activities. The most common type of involvement was participation in trainings or workshops organised by RVWRMP (100% of the respondents), and involvement in Open Defecation Free (ODF) and Total Sanitation (TS) related campaigning by RVWRMP (100%). The other given types of involvement options got none to a few responses only.

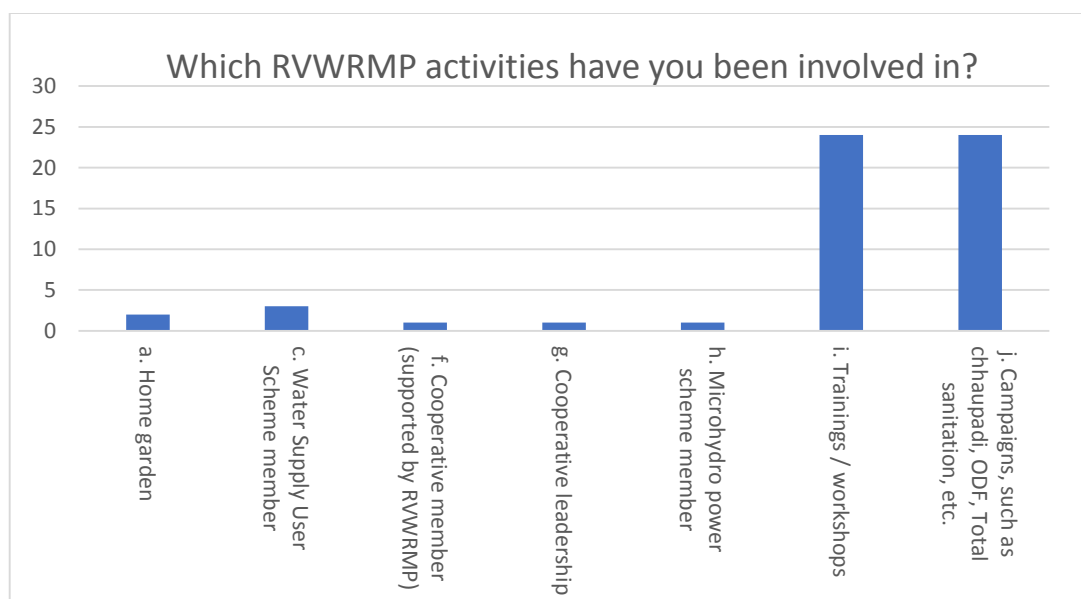


Figure 14: Involvement in RVWRMP activities.

Question 20: Have you participated in technical / vocational training by RVWRMP?

This question follows up the previous question by testing the activeness of the respondents in trainings. Only three respondents (13%) reported participation in technical / vocational trainings, including Leader Farmer and Multi-purpose Nursery Management trainings.

Question 21: If you participated in trainings (Q19 and Q20), did you gain useful experiences that you have used as an elected official, and what were they?

All respondents felt they have gained useful experiences and that they appreciated the received trainings. The open answers to specify it more, the most emphasised experiences were related to policy development and implementation (12 mentions), gender and DAGs related training (12), various types of implementation, awareness raising, facilitation and monitoring skills (11), general capacity building skills (10), and planning and budgeting skills (9). Other mentioned experiences regarded sanitation development (6), Dignified Menstrual Hygiene (5), and personal skills development and leadership (4). Importantly, the trainings seem to provide the very much needed and required skills for the elected women. The sought skills are especially related to policy development, implementation, facilitation and monitoring, and planning budgets, as well as on gender, menstruation, and DAGs related skills.

Many Vice Chairs have started with their own family, making them 'model households' with elements such as hygiene and sanitation, menstruation hygiene management, and home

gardens. The trainings have also resulted in development and implementation of activities in the Municipalities, triggered by the Vice Chairs. For instance, some of the RVWRMP core working Municipalities have adopted RVWRMP guidelines and modalities in their own WASH implementation (outside of the project support). In non-core Municipalities, the adoption is more difficult as the non-core areas focus on WASH only, lacking the components regarding governance capacity building, policy development, gender budgeting, as well as all the RVWRMP modalities on livelihoods and CCA-DRR.

Question 22: What has been the most important activity implemented by RVWRMP in your opinion? Why?

This question sought to find out what activities of RVWRMP the Vice Chairs consider most important. Almost all respondents started by saying that all components of the project are important. They then specified some values, themes, and result areas that came to their mind first. The most typical responses were related to women, MHM, and GESI (17 mentions), livelihoods (16), transparency of the project (13), good project modalities (12), participation (10), and sanitation (10). The respondents also mentioned sustainability (8), water supply, Multiple Use Water Systems (MUS), and private tap systems (8), trust and ownership (5), and particularly good quality of work (2). They all especially appreciate the activities conducted by RVWRMP as they are more sustainable, beneficial, and non-politically steered than the activities organized by RM or others.

