WOMEN IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IN NEPAL: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

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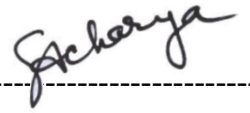

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Rebat Kumar Dhakal for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy in Education* presented on 20 September 2021.

Title: *Women in School Governance in Nepal: An Ethnographic Inquiry*

Abstract Approved

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Prof. Mahesh Nath Parajuli, PhD

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As Nepali society is largely men-dominated, women are under-represented in all public fronts, including politics, bureaucracy and institutional management. Nevertheless, efforts are made towards promoting women's participation in the governance of public institutions. In this study, I take the question of how the formal structures at an institutional level are (dis)empowering school stakeholders and (dis/en)couraging participation of women in school governance. As such, I explore the understanding and practices of inclusive school governance, especially from the perspective of women participation, in a rural Nepali community school. Applying the theoretical lenses of participation, representation, critical mass and feminist standpoint, I examine the dynamics of including and othering in the School Management Committee (SMC) by unfolding the perceptions of SMC members themselves.

The field materials are drawn from over 18 months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork, dominated by *kurakani* with the SMC members, conducted between 2016 and 2018 in a rural community school in Gandaki Province. Moreover, the participant

engaged meaning-making process was applied to co-construct the meanings, and then the key insights are further discussed in light of some literature and theoretical lenses.

The study reveals that the idea of women inclusion is contestable, and participants' beliefs ranged from conformist to transitional to utopian. Yet, their situatedness can be mapped largely at the transitional level. It further explores the driving forces that brought certain women to the SMC. Besides the policy reform, which required more women to be in the SMC compared to the past, family interest and support, community people's encouragement, sense of belonging and sustaining legacy, and acceptance culture also drove women to the SMC. The study further reveals that women SMC members' seeming ignorance of school affairs and strong trust in the Headteacher/Chair limited them from participating fully and made them feel 'othered', 'alienated' and 'excluded'. However, gradually, with the passage of time and learning, they felt somehow 'included' as their voices were also heard and interests were served.

Therefore, the agenda of inclusion has not only given women SMC members a chance to represent women but also to drive girl-friendly initiatives, which otherwise might be neglected.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CA	Constituent Assembly
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Accord
DEO	District Education Office
EU	European Union
HT	Headteacher
KUSOED	Kathmandu University School of Education
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
MoE	Ministry of Education
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NPC	National Planning Commission
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SMC	School Management Committee
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
UML	United Marxist and Leninist

CHAPTER 0

PROLOGUE

Ever since I was a child, I was mostly taught by teachers who were men. As far as I remember, there was one woman who taught me during my primary level schooling. Moreover, so far as I was aware, no woman occupied an administrative position (for example, headteacher [HT], Head of Department or Campus Chief) in the academic institutions where I formally stepped into in the course of my educational journey (from school level to the university level). Moreover, I also started working as a teacher as soon as I completed my intermediate level. Since then, I have also been teaching in different institutions where I hardly met any women HT. In fact, I had met one woman Principal in a school where I worked for almost a decade. Unfortunately, the Principal's term of service was over in two years, and all ensuing principals in that school to date are men.

When I was doing 'Master of Philosophy in Educational Leadership' in 2010, one of the common issues often raised was gender (less number of female students in higher education, fewer women school heads, and also fewer women as faculty members in general, and no women faculty teaching us). Since then, I also started thinking over why fewer women taught me (and only in lower grades) and why I could hardly meet any women heads. In fact, though the number of women teachers in Nepali community schools has been increasing in the last decade, it is still very less than men (Paudyal, 2015), and a majority of the women teachers are teaching at the primary/basic level. This inspired me to look into some school policies, where I did not find any provision of woman school head as such; however, there has been the

case of women inclusion in the School Management Committee (SMC) and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). Once I found that women can be in the SMC and PTA, I got more curious to know about their interests and participation.

Moreover, as a graduate of Educational Leadership (I had earned 'Master of Philosophy in Educational Leadership' in 2013), I often looked for opportunities to study and conduct training on school leadership in Nepal. In this course, I got an opportunity to facilitate a two-day training to school leaders on capacity building of SMC members from selected schools from Gandaki Province in February 2016, which led me to choose the research site for this study. Since one of the sessions was on 'participatory governance', I had explicitly asked the organiser, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), to invite at least one woman SMC member from each of the participating schools. However, the organiser invited the SMC Chair, PTA Chair and the HT. Out of the 24 school leaders, only one participant was a woman who was an HT. Rather than inviting a woman SMC member, they invited the PTA Chair. When I asked for the reason, the Training Coordinator, who was a woman, told me, "If we train the Heads, there will be some work – there's no use training others." Anyway, the training was conducted. However, a question constantly kept hovering over my head: why did the Training Coordinator intentionally avoid inviting the women SMC members? I ponder deeper, with some mild anger, from a man's perspective; she herself might have got the job since the NGO preferred women candidates to make the organisation inclusive in terms of gender.

The above incident hinted to me that even the NGO or other social workers, who are more critical of the patriarchal beliefs, held non-supportive perceptions towards women inclusion in their programmes or that they did not believe that women

SMC members have any power to impact decision-making. This further urged me to look into the issue of gender inclusion in the SMC in Nepali community schools.

During my schooling, parental participation, as occurs to me now, was a neglected agenda or that it was simply thought not necessary, not only because schools (administration and teachers) undermined parents' direct involvement in school, but also because parents themselves were mostly okay with the children's (regular) going to school. I do not remember my parents (of course, including neighbouring uncles and aunts) going to our school any day except for paying the fees (that too only till I was in grade seven), and this is somehow similar today as well when my younger nephews and nieces are going to school. Though there are frequent calls from school "Bring your parents to school", we rarely visit our children's school. Why we (parents) rarely visit our children's school might have many interpretations. But in my observation and experience, I clearly see two possibilities. First, parents are 'too busy' in their own jobs and that they are not interested in going to school and discuss their children's studies as well as matters related to school. Second, the schools may not welcome such interactions. Is it that parents are really distracted by schools? Or schools are such that they intentionally avoid parental engagement? Third and most importantly, our education system was not conceptualised and evolved in this way (i.e. parental involvement, participatory decision making, etc.). Perhaps, the education development activities began focusing on more participatory approaches from the 80s onwards.

The other part of the story can be that these days most of the school-related issues are discussed over the phones as well, which could have minimised the necessity of the physical presence of parents at school, especially in regards to children's school activities. Therefore, I, as an external observer, might not see the

dynamics of parental engagement. Moreover, in the context where even parental engagement in school seems weak, women's participation in school management might be more challenging. To better understand how the inclusion of parents in school decision making bodies is influential in school life, I thought a study of this kind was needed.

CHAPTER I

CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE FIELD OF INQUIRY

Gender inequality and discriminatory practices against women are global issues. And varying strategies to address these issues have been implemented at all levels (i.e., global, regional, national and local). Despite global commitments and efforts for gender equality and women empowerment, women representation in national politics and organisational leadership is still much lower than men. As per 2018 statistics, women held merely 27 per cent of managerial positions worldwide (United Nations, 2018). Likewise, only 20 women were serving as Head of State or Head of Government, which represented only 6.3% of the total number of international leaders (Women in International Politics, 2018). A later report of UN Women (2019) shows that as of June 2019, 11 women were holding the office of Head of State, and 12 were serving as Head of Government. Similarly, Inter-Parliamentary Union (2019) reports that only 24.3 per cent of all national parliamentarians were women as of February 2019, whereas women parliamentarians in Asia accounted for only 19.8 per cent.

In Nepal, the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament (formed after 2017 elections) was 32.73 per cent (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018), which was the highest in South Asia and second highest (after Timor-Leste, which stands at 38.46) in Asia. With the statistics, Nepal stood at 66th rank (out of 149 countries) in terms of political empowerment of women (World Economic Forum, 2018), and it held higher-than-average women representation in national parliament globally. Several efforts might have caused this, including the quota provision for

women in elections and having a proportional representation electoral system (Prihatini, 2018). Despite the seemingly encouraging statistics of women parliamentarians, the quality of their participation has been questioned, even by women members themselves. As many news reports revealed time and again, women do not speak and also that they are not given any opportunity to speak up.

Globally, women's presence and voice have often been ignored in public discourses and decision-making processes in the past. However, the scenario is gradually changing – calling for more women's involvement and participation in key decision-making bodies. The changing socio-political transformations in Nepal in the recent past have established several social agendas, including inclusion (and exclusion) of different segments primarily based on caste, ethnicity, and gender, in the existing social institutions. Principally, with the 2006 political change[1], the issue of inclusion (of gender, ethnicity, disadvantaged groups) has been evident in Nepal and many public policy reform measures to improve inclusion (of women, *dalits, adibasi janajatis, madheshis*, downtrodden classes, etc.) have been enacted. The year 2006 remained pivotal for gender mainstreaming in Nepal, with the adoption of the *Act amending Some Nepal Acts to Maintain Gender Equality* (2006). Moreover, the *Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007*, and the *Good Governance Act 2008*, all periodic plans (since 1956), *Gender and Inclusion Policy 2013* also addressed gender inclusion in one way or the other (see Appendix A). In fact, it has been more than a decade since the Interim Constitution (Government of Nepal, 2007) made it binding for all political parties and state mechanisms to ensure one-third of representation from women (K. D. Bhattarai, 2019). Likewise, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commit women's "full and effective participation" in leadership at all levels of

[1] The Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) was signed between the Government and the CPN Maoist on 21 November 2006, which ended the 10 year-long (1996-2006) armed conflict and set a path for a more inclusive state structure (CPA, 2006, Art. 3.5).

decision-making (SDG5.5) and responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels (SDG16.7) (United Nations, 2015). Moving on, the *Constitution of Nepal 2015* provisions the right to equality (Article 18), rights of women (Article 38) and the right to social justice (Article 42). Two crucial ideas on gender inclusion enshrined in the constitution are women's right to participation in all bodies of the State and access to opportunities based on the principle of inclusion and positive discrimination. Politically, these have contributed to the rise in the number of women in socio-political institutions.

Much of the literature on gender inclusion in South Asia discuss women's political participation – which mostly discusses 33% female quota in local government institutions in India, Bangladesh (since 1993) and Pakistan (since 2000) (Omvedt, 2005), and Nepal (since 2007) is acclaimed for leading South Asia in women political representation by reserving 33% positions in all of its state institutions, including the legislature, under Article 84(8) of the Constitution of Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2015). While rummaging on this scenario, Nepal presents us with a paradox. It has the female President and had got two other women in the country's top posts during the initial stage of this study – Speaker of the parliament and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Though women making it to the three top posts and increased presence in the national legislature might be considered a coincidence, it has proved that leadership is no longer confined to a 'men's job'. Nevertheless, their overall political participation is dismal (K. D. Bhattarai, 2019) and that women still have lower access to decision-making processes (R. Bhattarai, 2017).

In recent years, the inclusion agenda has become a hotcake in public policy discourse. Regarding school management, some provisions are made which encourage women's representation and participation. More specifically, the education

act provisions at least three female social workers or educationists and a person with a disability in the Municipal Education Committee and at least three female parents in the SMC (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016). Such policy provisions are evident across public institutions.

One of the critical factors influencing school effectiveness is claimed to be the nature and quality of school leadership (Machumu & Kaitila, 2014; Shah, 2016), which is mainly responsible for managing the school resources and utilising them for the best interest of the wider school community. Expecting a positive outcome, the government started transferring the management to the local community in 2002 (MoE, 2002), following the implementation of the ninth plan (National Planning Commission [NPC], 1998), Local Self-Governance Act (1999) and the Seventh Amendment of Education Act (2001). The plan had assumed that the local community participation would ensure financial transparency and quality in public schools. But very often, our school leaders (members of the SMC) are questioned about their competencies and preparedness in leading and governing schools. It may be because there are no specific provisions in practice to prepare them for governance before the appointment, and thus they often have to learn on the job. Given such a practice in Nepal, it is important to see how effective our school governors are in ensuring good school governance.

As I use it in this study, school governance refers to the system of managing a school through the exercise of collective authority to achieve its goals. To further enhance my own understanding of school governance, I borrow the idea of Upadhyaya et al. (2008) who state that governance involves the exercise of power in an institution to direct, control, and facilitate the activities in the best interest of its stakeholders. Likewise, to internalise the concept of inclusive school governance, I

take from Crowley (2004), who contemplated that school governance to be inclusive, it adopts a practice of allowing the entire school community to "shape decisions on school priorities, resources and activities" (p. 16). Different stakeholders at the local level are connected to the school, including teachers, headteacher, SMC, PTA, students, parents, elected representatives, Palika officials, and other community members, who influence the educational decision-making process, not necessarily with the same magnitude, though.

In the Nepali school governance context, different formal structural arrangements are at play from the central to the local level, requiring the representation of different stakeholders. However, these formal structures (e.g. School Management Committee, Parent-Teacher Association) at the local level may not be sufficient and/or capacitated to empower school stakeholders (especially teachers, parents, and students) and also ensure inclusive practices in schools. As a teacher, teacher leader and teacher educator, I have also observed a few initiatives by parents and other local stakeholders that have supported schools. Moreover, parental involvement is considered essential to ensure a "more transparent and democratic" (Balarin & Cueto, 2007, p. 1) governance of schools. It is therefore important to see the role of parent representatives in the school governing bodies. At the same time, it is important to see how this very notion of representation has excluded some stakeholders from participation in educational decision-making. This very notion of feeling excluded applies to other stakeholders, too. Therefore, it is timely to explore how schools are including members of their communities – students, parents, teachers, and others – in school decision making processes.

In this connection, SMC members and other school stakeholders, including higher line authority, teachers, parents and students, bear no less responsibility to

improve the school system and to promote inclusive and "participatory school governance" (Obondoh et al., 2005) to bring about overall school effectiveness (Karmacharya, 2015). However, the involvement of parents and community members, as members of the school governing body, is sometimes not taken positively by many headteachers and teachers (Adil et al., 2018; Dangal et al., 2016). A somehow contrasting finding was reported by Khanal et al. (2019) that some high performing community school headteachers in Nepal demonstrate flexible approachability for parents – though their study does not explicitly cover the participation of parents in formal school governance bodies. However, a South African study reported that some school principals regard themselves as superior to parents, and thus they are reluctant to work with parents participating in school governance (Mncube, 2009). Given this sort of scenario, it can be claimed that when it comes to involving women (parents), men (headteachers) might find this even more worthless, especially in rural Nepali communities where patriarchal values and 'gender roles' have a stronghold – which "privilege men's access to opportunities and control over resources" (UNICEF, 2018, p. 7). In this context, I understand that women's participation has been framed exclusively – only as a showcase, rather than committing to the inclusive agenda of school reform.

In this light, I argue that in the context where women's participation in decision-making has gained currency across the globe, there are fewer opportunities for women to engage in governance and decision-making in Nepali community schools. Since the earlier studies have shown that women's participation in public sector governance is challenging and that is even more so in a patriarchal rural society, I want to explore further whether this has been the case in rural school governance in Nepal.

Statement of the Problem

Reflecting on women's political participation in national politics, I delve into women's involvement in the education governance scenario. Aligning with the international trend, shifting political dynamics in Nepal have also led to growing awareness of inclusive governance. It has given way for inclusion in public institutions, including school management (Dhakal, 2019a). Given that inclusive governance in Nepali community schools is shaped by the national educational policy framework and own institutional and cultural forces, exploring the gender inclusion dimension can provide insights into the impact of context on the practices of inclusive school governance. The 8th amendment to the education act seems to reflect the inclusive ideology of the state by provisioning 33 percent of women in the SMC (MoE, 2016). Yet, studies highlight that women in governing bodies still experience several 'gendered barriers' in practice (J. Parajuli, 2018; Tamang, 2018). As such, despite enabling policy provisions, the ground reality has not changed much. This clearly indicates that Nepali women confront many challenges in getting into the management committee and performing their roles. There is still a grip of traditional men-dominated power dynamics in Nepali society that does not support women's entrance into the public sphere (Dhungana, 2014; Ghimire, 2006).

Decentralisation and school-based management provisions have given way for schools to have a louder voice of the local stakeholders. However, meaningful participation or inclusion to use a politically correct term, of the stakeholders in educational decision making is still questioned, especially because headteachers singlehandedly make decisions and do not discuss financial activities with teachers (Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development, 2004), or take a few powerful SMC members in hand, and dominate the decision making process – leading

to a kind of 'elite capture' (Hamal, 2018). In this regard, a lot of questions arise. Why, despite policy priority, has women's participation in school governance been confined to being simply a ritual exercise? Why has their participation, after so many years of implementation, not been able to take a meaningful form? Why have institutional and social practices largely remained ineffective in this context? Why are the outcomes of the growing participation of women in education/higher education, growing access to different forms of media, and the contribution of programmes like women empowerment and social awareness not yet seen in this aspect?

Similar questions arise in regards to the practice of school governance at an institutional level. How are school governing bodies (for example, SMC, PTA) formed at the local level? Are these bodies realistic or only ritualistic? Do women come to SMC, or are they brought? Are they brought to really engage in decision-making or just to fulfil the 'gender quota'? What drives women to participate in the SMC? Whose interests do they (not) serve? Do they just sit in or participate in decision making? Is their representation only symbolic or also substantive? Above all, how do intersecting social positions result in differentiated life experiences and participation pathways for men and women in school governance? Against the backdrop of such questions, it is essential to examine the interests, contexts, and exercise of the power of key stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of educational decisions, especially relating to the management of school resources.

Purpose and Research Questions

This ethnographic study aimed to explore the understanding and practices of gender inclusion in school governance in a rural Nepali community school setting. To address this purpose, I devised the following three research questions:

1. How do SMC members understand 'inclusive school governance' in a rural community school in Nepal?
2. How do women stakeholders get into School Management Committee in a rural community school setting?
3. How do women SMC members negotiate their participation in school decision-making?

Rationale of the Study

Recent years have witnessed rapid social, economic, and political changes both locally and globally and their impact on the education sector. Today, more than ever, some interconnected factors (e.g. international commitment, national policy framework, social inclusion and women empowerment issues) argue for the necessity of gender-inclusive school governance. This scenario has propelled all community schools in Nepal to ensure at least 33 per cent (i.e. three) women in their management committees. It is thus important to try to understand whether and how these policy interventions have been working. This requires a thorough analysis of the understanding and experiences of the women SMC members themselves. Since the existing studies have partly touched upon parental involvement in school (especially in regards to enhancing children's learning achievement) (Munakarmi, 2015; Tripathi, 2008) or the role of school governance in quality education (Shah, 2016), they have not adequately dealt with the SMC members' motivation, selection, roles and experiences, let alone exploring the experiences of women members. To date, we lack empirical analysis of women's participation in school governance and how that has (or has not) empowered them. Therefore, this study can be a timely endeavour, if not late, to address this gap and bring forward the local practices of inclusive school governance.

Exploring the dimension of ‘gender inclusive’ school governance is important because of the policy shift towards a greater political representation of women as well as increased inclusion of women in public institutions in Nepal. This is important for two reasons: how the changed context has empowered women on the one hand and how these women experience their participation in the otherwise men dominated space on the other hand.

Personally, I have a deep interest in unpacking the practices of inclusive school governance on a case by case basis and shedding light on the participatory processes in school-based decision making. Against this backdrop, this study finds justification since all stakeholders seem to be concerned about ensuring good governance in schools and ensuring the decision-making to be participatory as provisioned by the Education Act. This encouraged me to elaborate on how certain local (cultural) norms and practices in interaction with policy provision may influence inclusive governance within a local community school setting.

De/Limitations

The very notion of school governance seems to be too vast to cover in a single thesis. Therefore, this study addresses school governance in a limited way, as it does not relate to the role of the education officials down the professional line agencies from the central/Ministry level to the district and local government level; instead, it focuses on the practice of school governance at the institutional level (commonly called grassroots level school governance) – mostly deals with management practices within a school. Likewise, the focus of this study is on the ‘participatory’ dimension of school governance (i.e. how participatory and women inclusive the local level school governance body itself is, what drives for this participation, and the everyday trajectories of the ‘included’ women members in the SMC).

Again, the scope of 'inclusion' in this thesis is limited to the '*coming* and *being* of women with intersecting identities' in the SMC. In this study, the terms 'governance' and 'management' have been used synonymously, especially to refer to everyday decision-making and school management practices. In this sense, the scope of governance has been somehow narrowed or limited to 'everyday management'. Further, I have only looked into the participation and inclusion dimension of governance, especially of women SMC members in decision-making. Finally, in any discourse that addresses inclusion, the issue of exclusion also surfaces. However, the issue of exclusion has not been explicitly dealt with in this thesis.

Another crucial limitation of this thesis is my own positionality as a Brahmin man researcher studying women's interests and participation in school governance. However, I was very aware of my power and agency not suppressing women's voice, which I have articulated in Chapter III, "Positionality: Locating Myself in the Research" section.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis has been organised into seven chapters. The first chapter sets the background and presents the problem, research questions and rationale besides announcing its delimitations. The second chapter presents the review of extant literature that are crucial to the research issues in question. In doing so, it provides an important context and theoretical framework for the later analytical chapters. The third chapter deals with the methodology of this study which consists of the research design, tools and techniques, data collection procedures, quality standards and ethical considerations adopted in this study.

Similarly, the subsequent three chapters consist of the analysis and interpretation of the data where the fourth chapter is related to the theme of

understanding inclusive school governance from the perspectives of the practitioners (i.e. SMC members themselves), the fifth chapter explores the background, interests and circumstances of the SMC members (women) that drive them to come to the decision-making process, and the sixth chapter explores the way female members find and create their space in the school governance mechanism. The final chapter concludes by synthesising the key ideas presented in the three earlier empirical chapters. Moreover, this chapter is also informed by my theoretical and methodological positions, and it offers some new perspectives that I developed from the empirical evidence gathered in this research.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE: A RETROSPECTION

There are a multiplicity of concepts, theories, and models in the school governance literature – too many to cover in a brief overview of the literature. Regardless of the nature of those theories and models, the critical fact that must be borne in mind is their appropriateness and usefulness in this study. Therefore, to develop the argument delineated in the introduction section, I made a comprehensive review of the literature that enhanced my understanding of the following concepts: school governance, inclusive school governance, and women's participation in public administration. Besides, some theoretical underpinnings also informed this study. Some of the relevant theoretical perspectives adopted in this study include representation and participation, feminist standpoint theory, gender and intersectionality.

Furthermore, I have also reviewed some related empirical studies to develop my insights into research in a similar area. This review has helped map the methods used by previous scholars and get direction for this research. Some gaps are identified by reviewing the extant literature, and this thesis has been geared towards addressing some of those gaps.

Discourse of Women's Participation in School Governance

Some of the key concepts pertinent to this study have been reviewed along the following sub-sections. These concepts include school governance, provision of School Management Committee in Nepal, inclusive school governance, and gender and power in Nepali society.

School Governance

The general concept of governance is much older; however, its modern use seems to have been popularised during the public sector reforms in the 1980s and 90s (Bevir, 2016), when it emerged as the new public administration to reflect the idea of implementing public policies (Upadhyaya et al., 2008). As society emerged, people developed and followed some social relationships, rules, values, culture, rituals and practices, which started regulating and governing human behaviours and society (Lamichhane, 2021). As such, how a society or a social institution, including a family, functions is characterised by its nature of governance. As indigenous practices, Nepali society enjoys the legacy of certain community governance mechanisms or traditions like the *Barghar* or *Badhghar* (also known as *Bhalmansa, Mahatawa, Bargharia or Aguwa*) among the Tharus (Chaudhary, 2011; Sapkota, 2020) and *Choho* among the Kirants (Parajuli et al., 2019) as head of the community.

Governance basically relates to the roles, responsibilities and structure of governing bodies and the exercise of authority to make decisions and implement them (Cole, 2013, p. 6). Therefore, it is regarded as a process of managing an institution through the exercise of authority to achieve its goals. In other words, in an institutional context, governance involves the exercise of power to inform, direct, control and facilitate the activities in the best interest of stakeholders (Upadhyaya et al., 2008). In the field of education as well, the concept of governance generally includes some idea of authority and control over the affairs and activities of an educational organisation. I believe governance is a perspective on what a school is and how it should operate. In fact, it is an overarching term that covers every aspect of school policies, operation, monitoring, management, and overall school resource mobilisation. As such, all school stakeholders, right from students, parents,

community people, teachers, local government to the federal government, have a share in school governance. However, SMC appears to be a ‘formal’ ‘authorised’ body connected to the school that serves as the closest management body attached to everyday school affairs. Thus, the scope of SMC is synonymously used as ‘school governance’ at the grassroots level.

Here, I initially confronted the dilemma of demarcating between ‘governance’ and ‘management’. Though there are some differences and their scopes in school settings remain the subject of debate, their interchangeable use is not so uncommon (Balarin et al., 2008), especially regarding taking charge of individual schools (Heystek, 2011). By definition, governance is about formulating and adopting school policy (Mncube, 2009) and monitoring its execution. Thus it usually falls within the scope of the state or the central level education authority, or the local government or local education authority in the decentralised context. In contrast, management is about the day-to-day operation of the school and implementing school policies (Van Wyk & Marumoloa, 2012), which may or may not involve parents and wider community stakeholders. As such, literally, governance takes place at a higher level than management, and some organisations can have both of these bodies. The earlier provisions of the Village Education Committee and District Education Committee in Nepal could be labelled as local level school governance bodies (MoE, 2002) though their effectiveness was questioned due to their limited authority and power (M. N. Parajuli, 2007). Comparing the roles and composition of the school management and/or governance bodies across countries (e.g. School Governing Body in South African schools (Maponya, 2015), SMC in Indian schools (Right to Education Act, 2009), executive SMC in Pakistani schools (Adil et al., 2018), and SMC (in primary schools) and Boards of Governors (in secondary schools) in South Sudan (Ministry of

General Education and Instruction, USAID & UKaid, 2016), SMC in Nepali community schools are the institutional level school governance bodies. As such, SMC has been widely observed as a mechanism to establish good governance of school education. With these theoretical and practical insights, I deduced that the idea of governance and management often overlap at a practical level.

With close scrutiny of the extant literature, I found it convenient to see school governance from two perspectives: 'state-centric' (Connolly & James, 2011) (with paid personnel, supervising schools), and 'community-centric' (participation of community members, who serve as volunteers, in taking charge of an individual school). Reflecting on the nature of SMC in Nepal, I adopt a 'community-centric' view of governance, whereby SMC becomes the closest school governing body at the individual school level. In fact, SMC is the ultimate grassroots level 'school governance structure' (Khanal, 2013) in the present context in Nepal. From another perspective, it could also be observed that school governance takes place at the macro (state)-, meso (district/local level)- and micro (school)-levels (Huber, 2011). In the Nepali context, we can find four levels: macro (state), meso (province), micro (Palika) and institutional (school) level. As such, the community-centric approach focuses on micro and institutional levels; the latter one is the focus of this study.

I borrow Duşe and Câmpean's (2019) definition to conceptualise governance in my thesis, which aptly merges management and governance. According to them, governance is the process of decision-making and implementing those decisions (p. 325). For Mncube (2009), school governance is the institutional mechanism mandated with the responsibility of developing school policies. Adopting the community-centric approach, we can see the role demarcation between the micro (Palika) and the institutional (school) level. The Palikas make certain policies and schools act as

implementing agencies, whereas schools also make some of the policies at an institutional level and implement them, too. Therefore, I argue that the traditions, values, ethics, roles, responsibilities, decisions, actions and interactions of the SMC fall under the scope of school governance. Therefore, school governance in this thesis is operationalised as the school-based mechanism and processes where local school actors engage in negation, decision-making and influencing school environment and outcomes.

Provision of School Management Committee in Nepal

Though community management of schools is not a new phenomenon in Nepal – they were basically managed by the community right after they became accessible to the public with the downfall of the Rana rule in 1951 until they were centralised in 1971 through National Education Systematic Plan (M. N. Parajuli, 2007), its role is revitalised with the introduction of the Tenth Five Year Plan in 2002 (National Planning Commission, 2003). In fact, the Local Self-Governance Act in 1998 and the tenth plan were seen as the government's commitment to decentralise public sector management and to promote community participation. The World Bank (2007) asserts that decentralisation of school management to the local community can better contribute to enhance participation rates, quality and efficiency, and accountability of schools (p. 2). In fact, Nepal's education decentralisation was in response to the World Bank's interest and support (Carney et al., 2007; Khanal, 2010). Moreover, community management of schools is believed to address inequality and exclusion on the one hand and improve overall education quality (Adil et al., 2018; Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Visualising the importance of decentralised school management, the Education Act (Seventh Amendment, 2058BS) emphasised the involvement of communities in school governance through SMCs to ensure school

quality (MoE, 2002b) by making schools more accountable and their management more transparent and ensuring local ownership (Carney et al., 2007; Khanal, 2010). Therefore, this act provisioned for a democratic process of forming the SMC, i.e. parents electing the Chairperson and some members (MoE, 2002b).

Though the SMC was formed, no meaningful authority was given to the headteacher as well as the SMC (M. N. Parajuli, 2007). Deconcentration typically involves the transfer of tasks and responsibilities, but not authority, to lower units within the organisation (Khanal, 2010). Therefore, community management was not, in fact, decentralisation but the delegation of certain responsibilities of managing schools. Whatsoever the case was, the provision of SMC having parents has been acknowledged as creating space for the participation of wider groups of stakeholders (Khanal, 2013; M. N. Parajuli, 2007) in school governance at the local level. The recent education policy (Articles 10.33 and 10.34) also reiterated the provisions for stronger community partnership in school management (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2019). The SMCs under this study were formed as per the provision of the Education Act (8th amendment); however, the recent SMCs are formed based on the local level education acts or regulations, which are more or less similar to the 8th amendment. Recently, the Federal Government has also updated the Act (9th amendment); however, it has kept the nature and structure of the SMC intact as per the earlier Act. Since the scope of my thesis is the provision of the eighth amendment, it is relevant to discuss the pertinent provisions of SMC in general community schools (it also provisions for the SMC in institutional schools) made in this act. The Act provisions a nine-member SMC to operate, supervise and manage community schools. More specifically, the SMC members include: (a) Four persons, including two women, selected by the parents among themselves – Members; (b) The

Ward Chairperson of the concerned Ward of the (rural) municipality where the school is located – Member; (c) Two persons nominated by School Management Committee from among the founders of the school, local intellectuals or educationists, or those continually supporting the school for ten years or those who have donated 10 lakh or more (cash, or certain assets) to the school – Members; (d) One teacher selected by the concerned school teachers from amongst themselves – Member; (e) Headmaster of the school – Member-secretary. It also provisions the Chairperson of the SMC to be selected by those members selected as per (a), (b), and (c) above (MoE, 2016, Article 23). There were two crucial differences in the 7th and the 8th amendment that impacted the SMCs. In the 7th amendment, the members of the SMCs must have their wards studying in the school, which was loosened in the 8th amendment. Likewise, there was a provision of one woman member in the 7th amendment, but the minimum number of women was raised to three in the 8th amendment.

During the initial days of my doctoral research journey (back in 2016), the SMCs were formed and running as per the provisions of the Education Act (7th amendment). However, the eighth amendment bill was passed on 4 June 2016, which dissolved the SMCs formed according to the 7th amendment and required schools to form new SMCs with different provisions. Though both the education policies provisioned SMCs with the same mandate of managing schools by the community, there were fewer changes in the composition of the SMC and considerable variations in their actual practices across schools – some followed through, some faced challenges in forming SMCs, and some even could not form for quite some time. Therefore, for several months, most of the schools operated without a formal SMC. Yet, they were doing some ‘formal’ transactions and decisions through the ‘dead’ SMC. When the new SMCs were formed, the entire dynamics of women’s

participation in SMC changed – at least the numerical representation of women increased substantially in comparison with the previous SMC. In fact, this very dynamics is the focus of this inquiry, which I have discussed with empirical evidence in Chapters IV, V, and VI.

Gender Inclusive School Governance

The notions of 'good governance' and 'inclusive governance' have been in conversation among researchers and practitioners for a long time. Good governance (commonly 'good ruling') is often taken as a broader term, and inclusion is conceptualised as a crucial component of good governance. The very idea of good ruling in the eastern world is termed '*Adarsa Rajya'* (also, *'Ram Rajya'* – analogically Lord Ram's state in the Ramayan), and in everyday Nepali discourse, it is called *sushasan* or *asal shasan* (good ruling) – largely relating with public administration. The World Bank (1994) defines good governance as "epitomised by predictable, open and enlightened policy-making, a bureaucracy imbued with professional ethos acting in furtherance of the public good, the rule of law, transparent processes, and a strong civil society participating in public affairs" (as cited in Addink, 2019, p. 50). However, the problem that most of our school leaders are wrestling with is to find governance practices that work best in all circumstances. Since this is not possible, school leaders must find ways to fit the best possible governance practice in their specific school community contexts. Likewise, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2013) identifies eight key features of good governance: participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and adherence to the rule of law (p. 1). Therefore, good governance demands inclusive and transparent administration, and quality outcomes should be ensured without discrimination. Among these diverse

dimensions of governance, this study is focused on participatory and inclusive dimensions only. More specifically, these dimensions are also dealt with in a limited way – inclusion and participation of women in the SMC.

Here, inclusion is understood as creating the necessary environment for having a specific group (women's) access to school (SMC). In contrast, participation is associated with how they play their roles, offer their inputs, how they put their voice or even create space for their voice, strengthen their agency. As such, "inclusion is oriented to making connections among people, across issues, and over time" whereas "participation is oriented to increasing input for decisions" (Quick & Feldman, 2011, p. 274). Therefore, inclusion is the pre-condition for participation. Similarly, inclusion is a response to the existing exclusion of certain segments of society in societal institutions based on group identities such as caste, gender, ethnicity, religion (Thorat & Newman, 2010, p. 6). Inclusion primarily aims at "enabling all human beings to participate fully in society with respect for their human dignity" and also "seeks to maximise the potential of each human being" (Gidley et al., 2010, p. 4). As an inclusive governance practice, these days, women are also elected as Badghars or Bhalmansa in the Tharu community in Nepal. The major idea of 'inclusive governance' is ensuring the "inclusion of excluded groups in the decision-making process" (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018, p. v). It shows that with inclusion comes exclusion. Having said that, it is important also to understand exclusion as limiting individuals or groups from participating in the society's political, economic and societal processes (Atkinson & Marlier, 2010, p. 1).

Similarly, the concept of governance in this study also looks into the capacity of the governing bodies to effectively formulate and implement school improvement policies. To do so, including different stakeholders in the governing body and also

having maximum participation of stakeholders in decision making and implementation of such decisions is equally important. It means inclusive school governance is called for not merely to adhere to the policies but to effect change among those who require it the most – the local stakeholders. Inclusive governance is "a participative way of 'governance' wherein citizens and other stakeholders have a say in the decision-making process" (Sharma, 2012, p. 4). This definition underscores the importance of encompassing the larger school community into the broader framework of school governance, which supports social inclusion in the policies and practices of school affairs that affects them and their children. For the European Union (EU), the involvement of citizens enables governance to gain greater acceptance. EU also proposes a three-step decision-making process that can be implemented to reach the most satisfactory decisions. The steps include a) *Information*: informing citizens, b) *Consultation*: asking their opinions on an issue, and c) *Dialogue*: based on the results of the consultation, dialogue can lead to taking a somehow agreeable decision for all (EU, 2012, p. 1). However, it is rarely possible to arrive at the most satisfactory decision for everybody'. For Sigdel and Sharma (2013), inclusive governance is a form of "governance characterised by accountability, responsiveness and integrity among public sector service providers by ensuring gender equality and social inclusion in policies, programmes and practice of the government" (p. 1). A comprehensive definition of 'inclusive governance' may be traced from the Government of Cadana (2019), which states that inclusive governance considers gender (including women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) and other personal and social identity and engages them in institutions, policymaking processes and service delivery – making them also responsive to the community people.

The review above helped me to conceptualise inclusive school governance as the inclusion of the school community in decisions affecting their (children's) lives and taking part in implementing such decisions and promoting school-community collaborations. Based on the above review of governance and inclusive school governance, I can say that inclusive school governance is an institutional mechanism and process of giving access to participation for all school stakeholders, including teachers, learners, parents, officials from education line agencies, community people from diverse backgrounds like gender, ethnicity, geography, physical condition among others without discrimination in overall school activities. Among the multitudes of dynamics that school governance entails, this study focuses on the inclusion of women and their participation in school governance (SMC as a school governance mechanism, and participation in decision-making as a process) with special attention to their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, the scope of 'inclusion' is limited to 'women inclusion' in my study. Thus, I define gender-inclusive (school) governance as a process of allowing women's active participation in school decision making, thereby enhancing their capabilities to fulfil their roles as SMC members and contributing to school reform at the grassroots level.

In this study, I have thus depicted the nature, structure and dimensions of gender-inclusive school governance. I have also specifically examined the influence of socio-political contexts on the overall school governance practices.

Gender and Power in Nepali Society

Historically, women have been viewed in diverse roles. They are praised and honoured as mothers, nourishers and the most potent and empowering forces (*shaktiswarupa*) at one end. At the other end, they are also presented as "submissive and dominative subjects" (Sunuwar, 2019, p. 135). In the Hindu culture, newborn

girls are considered ‘Laxmi’ (Goddess of wealth), Panchakanya (five virgin girls are worshipped before any new venture), Kumari (a virgin girl from the Newar community is worshipped as a goddess). Likewise, female goddesses like Durga, Saraswati, Kali, etc., are celebrated and worshipped as the most powerful and empowering forces (as Shakti, Devi, *Mata*/Mother) in the Hindu tradition. They are depicted as representing *triguna* (three virtues) or *trishakti* (three dynamic energies) - women representing creation, maintenance and destruction. Johnson (n.d.) asserts that “Shakti may be personified as the gentle and benevolent Uma, consort of Shiva, or Kali, the terrifying force destroying evil, or Durga, the warrior who conquers forces that threaten the stability of the universe” (para. 4). On the other hand, women, in general, are considered the ‘weaker sex’ globally and are often “subdued and treated as domestic slaves” (Sunuwar, 2019, p. 133).

Given the position of women in society, religious texts, especially in the Hindu tradition, I found contesting ideas represented even within the same scripture. For example, *Manusmriti*[2] acclaims women in the following two verses:

यत्र नार्यस् तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः। यत्र-एतास् तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास् तत्र-अ-फलाः क्रियाः॥ ३-५६

> Where women are worshipped, there the gods are delighted; but where they are not worshipped, there all rites are futile. (*Manusmriti, 3.56)*

जामयो यानि गेहानि शपन्त्यप्रतिपूजिताः॥ तानि कृत्याहतानि-इव विनश्यन्ति समन्ततः॥ ३-५८

> The houses on which female relations, not being duly honoured, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic. (*Manusmriti*, 3.58*)*

On the other hand, the same scripture makes some derogatory remarks on women, demean their roles and curtails their freedom. In one instance, it indicates that

[2]Manusmriti, usually traslated as "code of Manu", literally held as "reflections of Manu", presents itself as a document that compiles and organises the code of conduct for human society (Pattanaik, 2017). It has been upheld as the ultimate guide to lead a moral life, the digressing of which is to be treated with serious negative sanctions (Ghosh, 2018).

a key source of women's power is through their men – father, husband and son (Anderson, 2016). To cite the text itself,

पिता रक्षति कौमारे भर्ता रक्षति यौवने। रक्षन्ति स्थविरे पुत्रा न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यम् अर्हति॥ ९-०३

> Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. (*Manusmriti*, 9.3)

There are similar and even more derogatory statements in the Manusmriti, upon which our social and also legal system is based. The following statements depict a women's duties towards her husband:

यस्मै दद्यात् पिता त्व् एनां भ्राता वा-अनुमते पितुः। तं शुश्रूषेत जीवन्तं संस्थितं च न लङ्घयेत्॥ ५-१५१

> Him to whom her father or, with her father's consent, her brother gives her away- she should obey him when he is alive and not be unfaithful to him when he is dead. (*Manusmriti*, 5.151)

वि-शीलः काम-वृत्तो वा गुणैर् वा परिवर्जितः। उपचार्यः स्त्रिया साध्व्या सततं देववत् पतिः॥ ५-१५४

> Though he may be bereft of virtue, given to lust and totally devoid of good qualities, a good woman should always worship her husband like a god. (*Manusmriti*, 5.154)

पतिं या न-अभिचरति मनो-वाग्-देहसंयुता। सा भर्तृलोकम् आप्नोति सद्भिः साध्वी-इति च-उच्यते॥ ५-१६५

> A woman who controls her mind, speech, and body and is never unfaithful to her husband attains the world of her husband, and virtuous people call her a 'good woman'. By following this conduct, a woman who controls her mind, speech and body obtains the highest fame in this world and the world of her husband in the next. (*Manusmriti*, 5.165)

The case of Durga being powerful has also been depicted as endowed (as *baksis*) by male Gods. Often, feminine entities are presented as largely dependent on male forces. The above are just a few examples of how the position of women is held traditionally, especially guided by Hindu mythology. In this context, how does a woman have a voice?

Nepali society, as still characterised by *Brahmanical* patriarchy, expects women to serve their duty or *stridharma*, "exhorting women to marry and beget sons" (Charpentier, 2010, p. 19) or *patibratadharma*, being loyal and faithful to her husband. Nepali patriarchal society also seems to hold an English proverb, "A whistling woman and a crowing hen are neither fit for God nor men", and has its localised derogatory idiom "*pothi baseko suhaudaina*" (it does not suit a woman to raise her voice) (Sunuwar, 2019) which imposes restrictions on women's public presence (Shrestha, 2014).

Women comprise half (51.50%) of Nepal's population, but their status is historically weaker than men's since they have lower access to public services as well as decision-making processes (R. Bhattarai, 2017). They have been mostly engaged in unpaid care work and domestic chores and thus facing several structural barriers, including those created by the state (National Women's Commission, 2013) and have been subject to discrimination and marginalisation across sectors. Moreover, Nepali society is characterised by a patriarchal system, which also "carries a legacy of a hierarchical social structure based on gender, caste and ethnicity" ([NPC, 2017, p. 4), and thus women subordination has been historical, which has restrained Nepali women from fully engaging in public life (Kanel, 2014). Also, the deep-rooted patriarchal values have consigned women to a "subordinate position in gender relations" (Upadhya, 1996, p. 449), and thus their "rights remain limited by the male

authority" (Rédaction, 2015, para. 1). The traditional gender roles – man as the breadwinner of the family, head of the family, owner of the physical assets, and so forth, and woman as homemaker, childcarer, 'domestic hand' still prevails in contemporary Nepali society. Therefore, achieving gender equity and empowering women have been challenging even today.

Though some rights of women are enshrined in the Constitution, many communities basing on old traditions, values and social customs limit women's freedom and rights (National Women's Commission, 2013). In the Nepali society, some categories of caste (Brahmin-Kshatriya), class (upper class), and gender (men) have remained more powerful than others (K.C. et al., 2017). On top of that, the intersection of all these suppresses some groups even more. For example, a poor Dalit (lowest category in the caste hierarchy system) woman from a rural setting is unlikely to reach a top position in a public institution (T. Acharya, 2017). Therefore, rural Nepali women, especially those from marginalised communities, are likely to experience greater and multiple exclusions (G. D. Acharya, 2018) when participating in public institutions.

Girls and women, in general, have been facing several challenges in their everyday life due to discriminated access to schooling (boys going to high fee-charging private schools; girls bound to attend community schools), repercussions of early marriage, domestic violence (physical, psychological), superstitions and social traditions relating to menstruation and dowry system. While analysing why women's issues and problems are not getting due attention, studies report that it is due to their less influence in policymaking and politics (National Women's Commission, 2013; Pandey, 2016). This warrants that special measures (especially educational opportunities, economic activities and political participation) are to be adopted to

listen to their voices and empower them to utilise their agency and rights to the larger extent possible.

Though the scenario of women literacy and engagement in the formal economy has changed positively from the last decades, female literacy (for aged five years and above) (57.4%) is still much lower than male (75.1%), and women engaged in self-employment activities and/or unpaid family labour is very high (64% of total working-age female population) (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). An update on the adult (15 years and older) literacy rate for both groups (67.9%) indicates that though improved, the gap in literacy rates persists between males (78.6%) and females (59.7%) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018). As per the 2011 census, women-headed households are 25.73% only (though it has risen from 14.70% in 2001). Though most of the women engage in the agriculture sector and unpaid care responsibilities, their engagement in paid work in the non-agriculture sector has increased to 44.8 per cent (compared to 19.9% in 2009) (NPC, 2016), but gender inequality in employment and incomes persists (NPC, 2016, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2019). Moreover, there is no reciprocal change in the gendered division of unpaid care work (Aryal, 2020), and that employed women still have a “second shift” back at home (Hochschild,1989), which has put employed women into a further gendered disadvantage. This shows that women are largely suffering the consequences of a patriarchal mindset which undervalues them and restricts them within some structural boundaries, e.g. family, marital and social spheres. As such, family and social traditions largely define a Nepali woman's role and position (Rédaction, 2015, para. 1), often limiting their roles to the socially defined responsibilities within the household (M. Acharya, 2006). It is then no surprise that their engagement in public life has been narrow.

In the recent decade, the broader scenario is changing slowly, especially with the adoption of measures for women uplift, including affirmative action quota for female candidates in politics and administration. The 'women quota' is changing the landscape of Nepali bureaucracy, security sector and politics alike - although women representation in positions of high authority is still limited (NPC, 2016). Likewise, women's access to, decision on, and control of family economic transactions have increased (National Women's Commission, 2013). Chasing the Millennium Development Goals and SDGs, Nepal has been narrowing the gender gap in "important socio-economic domains, notably in education, health services, employment opportunities and participation in the political decision-making process" (NPC, 2017, p. 34). The Global Gender Gap Index 2020 has ranked Nepal 101st out of 153 countries (which was 105th out of 149 countries in 2018, 110th out of 144 countries in 2016, and 120th out of 130 countries in 2008) for gender parity (World Economic Forum, 2018, 2019). As such, the gap has been narrowing gradually. Though there is some change in the traditional patriarchal mindset and men and women are engaging in mutually interchangeable roles (K.C. et al., 2017), the scale and pace of such changes may not be adequate to ensure gender equity, especially because the division of labour is heavily gendered in our social and cultural values.

One of the major pointers of women's attainment of rights and exercise of power is their participation in the political sphere (NPC, 2013). With the promulgation of the Interim Constitution 2007, which provisioned 33 per cent of women's representation in the Constituent Assembly (CA), we could see women representation in politics at a 'critical mass' level in the 2008 CA election (Kanel, 2014). However, against the constitutional provision and political commitment, the representation of women in the second CA election in 2013 dropped to 30 per cent.

The Preamble of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) envisions Nepal as an inclusive state and guarantees the right to equality for all its citizens. Following this, many public institutions, including schools, health services, the forestry sector and other user groups, have started becoming more 'inclusive' of gender and social groups'. However, in many public institutions, women are treated as subordinates by largely leaving out of decision-making positions (M. Acharya, 2006; K.C. et al., 2017). At this juncture, it is important to explore how our public institutions, including schools, are practising 'gender-inclusive governance' in principle and practice.

The discussion above exposed that gender and power are inexplicably embedded in our social and cultural system and that despite affirmative policies and broader gender outcomes, the everyday lifeworld of rural women and their participation in social interactions seem largely unchanged. Therefore, this study has tried to deal with the provision of women engagement in social institutions, especially schools. While doing so, I am mindful of the gender relations, social and power norms that have a bearing on how schools work. Moreover, I am also mindful of the fact that the power exercise of men and women in formal school governance space and outside school spaces are not coincidental and that "women can and do 'bargain with patriarchy'" (Nunan & Cepić, 2020, p. 2) which can ultimately neutralise gender roles. This study also builds on the above literature by highlighting how women representation in School Management Committee has increased and what kind of gendered narratives are developed in school governance, especially in regards to promoting inclusive governance in rural community schools in Nepal.

Theoretical Orientations

The study has been informed by some theoretical lenses and constructs such as representation and participation, critical mass, feminist standpoint and intersectionality. Though there are arrays of theoretical constructs, besides the above mentioned, to look at women's participation and empowerment, including capability, power, structure and agency, political dynasties, self-determination and self-efficacy, among others, I have used them in context while discussing the field text. Hereunder, I have outlined some major theoretical constructs guiding this study.

Representation and Participation

Though stemmed from women's under-representation and tokenistic participation in politics and development, these concepts are crucial to understanding the dynamics of women engagement in Nepali community school governance – which is basically a political process. As such, arguments for ensuring equal representation and 'meaningful' participation of women in politics, bureaucracy, and other social institutions are on a high note. Some argue for a need to have a certain number or ratio of women representatives (descriptive representation or critical mass) (e.g. Agarwal, 2015; Begum, 2007; Torchia et al., 2010), while others emphasise increased diversity and 'critical actors' (irrespective of gender or a few women office bearers who can actively push issues of gender-equality (substantive representation) (e.g. Bratton, 2005; Childs & Krook, 2009; Weldon, 2002).

One of the seminal works in the literature on representation is that of Pitkin (1967). In *The Concept of Representation*, she defines representation as an activity of making citizens' voices appear in policy-making processes. As such, to prevail citizen's voices in a democratic society, citizens must elect representatives who act in

their interests (Pitkin, 1967). She has also identified four types of representation as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Types of Representation

Type of Representation	Explanation
Formalistic	Initial giving of authority
Symbolic	Based upon the notion that a representative 'stands for' the thing they represent, it does not matter whether the representative is a man or a woman
Descriptive' (or characteristic)	The extent to which a representative resembles (or shares the characteristics of) those being represented (in terms of age, sex, gender, social class, religion, ethnicity, etc.), and that the representatives should be drawn from the group they are elected to represent and that they should share its characteristics – age, sex, gender, social class, religion, ethnicity, etc.
Substantive	'Acting for' and being accountable to the represented

(Adapted from Pitkin, 1972, p. 209)

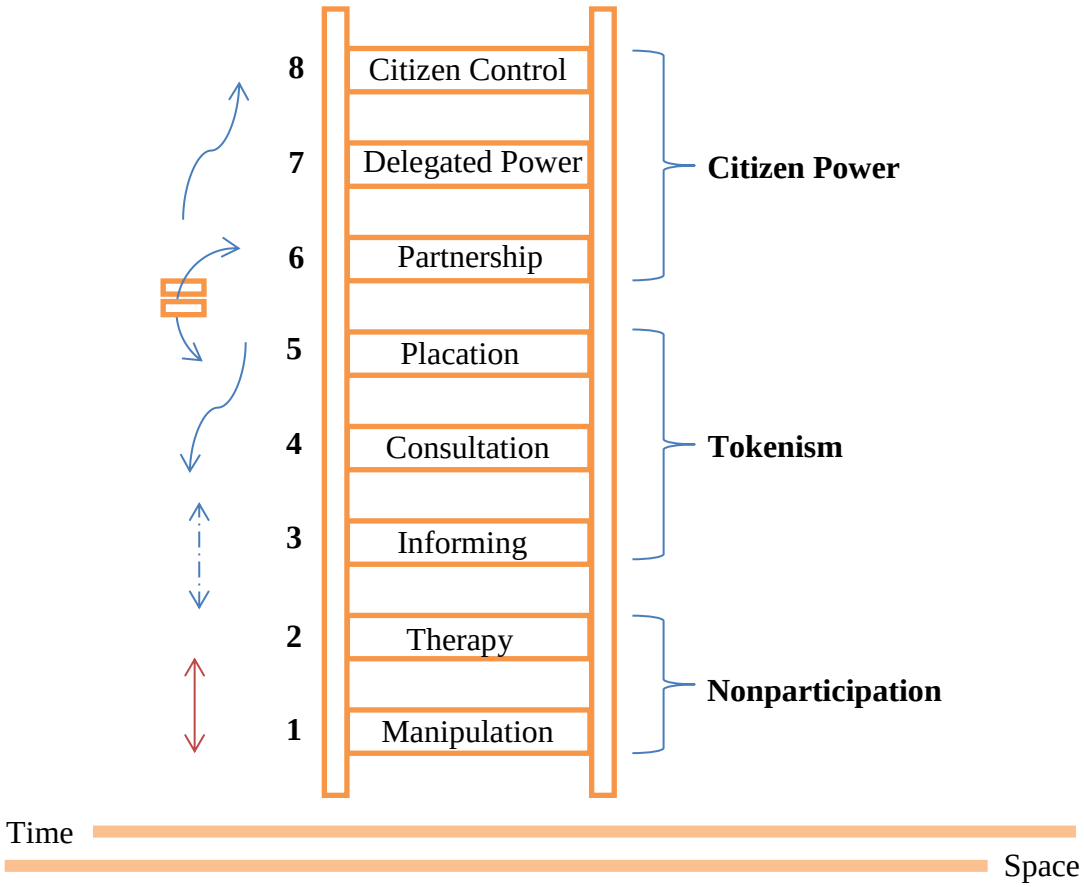
Among these four types, descriptive and substantive have been in constant debate in later works. The concept 'descriptive representation' focuses on minority empowerment through ensuring representatives mirroring demographic characteristics of those represented, whereas the concept 'substantive representation' focuses on ideological position and demands the representatives to "do what the citizens want" (Powell, 2004, p. 91). In gender studies, the argument of 'overlooked interests' is popular, according to which "male representatives are not always aware of how public policies affect female citizens" (Dovi, 2007, p. 309). Thus, it calls for at least descriptive representation of women; however, "descriptive representation is not achieved by the admission of a token woman" (Campbell et al., 2010, p. 173). Moreover, the theory of 'politics of presence' (Phillips, 1995) speaks for formalistic

representation, which asserts that "what has to be represented (women's interests) results from the diversified life experiences of different groups of women" (Celis, 2006, p. 87). In the case of school governance, these types create an opportunity to reflect upon the role that a specific actor plays in negotiations.

Another term associated with representation is participation. In everyday tongue, representation is a state or action of representing someone or a group, whereas participation is a process or action of getting engaged in decision-making. Here I resort to the seminal authors on participation. Arnstein's (1969) work is considered epoch-making in the discourse of participation. She has developed a ladder of citizen participation (Figure 1) in which she presents eight steps, which explain the extent of citizen participation and the level of power and authority they can exercise to influence the process and outcomes. Though she presents in the form of steps or rungs of the ladder, as such, one needs to climb up the ladder from the ground to the top; all individuals do not necessarily need to climb that way; some may get to any rung at any time based on who they are and where they are. Moreover, the ladder overlooks the barriers to move from one level to the next (Ghulam, 2014). As such, the ladder may be understood as indicative and that at the grassroots level, women may face many more rungs and that moving up and down the rungs may be comparatively easier for some and more difficult for others given their intersecting social roles. Moreover, a person might be at the upper level of the ladder in one situation (time and space) and at the lower level in some other situation (time and space) at the same time.

Figure 1

Pathways of Engagement Along the Ladder of Citizen Participation



(Adapted from Arnstein, 1969, p. 217)

For Arnstein, the two rungs at the bottom describe the level of 'non-participation'. Rungs 3, 4 and 5 progress to levels of 'tokenism', which allow the marginalised to have a voice, yet this stage does not ensure that their voices are really heard by the more powerful members. Moving up the ladder are levels of citizen power with increasing degrees of decision-making influence (Hedström & Smith, 2013). At rung 6, we can imagine the scenario for partnership between women and men to the decisions on gender reforms which enables women to engage in a trade-off with men. The topmost rungs (7 and 8) mean that women, other gender minority and marginalised citizens can enjoy the full managerial power and thereby influence the majority of decisions (Hedström & Smith, 2013). However, the idea of 'delegation'

(rung 7) also needs to be critically examined since it is not considered as a real power transfer in the literature of decentralization. In fact, delegation is just a temporary arrangement as wished by the 'power giver', which can be taken back at any time. Therefore, delegated power does not necessarily mean citizen power.

Building on Arnstein's work, later scholars have discussed different typologies, models and levels of participation. Richardson (1983), for example, discussed two types of participation (viz. direct and indirect), where Lupton et al. (1998) added 'mediated' to this typology (as cited in Bochel, 2016). In the direct form of participation, team members engage in a face-to-face discussion with each other while decision-making, whereas indirect participation occurs when people from outside the team try to influence the decision-making process through pressure groups. Similarly, mediated participation is "where citizens' views are represented to decision-makers by others" (Lupton et al., 1998, as cited in Bochel, 2016, p. 11). A cousin term for mediated participation could be 'participation by proxy' (Jayal, 2006) - the concept of a team member (usually a woman) with only symbolic power, and in the name of the team member, somebody else, especially her husband or another male family member, influences the decision-making. This idea is equivalent to Panday's (2008) argument of 'representation without participation', which means presence or attendance is not equal to voice and participation.

White (1996) offers four forms of participation where each form has different functions. In her typology of participation (Table 2), she argues more powerful actors and less powerful ones have different perceptions and interests (Ghulam, 2014). As such, her typology can help explore the hidden agenda and the dynamic relationships between more and less powerful actors and how their interaction and negotiation shape decisions.

Table 2

A Typology of Interests

Nominal	Legitimation – to show they are doing something	Inclusion – to retain some access to potential benefits	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency – to limit funders' input, draw on community contributions and make projects more cost-effective	Cost – of time spent on project-related labour and other activities	As a means to achieving cost-effectiveness and local facilities
Representative	Sustainability – to avoid creating dependency	Leverage – to influence the shape the project takes and its management	To give people a voice in determining their own development
Transformative	Empowerment – to enable people to make their own decisions, work out what to do and take action	Empowerment – to be able to decide and act for themselves	As a means, a continuing dynamic

(adapted from White, 1996, as cited in Cornwall, 2008, p. 273)

Critical Mass

Often used in both the discussion of representation and participation is the theory of critical mass. The initiation of the discourse on 'critical mass' can be traced back to Kanter (1977a, 1977b) and Dahlerup (1988), who observe women's experiences in the corporate and political spheres, respectively. Both authors, being keen on how women respond to the dynamics of marginalisation in minority situations, speculate how these experiences may change if the number of women increases (Childs & Krook, 2008). This very idea of increasing the number of women form the crux of the critical mass concept.

Observing minority women's token status in men dominated organizations, the idea of 'critical mass' was discussed by Kanter (1977a) and Dahlerup (1988), and this idea is further backed by policy interventions as reservation or quota to increase the representation of women and other marginalised groups in politics and public institutions. Critical mass, in principle, refers to the situation where a minority group needs to reach a certain size to influence group decisions (Konrad et al., 2008). In other words, this theory shows that the influence of a group becomes more pronounced only when critical mass is reached (Torchia et al., 2010). Studying the case of forest governance in Nepal and India, Agarwal (2015) claims that a critical mass of women, of around a third of the total membership, on (forest governance) committees are needed to ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making. The idea argues that relative numbers of socio-culturally marginalised groups are 'critical in shaping interaction dynamics' in organizations, especially in favour of their groups. Alternatively, women can impact above and beyond their token status if they form alliances with one another despite their small numbers (Childs & Krook, 2008, p. 731). Therefore, having an increased number of women in general organizations is important to give them the power of voice and action. Though critical mass or reservation quota has increased the number of women in South Asian politics, it has not ensured their genuine participation (Ara & Northcote, 2020; Pandey, 2016; Panday, 2008, P. Rai, 2017; S. M. Rai, 2012), and perhaps quotas need a longer time to work (Iyer, 2019) or perhaps it works better in non-political contexts than in political contexts.

Stepping on the critical mass, Nepal's community Forestry programme (an amendment to the Community Forest programme's operational guidelines in 2009) has set 50 percent as the minimum threshold for female representation in the

Executive Committee of the Forestry User Groups (Leone, 2019). Leone (2019) further claims that the new provision has actually increased women's participation within the Executive Committees of Forestry User Groups and increased overall effectiveness. Several studies on Nepal and India's forestry sector reveal that groups with more women in the Executive Committees exhibit improvements in forest conditions (Agarwal, 2009; Leone, 2019).

Against the popular critical mass claim that 30 per cent would be a crucial cut-off point (Dahlerup, 1988) for gauging the impact of women in politics ('critical mass' is identified at levels ranging from 10 per cent to 40 per cent), scholars tend to claim that increased presence of women in legislatures does not always translate into women-friendly policy outcomes (Childs & Krook, 2008, p. 632). Though scholars these days strongly criticise the idea of numerical representation of women, they agree that increased numbers will facilitate coalitions among women, and it forms a potential for 'critical acts' at all levels of descriptive representation (Childs & Krook, 2008). Of late, scholars and advocates have shifted their focus on 'critical actors' who examine the roles of women (and men) who seek to represent women substantively as a group (Childs & Krook, 2009; Tinker, 2004; Weldon, 2002).

Community participation in school governance and the processes of school-related decision-making is an essential issue in the education reform process. These days, "different facets of participation in everyday life in school are reconstructed via working out different features of participation, namely participation as handing over responsibility, enhancing and trigging conditions for participation, forms of participation, and finally consequences of participation" (Gastager et al., 2010, p. 1). The idea of participation focuses on ensuring the opportunity for different stakeholders, including parents and students, on being involved in school governance

(Lewis & Naidoo, 2007, p. 147). According to Wadesango (2012), "... greater local participation will improve the relevance, quality and accountability of schools" (p. 361). Wider public participation in decision-making is considered to give a positive vibe that will improve schools. And thus, all stakeholders need to be given a chance to have a say in the running of the school. While unfolding representation and participation, I construed that three questions are pertinent in participation: who the participants are or who participates, where they participate (decision making space, i.e. these spaces could be SMC meetings, school compound or even local public spaces where negotiations are held between members), and how they participate (presence, voice and influence).

The justification for community participation in school governance is the notion that all stakeholders can actively take part in decisions that affect their interests (Lewis & Naidoo, 2007, p. 151). However, in practice, the participation, especially of parents and learners, in school decision making is less clear, ranging from exclusion to controlled participation (p. 151). Unlike the policy provisions of involving parents and other stakeholders in educational decision making, I have observed that the practices at the ground level in Nepal often vary. This may be because parents and learners (and to an extent even teachers) may only be involved in decision making in areas that are relatively peripheral to the actual functioning of school (p. 151). Very often, I have observed the domination, which Gramsci (1971) calls hegemony, of one set of ideas or group (men and 'upper' caste) over another (women and 'lower' caste) in our society. In this study context, I have conceptualised it as a process whereby one group ('upper' caste, elite, men) in the SMC exerts leadership over others, especially women and the silenced ones – and often singlehandedly makes decisions. However, some are doubtful about the effectiveness of the participatory approach in that a

participatory process may merely provide opportunities for the more powerful and serve to maintain exploitation and exclusion (Hildyard et al., 2001). Sometimes, less powerful are also included so that the few powerful can dominate the decision making. Moreover, policies of social inclusion (Asian Development Bank, 2010), such as reservation, affirmative action quota, and proportional representation, to address the exclusion of systematically and historically disadvantaged groups have given some hope to the excluded groups (Gurung, 2009; Prasai, 2016). Seemingly, this is a reality in many Nepali public institutions as well. However, we cannot state this to be conclusive until rigorous research is conducted.

Nepal's SMC formation policy seems to confirm that when at least three women are on the board, they will reach "critical mass" – meaning they can influence the content and process of school governance discussions to a greater extent (Yang et al., 2019). Kanel (2014) argues 'critical mass' is not sufficient to influence the culture of male-dominated political institutions in Nepal. Therefore, apart from the critical mass, who are these masses, what is their formal power in the committee, what informal roles they can play in the committee will play a crucial role in decision-making. Therefore, rather than looking only at the number of women on board, it is also important to see how they contribute to decision-making and what contributes to their power, voice, and authority. This research is geared towards filling this gap at a micro-level.

Feminist Standpoint

Feminist standpoint theory, rooted in Marxist ideology, specifically refers to the notion that the working class's (marginalised group) unique standpoints differ from that of the ruling class (mainstream dominant class) (O'Leary, 2016). A product of the early 1970s, this theory critiques that the dominant group often fails to

recognise or understand the subordinate group's perspective (Pandey, 2016). Feminist standpoint theory problematises the intersection of everyday practices of power and the production of knowledge (Van der Tuin, 2016, p. 1). Harding (2004) defines this theory as "a feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power" (p. 1). Therefore, it brings into light the knowledge arising from women's experiences (O'Leary, 2016). As such, this perspective is important to mainstream the knowledge, skill and experiences of women and marginalised groups because they are often disregarded. Pandey (2016) further asserts that there are multiple feminist standpoints; however, all believe in diversity among women, their experiences and knowledge vary due to unique social, political and economic backgrounds. This idea corroborates with the third wave feminism that emerged in the mid-1990s – which advocates the need to accommodate diversity within the ambient of mainstreaming gender equality and the changing nature of society (Swirsky & Angelone, 2016).

I am also interested in exploring the power dynamics in school governance that emanates from gender. Maybe, I am developing my own male feminist standpoint. Harding argues that men can also contribute to knowledge by creating their male feminist standpoints, particularly where males struggle against male dominance and supremacy (Harding, 1998). In trying to understand women SMC members' perspectives regarding their roles and experiences in local rural school management, I reckoned that the lens of feminist standpoint is more plausible than others. This is because the feminist standpoint theory begins from the perspectives of women (Smith, 1978) and takes into account the role that gender and culture play in women's everyday life experiences. Moreover, as Harding (1987) argues, women's experiences can provide "more complete and less distorted knowledge claims" (p.

184). This holds true in exploring women's issues and experiences. Nightingale (2002) has already applied this lens to explore issues of women forest users in Nepal. Therefore, adopting this perspective is important to understand women SMC members' experiences of participating in school governance and the power dynamics thereof through their personal narratives and standpoints.

Intersectionality and Gender Quota

Besides the above key constructs, the idea of 'intersectionality' and 'gender quota' also interplay in discussing the findings of this study. The basic idea of intersectionality is that inequality or exclusion is intersectional given that individuals are diverse and identify as part of different groups. Thus, it highlights how intersecting social positions result in distinctive social contexts that differentiate social groups' life experiences and participation pathways. Intersectionality holds that different human characteristics and social roles such as gender, class, and social positions cannot stand in isolation but form complex interactions (Stephanie, 2018) and that understanding these interactions is a vital part of understanding human experiences (Gouws, 2017). "Women have unique experiences because of their race, class, religion, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity" (Huber, 2017, para. 1). The intersectional (feminist) framework provides an insight into how multiple systems of oppression interrelate and affect women (Gouws, 2017). Therefore, an intersectional perspective calls into question the unitary approach to examining women's experiences based on gender (category) and recognises how other unequal social relations that are due to their race, ethnicity, caste, class, age, ability/disability, religion, indigenousness, etc. affect women in different ways (Walby et al., 2012). As such, I am aware of allowing multi-stranded social relationships (Davies, 2008) to

interplay in how one actor perceives and treats other actors and how this shapes their position in decision-making.

Quotas for women entail that women must constitute a certain number or percentage of the members of a body, whether it is a candidate list, a parliamentary assembly, a committee, or a government (Dahlerup, 2006). As such, it is considered a measure to address the underrepresentation of women in public institutions. The Constitutional provision of gender-based affirmative action and reservation quota system has increased women's presence in politics and public institutions. The provision of having at least three women in SMC is also viewed as a result of the women quota in public institutions. Given the rise of the number of women parliamentarians in the last decade, Nepal's Constitution is considered one of the most politically progressive in Asia (Uehara, 2019). Therefore, gender quota has improved women's representation in politics, civil service and social institutions. Again, debates on competency and substantive participation (having voice) after their representation are ongoing (Baruah & Reyes, 2017). In fact, this thesis has addressed similar questions from micro-level school-based practices.

Empirical Work on Women's Participation in Governance

Some of the available empirical works that were accessible to me have been reviewed to develop my idea on what has already been explored about women's participation in governance. Some studies in the Nepali context highlight the increasing presence of women in public spaces in the last two decades. Though studies matching with the scope of my study are not available, I tried to draw some thematic as well as methodological ideas from the available studies on governance and women participation.

As I searched for some relevant literature, the one very close to the theme of school governance was one by Shah (2016). He studied school governance in Nepal, analysing the role of the SMC in quality education. Though the focus of his study was quality education, the context (urban and rural schools from Nawalparasi and Rupandehi districts) was related to my research site (rural school from Gandaki province). Methodologically, his study was a comparative case study; mine is an ethnographic inquiry focusing on a single case school. His research revealed that the sense of community ownership of the school, SMC's accountability towards school, and participation of the local community in the decision-making process of school management were higher in the rural schools. This finding also encouraged me to explore further governance dynamics (especially, women's participation) in a rural school SMC.

Another study that I could access was by J. Parajuli (2018), which has some similarities with my study in terms of touching upon women's participation. In fact, Parajuli studied women's participation in local election 2017 based on a case study in Pokhara Lekhnath Metropolitan City, in Gandaki Province, the same geographic location as my study site with a difference of urbanity vs rurality. Her study showed that despite enabling provisions for women's participation in politics, women faced several challenges like lack of educational qualification, intra-party discrimination against women, family barriers and lack of willpower on the part of women themselves. The learning from this study could inform my study as well – whether enabling conditions have really supported women to come up and participate in public institution governance in rural contexts. She also put forward some ways to enhance women's agency and participation in local politics. Her study, however, does not explore the motivation and drives of the selected women to be in politics. Though

people's interest in participating in larger politics and institutional decision-making might be different, a comparison could have been made to portray the scene.

A study conducted by Komatsu (2012) in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina examined school governance practice in a post-conflict society where a decentralised school governance system had been introduced to increase trust among different ethnic groups and between civilians and public institutions. Applying a mixed-methods approach, his study focused on school professionals' participatory democratic accountability and examined the school leaders' perceptions regarding school board influence in social cohesion areas, their interactions with school boards, and their accountability to the school-based governing body. This way, his study was focused on exploring some dimensions of school governance and hence partly informed my study, especially on participatory accountability. His study revealed that school boards did not appear to be actively engaged in the deliberative process to promote social cohesion policies and practices. As such, this could be relatable to the Nepali school governance scenario – whether SMCs are encouraging larger parental participation and school community engagement.

On the theme of water resource management in Sudurpaschim Province, Shrestha and Clement's (2018) study explored women's participation in Doti and Kailai districts. They focused on changing rural norms and practices in the villages that govern gender relations and shape women's capabilities in local water resource user groups. Applying capabilities framework and qualitative research tools, their study revealed that gender norms are key to shaping water inequities at various intersections such as caste, class, age, disability, location, etc. Their study revealed that despite men's seasonal migration for work, the left-behind women's role in decisions related to water management was almost nil. As such, women's access to

water was defined by their relation to men relatives. This study could be related to my study given the similar kinds of a scenario of more men outmigration from the village. Another study that also talks about women's participation in community institutions was by Agarwal (2010), which studies community forestry institutions in India and Nepal. This study has underscored that women are to be included in governance structures, arguing that the number of women in a decision-making body is positively correlated with a greater likelihood of women empowerment. This could be related to the increasing women's presence in public institutions in Nepal as well. Agarwal not only underscored the role of critical mass to make women's voice count but also equally analysed other aspects, especially women's economic class, that matters in women's participation. This study hinted at using an intersection perspective to analyse women's participation since it is not merely gender but other intersecting roles and identifies also affect women's position and voice.

Regarding women's participation in community forestry, Giri (2009) study, using a multiple case study design and based on forestry in the mid-hills of Nepal, explored two Community Forestry User Groups, each from Kavre and Ramechhap districts. She examined how the social context affected women's participation in community forest management. Her study revealed that with more men's outmigration, women's participation in community forest management has increased, which was not the case in Shrestha and Clement's (2018) study in Sudurpaschim Province. Nevertheless, Giri's study informed me to explore and understand women's participation as a transformative process that is adaptive and responsive to the changing social context. Extending Giri's (2009) work, Giri and Darnhofer (2010a) studied women's participation in two community forest user groups in Ramechhap district. This study critiqued the conventional static view of how and why women

were marginalised in the decision-making process. Moreover, their study revealed that women were widening their participation in decision making and becoming increasingly active agents in community forest management. This way, women's voices were being heard in Nepal. One important finding of their study was that "externally induced changes in the structure such as quotas for women in the Executive Committee are important supportive measures to create an institutionalised space for women's participation" (p. 1227). Their study suggested that the role of community forests user groups needed to be extended from understanding only as a forest management institution to an empowerment forum for a social process offering both men and women the opportunity to identify their common agenda and interests.

Similarly, another study by the same authors (Giri & Darnhofer, 2010b) reemphasised women's active participation in the community forestry programme in Nepal. The study indicated that men's outmigration had provided a "window of opportunity" to increase women's participation; however, their participation was sometimes determined by the family composition – if there was no adult man in the household, women would secure their participation in forest decisions. This study also informed me to look at the family composition and women's position and role performance in other social settings that have a direct bearing on how they perform in school governance.

Research Gap

Many studies have been conducted on women's participation in politics (national parliaments to local governments), and the international community has been showing great concern about empowering women. These studies have noted that inadequate spaces have been created in political affairs/leadership for women. Likewise, studies on women's participation in forestry governance, water governance,

etc., are also available in the literature; however, there is a dearth of similar studies in the context of school governance in Nepal. Likewise, studies on school management are abundant, especially in relation to head teachers' leadership and accountability; however, gendered dimensions of school governance have not been explored in the Nepali community school context thus far. Moreover, the barriers to women's participation and inclusion in different social institutions are overly studied, which have mostly focused on how and why women are marginalised; however, the drivers for women's inclusion and participation in school governance is rarely considered.

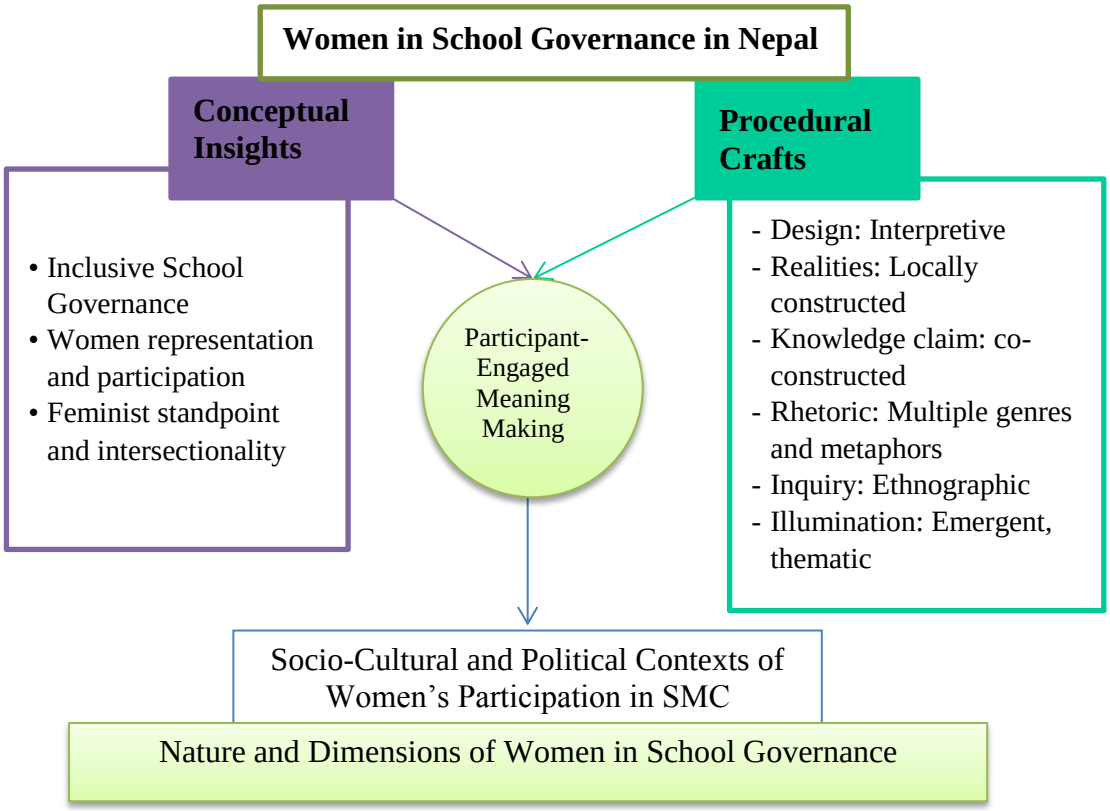
This study responds to the gap in evidence on the extent and nature of women's participation by asking how 'critical mass' of women is working in school management and by exploring enabling conditions on their effective participation. Moreover, this study takes into account the motivations, pushing factors and enabling conditions for women's presence in school governance in the context of rural Nepal. In addition, studies have explored the exclusionary practices (challenges of women in decision-making and actively contributing to organizational goals), especially in men-dominated organizations. However, they have not adequately addressed how the critical mass has enabled women to create their space in such organizations as schools. Grippingly, who brings the issue of gender is also important. Most of the studies on women's participation and representation in governance were noted to have been conducted by women. Only a few studies were conducted by a male researcher in this area. Therefore, this study also tries to minimise these gaps in the literature.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study has been designed in light of the conceptual underpinnings informing this study vis-à-vis the research approach adopted to undertake this research journey. Some of the key conceptual insights that guided this study included: inclusive school governance discourse, women representation and participation in social institutions, feminist standpoint and intersectionality perspectives. Likewise, the research approach covered aspects like the interpretive research design, ethnographic method of inquiry, co-construction of knowledge based on local realities and experiences as lived and held by women SMC members. Drawing field texts and narratives from SMC members of a rural secondary community school, I employed a participant-engaged meaning-making process to derive the first order (descriptive) meanings, which were further analysed and discussed with my critical observations, readings, and reflections binding with some conceptual or theoretical underpinnings at the higher level. By exploring the socio-cultural and political contexts of women's participation in school governance, I further discussed the nature and dimensions of inclusive school governance in the rural Nepali community school context. Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework in a schematic way.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Chapter Essence and Changeover

In this chapter, I have conceptualised and developed my understanding of some of the key ideas, constructs and theoretical perspectives pertinent to researching women's participation in school governance. Among others, I have conceptualised inclusive school governance as the inclusion of the school community in decisions affecting their children's lives and taking part in implementing such decisions and promoting school-community collaborations. Likewise, I also deliberated on the dynamics of gender and power in Nepali society, understanding of which would be essential to unfold women SMC members' experiences and dilemmas. Moreover, I expounded and contextualised some theoretical ideas such as representation and participation, critical mass, feminist standpoint and intersectionality. Then, I examined the research gap and indicated the need for this study by making a cursory

review of the extant empirical studies on women's participation in politics and public institution governance, both in the local as well as international contexts. After that, by reflecting on the conceptual insights and recollecting the working methodology of the study, I developed a conceptual framework for the study.