The responses reflect that the Vice Chairs link RVWRMP with certain appreciated values, such as transparency, gender equity and social inclusion, sustainability, trust, and ownership. Related to project result areas, they easily remember the achievements especially in the WASH and livelihood components of the project. A significant number of respondents remembered to explicitly mention project modalities in their list, such as the Step-by-Step and Procurement Guidelines. In general, the respondents highly appreciated the conduct of the project, especially the contribution to issues of women and DAGs and correct ways of working.

Question 23: Has RVWRMP been involved in building capacities in the RM? If so, how? What specifically-gender focused capacity building is needed?

All respondents said that RVWRMP has been involved in RM capacity building. Activities related to women's involvement and leadership, and livelihoods and sanitation were emphasised. RVWRMP activities require the compulsory participation of women, and empowerment of women is central to the Project in all types of activities. Regarding the types of activities needed, a vast majority would like to have more livelihoods and income generation trainings, as well as women's leadership related activities.

Question 24a: Have you participated in a Women as Decision-Makers Workshop by RVWRMP? How was that useful? What was missing in the workshop? Have the planned activities in the Gender Action Plan been implemented by the RM last year? Are you planning activities for women and disadvantaged persons for next year's budget? What should be done to improve the implementation?

This question aimed to observe the participation rate in RVWRMP's training on women as decision-makers that should ideally be chief-guested by Vice Chairs. Twenty-two (91%)

respondents had participated in Women as Decision-makers Workshop, which is a very good number.

The second part of the question asked the respondent to ponder what was the most useful. The respondents emphasised especially the importance of planning and budgeting, and the method of problem identification – analysis – solutions – budgeting. We also asked if something is still missing in the training, and one respondent mentioned a refresher training, and one mentioned insufficient DAG-related discussion and planning.

Question 24b: Have the planned activities in the Gender Action Plan been implemented by the RM last year? Are you planning activities for women and disadvantaged persons for next year's budget? What should be done to improve the implementation?

The first part of the question sought to find out how well the gender responsive budget has been actually implemented. 17 respondents (71%) confirmed that the activities in the gender action plan have been implemented. Four persons (17%) responded that the plan is partially implemented. Two had no idea (8%), and one (4%) responded that the plan has not been implemented. In conclusion, given that COVID-19 has had an impact on the budget implementation, the status of implementation can be seen as moderate. There are problems with the implementation in some Municipalities, and the situation varies from case to case. For the next fiscal year's budget, 23 respondents (96%) replied that they have women and DAG focused activities planned. One respondent did not know the situation.

Regarding ways to improve the implementation, the respondents particularly highlighted the need of coordination with other stakeholders and sectors, and commitment by all. Also increasing women's participation and networking, and their empowerment were suggested.

Question 25: Did you attend the study tour to Kathmandu for International Menstrual Hygiene (IMH) Day in 2018?

Ten Vice Chairs participated in the study tour to Kathmandu (organised by RVWRMP) for the first IMH Day in Nepal. They emphasised how the conference gave them ideas about DMM and an increased feeling of responsibility and enthusiasm. All the participants started MHM related activities in RM after the exposure. The ten RMs were in the frontline of implementing DMM activities and they have since supported the other Vice Chairs and shared the knowledge with them. The ten RMs were also the first to implement the DMM Directive, later followed by the others. Some of the ten RMs also successfully proposed to the Province and the central government to allocate funds for gender activities. In that sense, the exposure was very useful and fruitful.

Question 26: Participation in menstrual hygiene management trainings

This set of questions aimed to check the usefulness and popularity of the Menstrual Hygiene trainings by the project. Twenty-one (88%) respondents had participated in the trainings. The workshop was considered very useful by all the participants. The respondents emphasised the benefit of identification of MHM issues, support to raise awareness on menstrual hygiene management and eradicating taboos, and knowledge about DMM, sanitation and Chhaupadi management. In addition, the hands-on pad-making training was regarded as being very beneficial, as the awareness-raising, confidence-building and pad making skills had led to improved school attendance during the period.

The respondents told they had learned a lot about conducting the ‘chhau hut free’ campaign, menstrual hygiene and health management, menstrual products and their use, reuse and proper disposal. The workshop was seen supporting the habit to make and use sanitary materials. We also asked what could be done better. The respondents highlighted especially the access to sanitary pads (8 mentions), as well as the need for further awareness raising, changing people’s mindsets, as well as promotion campaigns (6), and vocational and entrepreneurship trainings (5), and further mobilisation of health personnel in the communities (4).

Question 27: Do you think that the Dignified Menstrual Management Declaration (Dhangadhi) and the policy setting in the RM are important?

All except one respondent (96%) answered that the declaration is important, in practice as well. After the declaration, the Vice Chairs started MHM campaigns and other gender activities like menstrual pad vending machine installation in schools, organising pad-making training in RMs independently of the project, mobilizing school WASH support personnel, and implementing Dignified Menstruation Management Directive. They committed to continue these activities in the future.

Question 28: How confident do you feel now in the job, almost three years after being elected?