Having discussed some conceptual insights that guided this study, it is time for me to make a changeover – indicate to my readers what is coming up. As also indicated in the conceptual framework, besides the conceptual insights, the doing of research (i.e. how I conducted the fieldwork) is important for academic research to take a complete shape. Therefore, in the next chapter, I highlight the workflow of my research by unfolding and contextualising some methodological concepts, research credibility, and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER III

CONNECTING THE DOTS … OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This chapter presents a description of the methodological approach that allowed me to answer the three research questions posed in Chapter I. More specifically, this chapter presented how I engaged myself with the research participants during the fieldwork of this study, how I made the meanings (at different levels) of the field texts and discussed the challenges involved, my positionality and roles as an ethnographer. To further develop this chapter, I first discussed the research design, followed by the method of inquiry and details of the field and participants. Then, I discussed the meaning-making process and my positionality in the conduct of this research. Finally, I discussed the rigour and ethical considerations that were taken care of in this study.

Interpretive Orientation

As this study aimed at uncovering the issues that lie at the heart of school governance at the local level in a context-specific manner, the study was closer to the interpretative school of social science. Therefore, governed by its exploratory nature, the research was framed within the interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Moreover, this paradigm enabled me to interpret the diverse experiences of participants (especially women SMC members) by studying things in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) - allowing for an in-depth investigation of women's lives, garnered through their own descriptions and accounts. Through this research, I have attempted to understand women's participation in school governance through the meanings the school stakeholders attached to them.

By working under the interpretive paradigm, I tried to explore the essence of school stakeholders' understanding of the realities of inclusive school governance as practised, experienced and understood by the participants in their own school context. As such, I found socially and experientially based, person-specific, multiple and fluid realities (Lincoln et al., 2018) of the participants in regards to their experiences and expectations. Therefore, realities depend on the individuals' real-world experiences, knowledge and contexts. Thus, the participants' locally constructed realities – both 'what is (inclusive school governance)' and 'what it means to be (governed)' formed my philosophical realities.

Similarly, while engaging with the participants in understanding the meanings of their perspectives, experiences and knowledge, we co-created multiple claims about knowledge. Therefore, I adopted a subjective knowledge claim concerning what I can know about participants' perspectives and how I can know them (Willis, 2007, p. 10) through a dialogical process. The dialogical social inquiry process (DeFehr, 2017; Dhakal, 2019b) allowed me to engage with the participants actively and give space for the co-creation of meanings through self-reflection, interaction, and contemplation. I believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world, and thus understanding of life can emerge from people's life experiences. This way, knowledge construction in this study was intersubjective (Fabian, 2014; Taylor & Medina, 2011), which allowed me to build rich local understandings of the life-world experiences of the school stakeholders. For me, research is for perspective-seeking, and thus I tried to understand their experiences from the participants' point of view. Since no two school contexts face the same challenges and adopt the exact strategies to cope with them, meaning-making cannot be an objective exercise. Due considerations were given to understand the

participants' local values, individual experiences, and socio-political context. Therefore, knowledge was “idiographic and relative to the situations and persons from which it emerged” (Hiller, 2016, p. 103). This resulted in bringing out narratives that were context-specific and not universal (not generalizable).

I believe that my own and participants’ values are integral to the research process, and thus they have been well-reflected in the study. I acknowledge that my own socio-cultural values could sometimes override the participants’ experiences; however, I essentially ensured that participants’ values were respected, represented and reported. Therefore, valuing the voice of the participants and their socio-cultural situatedness remained a cornerstone of the research process.

From the stylistics and rhetorical perspective, interpretive researchers use diverse logics, genres and metaphors “in ‘presenting’ fieldwork and ‘persuading’ an audience” (Rutten et al., 2013, p. 629). Therefore, I have used multiple genres and logics, as well as creative and expressive ways (Angeles, 2017; Downey, 2019; Kara, 2015; Luitel, 2007; Luitel & Taylor, 2013; Saldaña, 2011) to present, represent and reflect on ethnographic field texts such as expository narratives, vignettes, poetry, dialogues, ethnodrama, episodes, metaphors, among others. The use of such multiple logics and genres helped me capture critical moments in the field and portray the field vividly and realistically (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). Likewise, throughout this thesis, I used a first-person, reflexive and empathic writing style and thus adopted the arts of ‘writing as inquiry’ (Luitel, 2019).

Moreover, I found the use of multiple forms of expressions helpful to illuminate and expand on my field experience (Downey, 2019; Luitel, 2007) and pursue my understanding beyond bounded literalism (Luitel & Taylor, 2013). Therefore, I have utilised my knowledge of literary genres (especially poetry) to be

emotive, expressive, empathetic, and reached a different abstraction level (Koschmann, 1999). Following Davies (2008), I have also used some postmodern techniques to allow a variety of perspectives to interplay through multitextuality (use of multiple textual forms including vignette, poetry, drama, picture, etc.) and multivocality ("providing representational space for the plural and sometimes contradictory narrative voices" (Mizzi, 2010, p. 2) – varying perspectives of SMC men, SMC women, outsider men and women, and also researcher). I further believe the use of multiple genres and logic also added to the aesthetics of my research product, connecting readers with diverse interests.

Method of Inquiry: Ethnography

Based on the nature of my research problem that required me to take part in the social life of people and produce a holistic account of school governance culture, I adopted ethnography – the "study of social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions" (Reeves, Kuper, et al., 2008, p. 512). The ethnographic inquiry focuses on the description and interpretation of cultures across and within societies to understand social phenomena (Atkinson, 2011; Hammersley, 2018). I believed that the interactions that I as a researcher held with the participants or the 'researched' would be able to unearth "situated experiences that create unique forms of voice and agency that are intimately influenced by factors such as politics, economics, power relations and social structure" (Raynsford, 2015, p. 132).

The method involves extensive fieldwork and penetrating acquaintance of a community through engagement into the culture and draws on sustained contact with the research participants within the context of their daily lives (O'Reilly, 2009). Adopting this method enabled me to 'immerse' myself in a social setting and generate a rich understanding of social actions. It helped me capture a detailed description of a

culture sharing group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It also provided me with an opportunity to gather empirical insights into socio-cultural practices which were normally "hidden' from the public gaze" (Reeves, Peller, et al., 2013, p. 1365), following what Van Maanen (2011) calls the "I-witnessing" ideal - meaning its intense reliance on personalised seeing, hearing, experiencing in specific social settings (p. 156). This way, I could understand the insider's perspectives (Fetterman, 2010) by observing them and participating with them, where they would most likely encounter the practices in question. As an ethnographer, I believe rather than *what* I look at, *how* I look at and how I see my own way of seeing and that of others make more sense (Faeta, 2021). Therefore, for me, what defines ethnography is its focus on the detailed study and interpretation of specific local settings and the collecting of empirical evidence through which I could illuminate the way a given social system works.

Box 1

Did I Do Ethnography?

Go out there,
Learn their language
Be with them
Explore cultural nuances and patterns
Heed on what they do and say
And if you know some magic of writing
Weave their stories with a logical thread,
So say, anthropologists and sociologists.

I think I did.
But, did I do ethnography?
Have I now become an ethnographer?
I doubt.

All this seems so dicey: maybe too freakish.
Did I become a 'compromised' researcher?
I cannot say anything definitive.
Nevertheless, I now know, at least,
I encountered ethnographic dilemmas.

(Source: Chapbook, pp. 1-2)

Thus, in this study, I have engaged with a small group of people, observed their activities and styles of engagement, described their sociality, and explored their interests and contributions to the SMC and tried to co-create meanings as lived by the participants primarily through a two-way dialogue process (i.e. *kurakani*) through

which ethnographic knowledge was co-constructed. All this was achieved through my constant engagement with the research participants and their reciprocity and support as accepting me as a well-wisher of the school community. I, however, wonder whether what I have done essentially captures what ethnography is and whether by doing what I have done, I could become an ethnographer. I reflect on this dilemma in my reflective poem given in Box 1.

Context and Participants

I was very careful about the selection of a study site in which to "hang around" (Walford, 2018, para. 7). It had been almost two decades since I left a community school in a rural setting (where I completed my School Leaving Certificate examination) and thus had been extensively engaged in institutional school as a teacher and in many community schools in Kathmandu valley as a teacher trainer and a researcher. However, I was sadly missing a rural community school context. And therefore, I was interested in conducting my doctoral research in a rural school setting.

Initially, I was thinking of selecting a school based on my familiarity with the place and people, not necessarily with the participants. However, I sensed that going to a new site would be more rewarding (interesting, challenging and extending relationships) – which would also help neutralise potential bias as a native insider. Therefore, I opted to go not to my village but to an entirely new village. So I decided to go to some districts in Gandaki Province (I was originally from Province 1 and have been working in Bagmati Province, and going to Gandaki province would be a somewhat new experience). I initially consulted with some of my friends who were working in the education authorities to identify some rural areas where community schools are comparatively doing better. While discussing with an Education Officer in

Kaski, he shared with me the stories of three schools: two in Kaski and one in Syangja. I visited all three schools to have an initial exploration of the situatedness and their overall track of progress. While doing such scrutiny, I learned that one school in Kaski was in the Metropolitan city area, and thus I opted this out. Likewise, the school in Syangja was a basic school; besides, the journey would take much time. And finally, the second school in Kaski was some 20 km away from district headquarters and was running up to grade 12. As per my initial discussion with a local political cadre (in early 2016), who in fact gave me a lift in his car from the district headquarter to the school, the school was doing 'quite better in the last five-seven years'. He even helped me as a gatekeeper to reach the school headteacher and the SMC Chair. Interestingly, he was elected by mere 14 votes win in the local election in 2017 and became the Ward Chair where the school was situated. When I held conversations with the SMC Chair and the headteacher, I could sense a kind of friendly and welcoming gesture in their decorum, and they openly shared their school history. The SMC Chair gave credit to the new headteacher, whereas the HT acknowledged the contribution of the local community and the staff for school success thus far. Right from returning to the school, I felt a sense of attachment and felt like going and revisited the school in two weeks. This time, I also discussed with some teachers, students and community people and decided to start my study right from that school. I was also thinking of selecting one school from Kathmandu and make a comparative case study. However, for lack of time to engage substantially in two schools, I dropped the idea of the urban school in consultation with my supervisor.

As such, the study was conducted in a secondary school (Phewa Model Community School [pseudonym]) in Phewa Rural Municipality (pseudonym) in

Gandaki Province, a one-hour ride from the Province Headquarters. The school is considered a turn-around school (in the last ten years), especially with the school leadership change and community support – which the local elected representatives and the then-District Education Officials agreed, besides the claim of the school teachers and some local community members. The local community considered it a turn-around school for two reasons: a) student pass rates in SLC/SEE [3] (i.e., grade 10), and +2 (i.e. grade 12); and b) quality of education, especially in terms of English medium of instruction – which was incrementally adopted from the primary level. The earlier SMC Chair considered the role of the community in filling the vacant teachers' quota with *nijishrot*[4] teachers, who could teach in the English medium. It means community people agreed to give some yearly donations to school (since fees could not be raised in a community school as per the government rules) to cover the salary of the teachers appointed in the private resource.

The whole village (Ward – 2 of Phewa Rural Community) is called Himpakha (pseudonym), which is dominantly a Gurung community, whereas the smaller school community, called Sundargaun (pseudonym), is a mixed community. Again, the specific area where the school is located is called *Hariyali Tol* (pseudonym), which comprises a Bahun (everyday tongue for Brahmin caste group) dominant community. Himpakha village comprises around 300 households (the whole ward -2 of Phewa Rural Municipality comprises around 850 households, as per the Chairperson of the ward). Himpakha comprises mostly the Gurung community having around 40 percent Gurung, followed by 30 percent Brahmin /Kshatriya, 10 percent Magar, 5 percent

[3] SLC (School Leaving Certificate) / SEE (Secondary Education Examination) are the terms used to refer to the grade 10 completion national level examinations (i.e. school leaving qualifications); earlier than 2017, it was called SLC, which was later termed as SEE in 2017 following the new Education Act 2016. With the new education act having been implemented, now SLC examinations are held at the end of grade 12, which were earlier popularly called +2 or higher secondary level examinations).

[4] managed with private resource of the school

each of *Damai/Dholi* and *Kaami*, and 10 percent other households. Overall, the population of Himpakha village comprises 55% female and 45% male. Still, as per the Ward Chair, the real dwelling population at present comprises 65% female and 35% male since many men are abroad (mostly Gurungs are in relatively higher-paying jobs, especially in the UK or Indian army, and other groups are in the gulf).

The surrounding community of the school, called Sundargaun (pseudonym), is a mixed community with around 80 households (having a similar number of Brahmin /Kshatriya, and Gurung households, followed by Damai/Kami, Magar, Thakali, Newar, and others). However, the smaller community adjacent to the school, *Hariyali Tol*, is Brahmin dominant (comprising 5 Brahmin, 2 Gurung, 1 Kshatriya, 2 Damai, 2 Magar, 1 Newar, 1 Kaami families). The whole school community is influenced by the Gurung culture, even Brahmin/Kshatriya and other caste groups largely accepting the Gurung culture besides also having their own. The Gurungs culturally follow Tibetan Buddhism but also observe major Hindu festivals. Likewise, irrespective of the caste group or major religious orientation, the whole community celebrates the popular Gurung festivals of *Losar*[5] and enjoys *Ghatu naach*[6]. The majority of the people in the surrounding work on their farm; many men also work in the small scale cutter industry (cutting stones to make slates and tiles, which are mostly used on the outer walls of buildings). Women normally work on the farm, fetch grass, fodder and firewood from a nearby forest (which is around 2.5-4 km one way) and engage largely in household chores. Many Gurung and Newar women from low to middle-income families also run local hotels – mostly serving *chhyang* (local wine made either of millet or rice), masu (any meat item) and other general snacks. Very few women,

[5] Losar (also written Lhosar) is a popular festival among the Gurung, Tamang and Sherpa communities. Losar means a new year. There are different types of Losar (falling on different dates) celebrated by these communities.

[6] A popular dance ritual of the Gurungs, also culturally shared by Magar and Dura community in Gandaki Province.

including Kshatriya/ Brahmins, are employed in formal jobs. Some travel to the district headquarters (normally a one-hour ride one way) for a job or business daily.

Coming to school, most of the teachers and the School Management Committee and Parent-Teacher Association members are Brahmin; most of them also shared the same surname. Some non- Brahmins also consider it a legacy of Brahmin's grandparents' generation who constructed the school in their private land. Later, other caste groups also contributed to extending the school compound and building though. In the following table, I have presented the number of school governance committee (SMC and PTA) members in terms of ethnicity and gender.

Table 3

Ethnicity and Gender of School Governance Bodies' Members

Committees	**Men**	**Women**
SMC	Brahmin (4)	Brahmin (1)
(Led by a Brahmin man)	Gurung (1)	Dasnami/Sanyasi[7](1)
	Newar (1)	Gurung (1)
PTA	Kshtriya/ Brahmin (4)	Gurung (2)
(Led by a Brahmin man)	Gurung (2)	Kaami (1)
	Magar (1)	
	Damai (1)	

An interesting scenario, I, as an outsider, could observe that some parents, mostly men, including non-Gurungs, visiting school were wearing traditional Gurung dresses. A more interesting scenario was that even the Brahmins and other non-Gurungs were commonly found wearing Gurung dresses, especially *Bhangra*[8], *Patuka* (cloth belt) and *Kachhad*[9] by men (however, non-Gurung women wearing typical *ghalek*[10] and *gunyu*[11] was occasional) – while at home, going out for work or visiting

[7] A sub-caste within Hill Brahmin / Kshatriya (as per Nepal census). According to the participant, they also belong to the Khas community, but are distinct from Brahmin / Kshatriya because although they largely practise Hinduism (and animism), their men do not wear *janai* (a sacred thread) and they do not cremate their dead, but bury them.

[8] a handmade white cloth tied across the chest and open like a bag in the back (to carry things)

[9] a short sarong/kilt-like dress that wraps around the waist and reaches just below the knees

[10] a typical Gurung woman's cloth hung across from one shoulder to the opposite waist, forming a bag for carrying things

local *chok* (intersection of roads) and bazaar. I happened to be in the field while the Gurung community was celebrating *Tamu Losar*[12]. During that time, I could observe all teachers (male and female) and most of the students wearing traditional Gurung dresses on a school day and observing the festival through some cultural dances and folk music.

In terms of household composition, many of the adult male members were not in the village. Most of the Gurungs were *rekutes (recruited)* as either British *lahure* or *gorkha paltan,* whereas many non-Gurung male adults were in the Gulf countries for employment. Many of the families were having mostly the old generations since some of the women with their children have temporarily shifted to Pokhara to offer their children better education in English medium private schools. A few have also shifted for employment.

In the SMC that I studied, there were six men and three women. Out of the six men, 4 were *Pahade* Brahmins (who also bore the same surname), and two were *janajati* (Gurung and Shrestha) by ethnicity. Likewise, two women belonged to *Pahade Kshetriya/Brahmin* (Arya Khas), and one to *janajati* (Gurung) caste group. Most of the SMC members lived within the village from around 500m to 3 km away. However, the Chair of the SMC lived around 20 km away. Earlier, when he was the HT in the same school, he also lived in the same village. When he got retired, he shifted to a different town, some 20 kilometres away from school.

To seek insider perspectives on women inclusion in the SMC, I deliberately selected all (i.e. three) women SMC members. Besides, an equal number of men comprising the Chair, HT and a member were also selected. Likewise, two

11 (also *lungi* or *phariyā*) a long pleated skirt that is usually dark red in colour.

12 Tamu Losar is the celebration of Gurung's New Year that usually falls on 15 Poush in Nepali calendar (around 30 December). Gurung community celebrates this festival by vising Buddhist shrines, organising rallies in traditional attires and performing some cultural programmes.

community members (a lady with an NGO background and a man who was a local political activist) were also selected to gain a community perspective. The lady, however, dropped her participation and also left the country for further study. However, the man later became Ward Chair in the local level election and a member of the SMC. The rationale for having men in this study was because it was important to see whether men's view towards women has affected women's voice and participation in decision-making. Since SMC is largely a men's space, unless men's perspective on women's presence and participation is welcoming, women's roles and positions are unlikely to change. Therefore, understanding men's views, positions, and voices regarding women's participation and contribution is important.

Table 4

Participant Demographics

S.N.	Participants	Designation	Profile
1	Milan	SMC Chair	Brahmin, man, early 60s, retired headteacher, educated, economically elite, earlier lived 1km away from school, now lives 20 km away from school**)**
2	Rajan	Headteacher	Brahmin, man, early 40s; educated, has good public relations, lives 500 meters away from school
3	Nirmala	SMC Member	Brahmin, woman, mid-80s, economically and educationally disadvantaged, lives 500 meters away from school
4	Tika	SMC Member	Gurung, woman, early 30s; educated, economically elite, lives 3 km away from school
5	Sharmila	SMC Member	Sanyasi (calls her Kshatriya), woman, late 30s; literate, economically disadvantaged, prefers not to speak much; lives 2 km away from school
6	Bibek	SMC Member	Newar, man, mid-40s; educated, economically elite, local vendor/contractor, lives 500 meters away from school
7	Prabhakar	Political Activist (SMC Member)	Gurung, man, early 40s; educated, economically elite, entrepreneur, political cadre (turned leader, become ward chair after 2017 election) lives 500 meters away from school)

I have changed the names to maintain the anonymity of the research site, school and the participants.

Here I present a bit of detailed profile of the research participants.

Nirmala: Nirmala was an elderly woman who was in her mid-80s. I along with four other participants (except the Chair of the SMC, who calls her kaki), occasionally addressed her Hajuraama. She belonged to the Brahmin caste group. Though her family had donated land to build the school, she belonged to the middle class economically. She was educationally disadvantaged as she herself called *unpadh ganwar* (uneducated rustic) though she had completed grade three and could sign her name. She lived with her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. Her own son was also a school teacher but was working in a different district – who would visit the family once a month or so. She lived in her newly built concrete house by the main street just 500 meters away from school. Earlier her old house was almost attached to the school building.

Her husband was one of four key people who contributed to building the school. He had, in fact, donated a patch of land, besides physical labour, to build the school. He also served as an SMC member for almost one term, but unfortunately, he died before he completed the term. Then, from the next SMC, Nirmala took her husband's position in the SMC. She served as a single women member for two terms in the earlier SMC, and during this study, she was accompanying two other women in the SMC. She described herself as '*ghar kurne'* ('looking after home') as she was often alone at home during the day (her daughter-in-law also runs a fancy shop in a shutter-room in the same house).

Tika: Tika was a *Gurung* woman in her early 30s. She was married to the son of the Ex-SMC Chair – a Brahmin. Though she was married to a Brahmin, she

preferred calling her a Gurung (She once said to me, "You can see my citizenship certificate, I am a Gurung"). Her husband[13]had also served in the school for 3 years as a teacher, and recently he was a filmmaker and was mostly staying in Kathmandu. She belonged to an economically well-off family. She completed her intermediate level of education (equivalent to grade 12). She lived with her father-in-law and her daughter. Her husband's younger brother's family had got separated from them and lived near them. She was also a member of a cooperative and oftentimes participated in a women's group, where she was a treasurer. She described herself as a '*kaam garne'* ('working class') woman. She seemed to be active in her social life. As an active member of the women's group, she was mobilising local women in some community activities.

It was the first time she had ever been to the SMC. But her earlier engagement in community activities as a member of a women's group or the cooperative had enabled her to speak her mind in public. She acknowledged her father-in-law and her husband for making her able to come to the SMC. If they had not pushed her, she would not have even thought of becoming the SMC member because she thought that she was already busy enough. It appeared that rather than being self-willing to join the SMC, she became the SMC member in her family (male members') pressure or to 'hold the name of her family'.

Sharmila: Sharmila was a Kshatriya woman who was in her late 30s. She belonged to an economically disadvantaged family. She completed grade eight and got married. Her husband used to go to India for seasonal works. During the initial days of the fieldwork, he was reported to leave for Qatar thinking that he would make

[13] I met her husband in three occasions and has become quite familiar. The first time I met him was on the day the SMC was formed. The second time, I met him in Kathmandu when he wanted me to get connected to an actress (whom I had taught during her school level education). And the third time I could go out for a picnic to a hill-station north-west of Pokhara with the school team. He had joined the team as ex-teacher.

more money working in a big company. Sharmila lived with her father and mother-in-law and her daughter some 2 km away from school. She had a small patch of land (around 6 ropanies), and the earning and harvest from the land was not adequate to feed her family throughout the year. Therefore, for want of more money, her husband went to Qatar in 2017. Her husband would normally send some money back home every two to three months, which eased her family's living. Earlier, they also used to farm in other's land with 50% dividend (*adhiya kamaune*). In later days, as her husband was sending some money and that she was mainly responsible for all household chores, she could not work on other's land. During a visit to her family in May 2017, I observed that she was rearing six goats and some chickens and growing some grains and vegetables in the small patch of land. She described herself as a '*grihini'* ('housewife').

Sharmila had not got any chance to attend any formal meetings, nor had she held any recognizable position in any organization before she came to be the SMC member. She, however, was very keen on her daughter's school activities and mostly on her studies. During her daughter's pre-primary level, she would go to the school thrice a day – it was almost like she was attending the school herself, dropping her daughter, taking tiffin for her, and getting her back home. During my initial discussion with her, she told me that her daughter was studying in grade 2, and she would not have to always accompany her; she would sometimes send the tiffin with her. But after becoming an SMC member, she was trying to visit the school at least once a day, especially during the tiffin break.

Milan: Milan was a Brahmin man who was also a nephew of Nirmala. He belonged to a well-off Brahmin family whose parents had donated some land to the school. He had two sons and a daughter, who were all married off. After his

retirement as headteacher a few years ago (two years before he came to be the SMC Chair), he shifted his living to another town, which was around 20 km away from school. He had the longest engagement in the school, as a teacher for about nine years, as Headteacher for 13 years, and currently was holding the SMC Chair position. As such, he considered his life to be fully devoted to the school. He, together with the earlier SMC Chair (who also was a teacher becoming headteacher and SMC Chair) was reported to have played a very crucial role in getting the support of foreign donors as well as non-resident Nepalis to replace the old school *taharo*[14]with concrete buildings.

Now, he thinks that having the former HT as SMC Chair would be supportive for the school since he knows how the school functions, especially maintaining friendly relations with education officers, being familiar with government's policies and programmes on school and teacher development, and gathering resources (largely financial) for doing some new projects in school. He believes that his network and knowledge would help support the schools to offer better and quality education to the community children. He even shared that he wanted to be in the SMC because he had a sense of responsibility towards the community – by being the SMC, he would be serving the community much like when he was the Headteacher. I could sense that he was trying to show that he had love and attachment to his former community even though he shifted to another after his retirement.

Rajan: Rajan was a middle-class Pahade-Brahmin belonging to the same family group as that of Milan and Nirmala. Milan was his uncle (his father cousin brother) by family relationship, and Nirmala was his *Kaaki Hajuraama* (aunt grandmother). He called Milan 'Milan Sir' (also because he was Milan's student

[14] a single floor shelter made typically of bamboo and wood, and had tin-roof.

during his schooling and served as a teacher under Milan's headteachership), and Nirmala by Hajuraama. In fact, it was Milan who asked Rajan to get back to the village and start working as a *nijishrot* (managed from private source) teacher in the secondary level, with taking additional classes in the +2. As Rajan revealed, at that time, he was teaching in a good private school in Kathmandu and had recently got married. The earning from the private school was not so attractive, and he also thought that going to the village would mean living at own home and serving the same local school ('own school') that he went to in childhood, and also saving the earning ensuring better livelihood than in Kathmandu. After Milan got retired, Rajan was proposed to become the headteacher since there was no other local teacher who had completed a master's degree since it was mandatory for an HT of a school running a *+2 programme* to have at least a master's degree. Thereby, a nijishrot-based temporary teacher became the HT. While serving as the HT, he appeared in the Teacher Service Commission's examination for secondary level English teacher and went through. He was appointed in the same school (for which some lobbying and politics helped). As teachers and students reported, he was considered a good HT in terms of enhancing school quality (introducing English medium classes, good results in SEE and +2, teacher, exposure to teachers and students to wider academic and extra-curricular training, visits and activities).

Bibek: Bibek was a man in his mid-40s who was a middle-class Newar, living close to school (around 500 meters away). He, with his wife, was running a small *kirana pasal*[15]-cum-restaurant, and was also involved in taking some minor *thekka patta*[16] in supplying some goods to school and other community organizations. Oftentimes, teachers go to his restaurant, especially to throw a party while celebrating

[15] a retail shop of daily goods
[16] petty contract

some events like birthdays, success in some endeavours, etc. This way, he had a friendly relationship with the school teachers.

His two children were also going to the same school – his daughter was in the eighth grade during my introduction with him, and his son was in the second grade. Later, when his daughter reached grade 10, she also became the School's Captain (a title given to student leaders). She was good at her studies and was also leading a club at school.

Bibek shared that his decision to become an SMC member was instantaneous. He was not initially interested in becoming an SMC member. When he saw that three people from the same family (referring to Ex-Chair's family; two sons and a daughter-in-law) were standing for an SMC member, de decided that he should too. And then, he stood up and gave his name.

Prabhakar: Prabhakar was a Gurung man in his early 40s. He was educated and economically elite. He was also an entrepreneur running some stone-cutting factories, had a buffalo farm in the lek (high hills), and had an investment in different businesses (had a restaurant, trout farm, and was running two buses from the village to the Province headquarters). He lived some 600 meters away from school. Later in 2018, he also moved to the Province Headquarters and is now a neighbour of the SMC Chair. He, however, visits the ward office (which is 400 meters away from the school) daily.

He and the Headteacher were classmates during their schooling to higher education. Though the HT and Prabhakar shared different political thoughts, they had a good friendship. In fact, Prabhakar helped the HT get home-based school when getting permanent appointments after the Teacher Service Commission examination.

He lived with his parents, wife and son. His father was a Headteacher of another school (who passed away in 2016 during the initial days of my fieldwork). His wife also supports him in his enterprises, especially supervising the stone-cutting factories. He was an active political cadre who stood in the local elections as Ward Chair in the *Gaupalika* election 2017 and won. Then, as per the provision of the education act, he became an SMC member (a local government representative).

With the demographics of the SMC members, it was clear that the overall school governance bodies were Brahmin men dominated since both the SMC and PTA were led by men. Moreover, the member secretary of the SMC (the Headteacher) was also a Brahmin man. Further, the only three female members in the SMC also showed that two belonged to the Brahmin/Kshatriya caste group, and only one was a *Gurung* (who was also married to a Brahmin). Contrarily, the village was populated more by Gurung residents. Therefore, the idea of the representation of Gurung ethnicity was lost, though gender representation was ensured as per the policy provision in the Education Act. Moreover, what kind of *Gurung* woman represented the 'Gurung woman' may also be questioned.

Fieldwork Processes

Before actually discussing the fieldwork processes, I would like to situate my 'field' in the broader context of ethnographic inquiry. In my research context, wherever I met my research participants and observed their formal or informal activities and held some interactions in regards to my research focus, I considered all spaces, events and processes as fieldwork, not limiting to their 'formal' workstations. Yes, I have been to their homes, mostly visited them at school, and talked to them or observed their activities around the community. Even for some male participants (though they are not part of this paper), I met and discussed with them at Lakeside in

Pokhara, a hotel in Kathmandu, and one instance, at my flat Bhaktapur. Moreover, my regular telephone follow-ups and asking for clarification formed another major chunk of the 'field'. Therefore, field, may that be for pure 'data collection' at the first stage or 'data collection with meaning-making at the later stages referred to all locations and processes where and whereby I got in touch with the research participants.

As such, the fieldwork of this study began as soon as I selected the research site and has largely continued till the final reporting of this research. However, for ease of situating my major engagement in the field, I can largely divide the fieldwork into some phases. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in three major phases (besides telephonic conversations and follow-ups) between 2016 and 2017. The first phase was the **familiarisation** phase – which took place between **April 2016 to September 2016**. In this phase, I familiarised myself adequately with the study site – the school community since I was staying at 'Janasewa Hotel, a hotel run by a Newar family in the mid-of the community. The school was a five-minute walk from the hotel. During this time, there was no formal SMC in the Nepali schools. However, the old 'dead' SMCs were informally working in some schools[17], including my research site. Therefore, in this phase, I mainly got familiar with the school and the informally working SMC members – a woman member and the headteacher continued to be the members in the later SMC.

Above all, the major task during this phase was to locate the study site – selecting the school – and to enter the site. Moreover, with around six months of

[17] The SMC was disbanded by the government in 2015 June 30 in preparation for the promulgation of the 8th amendment of the 1971 education act, which was later promulgated in June 2016. The amendment was believed to have brought structural shift in Nepali schools: it categorised schools into basic level (grades 1-8) and secondary level (grades 9-12); earlier schools were categorised as primary level (grades 1 to 5), lower secondary level (grades 6 to 8), secondary level (grades 9 and 10) and higher secondary level (grades 11 and 12). More importantly from this research perspective, it provisioned for a restructuring of the SMCs in terms of gender representation. It ensured at least one third of women representation in the SMC.

constant engagement with the school (I mainly worked with teachers and students) and two other members of the informal SMC (the Chairperson and the only woman member) who would sometimes visit the school, I got a somehow insider position. My major task of familiarising myself with the site became easier when the Chair and the HT allowed me to serve as a 'substitute teacher' to fill in when a teacher was absent. This allowed me to be recognised as a volunteer teacher among the students (since such volunteer teachers, also foreigners, would be coming and going in every two or three years, if not every year), a supportive colleague and a researcher from Kathmandu University among the teachers and the SMC members, and a *'purbeli thito'* (a young man from the eastern part of the country) observing their school (*hamro school herna aako purbeli thito [a young eastern man who has come to observe our school]* – this was how a community member introduced me with others) among the community people. In the meantime, I was also requested to serve as a teacher selection committee member (comprised of the Chair, HT and I) – who was asked to set a question paper, mark the paper, also serve as a member of the interview panel. They had initially requested the earlier School Superintendent for the task, but since such a post was also dissolved and he was already transferred to another office, he denied serving as such unofficially. In fact, he had suggested to the HT to request any third person, maybe an expert who was not familiar with the candidates. Then, the HT and the SMC Chair approached me. With their request, I agreed to serve voluntarily to set questions and mark the paper, and I did, too. They further asked me later to also observe the class of the candidates who passed the written test and to be in the interview panel. They said that my role in these tasks would ensure an unbiased selection of the more deserving candidate. To their request, I could not say no and served my role.

With this kind of engagement, I was becoming more like an 'insider' - a full member of their school. I also learnt that unlike my theoretical idea of being a 'fully observer' or 'external researcher', my positionality is constantly under negotiation in the field. Upon returning from the field, I reflected that my 'participant-as-observer' (Gold, 1958) role allowed me to fully understand the context of the study and also erased possible hesitations and mistrust of the (few would-be) research participants in me. One advantage of participating in the daily life of people was that it also enabled me to "get a deeper insight into the culture of the people being studied" (Takyi, 2015, p. 864). However, I also sensed that I was going too native (Madden, 2017) – nearly losing my original purpose and identity as a researcher. This reflection taught me to balance my role as 'observer as participant' and 'participant as observer' as per the context.

The second phase took place between **November 2016 to February 2017**, which comprised mostly of **observing, rapport building - II, and initial engagement** with the participants. In this phase, I became a complete observer[18]in the beginning (November-December), where the discussion of forming a new SMC was a hotcake in school and a subject of little concern in the community. As such, I observed some informal discussions in school among the teachers, and also heard about some partisan lobbying for the Chairperson's position. Even though I tried to sketch out the political scenario behind the SMC formation, I could not until the SMC was formed. I observed and learned about the school headteacher sending a request letter (a chit) to all guardians to participate in the SMC formation gathering (*SMC gathan garne bhela*), which was slated for 28 December 2016. I also observed (in

[18] Detailed discussion of the role of ethnographer in participant observation was made by Gold (1958), who lays out four master roles that ethnographers can play to develop relationships with the participants. Likewise, Takyi (2015) further assesses these four key roles and prefers participant-as-observer role for ethnographic inquiry.

fact, attended – because the former SMC Chair also introduced me as a researcher from Kathmandu University studying about the SMC in their school and asked me to take a seat at the front row) the gathering that selected the members of the SMC, and the members then selected from among themselves a Chairperson. The gathering formed an eight-member new SMC (a ninth member was to be a local representative, but for lack of local election – which held later on 14 May 2017 in Province 4 (later named Gandaki Province), there was no elected representative) – having a former headmaster as Chairperson, the woman member in the former SMC got continued and selected other two new female and three male members including a teacher representative. The school headteacher was to be an ex-officio member secretary.

In January and February 2017, I visited the school, observed two meetings of the SMC, and developed a good rapport with the SMC members. I refer to this stage of rapport building as 'rapport building – II' since I had some kind of good rapport with two members of the SMC when I stayed in the school during my first round of field visits (familiarisation phase). In this phase, I also developed a good familiarisation with the rest of the new SMC. I even visited a woman participant's house – at the invitation of the former Chairperson of the SMC – who was her father-in-law. I even got to know her *Dewar* (husband's younger brother), who had worked in the same private school in Kathmandu where I had also worked (but he had left the school before I joined it, so I was not familiar with him). Then, she started calling me 'Babu' – the same term she would use to address her *Dewar*, and expected me to address her '*Bhauju'* (sister-in-law [older brother's wife]). Later, another woman member also addressed me by the same form of address and told me that I could say '*Bhauju'* to her as well – to whom I was normally addressing as a madam. Then onwards, there were two *Bhaujus* in the SMC and a *Hajuraama* (grandmother) – with

whom I was introduced by the headteacher, who was her grandson (*Naati)*, she often called me *Naati*, but sometimes also *Babu*. I had similar forms of address with men members of the SMC – ranging from *Dai* (Bibek) to *Uncle* (SMC Chair). For uniformity in reporting, I have used pseudonyms for all participants.

During this time, though we had some rounds of individual and group discussion, I largely shared my experiences as a teacher, teacher educator, an educational researcher, a textbook writer, and an admirer of nature – I wanted to be in their school also for the location and the scenic beauty of the Annapurna range that could be clearly visible in ordinary days. Likewise, I inquired about their personal and family backgrounds, discussed the socio-economic composition of the community and historicity of the community and the school, and the general school-related issues like student-teacher ratio, challenges in the school improvement, community support and engagement in school, among others. With my background in education and research, the new Chair (who was a former teacher (12 years) and headteacher (16 years) of the same school) requested me to facilitate to conduct a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis of their school, which I readily helped them by facilitating to conduct a sample SWOT analysis in one of the SMC meetings in February 2017. Though I initially frowned upon this idea of engaging at such a deeper level in their meeting, the event set a positive tone regarding the interaction with the SMC members. As Tara (a woman SMC member) reflected: "I thought you were monitoring us, but now I know that you are supporting us." This event made my further meetings and interactions with the women SMC members more engaging and participatory – they showed their interest in our *kurakani* (informal talks) as much as I was interested in talking to them. This further helped me use *kurakani* (informal talks, chitchats, or conversational style of dialogue) as a method of ethnographic inquiry –

which Desjarlais (2003) has termed *kuragraphy*, also followed by J. Rai (2013) and Meche (2019).

The third phase took place between **April to September 2017**, which comprised my extensive engagement with the participants. In this phase, I not only held *kurakani*[19] (individual, group) and wrote field notes (from scratch notes to reflective notes [a separate scrapbook is designed][20]) and reflective poems [a separate chapbook is designed][21] in regards to gathering field materials to inform my study, but also engaged with them while clarifying their statements, meaning-making of their expressions. Since my approach to engaging with the participants was informal and conversational, I did not have any defined research tools such as 'kurakani questions' or 'group interaction guideliens', but the research questions guided me throughout.

Therefore, during this phase, I not only reflected on what I understood by some of their expressions but also engaged the participants to self-reflect so that I could also confirm whether I was really making sense of the field materials – I intended to be self-assured of whether their intended meanings were akin to the expressed meanings. This way, participant engaged meaning-making served as a powerful strategy to generate an initial layer of meanings of the field materials, ensuring that participants' meanings were not distorted. While doing so, I realised that rather than "circling in and out of the field" (Wedel et al., 2005) – a researcher visiting and leaving the field time and again, meaning-making should be taken as an embedded process of 'field material gathering'. Thus, the idea of co-construction of meanings (Taylor & Medina, 2011) through mutual interaction between the researcher and the participants would be valuable for an ethnographic inquiry. Therefore, during this phase, I not only explored

[19] I have indicated the field text as kurakani, followed by the date of the kurakani while presenting the field texts in subsequent chapters.
[20] A separate handbook (but part of the theisis work), that contains my field notes and elaborated analytical notes.
[21] A compilation of my reflective poems during the course of the PhD journey, especially on fieldwork.

major chunks of field narratives but also reflected on my participants' expressions and experiences as well as engaged with them in the initial sense-making of the field materials.

Though this phase comprised my major field engagement, I did not find any 'exit' from the field – may be by a formal close of my dissertation, my engagement with the field (research issue for this endeavour) might cease, but my engagement with the field (site and participants) is extending further. I, therefore, consider that there can be a nuanced exit from the field with my identity of a doctoral researcher changing into an independent researcher or an academic or some professional. Even after this third core phase, I time and again followed up on some confusing issues or ambiguous expressions through telephonic and virtual means. Moreover, irrespective of my research concern, I have been in constant engagement with the SMC members, some parents, some elected representatives and teachers. I have felt a sense of contributing to the research site and thus have at times been supporting the school (teachers/SMC members) in planning and proposal drafting for school development by channelling opportunities for teachers' or SMC members' professional development (especially during the lockdown induced by COVID-19), and the community (i.e. rural municipality) by supporting in developing a community development project and currently supporting them for establishing a sister-city relationship with a Swiss town.

Meaning-Making Processes: Researcher-Participant Reflexivity

Meaning-making of the field materials is the central focus of all ethnographic writing, and thus, reflecting, elaborating and discussing women's experiences regarding school governance form the core part of ethnographic meaning-making in my study. An analytical starting point for this ethnographic inquiry had been how school stakeholders make sense of their identity, belonging and participation in the

school governance process. Therefore, the meaning-making of the field texts involved interpretation of the meanings of stakeholders' actions, ideas, values and experiences concerning school governance practices at the local level. In the initial (descriptive) stage, I utilised my knowledge of ethnographic meaning-making that included re-reading the field materials (talks, texts, scratch notes, reflective notes, observation notes, memories, and impressions), organising field materials using thematic codes and categories, searching for connections across emergent themes, and elaborating and reflecting on the meanings (Angrosino, 2007).

While engaging in the meaning-making, I was also aware of moving from what was unique to a participant to what was shared among the participants and offering a description of the experience, which moved to an explanation of the experience. I discussed field materials with "no predetermined theory, structure or framework" (Burnard et al., 2008, p. 429) but engaged with the field materials themselves to derive possible patterns and arrangement of meaning creation. Therefore, I opted for fitness for purpose, giving thick descriptions and making multiple layers of meanings, making multiple layers of meanings involved "attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions" (Genzuk, 2003, p. 9).

While engaging in meaning-making of the field materials, I encountered two key dilemmas – especially when I shared my initial meanings of the field materials at two scholarly communities in Kathmandu, first at Martin Chautari and second at Kathmandu University School of Education (KUSOED). As my reflective poem (see Box 2) indicates, the first dilemma was about my capacity to draw meanings beyond the given. The second dilemma was doing justice to the field materials.

Box 2

Will I Ever Make Sense of Field Narratives?

Poor me!
When I make literal meaning of the 'field narratives', I am not academic!
"You're just retelling what the 'data' says; where is your 'analysis'?
You have to do it again. Draw more meanings."
Oh, yes. I should draw more meanings.
Implied meanings, sarcastic meanings, emotive meanings.
Or even meanings maybe not stated (or intended?) by the participants.

When I make possible 'implied', 'further' and 'associated' meanings,
I was not doing justice to my 'data'.
"Does your 'data' speak that?"
"How come you make such meanings from your 'data'?"
I wonder what my field narratives tell me and what they tell others!

I recalled my professor saying, "What's not said is as important as what is said."
Was he wrong?
I think I misunderstood.
Which I often do.

(Source: Chapbook, pp. 8-9)

The first stanza is my reflection on the comments on my paper by the participants in a seminar at Martin Chautari in early 2017, who saw my draft paper as empirically rich but lacking my meanings and 'analysis'. I agreed. Maybe I was struggling with the novice-researcher syndrome – relying on "a mere summarization of other texts as if the other texts represent fixed and accepted meanings in the form of knowledge claims" (Riazi, 2016, p. 159). The same paper was further worked; at that time, I was confident that I had my meanings drawn and also 'analysis' done – discussed from a gender lens, and adequate references were cited. I presented this 'substantially revised' paper at a seminar at KUSOED in April 2017. The commentator was a professor from another university who was introduced as a subject expert on my research issue (i.e. women inclusion/participation). The commentator this time rated the paper above average but questioned the meanings I added and

wondered whether I made sense of and did 'justice to' the field narratives. To borrow the commentators' words: "Does your 'data' speak that?" This question pushed me into further self-reflection. While undergoing these deep traumatic thoughts into making sense of field materials, Denzin's (2009) remark that it is an arduous task to make sense of field texts solaced me temporarily. However, the question haunted me every now and then. I even started wondering: a) why field materials tell me one thing and my readers another, and also b) whether the field narratives should always tell the readers and the researcher the same thing.

With a feeling that I could not make 'good' or 'academically valid' meanings of the field texts, I started repeatedly thinking about how I could improve my meaning-making ability. I went through literature (Dougherty & Mitchell-Jackson, 2010; Hunter et al., 2002; Hunter Revell, 2013; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Wolsey & Lapp, 2019), discussed with my peers at weekly PhD Colloquium[22] at the University, and also discussed with some 'ethnographers' (including research 'methodologists', foreign experts and Nepali scholars graduated abroad) but remained inconclusive. As such, I felt that though meaning-making is the major process of the ethnographic knowledge construction (Schindler & Schäfer, 2020); it remains understudied, especially as an embedded process of 'data gathering'.

Some of the suggestions I found in the literature describe this process of ethnographic meaning-making in several ways. Hunter et al. (2002) suggest incubation, which is "the process of living and breathing the data, by which the researcher tries to understand its meanings, find its patterns, and draw legitimate yet novel conclusions" (p. 389), and immersion in the data but do not give practical ideas on how to go about in the ethnographic meaning-making process. Likewise, Emerson

[22] A weekly seminar of around 10-12 PhD research fellows at KUSOED where they would discuss key research issues, share their progress and writing, get feedback, invite faculty and guest speakers for talks on special themes of their interests.

et al. (2007) also outline from what 'kind of data' an ethnographer construct meanings (i.e. "bits and pieces of incidents, beginnings and ends of narratives, accounts of chance meetings and rare occurrences, and details of a wide range of unconnected matters" (p. 35) but do not evidently articulate how. Similarly, Wedel et al. (2005) suggest "circling in and out of the field" – researcher visiting and leaving the field time and again. They suggest observing and interacting in the field, and structuring and writing up analysis out of the field (e.g. at home) and revisiting the field to verifying their analysis and to gain more detailed insights into the unanswered issues. Likewise, Wolsey and Lapp (2019) discuss some models of meaning-making; however, they do not touch on how that meaning-making is an embedded process of 'data gathering'. Taylor and Medina (2011) also suggest that it is through mutual interaction between the researcher and the participants that meanings are co-constructed. Though these ideas might be useful for mid-career researchers doing qualitative investigations, these did not actually prepare me to venture into the ethnographic meaning-making process.

I then was thinking of visiting the participants, sharing my meaning of their experiences with them and asking them whether my expression of their experiences made sense to them. In fact, rather than how I make meanings (which are the secondary level of meanings) of the participants' life world, how the participants themselves make meanings (primary level of meanings) shape their understandings of the roles and their enactments thereof in everyday practice. Reflecting on the comments from the two scholarly communities in Kathmandu, I realised that I largely failed in meaning-making (thus my meanings did not count) and then I felt that a 'field-based meaning-making approach could be a possible way out for preliminary meaning-making. The extensive reflection on the field narratives and also prolonged

engagement with them helped me gain a richer understanding of their thinking, responding and negotiation processes in their varying phases of participation within the school decision-making body, i.e. School Management Committee. More importantly, I understood "what has a common meaning to a group of people may have a unique meaning to an individual member of the group" (Krauss, 2005, p. 763). For example, a woman SMC member not being vocal in most of the meetings may mean she is introverted and that she does not have anything to speak for; however, *the meeting room full of men was restraining for her to speak up* (Nirmala, reflecting on her tenure as the only one woman member in the earlier SMC). Therefore, individual construction of meanings is shaped by different factors and that it was the most challenging job for me to unearth these unique meanings.

I believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world, and thus, understanding of life can emerge from people's life experiences. This encouraged me to involve the research participants in meaning-making through a dialogical process of engaging in social interactions. Thus, the dialogue between me and the research participants became not merely an opportunity for me to gather information about the participants but rather an opportunity for each to develop new meanings together (Talbot, 2018, p. 11). The dialogic interaction allowed for constant, active communication and engagement between myself as a researcher and the women SMC members paving the way for emerging "co-construction of meanings" (Mertkan-Ozünlü, 2007, p. 456) during the conduct of this inquiry. Thus meaning-making with and through participants in the field is an 'interactive ethnographic performance' (Bird, 2015), and thus it is a shared experience between the participants and the researcher (Talbot, 2018).

Following this, I adopted a participant-engaged meaning-making process to co-construct an understanding of their socio-cultural life world and developed field narratives into ethnographic research (product) through a complex process of reflexivity and description (Harman & Harklau, 2013). This way of meaning construction may be called ‘inter-subjective knowledge construction’ (Taylor & Medina, 2011) or meaning through ‘participant reflexivity’ (Cassell et al., 2020), which allowed me to build rich local understandings of how the women SMC members make sense of their experiences. This insight allowed me to claim that preliminary meaning-making should not be isolated from participants and their context. The best idea would be to involve them in the co-construction of meanings and knowledge. Musing upon the process, I can say that the meaning-making this way can be termed as researcher-participant reflexivity.

Even today I often sit on my chair and go down the memory lane to that moment when I first presented the preliminary ‘interpretation’ of the field texts and reflect how I can better make sense of or let senses emerge from the field narratives. I thank the critics who helped me rebuilt my meaning generation, sense-making or ‘data interpretation’ skills brick by brick. The following poem (see Box 3) is my reflective account of the ethnographic meaning-making process I lived through.

Box 3

Will I Ever Call It An 'Elephant'?

I am an observer, information seeker, reflector, questioner, and learner;
They're the knowers, doers, experiencers, feelers, creators, sense-makers of their lifeworld.
Who am I to make sense of their lifeworld?
Will my senses CAPTURE who they are and why they act the way they do?

Tch, tch, tch! Poor me, a six-blind-men23* replica!
Will I ever assemble the 'body parts' and call it an 'elephant'?

Uff, I think I won't.
Until I submerge, assimilate, live the life they live.
Can I do that?
I think I can't.
Until I become one of them.

So what can I do?
Stop making sense, make senses emerge.
From them. Least, from someone like them.
Let them make sense of their lifeworld.
Betcha, then senses become clearer.

(Source: Chapbook, pp. 10-11)

With the preliminary meanings co-constructed with the research participants, my job of enlarging and extending the meanings of the field materials beyond the given became easier. In a more theoretical level of meaning abstraction, I reconsidered the patterns in light of the existing literature and demonstrated how my findings relate to the interpretation of others (Angrosino, 2007). Moreover, some of the unique findings further contributed to adding novel knowledge to the field of study.

[23] 'Six Blind Men and the Elephant' is a popular folk tale from South Asia that beautifully narrates how six blind men describe an 'elephant' by touching different parts of its body. Based on their limited observation and experience, they develop distinct senses of the parts of an elephant, rather than grasping the idea of a whole elephant.

*As an ethical note, this is not to demean people with some disability – everyone has different ability; the only analogy that I am making in this poem is how I myself felt when got into such a situation.

Positionality: Locating Myself in the Research

There were multiple hats I was wearing and was having a plurality of identities as a researcher, a teacher educator, a newly married husband, a male *Pahade* middle-class Brahmin, and a *Purbeli Thito* (a boy born and raised in eastern Nepal) staying in Kathmandu among others. These identities made me an outsider to the research site. Assumedly, I, having more power, information and resource, was researching those with less (Cohen et al., 2018). However, with some engagement in the selected school as a substitute teacher, supporter in material development, making two training opportunities available for teachers and SMC members, and also serving as an expert in the teacher selection committee, having significant exposure and knowledge of the school system gained 'quite an insider' identity. Therefore, my position, engagement and reciprocity in the school and with teachers, students and SMC members was fluid – often hinging insider-outsider. I maintained reciprocity in researcher-participant relationships (Millora, 2019). Likewise, I also had multifaceted relationships (Davies, 2008) with different participants. Moreover, to equalising the potential power differential in our relationships (I being the in-charge of the study in a conventional sense), I have made a conscious effort to include the voice and feedback of the participants and also sought to understand their own meaning and interpretations, and heavily used these interpretations of reality (Davis & Lachlan, 2017), and thus meanings are co-constructed (Mertkan-Ozünlü, 2007; Taylor & Medina, 2011). Likewise, my field-based work, coming back to Kathmandu, reflecting on the process encompassed circling in and out of the field (Wedel et al., 2005). For me, more important than balancing the insider-outsider dilemma was the dilemma regarding the conduct of research with and on women.

Researching on women could mean, at its worst, excluding them from meaningfully participating in the study, and capturing their experiences and opinions from 'other' men's eyes only, and at its best, exploring their experiences chiefly from their point of view, and also seeking 'other' male members' perspectives. However, I did not stop at studying women, but went on to engage with them and thus research with them, yet juggling with 'other's ideas on and about them. This way, I made to-and-fro moves iteratively and researched with and on them. Though I was aware that I was going to study with men and women and study mostly on women, I was conscious about not merely researching women by surpassing their own existence, and therefore I researched *with* them. I sought their personal, and informed, and freely given consent, not via proxies (Fielding, 2004; Cline & Frederickson, 2009), though later I also talked with their male family members. "I did not like the idea that my wife went to serve the SMC, but at that time, I was not in the village. Later, when I returned from abroad, I knew that it was a good thing" said Sharmila's husband. Likewise, I had a good conversation beforehand with Tara's father-in-law before I knew her; however, I knew about her husband through her.

I was aware of the issues of gender-based assumptions, especially the influence of men bias and men norms (Bem, 1993) through which I would perceive, conceive, and discuss social realities and women's lifeworlds. Moreover, by being aware and situating my identity, I think I could learn to understand the power, oppression, and interpersonal relationships of the women participants (Knight, 2000). As a Pahade Brahmin man, I was at least partly conscious that my Brahmin man egocentricity might discount the life experiences of rural women. As I spent time in the research site, I began to "understand the importance of emotion, voice, and dialogue" (Scantlebury, 2005, p. 3) in the participants' everyday life and culture.

While I ventured into researching women, I was looked upon with interest and disbelief by both men and women in my circle. Some friends even asked whether a '*lognemachhe'* (man) can really study to the depth of '*swasnimanchhe'* or '*aimai'* (woman); after all, there is a popular cliché that men just do not understand women. My counter-question would be: when we can research on animals and chemicals (whose language and sign is difficult to understand), why cannot one human understand another? Some even indirectly put some 'sex blame' on me for my interest in researching women. However, for me, 'men studying men and women studying women' is not purely gender aligning, but making the field 'private' and making it more difficult for men and women to understand each other, thereby giving continuity to segregation. Therefore, we as researchers need to divide the gender divide in the research field and make this visible to everybody since masculine/feminine ways of knowing might be different. I nevertheless was aware that it could be both a crucial limitation and a rewarding alternative standpoint that women's world is interpreted from a man's perspective. Therefore, I fear if I could really interpret the women voices the way they mean – because my 'macho subjectivity' might easily come up to the surface. I think there could be different interpretations of the same texts (of women voices) if they were interpreted by a woman researcher.

While introspecting into my own intersecting identities in the research site, I was mindful of how that might impact the research process, especially while conducting research with and about those who were different from me in terms of gender, sociality, cultural orientation, age, class and life experiences. As far as practicable, I was aware of my positionality – a man hill- Brahmin[24] researcher

[24] If any ethnicity based identify is to be made since social relations thereof might influence the researcher-participant interaction and this category becomes a major point for the 'critics' to see differences, I think I should elaborate. Hill- Brahmin refers to a so-called high caste group who/whose ancestors live/d in highlands (hills). In terms of the classical Hindu caste system (that

studying the participation of women in school governance – and the need to be extra cautious about reducing possible 'macho' bias that could creep in from using gender insensitive language or even flawed expressions (Warren & Hackney, 2000). In fact, researchers studying the other gender and doing the gendered research point out this challenge and cautions researchers to 'have the "balls" to negotiate certain situations and emotions (Poulton, 2012). I, therefore, aware my readers to take my interpretation as one made from a man's perspective but trying to voice women's standpoint. I was thus at least aware beforehand that understanding the meaning of the research participants' ideas, actions, or experiences required me to have an understanding of the context in which they were in (Chen, 2001). Therefore, I was somehow confident regarding my meanings and interpretations because those were what I sensed after multiple readings of the field 'notes', re-assessing the participants' social relations, their patterns of interactions, and using my memory to visualise their expressions.

In qualitative research, the idea of entering the field with a blank mind is in many ways a myth; yet "an ethnography in which the local does not have a voice is no ethnography" (Vesa, 2013, p. 31). This requires me to take different roles at different times. Reflecting on my experience of engaging in the field process or especially in researcher-participant reflexivity, I provided the participants with ample space to voice their ideas and worked with them to co-construct the meaning out of their ideas. While moving further, I used my ideas to draw meaning out of their ideas and out of

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groups people into four broad social classes or vernas, namely Brahmin [Bahun], Kshatriya [Chhetri], Vaishya, and Sudra), Brahmin is the high caste.

By ethnic genealogy, I could be a hill- Brahmin, but I am a first generation Terai-Brahmin with hill-based ethnic genealogy. This is because I was born in the Terai (the plain land), brought up in a mixed community where I did not feel casteism – 'dalits' and non-dalits, pahadi and madhesi distinctions – at least amongst my peers. "Eating in and entering dalits and non-dalits' homes" were equally accepted among my peers. Talking about being a pahade (hill based), I had never seen any 'hill' until I came to Kathmandu for my Master's study. Moreover, my parents had migrated from the hill in their childhood and have never returned to their birthplaces – most of their social networks and relations are based on a mixed community in the Terai.

co-constructed ideas. Along my professional journey, I have personally experienced school improvement endeavours and the many challenges they present to school governance in the Nepali context. Moreover, the professional backgrounds I have acquired – as a school teacher, coordinator, vice-principal and teacher educator in different educational institutions right from primary school to the university level, and as a research scholar investigating school leadership – make me somewhat of an "insider" allowing me to have greater access, interpretation and appreciation of the value of "shared experiences" (Labaree, 2002, p. 103). At the same time, as a member of the research community working in Kathmandu, brought up in Eastern Nepal in a Brahmin family, I will be an "outsider" in terms of getting to know the people (mostly Gurungs) and their local context in Gandaki. Therefore, I stayed at the nexus of these two positions, sometimes engaging more like an "insider" and at other times, as an "outsider", not necessarily maintaining an intricate balance of these two positionalities, however. This means my identity as a researcher in the research sites was subject to constant negotiation and re-negotiation through interactions with the participants as the study commenced (Cui, 2015). Moreover, I was aware that I needed to be careful in capturing the experiences as an insider while describing the experience for outsiders.

In qualitative inquiry, a researcher can become "the research instrument" (Frankel & Devers, 2000, p. 120). It called for me to be fully aware of how my own preconceptions might give way to the research results. Therefore, I felt it was indispensable for me to concisely describe my role as the researcher. My relation to the theoretical perspective, but not the research issue, seemed to be confusing and a little bit funny because I was going to make a kind of feminist study when I do not know the very construct beyond rudimentary beginnings. This was a limitation in my

research endeavour right at the outset. However, this, at the same time, allowed me a chance to look at things through an entirely new eye.

Rigour and Reflexivity

Lincoln et al. (2011) proposed two forms of rigour—methodological, related to the application of methods, and interpretive, related to judging outcomes. The portrayal of the detailed methodological journey (including fieldwork and meaning-making) as outlined in the above sub-sections would suffice to establish the methodological rigour in this study. Moreover, I have tried to make the research account rich and transparent enough so that the readers can note the specific details of the research context and methods and compare them to a similar situation that they are more familiar with (Smith et al., 2009). However, a key question might lurch in interpretive knowledge tradition: how the knowledge is considered worth when it has emerged from a field-dependent context. To convince readers that my research findings are worth paying attention to, I adopted Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1993) authenticity, plausibility and criticality framework.

My prolonged engagement in the field and meanings drawn from the field texts serve towards ensuring authenticity. For this, I have particularised the everyday life of participants, established close familiarity with SMC members' actions, and portrayed their perceptions and thoughts (Hogg & Maclaran, 2008). Moving on, in order to ensure the plausibility (i.e. does the study make sense to the readers), I have utilised an accepted methodological practice (i.e. aligning with 'ethnography') whereby I collected field texts by selecting the study site and participants who could help me in answering my research questions, co-constructed meanings, and produced the report in a narrative format. Besides, adequate details of each participant and concrete evidence have been offered, which would allow readers to compare with

their experiences (Bird, 2020). Likewise, the use of language (esp. words like seek, search, look, explore, delve, etc.) also "served to heighten the sense of discovery by reinforcing the image of the researchers on a quest" (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993, p. 610). In addition to creating gaps in existing literature, some unique contributions of this study have been highlighted. And for criticality, I have reflected on the field texts and participants' meanings as well as my experiences and meanings and created room for the readers to "re-examine their views without dismissing those presented" (Hogg & Maclaran, 2008, p. 134). Likewise, I was aware of my actions possibly perpetuating "inquirer-oriented power (as saviour, decoloniser, or one that would empower)" and thus was constantly "examining (and countering) individual power created for the researcher within the context of inquiry" (Cannella & Lincoln, 2018, p. 173). Thinking critically helped me scrutinise the "status quo from multiple lenses, filters, and angles to ask *how come*, *what if*, and *why not*" (Saldaña, 2015, Thinking Critically section, para. 1). Moreover, self-reflection and introspection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) also helped me ensure criticality.

As outlined above (see positionality), entering the field with an empty me in the research process was not possible. I, therefore, followed the norms of reflexivity (Parker, 1999), or "uncomfortable reflexivity" in Pillow's (2003, p. 188) words. This means I was aware of maintaining a reflexive attitude whereby seeking to understand the impact of my personal experiences as a research instrument with an insider advantage on data. Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self as a researcher, the research process, interaction with the participants and empirical materials, interpretations of underlying meanings as well as the text produced and the language used (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Lincoln et al., 2018). As an ethnographer, I critically wondered "how my particular point of access, personal

identity, social position, and subjective perspective" (Stuart, 2018, para. 1) are impacting the researcher-participant relationships, the types of field materials being generated and the meanings drawn of the field materials.

I have represented the "multiple realities, interpretations, experiences, and voices emergent from all participants" (Davis & Lachlan, 2017, p. 116) and maintained the legitimacy of their voice by encouraging the participants to speak for themselves. While doing so, I have reflected upon different aspects of the research process as well as my own role in meaning-making and knowledge construction. I have often explicitly marked on my reflective diaries with emphasis, critique and corroborating experiences of myself with that of the participants.

Ethical Awareness

I obtained the approval of the University's Research Committee to conduct this study as soon as I defended my research proposal. I was oriented, especially by my supervisor, about the ethical protocol required to be followed in research involving human participants, including ensuring participants had full information about the research (e.g. purpose, processes, risks and benefits), that they consent to participate voluntarily, that they enjoy the right not to answer any question or to withdraw their participation entirely from the study, and that no harm is caused to the participants.

I got oral informed consent from the research participants. While developing rapport with the participants, I talked about having a written informed consent, to which a participant (a man) disagreed, stating that 'when you say interview, recording, and signing a document, I don't want to talk. That would make me feel restricted, watched over or be careful of what I say.' Another participant (also a man) said, "Why do we need this (written form) when I trust you and fully believe that you

will keep the information confidential and will not report my name. But even if you report my name, I have no objection; rather I will be happy. And if you insist, I will sign the form." Another participant (a woman) added, "It is better just to talk; why to sign any document for just doing the *kurakani*." With all these remarks by the participants, I began to ask myself if 'written consent' is really necessary. In my other research experiences (including government-commissioned research or NGO's project/programme effectiveness studies) too, I have never ever followed such a procedure of written consent. This shows that written consent is not a cultural practice in Nepal for sharing one's ideas, beliefs, understandings, and experiences, and that, in most cases, Nepali people are open and like to share their life stories – stories of success and failures. In such a cultural context, talking about written consent becomes irrelevant. If a participant is ready to talk with the researcher and trusts the researcher, I think this trust itself is very important, which creates a social bond. Where there is such a bond, a piece of paper does not add value. Instead, it might create doubt. So I dropped the idea of formal written consent. During this process of negotiating with the participants, I realised that seeking and getting informed consent was a continuous and reflexive process and that "it is the quality of the consent, not its format, which is relevant" (American Anthropological Association, 2012, Informed Consent section, para. 3).

Likewise, one participant insisted that his identifier (real name) be kept in the thesis so that whoever would read the thesis would know what he had said. It took almost a month for me to convince him of the necessity of maintaining anonymity in research work, which might not only reveal one person's identity but of others as well and might put somebody at risk for having a certain statement recorded in their name. Then, I informed them about how I would maintain their confidentiality through their

choice of self-selected or researcher-selected pseudonyms (Barbour, 2014). The one who insisted on having the real name self-selected a pseudonym to conceal his identifier; others told me to select some aliases or codenames on my own.

Rather than having a fully predetermined ethical protocol, I largely relied on what Simons and Usher (2000) called ‘‘situated ethics’’, and Tracy (2013) called “situational ethics” that reflects specific local practices. Situated ethics was determined through continuous discussion and negotiation within the local context and participants (Vanner, 2015). Likewise, I maintained ‘relational ethics’ (Tracy, 2013) by being aware of my own role and power as a researcher and “treating participants as whole people rather than as just subjects from which to wrench a good story” (p. 245). Besides, I was also aware of my responsibility to engage in research ethically throughout the entire research process, including “respect for persons (i.e., privacy and consent), concern for welfare (i.e., do no harm and augment reciprocity), and justice (i.e., equitable treatment and enhance inclusivity)” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 215). During the research process, I was careful about capturing the participants’ voice – respecting their time for the study (days, time, and venues were their choices), ensuring their stories and expressions were presented honestly, and presenting the study report as originally as possible – even when other sources are consulted, they are given due credit.

Chapter Essence and Changeover

In this chapter, I sketched the pathways of my research process, how I undertook the study right from choosing the research design, engaging in fieldwork including meaning-making, how I positioned myself in the research context, how I ensured the rigour and reflexivity throughout the study and my understanding, realization and application of research ethics in the conduct of this study. While

engaging in the entire research process, I got some key methodological insights: a) the phased approach to fieldwork and meaning-making may be misleading, we should engage in constant researcher-participant reflexivity; c) *kurakani* seem to be an appropriate everyday term to use while engaging in researcher-participant interaction, interview would sound like more formal and participants might dislike the idea, as they did in my research; c) though some can argue that every individual has their own distinct identity and we should respect that, while that is true, my experience shows that rather than being a 'distant' and 'unrelated' researcher, it would be better for ethnographers to develop informal relationships as appropriate (accepting the forms of address used in family relations had been very crucial for me to win the participants' trust), and d) there's hardly any 'exit' from the field – even though the final thesis submitted and approved, I would feel a sense of responsibility to the research site and the relations developed with the participants and the community might make my engagement more sustainable – which I have already sensed.

In the following three chapters, I have presented the empirical materials with necessary interpretation and elucidation. More specifically, in the following chapter, I have attempted to address the first research question posed in this study (i.e. how do SMC members understand 'inclusive school governance' in a rural community school in Nepal?).

CHAPTER IV

EXPLORATIONS INTO GENDER-INCLUSIVE SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Using the field materials and meanings presented in this chapter, I wrote a journal article and it has already been published. Therefore, this chapter is a slightly modified version of the following publication:

Dhakal, R. K. (2019a). Promoting gender inclusive governance to deliver better education in Nepal. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies, 6*(1), 83-95. https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v6i1p83

The existing literature reveals that gender roles and norms prevail across communities, and therefore policies, rules and initiatives are put into place to limit or enhance their impacts. Moreover, the literature also recognises that the power and voice of women and underrepresented groups are often suppressed by poverty, exclusion, violence and discrimination (Gauer & Tanner, 2018). Global efforts to tackle gender inequality have usually focused on strengthening policies and laws to increasing the participation (numerical representation) of women and LGBTQ in public institutions and policy-making processes. However, it is also important to examine whether such numerical representation of women has led to their independent voices (World Bank, 2014) and influence decision-making processes (Mohanty, 2007).

Similarly, earlier studies have focused on why there are fewer women in the governance of public institutions and what restricts women from participating in governance, but they have not accounted for women's initial interests in coming to the

governance bodies, in my research context, School Management Committees. More importantly, I have also tried to capture the social context and positioning of my research participants believing that the way they perceive ‘gender inclusion’, ‘women’s participation’ or ‘school governance’ in a particular setting and participate in ‘official invited spaces’ (Mohanty, 2007) is based on their everyday social interactions, networks and relations (kinship, power, respect, fear, etc.).

In this chapter, I examine SMC members' perceptions, beliefs, and understandings about the meaning of ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive school governance’, with a special focus on bringing out women perspectives. In so doing, this chapter presents the divergent perspectives – of both men and women participants about inclusive governance, and my (a man’s) curiosity and reflections on how inclusive school governance is perceived at large and in my research site in particular (also my shifting beliefs on why gender inclusion matters in school governance). In so doing, I start off by questioning the very notion of school as understood by common people, including myself (Vignette 1). Then, I discuss my further motivation towards studying inclusion in my field context. Then, I enter the main themes that address my research question guiding this chapter. In order to address my research question, the collected data in the form of texts and voices were woven to derive some empirical themes and subthemes. The overarching theme of this chapter emerged as “Understandings and Enactments of Inclusive School Governance Discourse’. Moving along, I opted to present my empirical evidence in two episodes. The first episode explored the participants understanding of ‘inclusive governance’ of school in general. In contrast, the second episode focused on exploring the perceptions and beliefs of SMC members about the enactments of gender inclusion in their SMC. During the entire process of this study, I was aware that whatever happens in School Management Committees

and how school stakeholders behave with each other are often a reflection of beliefs and behaviours in communities and households.

Vignette#1: An Incomplete Image of School?

While I was going to my research site, I met this wonderful guy in his early forties, who was a local political cadre, entrepreneur and social activist, at a bus stop in Pokhara. As I was waiting for the bus, this guy came out of a nearby restaurant and asked me whether he knew me. After a little conversation, he said he mistook me for someone else and asked me where I was going. And he was going through the same route. He offered me a seat in his Hilux (Toyota Pickup), which was parked on the roadside some meters ahead.

During the travel, he asked me a lot of questions, and I almost always answered his questions, asking a few questions back. He asked me about where I came from, my family, my political interest, national politics, and about my visit to his village. And he talked about himself in greater detail. So we got acquainted with each other very well.

When I told him about the purpose of my visit, he asked me what I was going to research? I told him that I was going to study some good practices in schools in that region.

He said, *"Oh! Then you are going to meet teachers and students, right?'*

"Umm… kind of. But I will talk to parents, other community members, education officials, and community organization members, too."

"And you just told me about the school, no? And not about our village!" he giggled.

"Yes!"

"What do other people have to do with school?" he asked further.

We held some further conversation, and he agreed that school is larger than just teachers and students.

But the idea of 'school' made my head go round and round during the entire travel. In fact, this raised several questions in my mind, and I reflectively pondered how almost all of us have been trained to perceive school as mere buildings, classrooms, teachers and students. Who imparted such an idea of a school? Why do we often visualise school as merely building, and/or teachers and students?

The above scenario might have resulted because we were taught that way, we saw only teachers and students in a school, or we saw similar pictures in our school textbooks. I think this is the outcome of our modern education philosophy, policy, and practice that have confined education just to schooling. Reflecting on my fellow traveller's remark 'what other people have to do with school', I realised our schools have remained as an external imposition and have yet failed to become an integral part of the community. This understanding has been shaped by how we grew up or our children are growing up. I think similar thinking and images of school persists across countries, especially developing ones.

As I reached my hotel room, I downloaded (using my mobile data) some of the school textbooks (which I myself had co-authored) from my Google drive. Scanned through the pages and marked where there were sketches, images or pictures of schools. Most of them only had school buildings; some with teachers and students (well-posed) in front of the school building; some of them contained students playing on the ground; some showed school assembly with students, teachers and non-teaching staff; and some merely classrooms.

Figure 3

Visualisation of School in English Textbooks Used in Nepali Schools

Image 1	Image 2	Image 3
		
Interchange Communicative English 4 (Dhakal et al., 2018a, p 31)	Interchange Communicative English 5 (Dhakal et al, 2018b, p. 51)	Interchange Communicative English 7 (Dhakal et al., 2018c, p. 51)

Yes, it was partly true that our schooling had imprinted an incomplete image of a school. And now I think school basically means a school community. Is school possible without community stakeholders? This question pushed me to reimagine school comprising community members – so literally school community.

Vignette#2: Please, Sign Off Yesterday's Minute!

On 24 April 2016, I went to the school which had recently opened for the new academic year after the academic session break for about a month. As I entered the office, I could see a group of teachers, all-male, seated around in two long sofas. At one table, the headteacher was scanning the attendance register, and at the other table, the Accountant was pressing buttons on his calculator. By the window outside the Accountant, a female parent and probably her son were standing, perhaps to pay the boys' fees.

After the normal greetings and answering the general questions of the teachers on my visit to Phewa Model Community School, my eyes fell on the flex boards with the name list of the SMC and PTA. I rolled my eyes down on the SMC's list and could easily identify one woman member. By the time, the bell had gone for the first

period, and the teachers left one after the other. I inquired the HT and the Accountant of those SMC members' (all) backgrounds, but my secret focus was on the female members. They openly shared what they knew about them. The HT rather asked if he could invite some members who lived close to school if I wanted to meet them, and so he dialled his mobile and talked to two of them. The first one was a male member who was not at home, and the HT asked him if he could spare some time the following day. The female member was at home, and she promised to come to school after an hour. The HT also offered to invite the Chair and other members for the following day.

I was strolling on the veranda out of the office, and the HT came out to join me. Meanwhile, the bell rang for recess, and the children came out of the classes running and jumping. The HT said, "Grandma came", pointing to the school gate. And I could see an old woman coming in carrying a tiffin box in her one hand. She went up to the kindergarten classroom door, called out a kid (her grandchild) and handed him the box. There was a woman teacher in the class to look after the children. She talked to the teacher and some kids for some time and came to the HT's office at 1:30 pm. After my introduction with her, the HT also left for a class, and the Accountant sometimes added to our (mine and a woman SMC member's) discussion. I talked to her for around 30 minutes – just talked about my personal and professional lives and learned about her, her family, and her connection to the school. After the class was almost over, the HT came to the office and asked if we had a good discussion. When I concluded our discussion and thanked the old woman, the HT said, "*Eh, Hajuraama, please sign off yesterday's minute before you go home."* I was perplexed and asked why she had not signed off yesterday? The HT said, *"She was there yesterday, but she left before the meeting started*." *"I did not have anything to*

say, so I just left yesterday", Nirmala also added. The HT continued, *"And this is just a ritual because, after all, this document is invalid because the government has already disbanded the SMC. But we are continuing the same SMC until a new one is formed."*

I could visualise how the SMC meeting would have looked like that day.

Figure 4

Researcher's Image of the SMC Meeting

(Picture adapted from https://bit.ly/2Vgl6AH)

I imagined how it would look if the only female member was absent in the meeting and all male members decided and which she was endorsing later. Later, I also found that some members (not necessarily female) were not present in the actual meeting but were present in the minute. Sometimes, the meetings started before one or two members could reach, stating that they might be coming, and in one instance, the woman member signed off the minute book and left before the meeting began. Though there were many ways to see the practice, for instance, as the HT put it, *"Since the current SMC is legally dysfunctional, none takes the meetings seriously. It is only our informal agreement to continue our tradition"* - it was only a waste of time for some members, or as Nirmala put it, *"I had nothing to say, so I did not*

come" – reluctance to participate, this scenario further encouraged me to explore what it meant to have a women inclusive governance body in schools.

Discourse on Gender-Inclusive School Governance

By the time I selected the research participants, I had been to the school several times and got good familiarity with almost all teachers and some members of the SMC (in fact, I also had good familiarity with some members from the earlier SMC because my site visit had already begun before the new SMC was formed on 28 December 2016). Before I focused on six key members (three men and three women) of the SMC as the participants, I was generously introduced by the HT and the Accountant with the SMC and some PTA members on several occasions, and that I was like an insider of their school who supported them as an expert while selecting a teacher, and coached grade 11 and 12 'education stream' students on teaching practice, and gave some lessons to grade 10 students before they appeared the national board exam called Secondary Education Exam. Since then, I constantly met one or the other members at their convenient time and place and held informal open interviews. I also held two rounds of group interaction with all SMC members and two rounds of (focus) group interaction with only female members. In the following section, I present the empirical data and my interpretation of the data in episodic forms – trying to explore the perceptions and beliefs of my key participants about inclusive school governance in their school.