This question aims to get information about the feeling of confidence among the elected women. A majority of the respondents (17, or 71%) felt semi-confident (number 3) in the job, five felt confident and one very confident. One felt not confident at all. The good news is that the number of respondents who didn’t feel confident was low, but also the number of respondents reporting high levels of confidence (answering 4 or 5) was moderate (25%). The majority of the respondents were somewhat confident after three years in the job, which can be considered a good sign for the future.

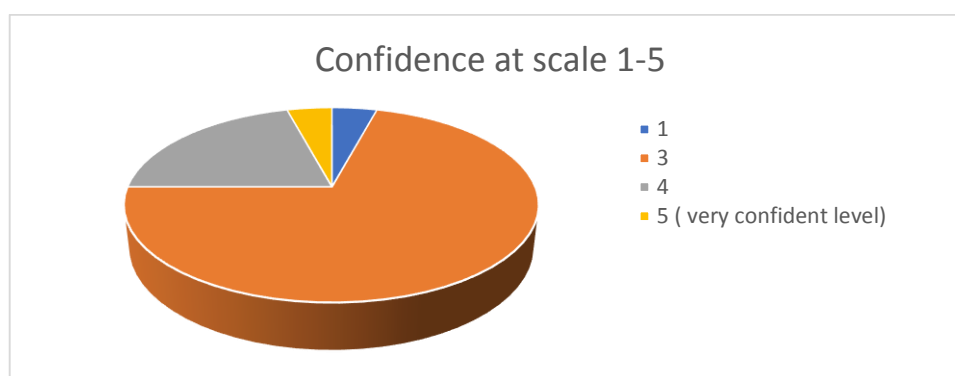


Figure 15: Self-evaluated level of confidence at work.

Question 29: Do you think there is any difference in the abilities of men and women to do the tasks of councillors? If yes, what difference?

Eleven respondents felt there is a difference, whereas 13 respondents answered that there is no difference. The responses were thus divided rather equally to both options. Those who saw a difference emphasised the unfair position of women, lack of trust in women, ignorance, and gender discrimination. Generally, it is believed that male representatives can influence more than women, which results in voters preferring male leaders, such as the Chairperson, over the female Vice Chair. Many of the respondents felt that women can do a lot, but they

are not given an opportunity. The general attitude of the public towards women leaders is not supportive. The respondents also said that women are less educated and confident, and that men hold the majority of political positions, leaving women in minority.

Question 30: Have the living conditions in the RM improved since the elections? Can you tell about any women whose life has been changed significantly due to your effort or R/MC's activities?

All respondents responded that the living conditions have improved. The respondents emphasised especially the position of widowed women, victims of violence, divorced women, and DAGs has improved as the legislation and social security has become more supportive towards them (8 mentions). In addition, the impact of income generating activities (5), improvements in MHM and chhaupadi (4), improved health and sanitation (3) and women's possibilities for networking together (3) were mentioned.

Question 31: Has the position of women improved?

All respondents confirmed that the overall position of women has improved.

Question 32: What still needs to happen to improve the lives of women?

Interestingly, a vast majority of the respondents highlighted the need for income generation and entrepreneurship trainings and support (13 mentions). The idea is that women should become more economically independent to be able to stand for their rights. Also support to women leadership (3) and different types of women's empowerment and participatory programmes (5) were frequently mentioned.

Question 33: Who are the most disadvantaged members of the RM now? What should be done to improve their lives?

The respondents mentioned especially the poor and distressed families (21 mentions), Dalits (21), women (15), and DAGs and PWDs (10), as well as widowed women (5). Also, orphans, victims of violence, field workers and Janjati were mentioned. The respondents proposed a few ways for improvement: The most typical recommendation was for more vocational trainings, livelihood improvement and income generation activities to enable them to become self-employed and independent (15 mentions), and also different types of skills development, awareness-raising, and capacity building activities were mentioned often (12 mentions). Providing need-based subsidies in cash or kind and social programmes were also mentioned (6), and granting better access to development activities was mentioned a few times (3). The responses reflect the need to become more economically independent as the foremost solution, supported by skill development and capacity building, as well as improving access to development activities. Social security and subsidies were mentioned more seldom, but still considered as a solution especially for DAGs and PWDs.

Question 34: Is it useful for your role to be in contact with other elected women – in your RM or in others?

All except for one person (96%) responded yes. The benefits included the view that Vice Chairs are the leaders of the elected women, representing women in general, and they need to trigger the other elected women to be active and spread information.

Question 35: What skills do you need to do your job better?

The respondents highlighted especially judicial and legal knowledge (10 mentions), leadership skills (7), and the ability to cope with, communicate and socialise with communities (4). Political knowledge (2), confidence (1), planning and implementation skills (1), and reading and writing ability (1) were also mentioned.

Question 36: Will you stand for elections again? If not, why?

This question tested the respondent's willingness to be involved as candidates in elections again. Most of the respondents (18, or 75%) were willing and even eager to stand for elections. Many of them are willing to stand for the chairpersonship, too. Only two respondents (8%) answered negatively, and the four respondents (17%) who were not certain were quite willing to go stand again, based on their additional elaboration. Those who were not certain referred to the party's willingness to stand her as a candidate again, as well as old age. This reflects that a vast majority of candidates who do not have personal or party-related doubts are willing to continue for the next election as a candidate.