Here, I developed a conversational presentation of the field texts in two episodes by stitching the scattered texts and talks drawn from the informal one-on-one and group interactions. While group interactions were held, cross-questions and adding on what others said were possible; from one-on-one interactions, I selectively brought participants' sayings to fit the questions in context. While doing so, there

could be some methodological limitations as to whether this would be appropriate to create a new scene (this came to my mind frequently). However, all these interactions and events keep moving through my head as something performed on a stage. Realising these performative events, I thought it would do no harm to present ethnographic materials as interactive ethnographic performances or theatrical representations of ethnographic inquiry (Bird, 2015, 2020) but add artistic quality of ethnotheatrical presentations (Saldaña, 2011). Moreover, discussing with the participants again to further ascertain what they would say when somebody (another participant) said something to a question provided an opportunity for reconfirming their opinions and positions. Therefore, with a rough scripted text, I sat with the participants (group) and shared with them orally what I had collected by talking to them. We also engaged in reflecting on what was meant by what they said. That sitting also changed some of the earlier scripts and added some meanings. This helped me create an 'ethno-dramatic play' (Sallis, 2014), which engaged the participants to speak to them, not at/about them (Goldstein, 2001, as cited in Cannon, 2012, p. 584). Later, I even gave them the print copy of the final version of the script [omitting my additions in square brackets] and asked them to read at any time and if they wished to add or remove something; however, they said it was okay.

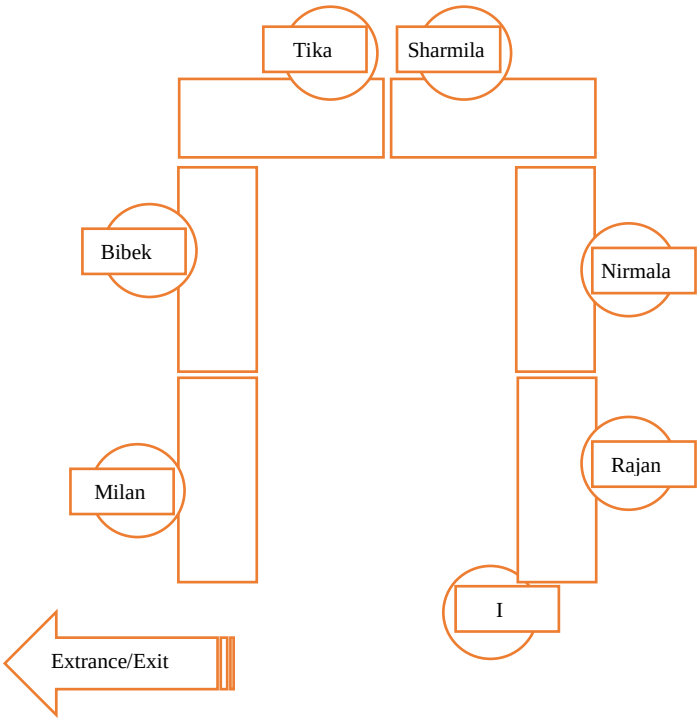
In Episode I, I have developed a narrative thread conversationally and largely presented the participants' discernment towards the discourse of inclusive school governance. Likewise, in Episode II, I highlight particular beliefs and understanding of the roles of SMC members, of course, with a focus on unearthing women's representation, inclusion and participation in the SMC. While presenting the field materials in an episodic form, I have added some of my meanings and interpretation [in square brackets].

Episode#1: Discernment Towards Inclusive School Governance

This episode consists of a scene followed by a consecutive discussion of the field materials drawn from one-on-one interaction with the participants. Scene 1 comprises the group interaction I held with my six participants on 19 February 2017 in the English Language Lab (equipped with some books, cassettes/CDs, cassette player, a laptop and a projector), which was often used as a meeting space during my fieldwork. Keeping the few extra chairs and benches in the corner, we set up the low reading tables in the U shape and sat on small mats over the carpeted floor. The way we occupied the seats during our first group interaction is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Seating Arrangement of Our First Group Interaction



I: *Namaste! Let me begin with a common question: For you, what is inclusive governance in schools?*

Milan (SMC Chair, former HT, Man, Brahmin, aged 63): *For me, having the representative from different sections of the society in school decision making – it is the right representation of the society in the SMC and PTA, which*

basically includes men and women, and also people from different caste groups and locations, and also other gender identity groups.

I: *How do you see the 'equal participation' of different stakeholders in the SMC?*

Milan*: Frankly speaking, most of the time, the headteacher can make key decisions…we are there to support him. In my experience, headteacher is every so often able to persuade others. But the main thing is the decision he proposes should be something that everyone approves.*

Nirmala: *We are only thakra [supporting poles]; the headteacher is the plant.*

[Her meaning was the members were largely supporting the HT to make (independent) decisions and move on. The metaphor of *thakra*, however, indicates the passivity of the members, and the metaphor of plant for the HT indicates he holds the major responsibility for institutional growth.]

I: Tika?

Tika (Gurung, woman, early 30s, educated): For me, inclusive SMC means the one which includes parents [men and women], students [boys and girls], and those who can contribute to school's development. Being a woman, I think having girls and women in equal numbers to men in the SMC would make it inclusive. Likewise, we also talk about Dalit, Janajati, etc. Having them would ensure better inclusion, I think.

I: *Nirmala, what is your say?*

Nirmala (SMC member, woman, Brahmin, was also in previous SMC, aged 84, 'illiterate'): *Inclusion has to do with giving a chance to all members of the society, not literally all, but a good representation of all kinds of people, including women, Dalits, Janajatis, teachers, students, etc.*

[Nirmala further gives anecdotal evidence based on her experience in the previous SMC to highlight why student representatives should also be in the SMC. I could see other members nodding their heads in agreement with Nirmala's remarks.]

I also agree with Milan in that our role as SMC members is that of trustees who do not intervene in the strategic moves the headteacher makes. Besides, he is also my grandson. He sometimes informs me what he is doing and how he is doing it. He also tells me what I should do and sometimes also what to say - when.

[I wonder why Nirmala seems to be in a dilemma about her role; on the one hand, she thinks of including students, and on the other, she presents herself (intentionally) powerless and not willing to participate fully. I understood this very sense of powerlessness, the experience of limited self-confidence as women's subordination (Sultana, 2012) to men – feeling inferior to men.]

I: *Rajan, your idea?*

Rajan (HT, Brahmin, man, aged 42, 'educated')*:* [crossed his legs and puts his one hand on the arm of the chair and another on the nearby chair] *I think that having the right representation of different groups as provisioned in the education act is what inclusion in school governance all about; and this is what we have been practising. Earlier, there was only one female, now we have three, and we have become more inclusive in terms of gender.*

As far as having students in the SMC is concerned, Nirmala raised a valid point, I think. I personally agree with Nirmala and think that it might be possible to replace two members with students in the current provisions. Though we cannot go against the policy provision and replace some members with students now, we have some mechanism to listen to our students' views in

the decisions which impact them. (He also sheds light on how they respect students' voices.)

I: *Bibek, how do you take 'inclusive' SMC?*

Bibek (Newar, Man, aged 45, 'educated'): *For me, inclusive governance of a school means having a mechanism for school operation which gives space for the presence [upasthiti] of all kinds of people, including the young, old, ethnic groups, occupation groups, and gender groups, so that the ideas of all groups can help the school succeed. Moreover, by the current practice* [indicating the recent change in the SMC formation policy]*, I understand 'inclusive SMC' as having the presence of more women members in the SMC.*

I: *What do you mean by current practice?*

Bibek: *It means the recent changes in the policy of SMC formation and having three women.*

[I reckon that Rajan and Bibek were more concerned about meeting the policy requirements.]

I: *Do you have any comments on this provision?*

Bibek: *I personally think that the policy of including female members is not bad, but the scenario in our community is that women do not easily come up; they have more household chores, and they cannot give much time to the school. They also do not know how the school functions. It takes time for them to understand the school context, and by the time they know the school dynamics, their tenure will be over. I think we need women who better understand school affairs in the school boards.*

I: *Sharmila, may I get your response on what makes the SMC inclusive?*

Sharmila (Kshatriya, woman, late 30s; literate): *The fact that it gives space for the involvement of the 'other half'(women) makes it inclusive. There could be other things as well to make it more inclusive, now our SMC has a good gender inclusion as it includes three women. It has given a chance for women to put their voice for overall school improvement.*

I: Milan, can you once summarise this discussion and put forth your ideas if any?

Milan: To make our school governance inclusive, we have to have the real presence and active participation of diverse people and minds in our SMC and PTA. Though I do not neglect the presence of diverse people, I focus on what expertise and skills each individual bring in are more important. This may sound more idealistic, but if inclusion is to be ensured, we should focus on the right mix of abilities and expertise in the members that govern the school. I, therefore, sometimes feel that the current issue of inclusion itself is very superficial.

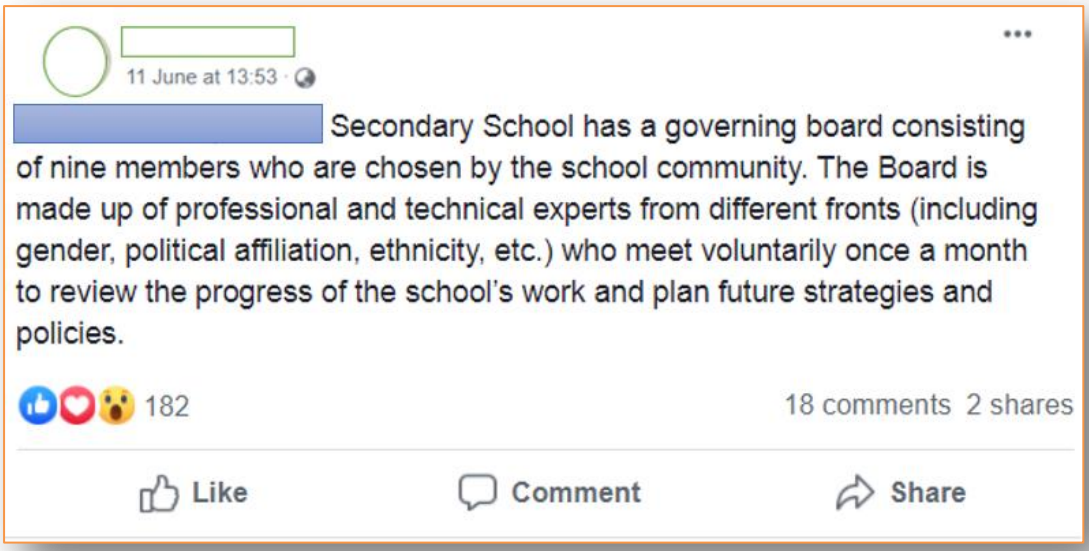
Inclusion by gender, caste is nonsense – can't a Gurung represent a Brahmin and can't a non-Dalit speak the voice of Dalits? For me, inclusion should have been in terms of the diversity of knowledge, skills and attitude each member bring to the school board, rather than mere identity as a female or a Janajati. I also believe that a single person can be inclusive in terms of speaking up their voice – this is the norm of democracy that one person represents the group.

(After some days, Milan posted a paragraph outlining his idea of an inclusive school governance body. He even telephoned me to remind me that he had posted a

'slogan' of inclusive school on his Facebook page. He wished they had such an ideal management committee.)

Figure 6

Milan's Vision of an Ideal SMC, as Shared on Social Media



Tika (Gurung, woman, early 30s; educated): *Yes, I partly agree with what Milan Uncle said, but at the initial stage of representing diverse group's voice, it is important that we include the diverse groups themselves because we are yet not ready for professional inclusion* [She referred to the idea floated by Milan on having people with professional and technical expertise]. *Once we develop professional competence, we should think of having professional inclusion as well.*

Inclusion is about our right as women – we have the equal right or even designated quota to participate in all public institutions. This is for fairness and equality.

Bibek: *One thing I also agree with Milan and Tika is that inclusion needs to be in the professional or technical expertise the people bring. And I also agree that our*

current inclusion practice based on identity is also a stepping stone towards ensuring professional inclusion in the long run.

During the interaction with the participants, I knew that some of them were aware of the policy provision that there needed to be at least three women members in the SMC, and therefore, they had three women in the SMC. They further indicated that they could have one to two more women by substituting the men members. Yet, they were happy that the current SMC has more women members comparing with the previous one. This way, the common idea that came up was having an equal number of men and women in any committee makes it more inclusive from the perspective of gender inclusion. Moreover, by the term inclusion per se, they also saw the need to have student representatives in the SMC. Likewise, their interest in having both men and women members with some expertise on educational issues showed that they were thinking of having professional inclusion rather than mere women inclusion.

The episode unfolds the perceptions that the SMC members held about inclusive school governance in general. Most of the participants clearly hinted that having the representation of diverse social groups, forming the school community, to be in the SMC. From the women inclusion perspective, having a proportional number of women (as informed by the policy mandate) or an increased number of women (from earlier SMC structure) made SMC more gender-inclusive. Their perception shows 'more women having a seat at the table' (Baruah & Reyes, 2017) is necessary to be gender inclusive. This also supports the idea of critical mass (Agarwal, 2015; P. Rai, 2017). As such, having more women in the committee meant giving space to bring in the voice of community people in general and of speaking for girl students in particular.

Although the research participants also tempted to have every school stakeholders' representatives in the SMC to call it 'more inclusive', inclusion is also context-specific (Silver, 2015) and it inevitably excludes some others. I felt that men often referred to the "inclusion" of women in the SMC as their "presence" or "representation" and "fulfilling the policy provision", while women were more inclined to understand their involvement in the SMC as their right (*to maintain fairness and equality in society*), and also the identity of being women and thereby representing the 'other half' of the school community. I could relate men's perceptions and beliefs to the 'formalistic', 'symbolic' and 'descriptive' (Pitkin, 1972) representation of women in the SMC, whereas women's understanding was somehow related with critical mass (Agarwal, 2015; Dahlerup, 1988).

I would say the aim of women inclusion is social cohesion through fairness and equality in terms of broader gender categories of men and women. And it is often done by fitting the excluded groups into the dominant norms and institutions (Pradhan, 2006). The lack of strong involvement of women members in the earlier SMC has also contributed to making the participants feel that their current SMC has a good gender inclusion as there are three women members. In this way, women were apt to consider this policy shift in response to social exclusion they had faced in the past.

During the course of interaction, one important and contestable point was raised by the participants about making their SMC more inclusive. When Nirmala thought that their SMC lacked student representatives, it was commonly agreed upon by men alike. Moreover, Rajan also clearly mentioned that if not dictated by the policy framework, they could replace two members (not indicating what gender) by the students. Here I understood what Rajan was indicating. He clearly enunciated that

having many "out-of-school" members was not very helpful. However, other members did not react to his response. Rather, Nirmala expressed her intentional powerlessness by endorsing HT's overall authority in the SMC.

When shedding light on how the participants perceived inclusion in SMC, Milan went on also to present some hypothetical and idealistic notions of inclusive SMC. For him, the current provision of inclusive governance is superficial only, and if they are to ensure the fullest inclusion, they imagine their SMCs to have the right mix of abilities and expertise. This view is also endorsed by London Business School (2003), which states that school governing bodies with diverse skills sets and experiences can improve school effectiveness. The SMC members (especially men) see the present provision as externally laden. Rajan and Bibek felt that the Ministry of Education has set the current inclusion practice, and they cannot change it. Rajan and Tika also agreed that the current inclusion provision is a stepping stone towards ensuring professional inclusion in the long run. Like some critics of inclusion argue, inclusion may embed the notion of "an already given set of procedures, institutions, and the terms of the public discourse into which those excluded or marginalised are incorporated without change" (Young, 2000, p. 11).

The episode also made it clear that men are not in favour of current inclusion. Talking about capacity-based inclusion and legal provisions bind us are examples that do not go with gender inclusion. Moreover, in the earlier SMC, there was only one woman (but they could have more than one), and now also there are three (they could have more), but still barred more women from coming. This shows there is little faith in women's capacity. However, their idea of inviting students sometimes to listen to students' voices is a local practice of giving a place for students' voices in the SMC.

As the episode unfolded, only men talked that inclusion should not be based on identity but based on capacity. From this, I draw that men say that the current women members lack capacity and are there only because they are women. This understanding is a sheer denial of women's agency. When the idea of capacity based inclusion comes, there's hardly any space for inclusion at all; this would be a continuation of the status quo since men and mostly Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Newars would be the ones who would be selected, always –after all these groups are already more capacitated than others, leaving the other groups to be more marginalised. The present inclusion has been envisioned in the context of increasing access of women and marginalised groups to decision-making.

Episode#2: Women Inclusion in the SMC: Beliefs and Practices

In this episode, I have tried to explore the perceptions and beliefs of the SMC members about women inclusion in the SMC. First, I present my interaction with the women members only (Scene 1) that took place on 6 April 2017 at the same venue as the earlier group interaction (Episode I) took place (i.e. in the English Language Lab). And then, I discuss with field tests from men members as well.

I: *Namaste! Let me begin with Nirmala. How do you relate your present experience with the past SMC?*

Nirmala (SMC member, woman, Brahmin, aged 84, 'illiterate'): *... the meetings are more regular, and most of the members are present. And this one is more open.*

I: Can you further elaborate on what you mean by 'open'?

Nirmala*: As I feel, it is more democratic and participatory. In this new SMC, the HT asks for our ideas and opinions. Earlier, the HT and the Chair would only sit together, and in the meeting, they would tell us the decision and ask us to sign*

off. Now, they have a formal procedure. Inform us of the agenda, and discuss the agenda one after the other and make decisions there. This grandson of mine also listens to our voice. Unlike the earlier practice, we now do not sign off the minutes if we are absent. Earlier we even used to sign off the minutes at home.

Earlier I used to be the only woman and would feel uneasy about speaking up, but now I have two ladies, and I do not feel alienated. They also say that they feel comfortable because I am also there.

I: *Tika, may I ask you for your opinion?*

Tika (Gurung, woman, early 30s; educated): *It is true that sometimes when the other two women do not come in time, I do not feel at home, and I feel relieved when I see them. Though there should not be anything that interferes with our participation, God knows for what; I do hesitate to participate in the meetings when I become the only woman to attend.*

Sharmila (Kshatriya, woman, late 30s; literate): *(interrupts Tika) I think I have more experience because Nirmala often falls sick and I fear that she may not come, and since Tika comes from a far distance, she is often late, and she is also sometimes busy in other works and remains absent. So I make sure that Tika or Nirmala is coming by telephoning them and feel more comfortable when I know that both or either of them is coming. Though it has only been a one-day incident that I attended the meeting at the status of just one woman, I like to be in the women's group.*

I: *Do you have any problems in attending the meeting if you were the only woman attending it?*

Sharmila: *Though there is nothing that I should be shying away, still…! I am new to these kinds of meetings, and I find it difficult to reach school alone and wait for other members to come. Also, because there is no designated seat and room for our meeting, and I have to go to the Headsir's office, and there are other teachers also. I don't want to disturb them with my presence. If only we (all SMC members) had a separate room and chairs, coming to school not even when there is no meeting would be easier.*

[The meeting-hall dynamics also shows that women tend to sit together. My observation of five SMC meetings showed that except for one day when Tika arrived late, women formed their group and sat together at one side. On the day Tika arrived late, she was asked to take a seat nearby the SMC Chair, which was near the entrance.]

I: *I am fortunate that whenever I come to your school and participate in your meetings, all female members are present (one or the other male member was absent, though). Tika, is there any reason or is it only a coincidence?*

Tika (Gurung, woman, early 30s; educated): (reluctantly) *Ummm! I am not sure but in most of the meetings, all members are present, at least seven or eight out of nine. I do not remember any day when there were fewer than seven members. You can see the attendance register.*

I: *Now, let me turn to Milan. How do you see gender inclusion? What is the advantage of having more female members on board?*

Milan (SMC Chair): *We have seen some system-level reforms and policy change trying to have more women in school governance. Earlier, we used to have only one woman and she seemed to be powerless, now they have got collective power. And that they can speak up. With more female members, I have found*

that they feel empowered; they have started some gender initiatives for girls. As the saying goes, "A female understands a female better" they are making a positive impact on the lives of girls.

[I navigate the discussion towards the competence, roles and engagement of SMC members.]

I: *What roles do you think are important for the SMC members?*

Nirmala: *From my experience, I can tell you that our major roles are attending meetings, supporting the HT to make school policies to ensure a good culture of teaching and learning, and managing school finances and procurement. But I think school personnel (HT and Accountant) should deal with the finance and procurement, and teachers and Headteachers better how to teach and what to teach. We leave these areas for them. But when we hear any complaints against any teacher's behaviour or way of teaching, we raise the matter in the meeting. It is because the school under the new Headmaster is doing good, we believe in what he does. We have informally given full authority to the Headteacher about pedagogical matters and students' discipline.*

Sharmila (Kshatriya, woman, late 30s; literate): (raises her right hand and interrupts Nirmala) *Oh, let me share it. In one instance, the teachers (with HT) expelled a student who was said to have been engaged in indecent activities (consuming cannabis, mistreating girls, and being disobedient to teachers). But the SMC members, after an appeal by the students' parents, thought that the HT made a wrong decision without their consent. And the SMC alleged that the HT was becoming super-powerful. But for me, it was the best thing the*

school did because I also know that boy very well, if he was kept in school, he would one day definitely spoil the school's image.

Tika*: For me, SMC is the school body with the responsibility and authority to implement school policy on a range of issues. It is also the one that formulates some local school policies.*

I: *Like?*

Tika: *Like school uniforms, school budgets, code of conduct for students and teachers, medium of instruction, …*

Nirmala*: [adds to the list]: … educational quality, staff development, procurement, school fees [donations and private tuition for grade 10 and 12 students], school-community relations, etc.*

Tika: [Complementing Nirmala]: Yes, … though we do not have any designated sector to look at, I find school-community relations as my own area of interest. I also feel particularly interested in girls in school. To be practical and to say it frankly, we have strong trust in the HT and teachers and that we do not interfere with the teaching-learning matters. Whatever plans they come up with that is considered good, we approve them, including coaching and tuition classes, day boarders' facility for SEE, grade 11 and 12 students.

Sharmila: *We are only members; who listens? So we rather keep quiet. We also don't know much about school business about teacher training, classroom management, curriculum. So sometimes we feel to be 'outsiders' to school.*

I: *Nirmala madam, do you also feel like that? What makes you feel like that?*

Nirmala: *I think 'outsider' means our role sometimes in the SMC is not important because they discuss teacher issues, teaching-learning issues. And there, we do not have much to contribute to the discussion.*

[Sharmila and Nirmala seem to have kept this social inculcation of 'you know nothing', you are the 'others' and 'women don't know, and they should better keep quiet'. This very idea is a barrier to the effective participation of women in social institutions and also in social interactions and negotiations. This is not only hindering women from their representation but also opportunities for (self-)empowerment. It appears that the idea of inclusion and how it empowers the otherwise neglected groups to seem to have poorly reached or even have not reached the general public.]

Tika: *Sometimes, not having some previous exposure to school jobs and not knowing the school affairs and relations with higher authorities make us feel incompetent and outsiders. I think slowly this gap will erase. But we should also be proud of what we could have done. We have been successful in bringing some gender-based reforms.*

I: *What kind of?*

Tika: *I think this case makes inclusion an important policy. Through our collective voice, we could manage sanitary pads for the girls and its disposal system. If we were not on the board, I think this would not have happened. We even started raising funds by inviting the teachers and students to donate some at their will to the 'school fund' on their birthday. Now no chocolates are distributed, but the birthday boy/girl will donate some money to the fund. And parents are also happy about it. We have also formed a Girls' Club.*

Rajan (HT): *In our context, mothers generally know much more than fathers about their kid's schooling activities and needs. And they know it better when it comes to girl children. I feel that gender-inclusive SMC has enabled us to implement gender-sensitive reforms. We must thank them because gender-sensitive issues have come up, and girls have benefitted. Moreover, girls'*

attendance, confidence and participation have increased. You can see now many clubs are being led by girls.

I: *How have you found working with female members? Is it comfortable or challenging?*

Milan (SMC Chair): *Female often probe deeply and get deep down the roots of the issues, but that is sometimes irritating…explaining to them everything in detail. Challenges included more prolonged decision-making and additional conflicts due to the increase in different perspectives. But one important shift in the current SMC is that the members are more regular and female are even more regular and punctual. Unlike my thinking that they would be busy with domestic chores and could not make time for school, they surprisingly turn up in time and regularly.*

[While saying this, Milan was making a warning like 'Do not interfere me!']

I: *Do you have anything to comment on the way sometimes decisions are taken by the Chair or the HT alone? If that has become the case any time?*

Sharmila: *Often, the decisions are made collectively, or at least we are informed of the likely decisions, and we approve them before they are executed. But it has happened once or twice in my knowledge, …it might have happened sometimes that decisions are taken by the HT alone or in consultation with the Chair or teachers, instead of the full SMC. And the meeting was later called to approve the decisions already made and executed. For example, the school had decided to accept the donation from Right-For-Children, and once about teachers' visit to best practising schools. Though there is often no clear line between what full SMC must do and what HT could do at his discretion, these matters have also become conflicting, especially when some members also*

have some interest (one member wanted to go with the teachers' team to visit schools). In those situations, we sometimes feel that we do not participate in decision making to the full extent.

Milan: *It is not always important to ask every members' opinion. If it is considered good by the teachers and students, they should be allowed to do it. We should give them some autonomy in such matters. But if those decisions affect teachers, students, or parents, it is better we pass the decisions in meetings. Yet, we (Chair and HT) know the school needs better than any other members, I think it is better other members do not make an issue of such matters as pedagogy and teacher development.*

I: *Bibek, you mentioned in the last episode that women lack the necessary knowledge of school affairs. On what basis did you make this claim because they have been visiting school since their children got into it, and they know how school activities are conducted?*

Bibek (Newar, man, mid-40s): *I mean, it is true that they know the seen activities, but there are many unseen businesses…dealing with District Office, local political leaders, Palika official, donor agencies, managing financial burden. They* (referring to the present female members) *hardly have any idea.*

[Bibek was also boycotting the existence of women.]

I: (I got more interested in understanding this and turned to the Headteacher.) *Rajan, do you agree with Bibek?*

Rajan (HT): *It is true, but it is not the only reality. It is also true that some men also do not know much about school business, and their participation is quite the same as that of women.*

I: *Can you explain what that means?*

Rajan: *It is as simple as what Bibek said. Those who did not have any close link with the school, meaning if they have never taught or served in a school, they have little knowledge of how the school functions. If you ask about their active participation in the meetings, I think it is not the gender but their previous exposure to the education sector or community organization that makes the difference. They therefore sometimes raise issues that the school cannot manage. They think that school gets lots of money from the government and we (teachers) use it for own benefit. But the reality is that they are as responsible as I am for the financial management of the school. Besides, we (SMC Chair, HT and Accountant) have often tried to make them understand the finance flow, presented in the SMCs when, from which sources, on what heading, and how much resources the school gets. Yet, they raise a question for the question's sake. We sometimes even ask them to talk to the accountant to understand things better, but they do not bother doing that. Some people are like that!*

[Rajan's perspective also shows complete denial of women's agency.]

I: *Tika, what do you say about Bibek's comments that women should be more knowledgeable about school activities?*

Tika (Gurung, woman, early 30s; educated): *No doubt that it would always be better if we had SMC members with some school teaching or administration background. But a single person does not necessarily hold all experiences. Since HT and Chair (ex-HT) are familiar with official regulations and higher authorities' (District Education Officer (DEO) / Department of Education / Ministry) directives, it is obvious that they are playing a more active role in school governance issues. I agree that we have come from a non-teaching*

background, and are new to this work, so we have little knowledge of teaching and school management, but there are some male members as well who are like us. This does not mean that those who do not have previous experience should not get a chance. See Nirmala, she has been in the SMC for many years, and now she is happy that she got two of us on board. This means it is better to have more female members.

I: *Shall I ask if people's perceptions of you (women) changed when you became a member of the SMC?*

Sharmila (Kshatriya, woman, late 30s)*: Many people, including school teachers, see us as women, not SMC members. Therefore, a gender-based discriminatory conservative practice still persists. This is even more challenging for us because all of the women in our SMC have come from a non-school background (none of us has experience working in schools). If only we were teachers earlier, I am sure, their perceptions would be different. (Early day of her SMC membership position)*

Now I think we are respected; everybody knows us. Self-esteem has increased, I feel empowered. Many community people consider me to be an ideal person – who is in charge of the school that educates their children. Many children also recognise me as their school representative and share their problems and good feelings in school. (Later day of her SMC membership position)

Earlier, we were sometimes tagged as 'quota woman', and nobody liked to be a 'quota woman'. But now, that does not matter. What matters is whether we can speak up for the common good of the school, of the girls, and of our children.

I: *What other changes have you felt with the increased number of female members in the SMC?*

Rajan (HT, man, Brahmin, 42): *Gender inclusion has increased accountability and trust. The general public now has full trust in us, and they rarely question the school's authority and the decisions it makes. Teachers have become more accountable and so are the members of the SMC. Trustworthy schools receive both moral and financial support from the community and non-state organizations.*

Milan: *With more female members, I personally feel that corruption can also be controlled which I have seen in many schools. Male members would generally expect some money even for the meetings, and would often seek ways to make some commissions when there is some medium to large scale projects. It was much difficult earlier. But these things are not considered now. Female naturally are less corruptible.*

I: *Is there any positive influence on children or the community due to your participation in the SMC?*

Sharmila: *I have found that my daughter is doing better, and she has been happier since I became an SMC member. My neighbours tell me that their kids are also doing better. It shows that where mothers are involved in their school, children do better and are happier.*

[Sharmila's expressions were consistently denying the blames made by men giving evidence that the presence of women in SMC has raised girls' expectations and achievements.]

The episode presented above highlights diverse views held by SMC members on the inclusion of women in the SMC. They reflected not only on the roles and

responsibilities of the SMC members but also on the influence and engagement in school management and also on how women's presence has influenced girl's attitudes towards school. However, in terms of discharging their roles, they seem overly delegating their authority to the HT. Moreover, all women and Bibek regarded HT and teachers as persons who should deal with school finances and procurement matters. The scenario seemed to have changed from the past SMC to the present one in terms of enabling women's presence. Nirmala refers to more regular meetings and members being present and that she does not feel alienated as she has got two other women with her in the SMC. Yet, women members feel it easy if they were in a group; therefore, they often liked to be in women's circle and thus were usually seen together in the observed SMC meetings.

Dhakal (2019) analysed that women were considered less skilled, lacking knowledge of school affairs and contributing not much in the meetings – which has made women feel excluded from fully participating in the SMC meetings. Moreover, men's perspectives also seemed to deny women's agency. More specifically, it considers women as simply trouble-makers, and that one does not need to value them. His statement was accusing the women of being dumb – they know nothing. Moreover, his accusation on women of not being informed or 'educated' of the school process also hints other deprivations of women (*aimaijati*) – including being not so 'educated', not being as capable as men, being mostly engaged in household and not being aware of outside networks. This indicated different social categories, besides gender, interact and affect women's participation – an intersectionality perspective. The women participants underscored that the intersection of existing hierarchies such as caste, ethnicity, the language with gender and ways in which this intersection creates assumptions about the "other" are creating both literal and symbolic barriers to

participation. When engaged with participants in making meaning of their different social positions and roles, we (I together with the participants) could make out that the women participants in particular and other community women, in general, were subjected by ethnicity/caste, literary level, class, gender and other forms of social difference all at a time (Nightingale, 2011). As such, gender gets embedded into other social positional characteristics.

This evidence verifies the claim that though "descriptive representation" (Pande & Ford, 2011; Pitkin, 1967) is ensured, women are yet to ensure their substantive participation in school governance. At this point, I reflect that when certain women were included, others were excluded, which holds true for any member irrespective of their gender and other backgrounds; but even the included felt marginalised and excluded in the decision making processes. This further indicates that the present challenge is whether women in the school board, over time, lose their outsider status and participate fully (Dhakal, 2019a). Nevertheless, in some specific issues, women's agency has also appeared to have been vocal - making a positive impact on girls' lives and having positively influenced the school community. It thus also appeared that there is some understanding of making some collective gain through "inclusion". This implied that voice, participation, capacity building and sharing come when women feel valued in civic spaces.

Moreover, the practice has improved because, unlike the past SMCs, they do not sign off the minutes if they (applies to all members) were absent. However, some instances were recorded where the decisions were taken solely by the HT, and the decision was later formalised by calling an SMC meeting. This revealed that there is a blurred boundary of what authority and autonomy are given to the HT and what authority is to be exercised collectively through SMC decisions.

In a patriarchal society, the popular belief that women are often busy in domestic affairs and cannot make an excellent contribution to their SMC roles was held by both men and women initially. Similar assumptions and findings are reported in some studies (e.g. American Association of University Women, 2016; Morojele et al., 2013). However, with the passage of time and with some experience of working in the SMC, this belief was challenged by women members. They were able to challenge this belief due to strong family support (in the case of Tara and Nirmala) and their role in bringing some reforms for girl children. I found the research participants believe that gender inclusion has brought about system-level reform and policy change to address inequities in education governance. It has enhanced and promoted school democratic practices. Moreover, they have also formed a local SMC meeting policy that mandates that they have at least one woman member and seven members to hold an SMC meeting. This local practice also places importance on gender inclusion in the decision-making process.

Analysing the above discourse, I drew three key understandings across the continuum that shapes my participants' perspective and attitudes towards inclusive governance in their school.

Table 5

Participants Understanding of Inclusive School Governance

Conformist Perspective	Transitional Perspective	Utopian Perspective
Rural women without previous exposure to school jobs lack knowledge of how the school functions. They are only there because they are women.	*By having women representatives (as per the policy framework) is sufficient to make SMC gender inclusive.*	*Inclusion is not seen in attendance, nor is it meaningful only by placing people in terms of mere gender, caste or ethnicity. Inclusion is to be in the 'diversity of skills and expertise'.*
Though this view was held by some men and was strongly expressed in the initial days of my fieldwork, it was later slowly subsiding, especially when women-led initiatives started becoming successful.	Current practice is a step towards professional inclusion. This is the mechanism for a transitional time – it Is time for empowering the members.	This view was widely discussed but as an ideal state. This idea was radical in that having the right mix of people in each institutional governing board could drastically change the institutions and the way they operate. However, given the existing socio-political environment, this turns out to be only wishful thinking.

The conformist perspective (especially that of men), at one end, almost negated the idea of gender inclusion and labelled it 'superficial'. Such an understanding indicates that unless there is some understanding of what can collectively be gained through true "participation", the impetus to really change behaviours, attitudes and, as a result, structures will be buried under existing hierarchies and power dynamics. The transitional perspective accepted the current realities both at the policy and practice level and believed that though the current practice is not adequate to empowering women members, it is a step towards fostering better gender inclusion in school governance. This perspective was influenced largely by the SMC policy. At the other end of the spectrum, a utopian perspective exists that

imagines a situation where inclusion would be in terms of the diversity of skills and expertise of the members. This perspective, however, disgraces the spirit of the agenda of 'inclusion' per se – inclusion is for bringing the deprived groups into the mainstream.

Since the three perspectives (conformist; transitional; and utopian) are in a continuum rather than linear hierarchies, women SMC member's situatedness can be mapped at the transitional level (Figure 7). Nevertheless, given their liminal experiences and changing perspectives, they hold varied beliefs towards where they want to be (including a sense of getting into the utopian level).

Figure 7

Mapping of SMC Members' Beliefs Towards Women's Inclusion and Participation

Again, these three are the beliefs/perspectives on why women participation is needed (not how actually it is). Their conformist belief is guided by socio-cultural setup, whereas legal tools somehow inform transitional belief, and the utopian belief largely stems from the social constitution or what they expect from SMC members (esp. in the context where the school is struggling for resources).

Here it is noteworthy to think over the meaning of diversity of skills and expertise. Inclusion, in principle, is basically targeted for the diversity of opinion and experiences. The whole idea of inclusion is based on the belief that a man cannot feel women's problems and concerns, and privileged caste/ethnic groups cannot understand the deprived people's sorrow. That is why we need women and other

castes/ethnic/economic groups in the governance process. Thinking of having the 'right mix of skills and expertise for inclusion would exclude the deprived groups from the opportunities, and the main philosophy of inclusion will be defeated. When talking about inclusion in governance, when people think of having a technical team, the idea of inclusion might be paralysed.

Is it that the SMC members should necessarily know how to monitor the school budget preparation, prepare a school plan, or support teachers pedagogically? When we are in a situation to have a woman budget expert, a Gurung planning expert, or a Dalit pedagogy expert in every SMC, then we do not need the whole concept of inclusion, and probably this is a utopian expectation. Rather, thinking of a situation when there would be a woman, a Gurung, a Dalit, a poor in the SMC, and they are trained/oriented on becoming an effective SMC member, and given more responsibility, would develop a radical belief. For me, SMC as of today is envisioned as a governance body, not a technical body. If we are to see it as a governance body, it should be dominated by people with diverse experiences and opinions and not purely by people with a diversity of skills and expertise.

Chapter Essence and Changeover

In this chapter, I discussed two key ideas: first, the general understanding of the discourse of inclusive school governance, and second, beliefs and practices of including women in the SMC. On the one hand, the idea of inclusive school governance emanated from a stakeholder based perspective. It reinforced the idea of having diverse stakeholders in the SMC or similar mechanisms where the voice of the school community is respected. On the other hand, the reflection on the practice, especially on gender roles in school governance varied - inclusion meant different things to different stakeholders. Some participants used this to refer to the presence or

attendance of female members in the school management committee, some believed in more involvement of female members in school affairs, including in decision-making processes, and some meant both. Rather than clearly stating where it can be positioned, participants wished to see participation (of both male and female) in a continuum. At one end, they questioned why women (or men?), to quota for filling the gender gap, and at another end, they highlighted the perceived impact women could make on school outcomes – which men might not do or could just overlook. Contrarily, inclusion has supported in bringing reforms at both policy and practice levels or at least created more favourable conditions for girl children and that it has created an environment for women's voices to be respected in public institutions. As such, the idea of inclusion was found to be contestable.

Having addressed the first research question (i.e. how do SMC members understand 'inclusive school governance' in a rural community school in Nepal?) in this chapter, now it is apt to make a shift to addressing the second research question (i.e. how do women stakeholders get into School Management Committee in a rural community school setting?). Therefore, in the chapter coming up (i.e. Chapter 5), I have examined the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the SMC.