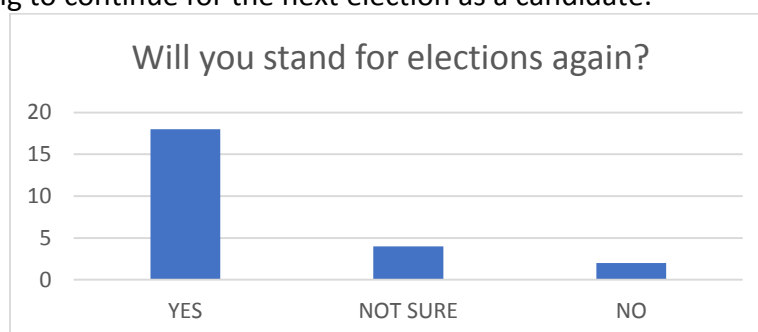


Figure 16: Will you stand for elections again?

6. Vice Chairs' story-telling on their political career

Summary of Vice Chairs' political career story-telling (from the 24 core RMs)

As the Vice Chairs are women themselves, they are quite experienced with the issues and problems they faced for their childhoods, women's issues were a starting point in the discussions. Based on the interview with them it was found that they had limited capacity to know about policies and go ahead with their role and responsibilities. In general, in their first year of working with the RM after the election, they found it challenging to play a meaningful role in the RM's activities. They gradually developed their capacity by different means and now they feel confident to take responsibility for any of the tasks of development. They have made significant efforts to overcome challenges and deal with the issues under their responsibility, in order to support changes in the community.

Analysing the story sharing by the Vice Chairs of the 24 RMs, it can be concluded that there are many changes in the RMs regarding the gender situation. Key findings are bulleted below:

- Increased access to health service. The following efforts were made by the Vice Chairs to increase access to health services:
 - Upgraded health care facilities in the health posts and birthing centres,
 - Conducted different health camps for the women,
 - Increased road access up to health institutions,
 - Purchased ambulances and other health equipment,
 - Managed human resources,
 - Capacitated human resources in relevant sectors.
- Provided capacity building to women in different sectors, assessing their issues and needs.
- Promoted women's enterprises with skills development and increased the financial status of the women.
- Promoted the participation of women in home gardens and other income generating activities.
- Improved the nutritional status of women.
- Increased the meaningful participation of women and Dalit in different activities at local, provincial and federal level.
- Ensuring equal incentives for women and Dalits.
- Increasing the participation of women and Dalits in key positions.
- Operation of the Judicial Committee at local level, which has supported women to share their issues easily with the coordinator of the committee (VC). It has encouraged women to break the silence regarding their problems (such as gender-based violence).
- Increasing capacity and confidence to share to speak on any of the issues.
- Increase access to the basic needs.
- Ensuring equal benefits to men and women via self-employment programmes.
- Trust in women's capacity for development actions, social movement and politics is increased.
- Quality of girl's education has improved.
- Women are trained to formulate gender responsive plans, including incorporating the issues of disability.
- Realization of ownership with development activities.
- Social transformation taking place.
- Improving menstrual hygiene and total sanitation status.
- Changing behaviours on traditional mindsets, such as harmful practices on menstruation management, child marriage, caste discrimination, gender-based discrimination, etc.

Saraswati Rawal - Ramaroshan RM, Achham

I started my political career in student life before I completed my secondary level education in 2056 B.S., when the conflict among Nepal Community Party (Maoist) and then government became very aggressive. I also joined the armed revolution associating with the Maoists, although I was student. I was given responsibility as a student union leader and went underground during the years 2058 to 2060 B.S. Unfortunately, I was arrested by the government in 2060 and I passed three years of my life in jail. After facing challenging conditions in jail, I was released as part of the agreement between the government and the Maoists. At that point I decided to start doing social work, and raise my voice for women to ensure their rights. I was assigned as district chairperson of the district interparty women's network in Achham, and I also joined other women's networks in Achham. Using that opportunity, I gained knowledge and experiences, and learned a lot. I also established close relationships with the community. I could not forget the opportunity that RVWRMP provided me when I worked as an RVWRMP field coordinator for the Water Use Master Plan (WUMP) preparation for Turmakhand VDC. This opportunity taught me a lot about social work, community mobilization, and confidence in public speaking.

Being an ex-combatant, I faced many challenges to establish myself socially in the community. But I continued my fight for women rights and for those suffering from other social disorders. Community people put their trust on me and encouraged to be an elected candidate. I decided to give my candidature as RM Chairperson, but the men in power did not support me. Even my party also forced me to not stand as chairperson. Then I was given the opportunity to be a candidate for Vice Chair. The election took place and I was elected as Vice Chair of Ramaroshan RM. I have experienced that male-headed society always dominates women. If there would not be a provision in the Constitution of Nepal for women's representation, I could have been ignored even for the role as Vice Chair. Being an elected woman in a key position for the first time in the village, I faced many challenges to retain my strength and to raise my voice in favour of women and DAG related planning and budgeting. The male majority didn't support allocation of capacity building related activities for women and DAGs. They always put funds to their priority for budget expenditure on roads, building and other infrastructure.