CHAPTER V

WOMEN IN SMC: COMING TO THE UN/KNOWN TERRITORIES

This chapter presents the field materials and discussion of how women come to the territory of school governance, especially when that is a somehow new area for them to venture into. At the same time, what motivation and belief hold some members consistently in the SMC has also been explored. As individuals, women SMC members have socio-political ambitions and that they want to show that they can contribute to the school community through their presence and voice. However, I argue that there could be several micro-level interests and willingness, other socio-cultural positions and also politico-economic dynamics that can push women members to make space in some social institutions. While trying to explore the response to the question: what motivates and drives women SMC members to become SMC members? I also explored other social dynamics, including men's role, interest and agency being carried by women. As such, this chapter unfolds such experiences and stories of the SMC members.

Women's participation or gender inclusion in public institutions has been a radical policy shift in Nepal in the recent decade. It emanated from social activists and political leaders' increased focus on women empowerment. As such, women's participation is considered inevitable for "enhancing social responsibility, building social capital, improving public services, qualifying for full citizenship and for enabling local democratic participation" (Blakeley & Evans, 2009, p. 15). Moreover, the growing public belief that the presence of women in public institution governance fortifies their identity as women and creates space for more participatory practices

(Mishra, & Mishra, 2016) allures people to involve them in decision-making bodies. Likewise, such commitment and policy shifts have driven women inclusion in school governance setting as well. With different policy interventions, including affirmative action measures (i.e. women quota), it is believed that women's political agency regarding decision-making and service delivery will be boosted (Mueller, 2016). However, Bennett (2014) argues that while gender-specific quota is an important tool for increasing the participation of women in governance, it is "constrained by a focus on *quantitative* outcomes" (para. 2). It is, of course, a quantitative measure; however, I claim that the 'women quota' has supported raising the quality of participation, though more needs to be done to maximise women's role in school governance.

Regardless of such augmented commitment to encourage women's participation in public institutions, including schools, there is little exploration of what motivates an individual woman to become an SMC member. Several studies explore why women do not participate or what socio-cultural barriers prevent them from participating in decision-making in different institutions (Betzer-Tayar et al., 2015; Moghaddam et al., 2018; Rout, 2017; Tamang, 2018). These studies often highlight age, sex, qualification, childcare and family responsibilities, lack of partner support, workplace environment, harassment and violence, lack of knowledge, etc. as the obstacles women face in obtaining decision-making positions and participating in the decision-making processes. However, when they do participate, why and how they come to participate has been scantly studied. Therefore, this chapter is going to fill this void by exploring the motivations and drives that the selected women had, which pushed them to become SMC members. Moreover, in the global and national scenario, where "politics is not just a man's game" (Karp & Banducci, 2008), women representation has come to the fore more vehemently. Has a favourable environment

been created for women to come forward and to compete with men in politics and public positions? Are women conscious enough of their rights and roles in contributing to equitable development? Are men becoming more open about women's participation? These and similar questions await a careful examination at this juncture.

In recent years, the policy discourse of social inclusion and women's participation in public institutions is becoming a buzzword in Nepal. In the South Asian context, the social institutions are created in such a way that they systematically exclude certain people based on their group characteristics (Thorat & Newman, 2010). In this chapter, I critically examine the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the SMC. In doing so, my focus is on how female members come to the SMC, what backgrounds determine their involvement, whether their presence in the SMC meetings is restrained by any reasons (including time and space). I use the concept of representation and theory of participation and critically review the policy on gender inclusion in the SMC to explain how women, with their intersectional backgrounds, come to be the members of the SMC. I argue that rather than personal choice, other factors like family background, public choice, and acceptance culture are more dominant in determining the participation of female members in the SMC. I also discuss the very desirability/unwillingness of the SMC members (both men and women) to increase female members in the SMC.

In the following section, I portray the scenario of how the new SMC was formed.

Vignette#3: Formation of the New SMC

Here I present the scenario of how the new SMC was formed. At first, I portray the overall scenario as observed in the meeting venue. Then, I explore what has also happened outside and behind the scene.

On the Scene

On the day the new SMC was to be formally formed, I reached the school at half-past nine. The formal programme was set to begin at ten. There were around 150 parents, teachers and some children. On regular school days, I could see more female parents visiting the school at recess supplying snacks to their children. But on this day, female parents were comparatively fewer than male parents. I wondered why there were so few parents out of 700 students. Some male parents were discussing in groups. The School Supervisor (SS) and Resource Person (RP) came 15 minutes late, and some of the teachers told everyone to get into the hall. The hall was full of plastic chairs, and there were few long benches at the back. There were few cushion chairs at the front where the few dignitaries and guests were asked to take a seat. I could see HT, Ex-Chair of SMC, SS, RP, and an elderly woman at the front. I was sitting on the 9th row. Meanwhile, the Ex-Chair saw me and invited me to take a seat on the second row, pointing to an unoccupied chair. So I took the seat on the second row. (*Later, when the account was asking for women to register their name as interested in becoming an SMC member, I went back because there were some women and actually I wanted to listen to their conversation.*)

The programme was hosted by the accountant, who first welcomed the guests and parents on his behalf and introduced the agenda. Then he asked the HT to welcome the guests and the gathering. Then, the Ex-HT was given time to speak about his experience; he also talked about the history of the school in brief. Then, the

School Supervisor was invited to speak some words, who praised the school for its success in the +2 exam. He then handed over his responsibility to the Resource Person to elaborate on the provision of SMC and PTA. The RP further took the meeting to the next level by asking members to register their interests to be in the SMC. He, with the help of the accountant, a teacher, a parent (who was a former teacher also) and the HT, collected a few names. Till then, none of the women had registered their names. He frequently asked the women to register their interests. The HT and the accountants were also asking some women to write their names. But, as I could observe, only two women (looked like *Gurung or Magar*) raised their hands from the fourth row – both of them had sat together. That was a good start.

Then they took some more time convincing some women. The RP talked about what they will have to do after becoming a member of the SMC. He was simplifying the roles, and the time they will have to dedicate to the SMC/school. He said, "*There is nothing difficult, and nothing big. You have to attend some meetings and give your opinions."* The accountant went to a group of women and requested them to come up and give their names. He insisted that they select one from their group and give him a name. Then after a while, a woman spoke out, "*I think Sharmila is suitable*." Then, other women added a voice for Sharmila. Initially, Sharmila resisted, but when other women in the room also turned to her and said that she should write her name, she agreed. The Ex-Chair requested the old woman to continue in the next SMC. The HT also aligned his voice with the Ex-Chair. The old woman was also ready.

Then, the final name list was read by the RP. He categorically asked who will fall into the category of 'those who are social-workers, educationist, contributed to the school for long, donated some cash or land to the school'. "*I need two people for this*

position with at least one woman," said he. Then, the old lady was proposed by the Ex-Chair as a woman member, and everybody clapped in agreement.

Then, he read the list of male members in the 'social-workers, educationist or donor' category; there were three. He asked them to go outside, sit in the sun, discuss among themselves and come up with one name in about 10 minutes. Only those three members were allowed to go out. Their mobiles were also seized during the time. Then, he read out the namelist with 13 people, three female and ten male. He asked the three women to go outside, discuss in a separate group and decide who two would be on the committee. The women went outside. Nirmala (who was already decided to fill the quota of 'social-workers, educationists or donors') was also allowed to go out with the women. Then, the remaining ten male members were sent outside accordingly asking them to reach a consensus on two people. They reached a decision and came up with two names in around 15 minutes.

The women came back in five minutes. One *Gurung* lady had agreed to step back.

Then came the three men who were sent out first. They could not agree fully. One member agreed to step back, but the two members did not want to leave a chance; rather they were ready to go for voting. The RP asked the accountant to get things ready for the voting. Meanwhile, the other men also came in. They agreed on two names. Then the SS stood up and said, "*Why do you make a fuss! Now you see two men have come out of 10, why can't you two come up with one name?"* He allowed them ten more minutes to discuss and come up with one final name.

The two of them were sent outside. After around 5 minutes of discussion, they came in. Milan was given consent by Toran (who was later selected as the Chair of the Parents' Teacher Association).

Then, the six of the selected members were sent out again, asking them to nominate one as the Chair. Meanwhile, the teachers were asked to nominate their representatives. The accountant already had the name on his hand. He invited Tirtha Sir, and everybody clapped their hands. Then, the six members came in (within five minutes) with Milan's name. The Headteacher was announced as member secretary of the SMC as an ex-officio member.

The RP read out the name one by one, and the SS and the Ex-Chair welcomed and congratulated them with red *tika* and a scarf each around their neck.

Meanwhile, I observed the overall scenario of the formation of the new SMC, I drafted a diary entry about this. Late in the afternoon, when the programme was completed, I was refining the diary entry (also translating it) sitting in the school office. Then, the HT came, asked me if my observation was meaningful for my thesis. He even looked at my note, which I had prepared in the form of a news item. He asked me if he could take a photo of my diary. And on the next day, I could see the same news (translated into Nepali) on the school notice board. Below is my diary:

New SMC Formed at Phewa Model Community School

28 December 2016, Phewa

An eight-member new SMC has been peacefully formed at Phewa Model Community School in Himpakha village in rural Gandaki today. This new SMC has filled the void created by the disbandment of earlier SMC on 30 June 2015 and is supposed to clear the pending decisions and make school operation smooth. The SMC has been led by Milan Sharma, former Headteacher of the same school. Nirmala Sharma, who had served on the earlier committee, is continuing her service. Four other members, two men and women each, have been selected among the parents. A new teacher representative (man) was nominated from among the teachers. As per the provision,

the Headteacher would serve as ex-officio member secretary of the SMC. The committee would get its full board once the local election takes place, and a member from the rural municipality will get nominated by the ward committee.

In the evening, I also reflected on the overall SMC formation process, especially from women interests, willingness to participate, and the scenario staged in the *bhela*. Capturing the essence of what I observed during the day, I composed a poem (See Box 4).

Though the meeting did not go that smooth, there were not many anticipated tensions either. No election was held; all members were allowed time for discussion to make a consensus or mutual understanding, and it all happened smoothly. Finally, they made two committees (SMC and PTA) without an election. Therefore, I was amazed at how things happened in a relatively well-coordinated and orderly manner since I had observed lots of arguments, lobbying, quarrelling, groupism, and even fighting (even causing injuries) in the SMC formation back in my village some years ago, and read the stories of the clash between political groups and

Box 4

Another Woman Who Got on Board

Out there, not that far from where I was
I saw and heard a crowd of four woman
You should go, you should go!
'No, no, no. I can't!' Speaks an unprepared woman!!

I saw this quiet woman, in her mid-thirties,
And she lacks disposition,
For what she was offered.
Yet, the pushing voices were untiring,
And she seemed to be retiring –
Maybe she was in two minds.
I got curious,
Will she make a move?
Oh, yes!
Another woman penned her name at the front.
Voices at the front turned noises,
And the crowd of four turned silent.

Tch! Will they speak up again?
I think they will.

(Source: Chapbook, pp. 3-4)

even shooting and killing in Dhanusha (Nepal Monitor, 2015). Not realising the backstage show, I was as happy as the key players (dominant male members, including district education officials, HT, local political leaders) seemed to be in the meeting. However, I was often haunted by a question: why only a few women come up. And I also rejoiced that any way they were able to form the SMC. Late in the evening, when I sat to write my field note, I reflected, in a poetic form, how women put forth their nominations.

The Education Act 2028, eighth amendment [Section 12(1)] has made the provision of at least three female members in the SMC. This way, the current policy creates spaces for women's participation in school governance. However, as I reflect, the SMC formation programme committee members, who seemed to be all-male, were so much prepared that they did not think of allowing any more female members than meeting the minimum policy requirements. They could have allowed all four women to be members. I further imagined what if the Headteacher and the accountant were women, or the SS and RP were women or at least one or two of these key players in this stage were women? Would the dynamics change? Would more women come up to register their interests? I felt that women lacked sufficient inspiration to serve on the committee. Many of them did not see anyone (woman) to look up to. Therefore, the situation of little interest from the female prevailed. Now, it is to the discussion of local political meddling in making up the SMCs that the chapter turns.

Behind the Scene

It is not always true what we see; instead, the performance is designed and planned behind the scene. Given the nature of 'performativity culture' (in a mundane sense – everything seems intact informal performance) in Nepali bureaucracy and political power play, I was aware that there could have been any plans going on about

who comes to the SMC and who does not. The game of inclusion and exclusion of certain groups of people or certain candidates could be felt in most of the political activities in Nepal – which was also frequently reported in the case of the SMC election. I was therefore also interested in exploring any possible truths that might have fallen behind the scene.

One day before the SMC was formed, I sensed that there were some games and power-sharing negotiations about who comes as the SMC Chair. The HT, who seemed not very much aware of what actually went behind the scene, but indicated that some power games were going on between the two candidates. He further assured me that either of those two would come up as the Chair of the SMC. He further hinted to me that Prabhakar[25] might have more information as he was one of those favouring and lobbying for a candidate. I tried to take his time and talk about that matter, but he had stayed in Pokhara that night. So, I postponed the idea of talking to him right away – that might also not be good as he might not be in a position to discuss that matter before the Chair was selected.

Taking the clue from Rajan, I further inquired of his idea of what kind of candidates are competing and his choice of the candidate. He told me that one of the candidates was the Ex-HT and the other one was a social worker. When I wanted to know his preference, he took me in a new direction. He wanted the Ex-Chair to come to the new SMC again. He said,

[25] Prabhakar was the one who offered me a lift in his car from the district headquarters to reach the school for the first time. He was a local United Marxist and Leninist (UML) Party cadre and an entrepreneur. He often had a louder say in any political and social activities in the village. Besides, he was close to the school and was also a very close friend of the HT (they had their schooling and higher education together). After the 2017 local level election, he got elected as Ward Chair of the ward where the school was situated, and thus became a member of the SMC – completing the SMC quota (as per the SMC formation guidelines, a palika representative would be an ex-officio member of the SMC). Until the local level elections were held, there were only eight members in the SMC.

> *Actually, I as HT would like to work with Harka Sir, but given his deteriorating health condition, he wished to step back. I preferred Harka Sir for two reasons. He had been a person with influence, though not politically, in the district and among our ex-students who are overseas and thus he could generate funds. Besides, he has been very regular to school unlike other SMC Chairs in our neighbouring schools, and his monitoring, observation and feedback have always helped us do better. It is very unlikely that we would get a person as knowledgeable of school as Harka Sir. … Milan Sir is also a good candidate since he has a good network with the education line agencies. But he has already left this village and is now living in Pokhara, how feasible will it be for him to serve in the SMC here? … I am sceptical about the role of the other candidate. He does not have that much connectedness with the school. He might be interested for a political reason – Nepali Congress supporters might have pushed him. I don't think he will make a better candidate, yet, this area is Congress dominated, he might get a chance if political lobbying worked. (#Rajan, Kurakani, 27 December 2016)*

When I visited Milan at his residence two months after he got on the SMC, he revealed his interest to serve in the SMC, not in the PTA. He Said,

> *If I was not given in the SMC, I would not be in the PTA either. I knew the role, authority and limitations of both the SMC and PTA. Why would I bother coming to school from Pokhara if I cannot make any significant changes or contributions? I could simply telephone the concerned people there. (#Kurakani, 26 July 2017)*

Though Milan did not speak much about the pre-agreement with the PTA Chair, he did indicate that there was a kind of game of power balance beforehand and

that they acted out their roles on the day. When I asked him about any possible political power balance or setting before the day the SMC was formed, he remarked,

> *Did you see any political play in the meeting? Everything went smooth, no? But I don't know why Toran Ji who had agreed earlier to be in the PTA wanted to be in the SMC so heatedly. (# Milan, Kurakani, 6 April 2017)*

Later, I could talk about the same matter with Prabhakar. He admitted that he could have wished to serve in the SMC, but he preferred someone who was not vividly tagged as a political member to be in the SMC. So he stood for the Ex-HT, though the Ex-HT had just shifted to another place. He was proud that the direct political meddling was not seen in the school during the SMC election. He said,

> *You know, how things work here. …We cadres were not present in the school. But it was pre-planned and decided that SMC would be Chaired by UML supported member (Milan) and PTA by Congress supported member (Toran). But in the meeting, Toran tried to stand for SMC – maybe they [Congress cadres] had plotted against us – thinking that our member was sojho (humble). But I know Milan was more popular among people, and especially among school staff; therefore, they would choose Milan for SMC. (#Prabhakar, Kurakani, 30 December, 2016)*

In my query as to why he himself did not want to serve in the SMC, Prabhakar remarked that it was not good to get involved in school having been tagged as a political cadre. He further said,

> *We can also suggest and influence, for good reasons, whoever comes to whatever committee. When we can influence from outside, why should we necessarily be in the committee? And I never see the political affiliation if somebody is fit for the job. (#Prabhakar, Kurakani, 30 December, 2016)*

As a school community member, he thinks he had a good influence on the school activities and is committed to doing anything to support the teachers and the HT to improve the school conditions. He narrated how he influenced the appointment of the HT to that school.

> *You know when Rajan got through the teacher service commission examination for a permanent position. Harka Sir, Milan Sir and other political cadres, along with me, had gone to the DEO to get Rajan placed in this school. But the DEO had decided to send another teacher whose name appeared first in the list; Rajan was second. Against all requests and political lobbying, the DEO was sending another teacher who also wished to come to our school. Finally, before we left, what I did was 'challenge' the DEO. I banged on the table and said, "If this is your final decision, then we will ask Rajan to tear your letter in front of you and resign. We will pay him more than your salary and incentives from community resources and get him back. He is the only deserving candidate for our school, do you know that? You may get the other teacher to sign here, but we won't let him work in our school. Do you want to spend the government budget for the one who does not work?" And there came a new letter from the DEO the following day – Rajan was placed in our school. (#Prabhakar, Kurakani, December 12, 2016)*

Rajan also acknowledged what Prabhakar said and remarked:

> *You know, sometimes, formal things and polite requests do not work in the system. Unless Prabhakar had threatened the DEO, I would have been placed in some other school. (#Rajan, Kurakani, 21 February 2017)*

When I wanted to discuss the issue of women inclusion, Prabhakar said that they had not thought much about the members, including women, as such. They

thought that not many people would be interested, and the people in the older committee might continue. And regarding why Nirmala continued, Rajan (the HT) said that they had to get Nirmala back again because there were no other women in her category – "founder or (land) donor". "If only Sapana[26] had agreed, we could have her in the committee." (#Rajan, Kurakani, 21 February 2017)

I could observe and feel that there was not much homework and exercise behind the scene to bring forth women. If they really needed Sapana, why did they not do the same level of exercise as they did for the Chair? Rajan made an excuse for why they wanted Nirmala back because they were ready to invite Sapana, who would not fit into the same criteria (donor) as Nirmala but would have found a place under the same category, which also provisions for *buddijiwi (wise person) or shikshapremi* (education lover) (which also falls in the same category). All the power games were centred on whose associate (which political party's favourable candidate between the UML and Congress) to be placed at the SMC Chair's position. There were some rounds of meetings at the party offices, DEO and in the village among the cadres (sometimes with the candidates for SMC) of UML and Congress, and DEO officials, especially School Supervisor and Resource Person. And given the closer tie of the UML favoured candidate to the school, they somehow agreed to let him lead the SMC on the condition that he would support the Congress favoured candidate in the PTA.

[26] Sapana, a Magar lady in her late 20s, was a local NGO worker, who was soon resigning from her post in the NGO. She was an active supporter to the school as a member of the NGO and was a good influence. Citing the reason that she was going abroad for study, she did not wish to be in the SMC. She even talked about not wanting to be a 'quota woman'. She sees the need to empower women, but does not consider 'woman quota' to be an appropriate means to do so. She feels that such quota has stigmatized women and belittled their capability. Actually, some of the women were alerted by her not to be a 'quota woman' and she had been somehow successful in convincing them that 'woman quota' degenerates women's identity and capacity.

Having collected this information, I got more curious to know why they wanted the members (both male and female) as such when they have their full concentration on the Chairs only. "*Curiosity kills, huh?"* I asked myself – reflecting on a famous proverb, "Curiosity killed the cat" (Am I adding more burden on myself by unnecessary exploration?). And I was not sure whether I could complete this variation on the proverb *"…but satisfaction brought it back"* until I could put my 'extra' efforts (Chapter VI). This curiosity led me to think on multiple questions: Do SMC and PTA really need any members per se? Can the members execute their authority against the politically backed-up Chairs? Do the members (not) appear powerless in front of the Chairs? Isn't their participation limited or negotiated in some ways? These varied questions gave rise to a new overarching research question: how do the members participate in school governance processes? In refining this question aligning with gender inclusion, I came up with the following research question: Why do female SMC members negotiate their participation in school decision-making the way they do? The answers to this research question have been explored in Chapter VI.

Coming to the Un/Known Territories

In this section, first I explore the perceived significance of becoming an SMC member and serving in the SMC, and then I explore what drives and motives actually push women to participate in school governance. Responding to my query on why women should come to the SMC, Tika said:

> *We have a saying, 'If a woman is educated, the whole society will be educated' and that woman understands the needs and aspirations of girls and children more than men do. Therefore, to stand for half the school population and to make decisions and learning conditions better for them, women need to*

be in some key positions in the school, including in the SMC. (#Kurakani, 8 August 2017)

Milan considered SMC to be a very important committee, and its members are crucial positions in a school management mechanism. He said:

Every member, including the women, have the opportunity to influence the management of the school in a practical way. All members help each other to reach common good decisions. Though I do not totally discard the notion of gender role in SMC, I can partially agree that women must be there to raise voice in their favour. This is also true for men members. We can represent each other – maybe this also partially. – (#Kurakani, 26 July 2017)

Though Milan indicated that every SMC members have the opportunity to influence decisions, he also denied the need for the presence of women in the SMC. Rajan shed light on the role performance and likely impact of the SMC members on school decisions. He expressed it this way:

The SMC members have the final say in all important decisions that are made for the school. Whether they are aware of this at this stage or not, but slowly they will understand this, and I know they will play their part very effectively. We need women in the SMC because they are more aware of some of the nuanced issues that the majority of girls are facing – which men might have overlooked. (#Kurakani, 19 March 2017)

Even the men members underscored the roles women members can play in the SMC, and Rajan also pointed to the need for having women members in the SMC. Now, I move on to explore what motivations and driving forces are at the place that inspires certain women to come forward and participate in school governance. To do so, first I bring some of the evidence (based on my observation of the SMC formation

process and interview and FGD with the participants) of how women came to the SMC and second present a vignette of who they may represent – being aware that given the patriarchal culture, women may tend to represent men.

Nirmala was somehow familiar with the way the SMC worked so it was not challenging for her to join the SMC because of likely changed roles and responsibilities. Though she seemed not to be serving in the would-be formed SMC, she joined it after getting requests from the Ex-Chair of the SMC (with whom she had worked for two terms earlier in the same portfolio). For her, it was re-entering the known territory.

Tika was actually pushed by her family members to come up and serve on the committee. With the nomination of Tika, space for speculating her family interests could be sensed by other parents as well. It was because her husband's brother had also registered her interest to be an SMC member. Later, Harka sir revealed that they were determined that they must find a space for either of the family members – as a legacy of his contribution, he wanted to see his family member continue this service.

Sharmila, on the other hand, had never ever thought of becoming an SMC member. It just happened on the spot that her name was put forward by some other women and more women supported that. It was, in a way, a kind of women's choice, if not a public choice, that made Sharmila stand for SMC. Here, though both Sharmila and Tika were coming to the unknown territory, it appeared quite easy for Tika to get into the SMC and possibly also assume her roles since her family background and other identities of getting closer to school intersected well to push her towards the position. Therefore, for Tika and Sharmila, the idea of intersectionality (Gouws, 2017; Walby et al., 2012), rather than just being women, has played a significant role to assume the role of SMC.

One thing that is common across these women participants was that they did not seem to be interested in becoming the members, but all ended up becoming one.

Now, I present a vignette on how Tika got to be an SMC member, possible conflict of representation as an SMC member, and she recently developed an understanding of what women members can do as SMC members.

Vignette#4: Women Can Change Things for Better

On a Saturday morning (around 6:30 am) in mid-March 2017, I walked out of the hotel for a short walk. As I reached the nearby *chok* (some elderly also pronounced this as 'chauka'), I could see some elderly people sitting on a *phalaicha* [a resting place] near the bus stop. As I was some distance away, I could not recognise them, but I could see that they were having tea – served by the nearby tea-seller. As I was walking past, I heard a familiar voice shouting to me, *"Eh, Dhakal Sir! Kata hidnuvo babu, bihan bihanai?"* It was the Ex-SMC Chair of the school. I greeted him and responded from a distance that I was just strolling to stretch my legs. He came walking fast and proposed to me to go towards his house.

I pretended that I had some works back in my room, but he insisted that I go with him right then. And I accepted. Actually, I also wanted to spend more time with him, and visiting his home also meant visiting Tika, who was his daughter-in-law. Though another meeting with Tika and other SMC members was set for the following day, I could not deny visiting them. On the way, he called his daughter-in-law to make food for me as well. As we walked around 15 minutes, we reached a riverbank where a new bridge was being constructed. He told me that once the bridge was fully ready, many students from the village across the river would benefit – because till then, they had to walk 2 km more for another bridge, especially during the summer. For other times, there would be a makeshift bridge. He further said, *"Though there is*

a school in the village across the river, many students from that village want to come to our school."

All the way to his house, I also observed the engagement of men and women in that village. I could observe that there were mostly women in the shops and hotels, men were seen in groups in *choks*, outside tea-shops, in the farm, stone quarry/crushers (slate cutting sites), buses, trippers and tractors. He told me that most of the males had gone abroad. More in the gulf countries and a few, especially Gurung men, are in the UK, who are recruited in the British Army. He told me about most of the villagers – who does what, where! He further told me that those women whose husbands are abroad mostly stay at home and do not engage in any other works – rather they have given their land in lease to others to farm. Some of them have even shifted to Pokhara city to send their children to good schools. The husbands of those women who were in shops and hotels are supporting their wives by bringing goods from Pokhara.

As we were walking towards his house, I got a good chance to talk to him about his involvement in the school. I also tried to get his perspectives on what drove female members to come to the SMC. I was more interested in learning about Tika's interests in coming to the SMC. He cleverly revealed that there were fewer women who were as forward-thinking and socially active as his daughter-in-law and that such women should come to the fore – to lead other women. He also revealed that he desperately wanted to see her serve in the SMC since he had felt the lack of female agency in the earlier committees. Moving on he further revealed that he with his sons and daughter-in-law had decided that they stand for the member position in the SMC or in the PTA. In my query on how she became interested, he replied, "We convinced

her that getting her in the committee is easier than getting any male member since there would be fewer women competing for the position."

As we reached his house, I was welcomed by Tika. After exchanging our greetings and with a little query on my arrival, she offered tea.

I also got some time before lunch to talk to Tika, and she spoke up honestly. She revealed that she was not interested in the beginning. Actually, she stood up as a member just to keep her father-in-law's name. As she reflected, gradually, she liked the job – feeling more attached to the school and pushed by her intuition to do better not only for the children but to keep up her father-in-law's name. She also revealed that she slowly got a sense of her duties as an SMC member. Now she feels proud that she was making positive changes for the children. She feels that her job is important:

> *It is important because we can put forth the problems our children are facing, and also change things for the better. For example, managing the sanitary pads for the girls and its disposal system has made learning conditions better for girls. If we were not on the board, I think this would not have happened.*

Although women could take their willingness to join the SMC as a possibility and opportunity to making an impact, Tika was initially pushed by her family members to register her interest to become a member of the SMC. The above vignette gives way for two layers of meaning. One that Tika was not willing to serve in the SMC, and because of the persistent interest of her father-in-law, she stood up. This gives me a sense of whether she is representing herself, a woman or her father-in-law, a man? Though literature also reveals that "proxy" or "rule by proxy" (men being represented by women) (Mueller, 2016) is widespread in local government systems in some South Asian countries, it would be too fast for me to reach this conclusion here. I will therefore see this part in the following chapter. And second, she did not know

what she could do as an SMC member and how meaningful their actions would be for the larger good of the school children until she became an SMC member and served for some time.

As I had talked with some women on the SMC formation day, I had sensed that many of them did not know what the SMC does and thus this lack of basic knowledge of its functioning, some women did not show up. I found some women feeling cynical about the way SMC and PTA were formed. For instance, Sharmila said:

> *Rather than inviting all for a one-shot meeting and forming the SMC (including persuading, nominating, electing and on-boarding), few dedicated pre-meetings could have given more members a better understanding of what SMC is and what it does*. (#Kurakani, 9 August 2017)

This implies that women are not willing to participate because they do not have a clear idea of the role performance and their potential contribution as an SMC member. If only they were aware of these in advance, they would have been more willing to join the SMC.

Different scholars, including Mueller (2016), leave the questions open - whether women in local government posts would act as change agents concerning service delivery or whether they would merely adopt established rules of doing politics. However, my study in a school governance context reveals that though women adopt established rules of doing politics, they, together with men, also act as change agents and make a positive impact on the lives of girls and boys. Therefore, this calls for capacitating and empowering women as equally as men so that they can co-act as change agents, complementing each other.

Inclusion: By Choice or by Chance

The female participants who are serving in the committee often felt that they came to the SMC by chance. They acknowledge either the policy provision, or their family, or women parents for their interests, nomination, and selection in the committee. In this regard, Nirmala, in one of the group interactions (24 March 2017), said, "*We came here because of the 'female quota'. Otherwise, there were a lot of men competing for the position.*" Nirmala, however, felt connected to the school. She vividly remembered how the school was constructed by her husband and other kin in their ancestral land. Nirmala further adds:

> *I have nothing specific to say, tell and do; the grandsons will do. I feel that the school made by my husband and brothers would be cared for and also earn fame. I am here only to continue my husband's legacy. .... If I get sick for a few days and cannot come to school, I feel like when I shall get better and come to school. I like to see children playing in the school.* (*#Group interaction, 24 March 2017)*

Sharmila, during the group interaction with the female members only, shared her part of the story about her unwillingness and how she came to the committee. She said,

> *I had never ever had the faintest idea of serving in the SMC. I'd not even imagined that I would take that position. It all happened on the day. Like other parents, I was also invited to attend the event – for a new SMC was going to be formed. I actually did not know what it was and what it had to do with school after all there are always HT, Accountant and other teachers. (#Sharmila, Group interaction, 24 March 2017)*
>
> She further adds:

Actually, I did not want to come. I was told by Sapana not to be a quota woman. But when there were no women who were so willing to join the committee, and at that time, I was proposed, I also felt that I needed to respect their trust in me. (#Sharmila, Group interaction, 24 March 2017)

While Tika had a different story. She shared:

I was frequently told by my father-in-law and also by my husband that I should give my name because there would be quite fewer females interested in becoming SMC members. So it was not my choice, actually. If they had not pushed me so much, I would not think of becoming a member. I know it is a voluntary job, and my home is not that close to school. I have to allocate time to visit school. Besides, I am also an active member of a cooperative. – (*#Group interaction, 24 March 2017)*

The evidence suggests that their background and school connectedness in any way paves the way for women members to come forward or to accept the request for becoming a member.

In the case of Tika and Nirmala, their decision to become SMC members resulted strongly from family ties rather than their own willingness for social prestige, moral superiority or commitment to eliminating corrupt practices in the existing system (Choi, 2018). Therefore, their entry to SMC followed the elite pathways to carry on their families' (men members') achievements, power, reputations, and political interests (Choi, 2018), which was driven by persuasion by male relatives – which Choi (2018) calls "benchwarming" tactics to sustain and extend family achievements, interests and reputations (p. 13), and Mueller (2016) calls "proxy" or "rule by proxy" in local government systems in some South Asian countries, and Everett (2014) calls "proxy women" in India's local councils. Their entry is also

supported by political dynasty literature, which argues that entry to any political posts for women is open due to their familial ties to prominent male politicians (Richter, 1990; de Silva, 2017; United Nations Development Programme, 2010). In this sense, patriarchy, in an elitist culture, is not an obstacle, but an asset, to these women from privileged families (Choi, 2018). With this literature, I can relate Tika's case with the political dynasty becoming a force for getting her onto the SMC. Alternatively, based on our social system, her entry to the SMC could also be attributed to the 'feudal, patriarchal family culture' which pushes its kith and kin forward through its high socioeconomic status. However, the same patriarchy could limit their participation when actually playing their roles in the SMC (This has been discussed in Chapter VI). From the feminist standpoint, Tika's coming to the SMC is not as per her own self-interest; she could give more time to the Cooperative and strengthen her voice and impact there. Therefore, she largely failed to challenge the patriarchal domination, and from the perspective of meaningful participation, she posed a threat for becoming a proxy. Though several such possibilities were there, she however later disproved these by exercising her woman agency for bringing about some gender reform, especially for girl children.

On the other hand, Sharmila seemed to accidentally stumble onto SMC; however, her nomination can again be justified by persuasion. In fact, her entry could be ascribed to persuasion by communities. For all of them, material rewards and social prestige did not seem to be important at the beginning stage – while coming to the SMC. Therefore, much like the general gender participation scenario in Southeast Asia (Choi, 2018), persuasion appeared to play a key role in women's decisions to come to the SMC in rural Nepal. Viewing the participation of women against Choi's (2018) three pathways (elite, middle, and grassroots) of women's political

advancement, my two female participants came from elite pathways, and another from non-privileged background came from ‘mediated’ grassroots pathways – not out of frustration with corruption or incompetent male SMC members, but out of trust from supporters.

By now, they have learned the basics of school governance and created their space with delegated roles. Moreover, they are more motivated by the desire to address gender issues and related concerns to make things better for children, rather than the desire to ‘deepen participatory governance’.

The increase in rural women's participation (political, administrative, and community) has occurred against a backdrop of major changes to the inclusive governance policy at the national level. Yet, there are limits to inclusion – caused by both individual agencies, attitude/self-respect, and family and community structure. The unwillingness of women themselves to become engaged in school governance seemed to be the result of their socio-cultural context, which discourages them from entering school governance.

> *I thought my family might assume that if I became an SMC member, I would not give them the respect as usual or that their social respect would be seized by me. So I feared marital, or family problems might arise in my family. (#Sharmila, 6 April 2017)*

Likewise, the socioeconomic status and family structure of the Gurungs was seen as a barrier to them for their participation in the SMC and in any other similar positions. Most of the Gurung families are poor, and their male members are mostly outside. The few rich Gurungs are unwilling to be on the committee, they have other choices – visiting their friends and relatives in Pokhara, Kathmandu or abroad, yet they are ready to support the school when needed. There were three *akshaya kosh*

(reserved fund) in some Gurung's name; they provide scholarships to some poor and *dalit* students.

I also inquired some of the women in the meeting hall who were sitting in a corner about why they were not volunteering to participate or interested in becoming the SMC members. Some of the responses were as follows:

- *Won't my husband kill me?*
- *There's no one to look after the family, who can look after school?*
- *We have no idea of school operation.*
- *Better keep lady teachers. They are more capable than us.*
- *How can we work with 'chhattu' [clever] Brahmin?*

The above remarks by the community women clearly show that these women are not disinterested to join the school as SMC members, but the family and social structures are framed in such a manner that they cannot claim the positions. When we seek skills and expertise (as discussed in Chapter IV), then how these women could become the members? Based on these, I can say that it is not these women who are disinterested but privileged men who obstruct all their ways to become SMC members. The very scenario propels one to think that the inclusion of a Gurung woman is needed in the SMC.

After the SMC was formed, I also met Shobha, who had raised her hand but later stepped back; I asked her why she stepped back. She replied, "I saw only one hand raised (*Tara*) among the women, so just raised mine. But when others were also suggested by the teacher and audience, they asked us to come with three names. I easily stepped back since other members were more eligible in my view." She further explained that women do not wish to be in the SMC because they have not worked in a school before. "Nor do they consider themselves as equal a member as in the

cooperative. I am sure if it was for a cooperative, there would be more women than men raising their hands." It, however, hinted that women are not disinterested in school or any social institution. Rather the patriarchal social structure has inculcated in them a sense that they should not try a new field – meaning they should be restricted to *'jutho chulo garne'*. These were being told that running a school is not like 'cooking rice*'*. This is how the social structure has pushed them behind.

Literature has also revealed several glass ceilings that restrict women's participation. The glass ceiling, as defined by a US Commission, is the unseen, unreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievement (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995, p. 4). The glass ceiling seemed to have been felt by Grandmother since she could not get into higher administrative level even during her third term on the same committee. "The problem with these glass ceilings and walls was that these barriers could not be seen from below or from above" (Morgan, 2015, p. 11). This required a widening and deepening of research to identify the barriers and to see how these operate in other aspects of school governance.

Kabeer (2000) argues that dominant groups try to invisibilise, impose dominant values or denigrate certain 'categories of people', and these forms of injustice stem from social patterns of representation – resulting in the exclusion of certain categories of people. In this study, 'gender' emerges as a category that "encompasses elements of injustice which stem from the dominant values of a society" (Kabeer, 2010, p. 6). Disadvantage results in social exclusion when the various institutional mechanisms through which resources are allocated and the value assigned operate in such a way as to systematically deny particular groups of people the resources and recognition which would allow them to participate fully in the life

of that society (Kabeer, 2010, p. 9). By sheer inclusion, there is also a doubt that women may be used as 'puppets' or even on adverse terms (Kabeer, 1994). This gives way for simultaneous inclusion and exclusion – 'categorically' included, 'substantively' (in terms of meaningful engagement) excluded.

What Might Work

Exploring further, I asked the participants what they would like to see when they want to venture into new territory. Sharmila pointed out that they lack strong women as role models in front of their eyes who have challenged the traditional socio-cultural norms and proved them worthwhile. While Tika raised the issue that even the policy for having women in the SMC is weaker compared with the policy for the election of local level representatives. She said, "In the local level election, either the Chair or the Deputy Chair should be a woman candidate from every party; in the SMC, there's no rule as such." She indicated that if the HT is a man, SMC Chair should be a woman or vice-versa. Her point has a strong political rationale for the representation and empowerment of women in public institutions – to have equal power-sharing between men and women.

Milan and Bibek labelled women as 'ignorant' (of school functionality) – 'what do they know about how school works?' and called for orienting them on school businesses. All participants felt that all members (excluding the HT and Chair) needed some support in realising and discharging their roles and responsibilities since they were new to such an experience. However, trying to give more inputs to women only to make them fit in the eyes of men would be biased. In fact, as S. Acharya (2014) asserts, we are trying to enforce a 'scientific' and 'rational' model of school – school distinct from the community and is purely governed by its own rules and regulations. However, SMC members are the representative of the community who

follows the relational model, i.e. “cultural norms, values and/or gender stereotypes” (p. 74). Based on S. Acharya’s ideological distinction of ‘scientific’ or ‘rational’ thinking (followed by school) and ‘relational’ thinking (followed by the community), I realised that SMC members were following a ‘relational model’ and thus they preferred to be called by a family relation (e.g. *sister-in-law*, *grandmother*).

Rajan added that SMC members need to see a possibility for progression within school governance roles. There could be a system for the promotion of women (members) in the governance hierarchy. Nirmala raised the issue that there should be some support and training for the women so that they can make informed decisions. Sharmila and Tika further added, if only we could get some specified areas (sector) to look at, that would make us more interested and also feel valued.

As the above evidence suggests, some men (also a woman) believed that if women were oriented, trained, or supported in school businesses, everything would be fixed in terms of women’s participation and voice in SMC. I, however, feel that this conventional assumption is not going to help much in terms of women empowerment. Given the empirical evidence, I feel that women may feel empowered just by finding other women around them (as Nirmala did), or by seeing men valuing women’s work (men’s appreciation of women’s role in some gender reform), or by equal power-sharing in executive positions (SMC Chair and HT). In Stromquist’s (2015) words, women feel empowerment when their agency —at both the individual and collective levels—is promoted (p. 307). Inversely, against the stereotypical men’s view on women empowerment, I realise (also based on a workshop I ran for a few SMC Chairs and HTs from Gandaki Province on Inclusive School Governance in early 2016) that there is a need for men’s empowerment (re-orientation and learning) to view things from different perspectives for gender equality and women’s

empowerment. Therefore, there is a dire need of empowering men, especially to respect and value women's presence, voice, participation and decisions. What else could women empower when other people or men are ignoring or excluding them. At this juncture, I think it's time for us to take an alternative perspective rather than adding loads of empowerment activities on women only and still complaining that they are not empowered while actually the other side needed attention. Therefore, I think interventions on men's attitude and behaviour towards women's participation, beginning with making a "critical reflection on gendered social norms" (Stromquist, 2015), are much needed. Otherwise, it will be like adding more and more burdens on women in the name of empowering them to fit in the men's world.

Chapter Essence and Changeover

This chapter examined the means, conditions, mechanisms, and informal practices to *bring* certain women to the SMC and also to exclude 'other' in the process. Moreover, it explored varying backgrounds, interests, and motivations of individual stakeholders, especially women members, in becoming SMC members. More particularly, it showed the pathways of women inclusion in SMC, taking account of their social positions, familial ties, intersecting backgrounds (education, ethnicity, economy, class, age, etc.) against their un/willingness, rationale choice, and personal impetus for school politics. Family ties feature in two women's stories whose decisions stems from 'political' (school managers') dynasties, whereas another woman's interest stems from community persuasion and trust. It showed that patriarchal family structure and women's socio-economic positioning obstruct them from showing their more actual identity as women who can represent their category in public institutions. Though it initially appeared that women were disinterested, that was not the case – they were made to feel dumb, incapable, and docile by the

patriarchal social structure. So, for them to speak, there was a need for men members' support and other community people's encouragement. In this sense, they initially need to be brought forward since they are not allowed to come forward on their own. However, it also shows that once they come (or are brought) to the SMC and learn the basic dynamics of the school affairs, get acquainted with their roles and responsibilities; they can work for the better of the school children, especially girls (as Tika claimed they could change things for better).

This chapter also tried to justify the argument that "woman quota – as a formal mechanism – has increased women's quantitative participation and also provided opportunities for women's engagement in school governance, though constraints on their agency might be engrained in men dominated SMC – and that their say in decision-making might be inaudible (This will be explored in the following chapter).

In the following chapter, I attempt to address the third research question posed in this study (i.e. why do female stakeholders of a rural community school negotiate their participation in school decision-making the way they do?). While doing so, I also examine the type of interactions they hold during the decision-making processes and also interrogate the idea of 'feeling excluded while being included'.

CHAPTER VI

DYNAMICS OF 'OTHERING': NEGOTIATED PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Using the field materials and meanings presented in this chapter, I wrote a journal article and it has already been published. Therefore, this chapter is a slightly modified version of the following publication:

Dhakal, R. K. (2021). How are 'included' excluded and vice-versa: Negotiated participation of women in school governance in Nepal. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies, 7*(1), 16–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/23944811211020369

Women representation in public institutions has been a key policy shift in Nepal in the recent decade, given the increased focus of social activists and women political leaders on women empowerment. With the growing public belief that the presence of women in politics and public institution governance fortifies their identity as women and creates space for more participatory practices (Haug et al., 2019; Mishra & Mishra, 2016), allured political leaders and policymakers to involve women in decision-making bodies. Likewise, such commitment and policy shifts in Nepal have driven women's inclusion in school governance settings.

Chapter IV portrayed the understanding of 'women inclusion' in school governance where predominant female gender images were reproduced in the initial stage of participation. Here again, I portray that the reproduction of those women's gender images and their seeming ignorance of school affairs curtailed their active involvement and that their participation in decision-making is negotiated. Similarly,

In Chapter V, I discussed the pathways of women SMC members to school governance. Though the journey into SMC membership was somehow rosy, creating their own space, speaking up the voice of women, and above all feeling 'included' would be challenging.

In this chapter, I examine the engagement and contribution of women members in the SMC. In so doing, I elaborate on the perceptions and practices of women members on how their participation has influenced the school decision-making and also how they feel about being included or excluded in the meeting room. I examine the meeting hall dynamics in connection with observing the activities, voices, roles, and space of women in the men-dominated SMC. I use the theories of representation and participation to explicate how women negotiate their participation in the decision-making process in the SMC. I argue that though women's participation in decision-making has gained currency across the globe, there are fewer opportunities for women to engage in governance and decision-making in Nepali community school governance. I argue that given their little exposure to and experience of administration, management or teaching (school connectedness), women initially feel 'othered' or excluded from the decision making processes; however, gradually, they feel more connected with the school, feel 'included' as their voices are heard and interests are served, and thereby also demonstrate 'substantive' participation.

Throughout the country, community schools are experiencing drastic changes in the makeup of their governing bodies (this issue is different in institutional schools). There has been radical growth of female members in the SMC and PTA with the implementation of the eighth amendment of the education act (earlier, there was a special provision for one female member). Ensuring that there are at least three

women members in the SMC was one of the agendas resulting from this policy focus on gender inclusion and women empowerment. However, the policy does not suffice to ensure that the 'included' women participate in school governance on equal footing with the men who had captured those positions for a long time. Often, gender and novice vs experienced differences are bound to emerge and need to be addressed. Therefore, not undermining the changing demographics in the SMC resulting from the policy shift following recent socio-political changes, I examine how the 'included' women negotiate their participation in school decision making the way they do.

Engagement of Women SMC Members

Gender inclusion policy has increased the number of women in the SMCs, thereby giving them space to raise their voice in matters related to their children, themselves, and the larger community. With the increase in female members in the SMC, the ex-officio member of the SMC, who is also the HT, has perceived women inclusion as an enabling policy not only for empowering the women but for activating the school governance bodies. In his experience, the current SMC (with more female members) has been more active than the previous committees which had only one woman. As I have already discussed in Chapter IV above, the HT and Chair praised the women members particularly for their regularity and punctuality in attending the SMC meetings. Even one woman member, who was also in the previous committee, shared that her own role as a member of the SMC has been more effective. She shared:

> *Earlier, no one would ask me about any matters. I was there to just sign the minutes. But now the Head Sir and the Chair also ask for my opinion. Even the two ladies come to discuss with me some matters before the meeting. They listen to my thoughts and opinions. (#Nirmala, kurakani, 4 September 2017)*

During my earlier field engagement, when the old SMC was in place, and also at the transition period of the old and new SMC (the old one was disbanded and the new one was not yet formed), I had observed that some members were absent in the meetings but had their signature in the minutes (later) (See Chapter IV), and that was very often the case with Nirmala. But I could observe and sense that in the current SMC, all women members are regular. With more members being regular and punctual, the meetings are held timely. Milan, SMC Chair, thought that the active participation of women had increased the accountability and trustworthiness of the SMC itself. He mentioned:

> *Women's group serves as a critical audience, who asks for the details of every agenda and activities and thus we need to answer them. They, in turn, will be able to answer and communicate with the people in the community. (#Milan, kurakani, 28 August 2017)*

Moreover, all SMC members openly talk about the contribution of women SMC members in bringing out some gender initiatives like constructing a new girls' toilet (earlier one was in bad condition) with sanitary pads and pad disposal system. With their focus on girl education, they have been able to set up a girls' club with a lady teacher with their mentor. I also observed the club meetings and activities and found that the girls were active in their weekly meetings and activities. The club had designated each member to look after the girls in a particular grade. They would either suggest the girls some of their own ideas, or recommend them to visit a particular (woman) teacher, or even send them to the counsellor (teacher) when they were found to be facing any problem. I even found that though the number of boy students was slightly higher in grades 6-10, more girls were involved in most of the student clubs (11 clubs were formally set up with the help of teachers). Interestingly,

eight of those clubs were led by girls (some sample club organograms are attached in Scrapbook, pp. 12-13). Though there was no direct influence of the SMC in forming those clubs, and that the presence of more women in the SMC might not be the sole cause of more girl students coming to the fore, it indicated that girl students were equally or more empowered. Tika credits the girls' club for the increasing participation of girls in different clubs in school. She shared:

> *Since the girls sit together and discuss their problems and also solutions in the girl's club and report to their teacher mentor and also with us [female members], they have become more confident. With the active role of the girls club and female SMC members' careful observation, girls' attendance has risen. Now, girls have become more active; you can see many girls participating in different clubs. (#Tika, kurakani, 9 December 2017)*

The evidence above suggests that women SMC members are gradually creating their space by identifying areas they can impact and learning other school dynamics. A growing body of evidence has demonstrated that men and women differ in policy preferences and intervention focus (Pande, 2003). This study also presents similar insights that with the presence of more women SMC members, girl-friendly reforms and girls' empowerment have taken momentum.

Feeling Included or Excluded

With my prolonged engagement in the field, I could observe a gradual shift in the understanding and experiences of female members about their roles and responsibilities as SMC members. There was also a shift in their expressions of feeling 'insider' or 'outsider'. They initially felt that they were like outsiders and were alienated (See Chapter IV), but gradually learnt some basics of school dynamics and found their space, and started feeling somehow 'insider'. Yet they have not been full

'insiders'; they rather at times felt that they were being excluded while having been included. This has, however, raised critical concerns on women empowerment.

In a group interaction with female members, I discussed their ideas and experiences with the SMC. I found that they were not feeling easy with the new roles. They were rather not happy with the working modality of the SMC or that they did not simply like the first few SMC meetings.

> *I think that's not the place for women because it's all about men talking and writing the decisions. And we're only there to agree what they say. – (#Tika, group interaction, 24 March 2017)*

Partly agreeing with Tika, Sharmila remarked:

> *It's a totally new field for me. Unlike the other male members, I had never worked as a teacher or worked with teachers and schools so closely. I don't know who the resource person, school supervisor and other district-level officials are. In fact, we [female members] have little idea of how the school functions and what kind of actions and decisions would do well for teachers and students. So, I think we have to learn a lot of things first. (#Group interaction, 24 March 2017)*

This evidence suggests that women in my study context have lesser contacts and confidence to actively participate in school governance. Surprisingly, nobody (especially the 'insider' HT and the Chair) bothered to ask in genuine terms (with the purpose of making them comfortable and have them actively participate) what has been their experience or how they felt about the meeting. In fact, Sharmila had no experience of engagement in public space at the capacity of becoming a member of a committee or a group. She further remarked:

> *We are like kūpamandūka [kuwa ko bhyagutta]. Since we don't know much about school business, we feel as if we are 'outsiders'.* (#Group interaction, 24 March 2017)

Women initially also held the gendered belief on themselves as frogs in a well; who have not come out of home and spoken in public (raised their voice in public), and thus they largely limited their roles as housewives. The following remarks by Tika and Sharmila also show how they felt about attending the SMC meetings in the initial days of their tenure as SMC members. This showed that one reason for women feeling excluded from decision-making was their lack of understanding of how the school system works. But this does not stop there; they feel marginalised and excluded if only one woman has to face the men-dominated SMC.

> *I do hesitate to participate in the meetings when I become the only woman to attend.* (#Tika, Kurakani, 6 September 2017)
>
> *Though it has only been a one-day incident that I attended the meeting at the status of just one woman, I like to be in the women's group.* (#Sharmila, Kurakani, Group interaction, 24 March 2017)

These remarks point out that female members hesitate to participate when only one woman is present in the meeting, which means they felt it was not easy to sit in a meeting hall filled with all men. Moreover, my observation of five SMC meetings showed that women formed their group and sat together at one side except one day when Tika arrived late. Thus, the boardroom dynamics also showed that female members tended to sit together because they were yet not compatible with the male members.

Sharmila pointed to the organisational arrangement itself that does not enable them to feel like they belong to the school or even own it. So it is also an institutional

issue than these women's. She referred to the situation of having no seat and room for the SMC members (See Chapter IV, Episode II). When Sharmila pointed out the lack of designated seats and roles for (women) members, Tika critically questioned:

> *Are we just pawns? We have no specific role. Only the Chair and the HT have all of the roles, and they sometimes ask us for our opinions. There are two people at the top who do all the agenda-setting and decision-making.*
>
> (#Kurakani, 14 April 2017)

Tika raised an important question: Who runs our community schools? And answers that two people [the HT and the Chair] run the school in the name of the nine members. In this expression, she was looking for her role, and she pointed out that the system of HT/Chair being dominant all the time should change. Her voice was demanding that all members be given some specific roles or sectors to look at so that they can engage more in their field and also become more competent. She raised an important issue for creating her space in the SMC so that her agency and voice would be stronger.

I could observe that all the members of the SMC, including males, were experiencing some awkward situations in just showing their presence during the meetings, they wanted to come to school at other times also and to contribute at their capacity, at least by observing and monitoring teachers' and students activities, talking to parents and taking care of teachers' and students' needs. This made me reflect that if there were different sectors for everyone to look at, all of them would have their say, at least in their areas. Therefore, there were fewer opportunities for members to put forth their opinions because of not having specific roles. And as a result, members could exercise little authority.

This very critical observation and cynical comment of Tika fades gradually over time as her involvement in the SMC gets more impactful. In a later visit to her, she said,

> *Since there are three women, we have got collective power and can speak up. Now, we have also found our space for what areas to look at and that we are respected by the SMC members, teachers, and the community. (#Tika, Kurakani, 12 Dec 2018)*

Sharmila remembered,

> *When the HT asked us for our opinions, I used to feel that he was asking us to mock our ignorance of school affairs and our inability. Now, I think it was a good practice. Now I feel included in the meeting. Our opinions are respected. (#Kurakani, 14 Dec 2018)*

With their success in constructing girls-friendly toilets with proper management of sanitary pads and the establishment of girls club, women members felt that their opinions matter in decision-making and that they can influence the decision-making processes by bringing forth their interests and priorities. This experience proved to be important in building women's confidence and self-belief and encouraging their agency, and extending their influence (Jackson & Wallace, 2015). This made them realise that women's participation is about more than just numbers; they need to have real influence over decisions (Womankind, 2021). This showed that women are slowly becoming more audible and vocal in formal spaces of decision-making. Over the years, women SMC members have gained some practical skills, knowledge, and experiences regarding decision-making, setting priorities, and putting forth their views. This shows a somewhat fair picture that they are progressing along the ladder to active participation.

Relating the women's participation in decision-making with Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, I reflect that women in Nepali community school governance are slowly moving to the upper rungs leading them from tokenism to citizen power (Arnstein, 1969). For Arnstein, the two rungs at the bottom describe the level of non-participation. Rungs three, four and five progress to levels of 'tokenism', which allow the marginalised to hear and have a voice, yet this stage does not ensure that their voices are really taken care of by the more powerful members. It means the powerholders still retain the right to decide. The success of women members in bringing together men to the decisions on gender reforms (girls' toilet and girls' club) put them into the rung of partnership (6) which enabled them to negotiate and engage in trade-offs with traditional power holders. While locating women's current position in Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, I can deduce that their roles hinge or even move from rungs to rungs (no linear, of course) based on the issue (their interest, knowledge and impact); so they now do not stick to a definite rung; yet their level of participation may be characterized largely as being shifting between rungs 4 (consultation), 5 (placation) and 6 (partnership). Now the call for a sector-specific job description for each member is a sign that they are trying to climb onto the rung of delegated power (7). By the time they reach the topmost rung, i.e. Citizen Control (8), they will obtain full managerial power. This shows that they have yet not been able to fully experience rungs 7 and 8 where they could enjoy full managerial power and influence the majority of decisions. This, however, clearly indicates that within that ladder, women's token identity is changing – even men have at times applauded women's efforts and their contribution, and the HT specially asks whether women members have any specific idea on the issue/agenda under discussion (if they seem not speaking).

However, unlike the SMC meeting spaces, decision-making spaces are not always formal. Therefore, it is important to build an understanding of the local context and how this influences or shapes the decision-making spaces (Jackson & Ngoma, 2015, p. 6). Since the patriarchal practice has imposed distinct social norms for men and women, it is important to acknowledge 'private and public spheres' (Stromquist, 2015) where decisions are made and whether both men and women have equal access to both of such spaces. Given the social context where women do not normally go out with men to have tea or snacks or invite men officials for dinner at their homes, their influence in informal decision-making spaces is not easy to see. I could observe the HT, Ward Chair and Palika Chair sitting together at a hotel in a city, far away from their school, and planning for the school's golden jubilee celebration and discussing the amount to be donated by the Palika. I, however, could not even listen to such an incident with women SMC members. In fact, many women remain unaware of such kinds of out-of-the-scene decision-making, which Stromquist (2015) calls 'private space' that "seriously constrains women's availability and possibilities for transformative action" (p. 307). Therefore, unlike these rungs in a hierarchy, participation in school governance take some steps up or down based on the nature of the issue brought to the table (as can be viewed on the slightly modified figure of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation in the literature section (Chapter II).

The field materials showed that the women members have recently felt more self-empowered; respected and valued, and included in formal spaces of decision-making since men members also responded to women's priorities and needs, yet they (including men) were sometimes bypassed and excluded by the HT in the name of exercising his authority and autonomy in pedagogical matters. Assessing the overall

scenario, I feel that this is not only the issue of women empowerment. They were already in the empowerment process, so they learned the basics and were finding space and participating. They however cannot control other people's behaviour – especially those who hold more power. Therefore the concern is whether 'others' are also empowered enough to accept women as equal partners in the SMC. As such, other's (men's) inability to accept and value women's voice in the SMC sometimes makes women feel excluded.

Another important dimension associated with women's participation in SMC is regulated or even curtailed by the recently introduced local level education policy. To discuss this, a little background is to be elaborated. In the majority of the fieldwork phase, local level elections had not been held and thus local governments were not active (though district-level education officials were actively supporting in SMC formation as well as resource generation/mobilization); at a later phase, local government representative (who is the Ward Chair) is also on the SMC, with his presence, some regular programs (if not the budget) have been coordinated across ward level or even Palika level schools. Lately, with his commitment and idea, the school raised 1.5 crores (10 lakh from the Palika) to launch technical education in the school. In terms of resource allocation and mobilization, the local government has played a very supportive role. However, the recently launched local level education policy 2020 has curtailed women's participation (reducing women's number to one – in the newly formed SMC – which is beyond the scope of my study). So putting my research issue at the centre (feminist standpoint), local government has negated women's presence in SMC.

Negotiated Participation

Currently, our national politics and public policymaking have focused on increasing women's inclusion, with a special focus on participation and voice, in all sectors, including politics, public institutions and development works. And, the numerical representation of women in different public spaces has been ensured with constitutional policies and regulations. Yet, when it comes to realising the provisions in real life, several in-betweens keep women at bay.

Vignette#5: Boardroom Dynamics

On 26 April 2017, I went to observe the SMC meeting. Right at 11 am, they began their meeting with three items on the agenda: felicitating a representative of Doha-Kaski Samaaj, which has donated two hundred thousand rupees to the school. The next was to approve the resignation of a temporary teacher, and the third one was the selection of the pre-primary teacher. In this meeting, the ex-chair of the SMC was also invited since the relationship with Doha-Kaski Samaj had been established since his time as the SMC Chair. I was also invited as an expert in the teacher selection committee. And the representative of Doha-Kaski Samaj was also invited. All of the invitees and most of the committee members were present in time except for one male member of the SMC, who turned up 15 minutes late. I could also see the accountant, who was not a member of the SMC but was present in four of the SMC meetings I attended. In this particular meeting, he was there to present the account details (including salary and benefits) of the resigned teacher. As I entered the meeting room, which was held at the language lab, I could see the HT, Ex-Chair, Chair, and the representative of Doha-Kaski Samaj at a side. They were all sitting on the carpeted floor behind the low tables (which were the writing desks for students). At the

adjacent low table, there were two male members and the accountant. And just opposite the HT's table, there were three female members. I took a seat near Nirmala.

The meeting was held under the Chairpersonship of the Chair and the Ex-Chair was nominated as the Chief Guest. The HT took the role of facilitator of the meeting. He welcomed everyone and with permission of the Chair briefly introduced me and the representative of Doha-Kaski Samaj to the SMC members. He then described the agenda of the meeting and jumped into the first agenda. As per the first agenda, he briefed the support from Doha-Kaski Samaj and then requested the Chair to receive the donated amount from the representative. He then asked the representative of the Samaj to speak a few words on why and how they were supporting the school. After that, the Chair and Ex-Chair jointly felicitated the representative – they put on some red tika (vermillion powder) on his forehead and *flower garland* and *khaadaa* (scarf) around his neck. All members clapped.

Then, the representative took leave of everyone; the accountant went to see him off till the school gate. After some time, the accountant came with the other man – a member of the SMC. The HT asked the member for his lateness and then asked him to take a seat. He joined the male members. In fact, there was a seat vacant for him. Meanwhile, the rest of the members were talking about the good and not so good works of the teacher who had resigned and left school already for two weeks. Then the HT asked the members if they should approve the resignation, and most of them nodded their heads. One male member spoke that they had to since there was no option. And everyone laughed! Then, the accountant was called to report on the account status of the resigned teacher. The accountant narrated all details associated with his attendance, saved sick leaves and last one month's salary. And the HT asked

if they can clear the resigned teachers' accounts and close them by three days. The accountants said that they can. And the responsibility was given to the accountant.

Then, the HT moved the meeting to the next agenda. The HT asked the Chair who was also the Chair of the teacher selection committee (comprising of himself, I and one female teacher teaching at pre-primary level). I don't know why the lady teacher was not there in the meeting, since the HT reported that she was also invited. But they did not feel the need of reminding or calling her. The Chair said, since the scores by her are also in his hand, they can calculate and announce the results. The Chair opened the envelope, which consisted of the written test scores (provided by me) of the three teacher candidates, and three separate score sheets (each one prepared by the Chair, I and the pre-primary teacher) for demonstration class. He took the help of the accountant to calculate the average scores and then announced the results. And he declared that Miss Dilshobha was the main candidate and Miss Pabitra would be an alternative candidate. The accountant took note of it and said that he would prepare the result notice shortly and went to his office.

Then, the HT asked the members to develop any other agenda or issues that they thought needed to be discussed. Then, the meeting took an open discussion format where they talked about a community member's request to chide his boy for not being serious in his study, progress and activities of the student clubs (which clubs were more active), need for managing space for feeding the kids in pre-primary level during the recess, sending of students to participate in a volleyball match organised by a local youth club etc. During this time, the female members also took part in the discussion. They especially highlighted the need for separate feeding spaces for kindergarten kids. Then, the HT requested the Chair to conclude the meeting. The Chair summarised the discussions and decisions and announced the formal closing of

the meeting by signing of the minute (prepared by the HT). Then, other members also put their signatures on the minute.

The kind of one-sided presentation by the HT reminded me of the decision-making mechanism to be overloaded with informing rather than consulting and discussing. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2012) provides a three-step mechanism for decision making: informing, consulting, and discussing. By following this process, members are first informed of the issue, and then they are asked for their opinions and ideas on the issue, and based on the results of the consultation, they can engage in dialoguing, which is supposed to lead them to make an agreeable decision. Though the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2012) suggests this process as constituting steps, I found that these are sometimes alternatives rather than linear steps, as some members clearly stated that certain pedagogical matters are handled by the HT (it's HT's autonomy), whereas for some tasks, SMC is to be informed (like managing tuition and coaching classes for weaker students, disciplinary actions against students, and sending teachers for short-term training). I, together with the research participants, also interpreted this scenario through our social practice guided by the patriarchal Hindu tradition, which judges women's role in society on Manu's statement that a woman deserves no independence in all stages of her life (*Manusmriti*, 9.3). Likewise, women members also related well to the struggle of Sita in the Ramayan, especially about how Sita had to "struggle for her identity and space of honour" (Hazarika, 2014, p. 295). Therefore, the cultural practices and beliefs of Hindu society have influenced greatly in limiting women's agency and voice.

When I talked to the members of the SMC (especially women), they referred to the power and authority of the two at the top: HT and the Chair. And as such, a few

key decisions were made and passed on by the two, and sometimes conflicts have also risen regarding their authority. In this part, I explore how these two at the top have felt about those claims by the three women (if not all seven members) at the bottom.

When I asked the Chair about the authority and power of the Chair in decision-making, he said:

> *Usually, the HT, as the linking person between the SMC, teachers and students, and as the Head of the institution, have the first voice – on which we may agree or disagree. After all, it is the HT who is going to implement the decisions. No other members can be as closely observing any task as the HT. …But, I also have adequate experience of school leadership and know the ways out in most of the cases, suggest the solutions. This does not mean that I am pressuring all to follow what I say. Yet, sometimes we have to convince the members, after all the blames for the unwanted consequences falls on the Chair. (#Milan, kurakani, August 28, 2017)*

The HT thought that SMC is a collaborating institution and every member should have a voice in decision-making. This, however, does not mean that all members can contribute to the decision-making equally since their background, knowledge, networks, and problem-solving skills are not the same. He goes on to say:

> *I believe that diversity in the committee is for making better-informed decisions and that in some issues, some members will inevitably have better ideas than others. (#Rajan, kurakani, August 29, 2017)*

The HT also talks about the centrality of the HT and Chair's role in decision-making. He said:

> *Since the line between HT's power (autonomy) in everyday school activities and his commitment to collective responsibility in the SMC is not clear, I opt*

> *to ask at least two SMC members, not often the women, but SMC or PTA Chair, and one of the teacher members of those committees [all of them are male] before making any decisions. I have become particularly careful about getting some members' consent since there rose a conflict over the decision on a student expulsion. And, naturally, the HT and the Chair become the centre of all the decisions since they are the ones who are first blamed or praised for the failure or success of a decision. (#Rajan, kurakani, August 29, 2017)*

In conversation with two at the top, I drew that because of their knowledge, experience and school connectedness (years spent in school), and also the fact that they are answerable for any consequences, they wanted to take the lead in all decisions. This, however, has boycotted the existence of other SMC members, making them 'othered' and excluded. Retrospectively, SMC, in some ways, appears to represent that "in-between" where some effort towards inclusion is made, but the structure and function still perpetuate many of the same hierarchies. This also raised a question: How do women *feel* in spaces where they are present but not quite valued? The response to this question has been discussed above in the 'Feeling Included or Excluded' section.

Understanding the fact that not all human beings are vocal in every situation (I also fall into the category of people who do not speak much, sometimes even when needed. I speak when things might really go wrong and that my voice will make a difference in such a situation.), I assume that several factors keep some people silent. Yet, I enjoyed the benefit of the doubt to critically view the members' presence and listen to their voices – because I was studying 'people' other than me! Therefore, not believing in what I could observe in the meeting hall dynamics, I also interrogated women some days later, out of the school, at their homes, about their positionality and

lack of voice in the meeting hall. Unlike my comparison of myself with the members, I found that Sharmila had a different story. When I talked to her at her home, she shared:

> *I do not usually like to speak when I don't know anything about the agenda. Actually, it was good of HT to ask for my opinion, but I think that was not needed. If I thought I could say something that could help make a better decision, I would have spoken. Now, I think, speaking for just showing our presence is only lengthening the meeting time.* (# Sharmila, kurakani, 10 August 2017)

Tika asked me in return if I did not see that they had nothing to say in that meeting. She further elaborated, since the agenda were all related to the HT and accountant, all we could do was approve their decisions. Sharmila added that now the scenario has changed much more than the earlier days. She also added that though they could not speak much on school finance, procurement, and pedagogical decisions, which are in a way (not formally) entrusted to the HT/accountant/chair, they were watchful of the processes for transparency. She further said that when there are points for discussion, we usually express our ideas, and sometimes our agenda also get space in the meeting.

For Nirmala, however, she feels not much self-empowered and is rather not very active now though she goes to attend the meetings. She feels that the other two ladies can speak for her. On the other hand, she was also bound by a family relationship with the HT and the Chair, and she normally does not become critical. It was perhaps also easier for her to speak her voice in one hand because the HT and Chair were her junior relatives. On the other hand, she also has a strong trust in the HT and is happy about his school leadership and the way he asks for all members for

their opinions in the meetings. Nirmala also admits that sometimes the HT informs her what to say and what not to in the meeting. Therefore, kinship and strong trust in a particular member thereof has also resulted in not so engaging participation of the female members. Moreover, as Corner (1997) suggests, a “specific interest group could be systematically excluded from direct participation in decision-making on the grounds that others can "speak" for them” (p. 3).

Moreover, due to the existing social relations, contacts and information power, the HT and the Chair seemed to be more powerful and autonomous in making decisions. Members acknowledge the economic efficiency/link of HT and Chair in resource generation and fear if they might challenge them to bring in more resources. This subtly makes them agree on most of the decisions proposed by the HT and Chair. In some instances, decisions were made by HT alone, which resulted in conflicts between the HT and the SMC. The conflicts were caused due to the gap in the HT’s assumed autonomy as granted by the SMC and HT’s exercise of authority (e.g. student expulsion and teachers’ tour). Now the HT feels that to avoid such conflicts in future, they need to transform the existing power relations by specifying the sectors to look at by individual members and delegating authority to them.

It was true that seeming ignorance of school affairs (in the initial days) had limited their participation. But scepticism about women’s capability and knowledge has still also been found among the men. For instance, a man, also a local ward chair, said,

> *What can the women do who do not know any contacts in the district, nor do they have a good knowledge of procurements and finances? (#Prabhakar, kurakani, 12 August 2018)*

Sharmila also agreed that they were not ready for leadership, and thus they had to rely on the HT, Chair and teacher representative on ideas of school affairs. I could sense that she used the term 'leadership' to mean being active and vocal in the SMC meetings. She might be confused about her role as an SMC member. And Nirmala was there only to support [act as a *thakro* for] her grandson, and she rarely questioned his authority. This means traditional gender roles, attitudes, and beliefs have also limited women's role in school governance. This idea was also attested by Zeh (2016) who states that gender socialisation and the acceptance of dominant gender roles have often restricted women's participation in decision-making (p. 33). In this case, the stereotypes that women are good followers, work less than men or in less demanding positions, are very much alive (Sandberg, 2013, p. 39).

The policy that has given them the right to speak up does not mean that they can speak up given the socio-cultural space they belong to. Also, kinship and social relations can be both enabling or hindering forces for women to speak up. For example, it is easier for Nirmala to speak up, but she feels that whatever the decisions are made by the male members, who are her kin, are for the better of the school and children, and she does not feel the need to raise her voice. She even said:

> *This 'illiterate old woman' does not know much about what should be done to improve the school. Besides, my son and grandson are well-educated and have the experience of working in the school. So I believe in their ability and decisions.* (# Nirmala, Group interaction, 24 March 2017)
>
> Regarding their trust in the HT and the Chair, Sharmila also stated:
>
> *They [HT and Chair] are more knowledgeable about school – teaching and learning, teacher management, relation and network with education officials in the district and other donors. So we basically believe in their network and*

> *power. If we think that their decisions might do any harm to school, we need to speak up. Otherwise, we are there to support them. (# Sharmila, kurakani, 12 August 2017)*

When I saw women flocking together, sitting together, nodding their heads, and rarely speaking up, especially when asked by the HT for their opinion, I felt that the women were just sitting in rather than participating fully in the meeting. My observation of the SMC meetings also showed that the female members mostly nod their heads in agreement or say 'we don't know' when they are asked for their opinions. The type of interaction I could observe was mostly responsive on the part of the female members. Rather than actively collaborating and having dialogical interaction, women seemed to be responsive in most of the issues. This lack of interest, lack of understanding of school affairs or their womanliness of being responsive or even submissive might have left them with lesser opportunities for engaging in decision-making.

Against my assumption that women did not speak because they somehow fear the power of the HT and Chair, they rather expressed that their trust in the HT and Chair is so strong that they do not need to speak up because they (HT and Chair) were doing good for the school. This also indicated that the relationship of trust was very strong; there was a high public trust on the HT and thus 'accepting culture' was prominent – believing that he will do better for the school since they have witnessed many good things happening in school after he got into headship. They put full trust in the HT and rarely question his authority and the decisions he proposes. Moreover, Nirmala sees the relationship between the SMC members and the HT as that of trustee and promoter. This scenario portrays that women were being represented by men, undermining the fact that women have different needs, interests and priorities and

thus women cannot be adequately represented in decision-making by men (Corner, 1997, p. 3).

On the contrary, when the male members, who were also as marginalised as the women members were, were asked about their participation in decision-making, they state that they were often bypassed by the two heads (HT and the Chair). One member states:

> *On the ground that they are clever, have a better experience with school affairs and have more authority than us does not mean that our ideas do not matter. (#Bibek, kurakani, 18 August 2017)*

This showed that even the male members have experienced 'marginality' at the meetings, which women have learned to accept as 'normal', which may be the consequence of living and working in an environment that was created by and dominated by men who have different interests and priorities from women (Corner, 1997, p. 2). This, on the one hand, shows that gender does not always matter. On the other hand, it also indicates that women are still far from achieving equality in decision-making and leadership. Yet, to this end, the SMC has come up with a local policy on gender inclusion in decision-making and provisioned that there should be at least one female member in every SMC meeting. In this regard, Sharmila expressed:

> *Realising that presence of female member is important, we three sat together and decided to propose that there must be at least one female member in the SMC meetings. And it was welcomed by everybody on the committee. (#Sharmila, kurakani, 18 June 2017)*

Moreover, the committee also decided on a local policy that there must be at least five members to commence an SMC meeting. The HT shared with pride that:

…and there has not been any day when we have less than seven members in a meeting. (#Rajan, kurakani, 6 September 2018)

This local policy for SMC meetings has been a way forward in capacitating the SMC members and in promoting gender inclusion or woman voice in every SMC meeting.

Even Though I Am Not There, I Am 'There'!

Here I bring forth the participants who have had a strong influence on how the school works and the SMC. I found that it was not mere gender or caste, but how people look upon the provision of 'women quota' itself. For example, Sapana did not want to become a quota woman – irrespective of what she could contribute to school being an SMC member. For her, getting into the SMC as a 'woman' per se is belittling her own capacity as a woman. "*We feel devalued and disrespected when we are tagged as quota women. So rather than being a quota woman, I can help the school from outside."* As per Sapana, women do not want to be minimized or belittled; they want to go on an equal footing with men. Quoting Sapana, another woman also said that "*As Sapana said, women quota is making us feel inferior."* Sapana further claimed that gender quota has also included those women who are near those of privileged ones. Her argument does have some bearing that gender quotas have "crowd out other marginalised ethnic or socioeconomic groups that are also underrepresented" (Pande & Ford, 2011, p. 12), but her perspectives on 'gender quota' and 'not willing to serve' also provoked some marginalised women, who would otherwise be included through quota, to opt-out of the game – restraining themselves away from the right to get included, which might make them more marginalised.

Prabhakar, an elite Gurung, satires the existing members, "*What's our job where there are many Bahuns?"* His satire does have a deeper meaning for some other *Gurungs*, especially women who, in Prabhakar's eyes, seemed unaware, stupid and submissive in front of clever Brahmins. Prabhakar further makes a succinct comment on how some members not being the official members can have their voice above the official members. He said:

> *... I can get things done even by not being in the SMC. Even though I am not there, I am there! (#Prabhakar, Interview, December 30, 2016)*

The field text shows that men or women outside the SMC also have some influence on the decisions SMC make. As reflected in Sapana and Prabhakar's remarks, they could make things done through the SMC without them being physically present in the SMC. This, however, has a constraining effect on the role of the existing SMC members – especially by devaluing the role SMC members play; after all, it is the SMC members who need to approve or disapprove any agenda set for discussion. On the one hand, Sapana does not want to be a 'quota woman' and proudly says that without being in the SMC, she is there. On the other hand, Prabhakar makes caste-based remarks on the powerlessness of the women members in front of the clever Brahmin men, but he openly challenges that these 'clever Bahuns' are no one for him (he is an SMC member, though). This indicates a kind of hidden conflict or resentment against the dominant Brahmin men. Whatsoever, the perspectives of these two characters not only belittle the importance of the role of SMC members but deny women's agency in school governance.

Chapter Essence and Changeover

Reflecting on the overall discussion in this chapter, it occurred to me that predominant female gender images were reproduced in the initial stage of women's

participation which curtailed their active involvement. Moreover, their seeming ignorance of school affairs and strong trust in the HT/Chair limited them from participating fully, and made them feel ‘othered’, ‘alienated’ and ‘excluded’ from the decision making process; however, gradually, with the passage of time and learning, they felt more connected with the school, felt ‘included’ as their voices were also heard and interests were served and thereby were likely to demonstrate more substantive participation.

Having presented the empirical materials integrating with my interpretation and literature engagement in the three empirical chapters (i.e. Chapters IV, V and VI), now I make a changeover to discuss some key ideas that emerged from these chapters. While doing so, I will also be deriving from the literature and theories that help illuminate the field text and draw the meaning from them. Therefore, in the following chapter, I attempt to discuss and reflect upon some key ideas that emerged during the interaction with the participants and while interpreting them.

CHAPTER VII

SYNTHESISING THE EMPERICALS WITH MY REFLECTION

The study aimed to explore the dimension of women's participation in community school governance through an ethnographic inquiry. While doing so, I set out my journey seeking answers to the following three research questions:

1. How do SMC members understand 'inclusive school governance' in a rural community school in Nepal?
2. How do women stakeholders get into School Management Committee in a rural community school setting?
3. How do women SMC members negotiate their participation in school decision-making?