But now, we have some good examples of GESI mainstreamed in the RM. We can see meaningful participation of women in all of the development events and women are also being considered to have their participation in the key position of social events.

Amrita Buddha – Turmakhand RM, Achham

I was a political cadre of the Nepali Congress party, with the responsibility of district committee member. I was also an elected ward member of Turmakhand VDC. However, I did not have good knowledge on planning and budgeting. Therefore, I could not have active role after being elected as Vice Chair.

In connection to my experience, involvement of women in politics is not easy. We need to go outside from the house to work in the community. Being a woman under the existing cultural practices, we need to still convince family members in order to get permission to go outside for any tasks. We also need to convince and change our society, otherwise the community can raise issues of character and blame women for problems.

This is the result of the patriarchal society with the mindset of male-headed culture. Women are always dominated, and men want to hold the power in their hand, at home and in society. As an impact of such social rites, we have been suffering from varying gender-based discriminations at different levels. Even in the RM, men did not believe on any of the actions that falls under the Vice Chair's responsibility.

Initially, elected women were always ignored, and it was problematic to make plans or take any decisions for the RM. I strongly raised my voice on this situation. Nowadays, the participation of women is encouraged, and the RM leadership consider it important to implement decisions in connection to women's issues. However, there are still some challenges for implementation. We have found that budget allocations for GESI activities are still transferred to other headings sometimes. But now we strongly follow it up when this occurs, and we have been able to achieve effective implementation, as per the plan and budget.

There were many challenges initially to perform my responsibilities due to having limited experience and the new structure of local government. We did not get any orientation and other capacity enhancement from the RM initially. Later on, some organizations provided the training gradually to elected representatives. RVWRMP provided important capacity building such as Women as Decision-makers training, and other MHM- and cooperative-related trainings, as well as training on the Step-by-Step implementation process and policy activities. That helped me to perform the responsibilities as per my ToR.

Radhika Ratala – Chhabis Pathibhera RM, Bajhang.

Women do not have freedom to do anything for society due to the lack of knowledge and traditional mindset of the community people. Being an elected Vice Chair, I also have faced many challenges. When I used to conduct visits alone in the RM, I used to hear gossip in connection to my actions (i.e. moving alone). It meant that women feared to do anything alone, because men did not support the women.

In the initial period after the election, all elected representatives were new and were not familiar with the prevailing rules/regulations and policies. Gradually, we coordinated with each other and learned how to go ahead with the responsibilities following the policies. Now, my efforts are going ahead to support development of entrepreneurship skills for women to establish enterprises, along with offering some other capacity building activities for them. RVWRMP gender activities helped me to understand gender issues and constraints and how to manage them.

Bina Bhatta – Pancheswor RM, Baitadi

My professional career started with my work as a social mobilizer in the Poverty Alleviation Fund Programme. Later on, I shifted my career into politics and got the opportunity to be Vice Chair. When I started to handle my responsibility, I did not have any idea about politics, though there were many important responsibilities that I had to perform. Men used to make all the decisions in any matter in the RM. I spent the initial year without playing a key role, because the RM Chairperson and Chief Administrative Officer remained the key persons responsible for any of the activities. Gradually, I developed my skills by studying various

policies, participating in different capacity building activities, including all of those provided by RVWRMP, and sharing what I had learned with other Vice Chairs. The RVWRMP trainings taught me about policies and planning for gender activities, as well as how to support and prioritise the activities with greatest demand among the people. The RVWRMP staff supported me to make gender-budget related proposals for the Province level. Now I feel that I am quite perfect to handle my responsibilities effectively.

Kalawati Bhand – Ajayameru RM, Dadeldhura

I belong to the Dalit community and I was a political cadre from the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). Before associating with the Maoists, I was a leader of the Badi community. I actively led the movement and finally succeeded to ensure the rights of the Badi community. They got citizenship cards and were considered for inclusive reservation in the government system. I struggled a lot during the movement. I strongly raised my voice for the Badi community in the provincial and federal level as well. After having a continuous struggle of 48 days in Kathmandu, we became successful to establish the Badi Development Board to unite all the Badi community in the development mainstream. Finally, they got their rights. After succeeding the leadership in this regard, the Maoists offered me the candidature of Vice Chair.

There were many practices of discrimination in the community in household, community and development activity level. I have many bitter experiences in this regard. Once, when I was working in another community, I faced caste discrimination. I cannot forget a bitter incident. I asked a shopkeeper for a cup of tea. He gave the tea. I drank it and started to go back to my destination. But he stopped me, became angry and forced me to wash the teacup that I had drunk from (unlike other customers). I didn't want to wash the teacup, as this is a symbol of the cruel discrimination against the Dalit community. I was compelled to wash the teacup and put it in the sunlight to dry. This type of discrimination could be seen in our society only couple of years ago. But now, we cannot see such behaviour, though there is still some evidence of discrimination.

At this time, there are many changes in the communities. Dalit people are included in development activities and get equal opportunity to work with other people. After becoming the Vice Chair, it was my first priority to address the issues of Dalit communities. I made my efforts to encourage disadvantaged communities to ensure their active participation in all kinds of development initiatives. RVWRMP implemented activities and policies help to ensure the rights of the DAG, helping me in this task.

Sita Thapa – Gaumul RM, Bajura

Women are discriminated by birth. It is the deep-rooted practice of our community. It is not easy for women to succeed in politics. They have less opportunity for quality education, and no equal access to fulfil their basic needs. Working outside the home by women was challenging, because there were some restrictions in society. It was a key social value that if women went alone outside of the house, they should pay considerable attention to preserve their reputation and dignity. If they lose their moral reputation and character they will be disabled in society. Similarly, women have no control over property. There used to be no equal access to decision making and other opportunities. Women were not respected mutually even when they made the decision.

This was the situation that the girls and women were facing. When I was elected, and I started to analyse such situation, I came to understand the challenges. We started to encourage and support women and girls to come out from such problems. Now we have tried to involve women in decision making processes encouraging them to identify their issues/problems and make budget to address them, in the Women as Decision-Makers Workshops and the follow-up workshops, supported by RVWRMP. Now the situation is progressing and gradually it will be solved.

Urmila Bohara – Apihimal RM, Darchula

30 years ago there was no trend to send girls to school. I was the first girl who enrolled in the school at that time. There was no other girl in the school. However, my parents gave me the opportunity to study in this situation. Gradually other girls started to enrol in the school. When I was in grade 6, I had my first menstruation, and I was restricted to go to school for five days. Once, I was having my period during the examination. I went school to attend the exam. My friends knew that I was menstruating, and someone informed the teacher. Then I was isolated from the others. I felt embarrassed to look and talk with others. I used to get first position in the class until grade 5. Due to menstruation, I passed my 6th grade in second position. I stopped my educational career after completing secondary level. I could not get the higher education because there were no nearby schools I was not supported to go away from home for further education. Then, I got married and found a supportive partner for the next step of my life. He encouraged me to be active in the community and to attend meetings, assemblies and other community level activities.

During that time, women were suffering from different forms of domestic violence. Alcohol consumption was the main problem causing the violence. I was triggered to raise my voice and campaign against excessive alcohol consumption in the communities. With support of other women, we became successful in the movement. Then I continued my social movement. I gained the Chairpersonship of a school management committee, challenging men's candidature. The men did not accept my claim in a consensus process and finally an election took place. I was elected as the first lady SMC Chairperson. I performed my responsibilities very successfully and became able to upgrade the school and increase girls' enrolment. I also became successful to establish myself in the community as a good social leader. The trust of the community in me inspired me to move my further career towards politics and became able to get the opportunity of Vice Chair.

Being Vice Chair, I have been doing well by keeping the issues of women foremost in my mind. The situation is improving and I will try my best to overcome the difficulties facing women. I have been interested to organise the gender related activities and policies promoted by RVWRMP, and to implement them in practice, too. Now we are happy to declare DMM-friendly schemes and communities in our RM. I believe that due to the lessons learnt with RVWRMP and elsewhere, I possess good capacity to lead and manage, and I also have trustworthy relations with the citizens, and especially women.

7. Responding to the key questions

A. Are there any cultural or institutional barriers for women to become politically active in the RMs?

Becoming a political candidate in the elections: Most of the elected women did not have strong self-initiation towards a political career, but they were influenced by their political party and hierarchy. The initiation for candidature in the elections usually came top-down from the party to the female candidates. Sometimes dealing with the political hierarchy may hold women back from starting political careers. On the other hand, there is a degree of bottom-up, self-initiation towards politics among women. Some families have strong political affiliation, and in those cases women in the family were requested to stand as candidates in the election, sometimes even against their will.

Roles and participation in the Municipality work: All Vice Chairs had significant political tasks. This means all Vice Chairs feel they have significant roles in the municipality office, and that they are needed. Most of the elected women had no difficulties in participation in official meetings, but a few mentioned difficulties regarding a lack of timely information and the lack of her credibility in the other politicians' eyes. Most Vice Chairs were fully aware of the plans and decisions, but as many as one fourth reported that they are not fully kept updated. This is a relatively high rate, given that this study focuses on the Vice Chairs who typically are the highest-ranking female representatives in the municipality. The main reasons were that the others do not take the respondent seriously or men were ignoring the female representatives. Other reasons involved the respondent's experienced lack of capacity to understand the decisions, and problems in communication.

Problems the women face in their work involved male dominance and gender discrimination. Men demonstrated a lack of trust and appreciation for female politicians, giving priority to men. Some noted ignorance of the female Vice Chairs' recommendations, making the Vice Chair's role smaller in practice, and a lack of support to implement the ideas and plans of female politicians. Another issue was that women-focused activities were sometimes not implemented or not sustainable.

Responsibilities in both family and politics: Most of the Vice Chairs are married, and culturally the married daughters-in-law should do the housework, including cooking, sanitation, taking care of elders, looking after the cattle, and general management of the house. Men do not traditionally have such responsibilities. Therefore, the Vice Chairs have limited time for reading documents, liaising with citizens and improving their skills. In this sense, the married Vice Chairs have a dual role that hampers their performance in both their political career and in family life. This also has an influence on their opportunities to stand for the elections.

B. What are the motivations and capabilities of the elected women to do their job?

Political and administrative experience. More than one thirds of the respondents had political experience prior to the 2017 election. This rate can be seen to be relatively high, given that the elections were the first held at local level in the current democratic system (the last elected local governments were suspended in 2002 during the civil war). Women who were already involved in politics before the elections had a relatively good chance of being elected and being selected as Vice Chairs. Two thirds had prior administrative experience. All types of civil and administrative experience in their lives previously may help the persons becoming more appreciated and well-known locally, improving the chances of getting selected to leadership positions.

Important skills. The most important skills for an elected woman were collecting ideas from constituents, strong literary and numeracy skills, and information on the governance system. Confidence, public speaking, and managing meetings were also seen as important abilities. Many of the respondents emphasised how strong literary and oral skills would help them to speak in public, and higher education levels would help to consider the ethics, rights, policies, etc. Now some women need to ask men's opinion about ethical and legal issues as they are not confident enough to consider these issues alone. The most important skills needed to do the job better were especially judicial and legal knowledge, leadership skills, and the ability to cope, communicate, and socialize with communities.

Content of work. The first priority is in field monitoring and the Judicial Committee and these roles take lots of their time as there are many judicial cases and they possess limited capacity to deal with the cases. Furthermore, the field work is generally time consuming. They also frequently participate in different meetings and are involved in planning, and they also need to take the lead when the Chair is out of the Municipality. Most of the respondents were also willing and even eager to stand for the next elections, reflecting that they see their role both significant and meaningful.

Problems raised regarding skills and capabilities: lack of knowledge and experience – unfamiliarity with laws and policies and lack of knowledge on legal and judicial processes, use of complicated language makes it difficult to read and write decisions, lack of legal assistance and other advice. Often the elected women do not have capability to form their own opinion, but they follow the Vice Chair's stance. Women politicians lack the skills and capability to influence decisions, and a lack of knowledge about budgets and planning to be able to influence and have an opinion on implementation. This reflects the general lack of skills and low education of women.

Confidence: A majority of the respondents felt semi-confident in the job – the number of respondents who felt very lacking in confidence was low, but also the number of respondents reporting high levels of confidence was only moderate. However, the majority of the respondents were somewhat confident after three years in the job, which can be considered a good sign for the future.

C. What is the perceived space for participation and opportunities to influence in local councils?

Participation in meetings: The Vice Chairs are frequently involved in the official meetings and they are not left out. Formally, the Vice Chair is required to attend to the meetings.

The Vice Chairs work especially with Dignified Menstrual Management, monitoring and observation activities, the judicial committee, disadvantaged groups and women's issues. They have the best opportunity to influence the mentioned sectors and themes in the municipality. All respondents replied that they are responsible for significant political tasks. It means all Vice Chairs feel they have significant roles in the municipality office, and that they are needed.

Problems raised involved limited understanding of legislation – either in understanding of legal matters, processes, and language, or problems in implementing the decisions that are not a priority for male leaders. Lack of knowledge in the Judicial Committee and non-useful or absent legal advisors were seen to be an issue. Most of the respondents reported that they are fully aware of the plans and decisions, but as many as one out of four respondents reported that they are not fully kept updated. This is a somewhat high rate for the relatively high-ranking Vice Chairs. Moreover, a particularly large number of respondents claim that they are not at all consulted or involved with checking documents and budgets. Half of the Vice Chairs felt that they do not have the authority to check plans and documents if needed. This is alarming, as influencing the budgets and document contents is a significant way of having political influence and impact on municipal development.

D. How do the elected women represent the concerns of women in general? Does having more women in local governments lead to the creation of more gender sensitive programmes and legislation as well as empowering other women in local communities?

The importance of representing gender for the respondents as politicians was particularly evident. The respondents felt that Vice Chairs are the leaders of the elected women, representing women in more general, and they need to trigger the other elected women to be active and spread information. The elected women have a strong gender identity among the politicians, and gender-related agenda. Local women contact the Vice Chair with their concerns, and the Vice Chair is therefore well-aware and informed about women's issues in the municipality. The Vice Chairs also represent all women at Province and National level.

Important issues in Vice Chairs' work were related to gender and the disadvantaged, especially Dignified Menstrual Management, work with the judicial committee, work on behalf of disadvantaged groups, and ensuring that women's issues get attention. The elected women were involved in various committees and tasks: The most frequent answer considered work in different types of women groups or networks, gender budgeting, work with widowed women and the elderly, work on violence on women and child marriage issues, women livelihoods development and income generation, tasks in Judicial Committee and work on women's rights, work with adolescent girls, as well as on Dignified Menstrual Hygiene. Remarkably, most of the responses were related to gender issues.

Regarding whether gender matters, the responses were thus divided rather equally to both options. Those who saw a difference emphasised the unfair position of women, lack of trust in women, ignorance, and gender discrimination. Generally, it is believed that male representatives can influence more than women, which results in preferring male leaders, such as the Chair, over the female Vice Chair. Many of the respondents felt that women can do a lot, but they are not given an opportunity. The general attitude of the public towards women leaders is not generally supportive. The respondents also said that women are less educated and confident, and that men possess the majority of political positions, leaving women in the minority and lacking power to make change.

E. How could the elected and local women's standing be improved in the future?

Elected women can be empowered by resolving problems regarding:

- 1) Limited understanding of legislation
- 2) Men dominance and gender discrimination
- 3) Women focused activities not implemented or not sustainable
- 4) Lack of knowledge and experience

Many of the respondents emphasized how strong literary and oral skills would help them to speak in public, and much higher education would help to consider the ethics, rights, policies etc. Now some women ask men's opinion about ethical and legal issues as they are not confident enough to consider these issues alone. Regarding ways to improve the implementation of gender related activities, the respondents particularly highlighted the need of coordination with other stakeholders and sectors, and commitment by all.

Regarding the ways forward for local women, several means for improvement were mentioned. The responses reflect the need to become more economically independent as the foremost solution. The first priority is that women should become more economically independent to be able to stand up for their rights. Interestingly, a vast majority of the respondents highlighted the need for income generation and entrepreneurship trainings and support. This should be done through vocational trainings, livelihoods betterment, and income generation to become self-employed and self-dependent, and also different types of skills development, awareness-raising, and capacity building activities were mentioned often.

Social security and subsidies were mentioned more seldom, but still considered as a solution especially for the DAGs and PWDs. Providing need-based subsidies in cash or kind and social programmes as well as granting access to development activities was mentioned a few times.

The most effective activities for women empowerment the Vice Chairs were involved in were 1) women's skills development and income generation activities, 2) getting justice for women, such as in terms of child marriage, women victims of violence, etc., and 3) women's groups, mothers' groups, women's networks, child clubs, etc. that empower women and make them better networked, and thus, able to support and inform each other.

The most important RVWRMP activities were related to women, MHM, and GESI, livelihoods, transparency of the project, good project modalities, participation, and sanitation. All the respondents especially appreciate the activities conducted by RVWRMP as they are more

sustainable, beneficial, and apolitical than the activities organized by the RM or others. All respondents felt they have gained useful experiences from RVWRMP. The experiences were related to policy development and implementation, gender and DAGs related actions, awareness raising, facilitation and monitoring skills, general capacity building skills, and planning and budgeting skills. Other mentioned experiences included sanitation development, Dignified Menstrual Hygiene, and personal skills development and leadership. Importantly, the trainings seem to provide very much needed and required skills for the elected women, to enable them to work effectively for their communities, and particularly for the benefit of women and disadvantaged groups.

F. Has RVWRMP made a difference in the lives of women and DAGs in the RMs?

The Vice Chairs link RVWRMP with certain appreciated values, such as transparency, gender equity and social inclusion, sustainability, trust, and ownership. Related to the project result areas, they easily remember the achievements in the WASH and livelihood components of the project. A significant number of respondents remembered to explicitly mention project modalities in their list, such as the Step-by-Step and Procurement Guidelines. In general, the respondents highly appreciated the conduct of the project, especially the contribution to women's and DAGs' issues and the correct ways of working.

All respondents reported having been involved with RVWRMP activities and felt that they had gained lots of useful experience from there. Many Vice Chairs have started making change with their own family, making them model households in terms of sanitation and homegardening. The trainings have also resulted in developing and implementing actual activities in the Municipalities, triggered by the Vice Chairs. For instance, some Municipalities have adopted RVWRMP guidelines and modalities in their WASH implementation also outside the project support.

All respondents said RVWRMP has been involved in RM capacity building. Activities related to women's involvement and leadership, and livelihoods and sanitation were emphasised. Almost all respondents had participated in the Women as Decision-makers Workshop. Take-aways from that training were especially understanding the importance of planning and budgeting, and the method of problem identification – analysis – solutions – budgeting.

Almost all respondents had participated in the Menstrual Hygiene trainings. The workshop was considered very useful by all the participants. The respondents emphasised the benefit of identification of MHM issues, support to raise awareness on menstrual hygiene management and eradicating the taboos, and knowledge about DMM and sanitation.

The hands-on pad-making training was regarded as very beneficial, as well as boosting school attendance during the menstruation. The respondents told they had learned a lot about conducting the 'chhau hut free' campaign, menstrual hygiene and health management, menstrual products and their use, reuse and proper disposal. The workshop was seen supporting the habit to make and use sanitary materials.

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