In response to these research questions, I presented the field texts with some of my quick reflections in the proceeding chapters (IV, V and VI). In this chapter, I have tried to discuss the key insights and reflect on my learning while engaging in the entire process of this research.

Insights From the Study

The research insights highlight some surfacing inclusion issues in school governance that are contestable. Nevertheless, inclusive governance practices have empowered women and brought about positive changes in the way the role of the SMC was perceived and experienced by women. The study claims that though much can be done towards ensuring substantive participation of women in the SMC, even the descriptive representation has given some positive outcomes – capacitating the women members themselves, and making the school safer and comforting for girls.

Moreover, girls' active participation in different clubs and the interest and motivation of girls towards study have increased (these outcomes are also accepted by men SMC members). Moreover, the regularity and timeliness of the meeting as well as the overall effectiveness (especially accountability) of the SMC, have also increased. Along the following lines, I draw some key insights drawn from this research.

Social Construction of 'School' vs Women Inclusive School Governance

Here I raise two important issues and discuss them. The first one is about the social imagination of a school, and the second one is about who governs our schools.

As reflected anecdotally in Chapter IV, it has been ingrained in our mind, right from our childhood, that a school is basically a physical building. The very psyche of considering building a school or limiting our understanding of school as a 'classroom' or a 'bounded space for teachers and students to spend the day' has derailed our understanding of school as a social unit. As such, our social imagination of school rarely portrays parents or community people to be a part. Thus, seeking community participation seems like going beyond our imagination of what a school is and whether it is to be collectively owned and managed. This further questions the very notion of school emergence in Nepal – since schools emerged from the community historically, we now seem to separate schools from the community.

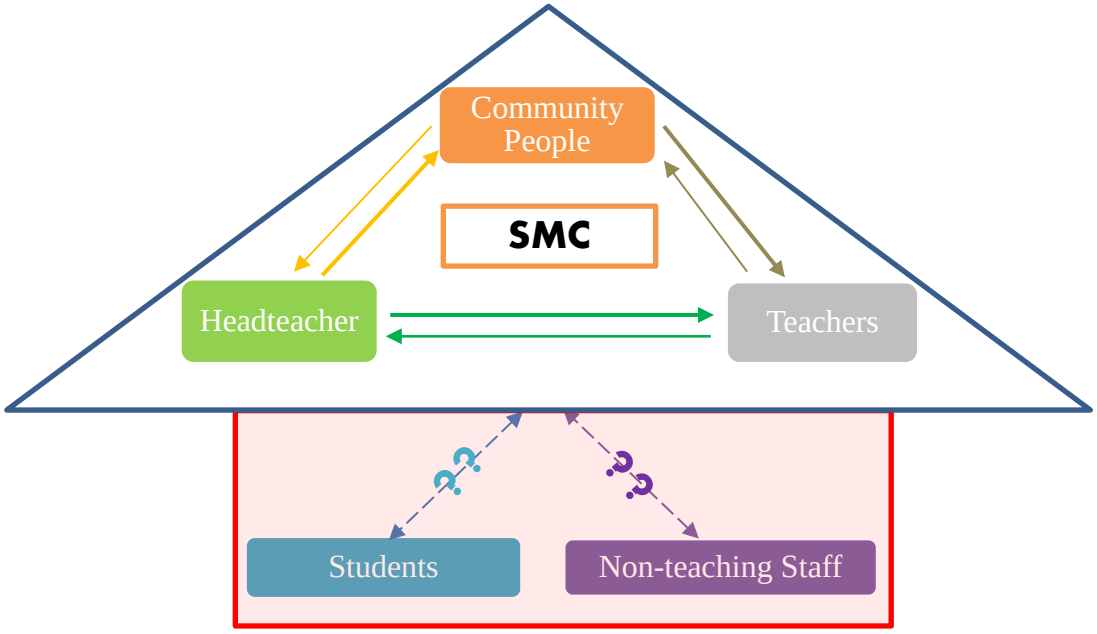
'Who owns our schools?' If the government would bear all the costs and ensure 'free' education, the community may not be governing our schools. The role of SMC is not only to utilise resources but to manage (create, allocate and utilise) them. And hence community-centric approach (Connolly & James, 2011) to governance holds prominence in practice. Moreover, it is not by sheer macro or meso vision that our community schools are performing better or worse (if that was the case, most of them would be the same or based on resource input, the outcome would be corollary);

however, what has impacted the 'school success' is the micro-level school-community arrangements that have changed the outcomes. Therefore, the participation of school stakeholders in school governance is a must if it is to be participatory and inclusive. However, the primary stakeholders (i.e. students) are largely left out in this process in our current stakeholder-based school governance model.

While reviewing the practices of SMCs across countries and contexts, though there are differences in their authority, power and functional dynamics, things converge to one idea – that is wider stakeholder participation. Being engaged with schools, teachers, students, non-teaching staff, parents, community organizations and people, local education authority, elected representatives, and others seem to be crucial in influencing school decisions. It is therefore important to develop a mechanism to represent those stakeholders. Therefore, there is an interactional relationship between these stakeholders which informs school governance. Narrowing these stakeholders to teachers, ‘community’ (parents, community organizations, elected representative, donors), non-teachers (non-teaching staff), and students form the core group of stakeholders in school education at the institutional level, and therefore representing these ‘groups’ in the SMC could ensure more democratic and participatory governance of the school. However, the current interactional pathways of the School Management Committee can be diagrammatically sketched as follows:

Figure 7

Interactional Pathway of SMCs in Nepali Community Schools[27]



As the most influential and active body of school governance, it is important to see SMC in an organizational context in which the politics and economy besides sociology of human thinking affect how SMC members perceive themselves and those they work with, as well as how other stakeholders perceive their roles. Regarding the perceptions on women inclusive school governance, men and women seem to hold differing perspectives. Men largely perceive 'presence' as participation, whereas women do not see their participation as mere 'presence'. As such, men's understanding is more inclined to 'representation' or 'presence' of women in the SMC (participation at the level of tokenism in Arnstein's ladder) rather than their actual participation in the decision-making process. Therefore, men still view women-inclusion largely as a formalistic process (Thebe Limbu, 2018) of getting more

[27] In the above triangle, the 'thickness' of lines indicates the 'intensity' of interactions between the groups, and the direction of arrows shows 'who dominates whom' in the interaction. The groups in the box below the triangle have been shadowed to show that they are excluded in the formal SMC, and thus their voices may not be heard since their lines of interaction are fissured.

women in the SMC and relatively little discussion from women's participation perspectives. If such a discourse is raised, it's mainly a woman who does it. This requires that a strong feminist standpoint (placing the women at the centre) is needed to understand women's worldview and life experiences (Pandey, 2016). It means, though there is increasing awareness of what it means to include women and the importance of having more women (critical mass) (Agarwal, 2015) and also the need for acting as 'critical actors' for school effectiveness, men are still reluctant to see more women coming to the SMC. This shows that it is as important to empower, motivate and drive women forward to realise their agency and power as it is for men to realise the need for breaking away the patriarchal stereotypes for creating an equitable society.

Stakeholder Based Model vs Competency-Based Model of Inclusion

SMCs in Nepali community schools are formed under the framework of community participation – a stakeholder-based model. However, there has been some form of denial of such a model and a search for a competency-based model within the stakeholder-based model by the men members. When the SMC Chair asked – what do each member bring in? Here, the common responses would be 'representative voices', 'community ownership' and 'collective responsibility. However, the question is targeted at 'what resources', 'what experiences – capacity to transform schools' and 'how much (bargaining/resource generating) power' these members possess when they come in – all indicating their social capital in garnering resources from the local and federal government agencies and/or other partners. Talking all these, some men completely denied the whole idea of inclusion – calling it superficial and thus seeking for an ideal 'right mix of skills and expertise' in the SMC. This would be an ideal situation for which we would even not have to discuss the idea of 'inclusion' –

bringing in the voice of the underrepresented, mainstreaming the marginalised and empowering women and other groups who represent socio-culturally a deprived group.

Therefore, the discourse of inclusion should be around a stakeholder-based participation model rather than a competency-based economic resource generation model. If we are already competent enough, why do we need special inclusion measures?

Coming or Bringing to the Table?

In principle, women SMC members come to the SMC for several reasons. What drives them can be attributed to their family interests (likelihood of 'proxy representation'), social acceptance (other women nominated and one accepted), and feeling a sense of *bido thamne* (continuing the legacy) of her husband. There is hardly any spontaneous idea of coming to the SMC in women in general. However, they are brought to the SMC by their family and community. The implication of 'bringing to the table' can be that the one bringing them might have some hidden interests and want them to be served through the chosen/brought representatives. Literature also suggests the risk of 'participation by proxy' (Everett, 2014; Jayal, 2006; Mueller, 2016) and 'representation without participation' (Panday, 2008). However, developing a sense of responsibility and proactively creating space for their roles make them empowered, confident, and 'included'. Hence, their participation can become more meaningful as they engage in constant negotiation and renegotiation with the SMC members. This also erases one's memory of how they come (or are brought) to the SMC since the focus falls on what they are doing currently. Though their entry could be attributed to 'political dynasty' - familial ties to prominent male

politicians (de Silva, 2017), their presence and participation served their 'transformative interest' (Cornwall, 2008).

The pathways, as they appear in this study, do not seem to be very much challenging for certain women since kinship and relational network serve as a catalysing force in Nepal that can pull *aafno machhe* (own people, especially family members) including women to any public institutions including the SMC. As such, patriarchy may become a tool for certain women, especially in an elitist culture, to be included (Choi, 2018). However, those who even cannot show their willingness openly and lack such empowerment are prone to get excluded (or feel multiple exclusions) (G. D. Acharya, 2018), become 'othered' and 'alienated' from the decision making process. As such, lack of capacity and agency of 'other' women candidates is also a cause that allows certain (in this study, three) women members a solid chance to step onto the school governance body (i.e. SMC). This shows that for rural, uneducated, marginalised, poor, 'lower caste' women's pursuit of public institution governance is still a complex process; their pathways are not as easy as for those privileged. And again, it is the woman from a privileged family who can easily take advantage of the 'women quota' (Choi, 2018; Search for Common Ground, 2017). This may even push certain underprivileged women into permanent vulnerability (Mainaly et al., 2018). Therefore, as Dhungana (2014) calls, rustic women's pathway for participation is thorny.

Journey Towards Substantive Participation of Women

One key issue that the SMC members, especially women, persistently raise is the lack of distributed roles in the SMC. Not having a designated seat and not having a responsibility to look after a particular sector means the (women) SMC members are denied any responsibilities. The HT and the Chair (male, Brahmins, 'educated')

normally set the agenda and invite members to endorse their decisions. Yet, with three women (critical mass) in the SMC, the collective voice of the women has risen and thus, some initiatives like Girls' Club, sanitary pads (though this idea was later boosted by the government efforts of distributing free pads to schools) and proper disposal system of the used pads got successful. With some success in what they desire, women members start feeling a sense of power in the SMC, and they think that they are becoming accountable to the represented, which scenario may be called 'substantive representation' (Pitkin, 1972). However, this indicates that women have shown 'activity-specific participation' (Agarwal, 2001) – especially by volunteering to undertake some specific tasks and want to have more meaningful and empowering participation – putting voice and influence in the majority of the group's decisions.

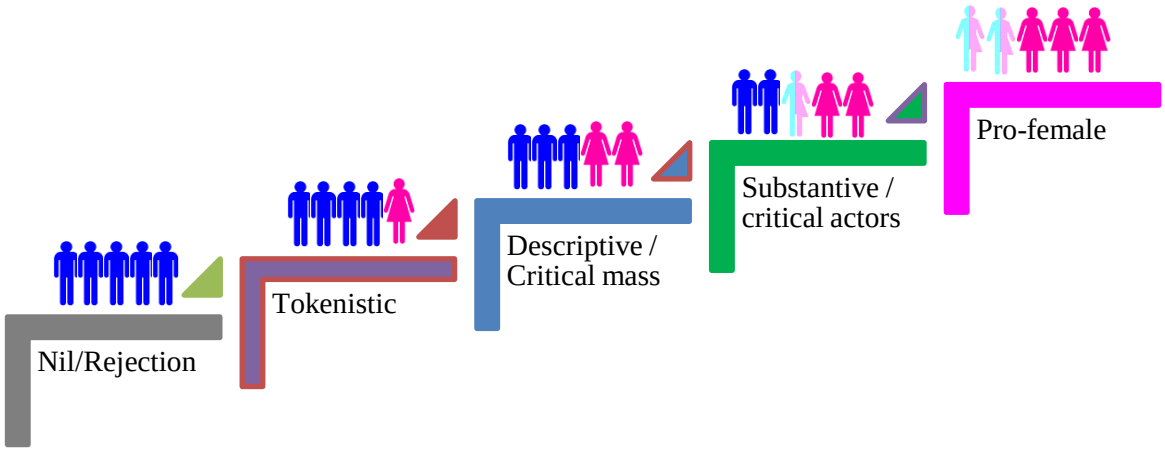
Typically, the current stage of women's participation in Nepali community school governance is characterised by 'critical mass' – women have got more representation in number than earlier times which has taken them out of their tokenistic participation. However, there seemed to have been no systematic efforts for their opinions and interests to be considered. Yet, women members demonstrate that they can gradually learn to play their roles, creating their own space (yet they are not formally taking charge of any 'given' responsibility). Therefore, what matters in women inclusion and participation is not necessarily how one comes or is brought, but how that person feels empowered, respected and can make something that helps the mission of better/inclusive school governance.

Improving the substantive representation of women implies more acts in support of women's issues as broadly defined as possible, thus including practical and strategic interests (Celis, 2009, p. 109). Furthermore, to improve the responsiveness towards more women, diversity among women and feminist strands needs to be

recognised and voiced (Celis, 2009, p. 109). Observing the discourse thus far on representation to participation, I have traced the following spectrum.

Figure 8

Spectrum of Women's Participation in School Governance



The above spectrum shows the increasing level of women's participation in school governance informed by the theory of representation (Pitkin, 1967), Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, and critical mass by Kanter (1977a) and Dahlerup (1988). The purpose of showing the spectrum in steps is to show that the level of women's agency and meaningful participation increases in each upper step. However, this does not mean a linear progression from step I to step V. Schools can have their SMC at any point currently and that they can either step up the stage or even step down, not necessarily a single-stage each time (see my critique on Arnstein's ladder of participation in Chapter II).

The first stage shows a case of nil participation or non-participation (Arnstein, 1996), where even the presence of a woman is completely ruled out. In the second case, it is more like trying to maintain legitimation – to show they are doing something (White, 1996), but in practice, woman's participation is only tokenistic (Arnstein, 1996) and is mediated in such a way that her views may be represented to

decision-makers by others and thus she may also be replaced by a proxy – a man from the family influences the decisions, which Jayal (2006) calls 'participation by proxy' and thus this scenario basically means 'representation without participation' (Panday, 2008). This scenario might worsen power relationships and further disempower women (Agarwal, 2001). The third case shows that a certain number or ratio of female representatives is necessary to affect the entire group (Konrad et al., 2008), of around a third of the total membership (Agarwal, 2015) – the concept of descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1972) and critical mass (Childs & Krook, 2008). The fourth case shows the scenario of critical actors (Childs & Krook, 2009) and more substantive participation (Pitkin, 1972) of women in school governance; in which case the SMC members who are critical actors act for and become accountable to the presented. The final stage shows an ideal or somehow ambitious case of having all women or critical actors in the SMC.

As observed in the research site, though descriptive representation seems to be ensured by having a critical mass (Pitkin, 1972; Agarwal, 2015), whether the critical mass 'mirrors demographic characteristics of those represented' (Powell, 2004) is questionable. Do two *Bahun/Chhetri* and one *Gurung* (married to a *Bahun*) women represent the ethnic composition of the school community, which is largely less privileged *Gurungs* and *Dalits*? Therefore, though critical mass is ensured, from a feminist standpoint, I do not see even 'descriptive representation'. It means though critical mass is a pre-condition for ensuring descriptive representation, it is not adequate. Unlike the literature that focuses on having descriptive representation for ensuring substantive representation (Pitkin, 1972; Powell, 2004), I reckoned that despite not having 'proper' descriptive representation, women could play their roles and show substantive participation (initially revealed by some 'activity-wise

participation) through the execution of their ‘transformative interest’ (Cornwall, 2008).

Participatory Exclusion vs Non-Participatory Inclusion

Even though women members were included in the SMC, they were participating in the SMC meetings; their agenda, interests and agency were often denied. The socio-cultural inculcation led them initially to believe that they know nothing and that they are there just to support the HT and the Chair. They even did not have things to say in some meetings, and when one woman is to attend the meeting (in the absence of the other two), she would feel alienated from the group. These show that they were not fully included even though they were the chosen SMC members. And thus, they were feeling exclusion – which can be labelled ‘participatory exclusion’ (Agarwal, 2001; Choudhury et al., 2018). Here, this should be observed through the lens of intersection (Huber, 2017; Walby et al., 2012) that women do not simply belong to a gender category but are also coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds, educational levels and family contexts which might also be accepting their perpetual ‘exclusion’.

On the other hand, there are other people in the society like Sapana (who was also a woman but with more social capital being an NGO worker) who openly speaks against ‘women quota’ in the SMC, especially when she thinks even if she is not in the SMC, her voice is powerful enough to reach the SMC. Likewise, Prabhakar (who later also became an SMC member) also openly denied the agency of women in the SMC, especially in front of the ‘clever Bahuns’; however, he being a Gurung (his comparison was also like Brahmins are clever and non- Brahmins are not) said that he has the hold of the SMC despite two Brahmin men leading the SMC and School. These two examples show that though they are not formal SMC members, they have

easy access to the SMC and to get their voice represented (and also endorsed) in the SMC. This scenario can be termed ‘non-participatory inclusion’.

The HT and the SMC Chair believed that SMC is a collaborating institution and every member should have a voice in decision-making. However, they explicitly expressed that this does not mean that all members can contribute to the decision-making equally since their background, knowledge, networks, and problem-solving skills are not the same. The HT seemed to become collaborative, at least by informing some members and seeking their consent. However, he also talks about the centrality of the HT and Chair’s role in decision-making. In conversation with ‘two at the top’, I drew that because of their knowledge, experience and school connectedness, and also the fact that they are answerable for any consequences, they wanted to take the lead in all decisions – which excludes other members, especially women. The active role of the SMC Chair and HT is natural; however, bypassing the other members at some events make other members appear only as pawns.

The idea of participatory exclusion and non-participatory inclusion comes from the notion of agency – “women’s ability to exercise power by making choices” (Allendorf, 2012, p. 2). Even though they have some interest, women in rural Nepali communities exclude themselves or are excluded from participation in social institutions because of their socio-cultural inculcation, which has generally subjugated women’s position. Nevertheless, women (and men) with social capital and network are better able to exercise their agency even without being in the formal structure of the organization.

Strengthening SMCs With Inclusion With Authority

Much like the country’s electoral provisions of ensuring more women in decision making (President or Vice-President of the country, Speaker or Deputy

Speaker in the parliament, Mayor or Deputy Mayor), voices for having a woman in a key decision-making position (headteacher or SMC Chair) are rising. Since much of authority and power is inherently centred on the two (i.e., Chair of the SMC and HT) as the administrative head and pedagogical leader, the SMC members often appear voiceless, powerless, and sometimes even responsibility-less (unless they come up with some ideas and agenda, for which they might not yet be habituated or capacitated). Therefore, if one is given more authority – with authority comes the power to perform, their participation will not limit to mere 'presence' but extend to 'meaningful participation and 'substantive contribution'. Therefore, having a woman in the key executive position (either as headteacher or SMC Chair) in the current structure would help women SMC members look up to and put their voice forward.

Moreover, the women SMC members also indicate a need for specifying their job tasks as well as allocating certain sectors under their supervision. This would give them space to build their confidence, practice agency with power and authority, but also feel valued in their roles.

My Learning and Academic Contribution

In this section, I reflect on my learning and the possible academic contribution I have made through this study.

Women's Participation in a 'Men's Territory'

Reflecting on the overall discussion in this chapter and beyond, it occurred to me that predominant women gender images are reproduced in the initial stage of women's participation which curtails their active involvement in the SMC. Moreover, their seeming ignorance of school governance affairs, socio-cultural acceptance culture and trust in the few men (especially HT/Chair) limit them from participating fully and make them feel 'othered', 'alienated' and 'excluded' from the decision

making process. However, gradually, with the passage of time and learning, they may feel more connected with the school, feel ‘included’ as their voices are also somehow heard and interests are served, and thereby they are likely to demonstrate more substantive participation by creating some space for their active participation.

Often, system actors create spaces but do not pay attention to the type of culture and climate created in those spaces that can either foster a productive and fulfilling environment for all or further deepen existing social dynamics and hierarchies. Therefore, women feeling excluded from decision-making was not solely because of their lack of understanding of how the school system works but how the formal space environment is in terms of listening to their voices and respecting their ideas.

I further reflect that formal policies and structures are the preconditions for ensuring more women’s participation (critical mass) in school governance; however, these are not sufficient to ensure that women really participate and exercise their agency in decision-making. For this, local practices can foster enabling conditions for women to come up with their ideas, have their say in all of the matters presented for discussion, and encourage them to come up with their specific sector-wise issues in which they may lead the discussion and decision-making process. Likewise, local informal policies of setting criteria for having a certain number of women in each meeting can further empower women and enhance their participation in school governance. Furthermore, as a practical implication of this work, I realise that it is important to go beyond surface-level notions of gender inclusion and participation to solidify women inclusion agenda in school governance in Nepal. Likewise, governance spaces and structures are to be made genuinely representative and respectful of women. Above all, women themselves should continue building their

capital and agency to ensure more meaningful participation in the governance mechanism.

Perceptions of men members on women's participation in school governance is still largely shaped by a patriarchal mindset which views women as being limited to *'jutho-chulo garne'* and that they do not know about school governance – that is not their territory (this is men's game, you (women) don't know the rules of the game). This silences women's voices and represses their agency. This not only rings out women right at the beginning from coming to the SMC but also curtails the scope of women's participation and contribution. This, however, may gradually fade away with women's impactful performance despite them having been given any specific 'formal' roles. It means women's agency reveals itself once they are given a 'seat'. Moreover, there is another side of feudal family patriarchy. At the cost of larger social participation, due to the political dynasty and for holding the family power intact on the social institutions, some women are pushed forward by men – which makes the path for certain women's inclusion and participation in public institution's governance (also in politics) easier. This, however, has compelled other less privileged and voiceless women to face multiple exclusions – making it almost impossible for them to come to the territory of school governance. Likewise, different categories of even 'included' women face different levels of challenges and privileges both as a societal member and a member of the social institution. For example, a middle-aged woman from an elite family, educated, having some public image as a 'working woman', having strong family support for her participation, who is somehow 'outspoken' can exercise her agency, revolt against men-domination and thus create her space in school governance. However, for an economically less privileged woman, characterised by '*grihini'* status, dependent on husband's income, having a difficult

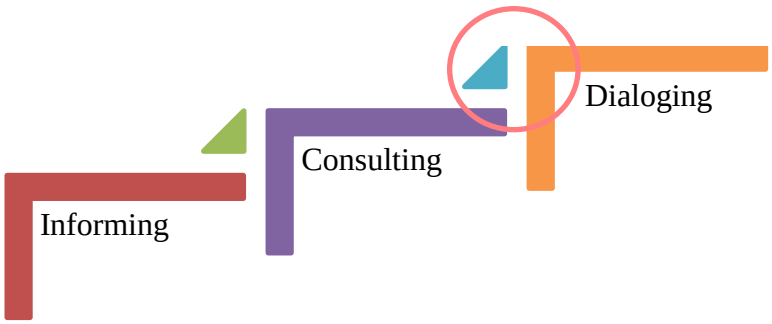
time running her family, lack of family support in her participation in social activities, etc. may not be as vocal as she wishes to be and her agency is suppressed in larger social composition, which is men-dominated.

When looked at from the typology of interests (White, 1996, as cited in Cornwall, 2008), women SMC members no longer limit their presence to be 'nominal' but largely 'representative'. Nevertheless, their role is not static but dynamic, and it appears their participation hinges between representative (largely) and transformative (sometimes) ranges.

Again, putting the current situation of women's participation in EU's (2012) three-step decision-making process, it can be characterised by 'consultation stage' (as located in Figure 9) – they are at least asked for their opinion on an issue. Here, the step of information (only informing women of the decisions) is no longer practised; yet engaging in full 'dialogue' to take the most satisfactory decisions for every agenda is somehow little practised.

Figure 9

Locating Women's Participation in Decision-making Process



To close, women and other marginalised groups have somehow benefitted from the affirmative action measures. It is, however, important to examine whether the reservation is actually empowering or disempowering the marginalised people. With the existing reservation policy, some feel belittled, some feel disrespectful

being a ‘quota women’, and on many occasions, those who would otherwise still benefit have double benefitted (elites within a caste), excluding ‘Other’ who are marginalised. I keep this issue as a research agenda (for the future) that needs further investigation.

Women’s Lifeworld Explored By a Man

I understand that due to my own upbringing in a patriarchal socio-cultural set-up and social positioning – characterised in the research site as an eastern *pahade* youth who is educated, lives in the Capital City, researches school governance, provides training to teachers, who is also associated with a so-called ‘renowned’ ‘high class’ university which many rural Nepali from low-middle income families even do not think that they can get admission to it (I held similar view before joining it), the study could have several limitations. I confess that I may not have been able to explore women’s lifeworld as precisely as a women researcher might do. My presence as a man interested in women’s participation might not make women participants feel comfortable. Thus they might not have revealed as much as they could do with a woman researcher. Despite these limitations, I have tried to present a new flavour of exploring women’s world by a man researcher believing in women’s standpoint.

Minimising the Research Gap

Studies on women empowerment in general and participation in public institutions, in particular, have largely been focused on exploring the ‘barriers’, ‘glass ceilings’ and ‘exclusions’. However, this study has tried to bring out the issue of the ‘included’ or those who are ‘participating’ in public institution governance. Unlike what other studies have already enlightened, I have examined women’s participation from the dimension of what drives women to actually come to the participation landscape. Moreover, though women’s participation and representation in ‘politics’

and ‘natural resource management’ had been the subject of the majority of earlier studies, this study has captured rural Nepali women’s participation in school governance, which had been somehow ignored research area. This study has specifically examined how the ‘critical mass’ is ensured and how that ‘descriptive representation’ has served the ‘transformative interest’ of women parents in school governance. Again, despite a body of literature suggesting ‘rule by proxy’ when women are brought to participate by family members, the women SMC members clearly ruled this out by displaying that their women’s agency was high enough to serve the interest of the represented (i.e., women).

I feel the study has laid out ways in which Nepal has made strides and efforts towards the representation of women in government at the national and sub-national levels and in various other civic spaces to address deep-rooted patriarchy. It also shows the lack of these same efforts in local governing bodies, especially those related to public systems such as schooling. The underrepresentation of women in teaching and educational leadership positions is already visible and daunting, but the lack of women in opportunities for parent participation and governance seems even more surprising in some ways, given the role mothers often play in the education and wellbeing of their children and communities. Against this backdrop, I could draw that power-sharing in key executive positions (HT and SMC Chair) by men and women would ensure equal participation and encourage more women’s participation and voice. This indeed is a practical implication for gender-inclusive and participatory school governance policy and practice in Nepal.

Methodological Add-on

Thinking methodologically, I learned some fundamentals of ethnographic fieldwork and the meaning-making process. Unlike my earlier theoretical knowledge

of general qualitative research, the idea of going to the field, collecting field materials, coming back and interpreting, and 'exiting from the field' seems little helpful. In fact, the phased-approached to fieldwork and meaning-making became futile in my study context, and thus I had to engage in constant researcher-participant reflexivity to better co-construct meanings. In fact, such reflexivity provided the participants with some space to voice their ideas and co-create meanings out of their life experiences.

Likewise, *kurakani* appeared to be an appropriate everyday term to use while engaging in researcher-participant interaction, 'interview' sounded more formal, and the participants disliked the idea; therefore, informal way of common talking to participants became helpful. Thirdly, though some can argue that every individual has their own distinct identity and we should respect that, while that is true, my experience shows that rather than being a 'distant' and 'unrelated' researcher, it would be better for ethnographers to develop informal relationships as appropriate (accepting the forms of address used in family relations had been very crucial for me to win the participants' trust).

Ethnography allowed me to be conscious of my positionality, be keenly aware of other power dynamics that can shape both the research process and outcomes, and authentically capture participants' stories and voices, all giving the study impressive depth and rigour. By choosing to focus on the gendered dynamics of an SMC as a local-level governance entity and utilising ethnography to deepen relationships within that sphere of analysis, I feel I have accomplished the depth of inquiry. Also, maintaining situated and relational ethics rather than adhering to an encoded ethical protocol allowed me to uphold both depth and attention to the ethical dimensions of ethnographic educational research. Moreover, as my study is characterised by a critique of simplistic notions of 'inclusion' or 'participation and gendered notions of

social reality, I am confident of extending my ethnographic knowledge base into 'critical ethnography' in my future work.

Sense of Belonging and Achievement

For me, the entire PhD research journey has been enriching. People rightly call 'Time flies', so it does. It has been complete five years since I started my PhD research journey, and I feel I just started it yesterday and want to be engaged even longer. However, 'we have limitations and boundaries.' And with such engagement in academia, I have learned much and accomplished similarly.

I especially cherished my academic engagement in the trio-institutions supporting my doctoral research journey, namely, a) Kathmandu University School of Education, b) Martin Chautari, and c) School of Education, Aarhus University. Likewise, my research site has become my second home community where I have no less social relations than back in my birthplace. Now, I have a sense of belonging to the community of my research site. In fact, I have also been working with the local government and the school in different ways. I have been a key education and community development sector adviser to the local government and a constant supporter and well-wisher of the school. I have specifically supported the local government to some extent in two key projects: a) maintaining a sister city relationship with a Swiss town (which is still underway), and b) establishing an 'old-age care home' in support of a German foundation (grant successful, operation underway). Even when the teachers and the Palika representatives come to Kathmandu, they visit me or at least inform me that they are in Kathmandu. Even my wife has maintained social ties with some women teachers and community people from my research site.

In retrospect, my academic engagement during this period was beyond my imagination when I started this journey. I had not even thought that I could achieve these all. I have listed my key achievements in Appendix D. I feel particularly proud of getting space in some renowned journals that published my research articles, which requested me to serve as a peer reviewer and offered me to serve on the Editorial Board. I thank my Supervisor, faculty and researchers from the three institutions that supported me immensely in my doctoral journey and made me capable of all these. Likewise, I cherished my study stay in Copenhagen, where I not only got good mentorship from the faculty from the School of Education (Aarhus University) and beyond, but also got opportunities to engage in sharing my research work (from a least developed nation) across academic fora in esteemed European universities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Policy Measures to Address Gender Inclusion

S.N.	Policy Document	Key Provisions
1	National Plan of Action for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (Revised September 2004)	• Gender focal points have been appointed at the district level.
2	2005 amendment of the Civil Service Act	• Includes a provision for formulating affirmative action policies for women in government service and has exempted the age bar for temporary women staff wishing to apply for positions advertised by the Public Service Commission
3	Muluki Ain (Eleventh Amendment 2059 BS [2002])	• A daughter can enjoy the right to inherit her parent's property from birth. • A wife has equal rights to her husband's property immediately after marriage. • Daughters are provided a share in ancestral property, but after her marriage she needs to return the ancestral property to her parental family (still discriminatory). It was later amended by Gender Equality Act 2006.*
	Muluki Ain (Amendment 2007)	• 2007 amended that an unmarried daughter is allowed an equal share of property and need not • return the property after marriage. Yet, married daughters are still not considered as partakers during partition.
	Criminal Code 2017	• Discriminatory behaviour by government authorities on using legal rights on gender and other perspectives will be punishable (Section 160.1) • Traditional social practice of *Chhaupadi* is criminalised (Section 168.3).
4	Act amending Some Nepal Acts to Maintain Gender Equality (2006)	• Women's equal access to parental or inherited property. • *Amended some gender-discriminatory clauses of the Muluki Ain, including the provision that a daughter is required to return

		shared property upon marriage. “an unmarried girl, a married woman, or a widow living separately may enjoy movable or immovable property on her own” (Article 2.5). • Established sexual violence as a crime punishable by varying years of imprisonment.
5	Local Self-Governance Act	• Proposes quotas for the participation of women and socially disadvantaged population at the Ward and Village Development committee level and District and Municipality Council level.
6	Local Bodies Election Procedure Act Amendment	• A political party shall have to file candidacy in such a manner that at least 50 percent of the positions of Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and Ward Member of Village Development Committee; Mayor and Deputy-Mayor of Municipality and President, Vice President and Area Member are women (Election Commission, Nepal, 2015)
7	The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990	• No discrimination shall be made against any citizen in the application of general laws on the grounds of religion, race, sex, caste, tribe or ideological conviction or any of these (Fundamental Rights, Article 11). • Provided that special provisions may be made by law for the protection and advancement of the interests of women, children, the aged or those who are physically or mentally incapacitated or those who belong to a class that is economically, socially or educationally backwards.
8	Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007	• It is mandatory for political parties and state mechanisms to ensure 33 percent women’s representation. • No discrimination in regard to remuneration social security shall be made between men and women for the same work (Article 13.4) • No discrimination of any kind shall be made against the women by virtue of sex (Article 20.1) • Sons and Daughters shall have the equal right

		to ancestral property (Article 20.4) • Economically, socially or educationally backward women shall have the right to take part in the structures of the State on the basis of the principle of proportional inclusion (Article 21)
9	Good Governance (Management and Operation) Act 2008	• Policies: - empowerment of women and promotion of gender justice; - uplifting of ethnic groups, Dalit, economically and socially backward classes •
10	Gender and Inclusion Policy 2013 [Election Commission, Nepal]	• Polling centers will be made gender friendly and adequate attention will be paid to gender needs in course of voting process (9.5) • Principle of inclusion will be enforced when the political parties nominate candidates under the First Past the Post (FPTP) system for election and when they prepare list of candidates under the Proportional Representation (PR) system (9.12) • Women, Dalit, oppressed caste/indigenous peoples, backward region, Madhesi and other minority citizens will be encouraged to participate in the election through electoral education. (9.13)
11	Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015)	• Full and effective participation" in leadership at all levels of decision-making (SDG5.5) • Responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels (SDG16.7)
12	Constitution of Nepal 2015	• Right to equality (Article 18): no discrimination shall be made in the application of general laws on the grounds of origin, religion, race, caste, tribe, sex, physical condition, condition of health, marital status, pregnancy, economic condition, language or region, ideology or on similar other grounds (Article 18.2) • Rights of women (Article 38): Every woman shall have equal lineage right without gender-based discrimination' (Article 38.1); Women shall have the right to participate in all bodies

	of the State on the basis of the principles of proportional inclusion (Article 38.4); Women shall have the right to obtain special opportunity in education, health, employment and social security, on the basis of positive discrimination (Article 38.5) • Right to social justice (Article 42) • "Women shall have equal ancestral rights without any gender-based discrimination" (Article 43) • Women's right to participation in all bodies of the State • Access to opportunities on the basis of the principle of inclusion and positive discrimination • spells out the need for recognition of Unpaid Care Work and inclusion in the GDP.

Appendix B: Chapbook

The Chapbook consists of a collection of reflective poems from the field. It has been produced as a separate booklet. The cover and contents pages are presented here. The full book can be accessed from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rebat-Dhakal.

Appendix C: Scrapbook

The scrapbook consists of scratch notes and field notes produced during the fieldwork and field-text interpretation phases. It is produced as a separate booklet, designed in a PowerPoint file. The cover and contents pages are presented here. The full scrapbook can be accessed from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rebat-Dhakal.

Appendix D: Major Academic Engagement and Accomplishments

S.N.	Activity	Details
1	**Relevant On-campus Courses Completed**	1. "Sociology of Education" at KUSOED 2. "Advanced Qualitative Research Methods" at KUSOED. 3. "Understanding Public Sector Governance" at Martin Chautari 4. "Improve Your Research - Academic Search, Digital Methods and Scholarly Communication" at Aarhus University, Denmark
2	**Relevant Workshops Attended**	1. DFC Research Workshop I: **Public Finance Dynamics in Education in Nepal**. 24 Nov 2016. Kathmandu University, School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal. 2. Doctoral Workshop on **Participatory Research**. 27 January 2017. Kathmandu University, School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal. Offered by Anna Robinson-Pant, University of East Anglia, UK. 3. Writers' Workshop: **Research Writing for Doctoral Students**. 2 June 2017. Kathmandu University, School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal. Offered by Anna Robinson-Pant, University of East Anglia, UK. 4. DFC Research Workshop II**: School Governance in Nepal.** 12 December 2017. Kathmandu University, School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal. 5. DFC Research Workshop III: **School Governance in Nepal.** 7 December 2018 6. COMPARE Writers' Workshop: **Writing for Publication**. 16 September 2019. New College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom.
3	**Relevant Online Courses/Workshops Attended**	• **Inclusive Learning and Teaching Environments**. September 3-October 31, 2018. Online Course offered by University of Southampton, United Kingdom. • **Academic Integrity: Values, Skills, Action**. October 31, 2018. Online Course offered by University of Auckland, New Zealand. • **Introduction to Research Ethics: Working With People**. November 23, 2018. Online Course offered by University of Leeds, United Kingdom. • **I Know Gender: An Introduction to Gender Equality**. 18 April 2020. UNICEF. • **Evidence and Data Collection for Problem Solving.** 01 May 2020. University of Leeds & Institute of Coding. • **Gender Inclusivity in Peacebuilding.** 12 May 2020.

		United States Institute of Peace. • **How to Turn Your Thesis into an Article**. 23 February 2020. Researcher Academy, Elsevier. • **The Article Publishing Process: An Elsevier Author Workshop**. 01 June 2020. Researcher Academy, Elsevier.
4	**PhD Qualifying Papers (Presented at KUSOED)**	• Qualifying I (Presented 12 Nov 2019): **(Re)Framing the Discourse of Inclusive Governance: Promoting Women Participation in School Management Committee** • Qualifying II (Presented 15 June 2020): **"When I Stopped Making Sense, Senses Became Clearer!" Meaning Making in Ethnographic Research**
5	**Paper Presentation / Panel Discussion at (International) Seminars / Conferences**	**Single Authored** • **Transforming School Governance Through Participatory School Management Committees.** Paper presented at the First International Conference on Transformative Education Research and Sustainable Development, 21-23 October 2016, Kathmandu University, Dhulikhel, Nepal. • **Strengthening School Governance Through Competency-Based Inclusive School Management Committees.** Chautari Annual Conference, 23-24 April 2017, Martin Chautari, Nepal. • **Getting High-Heeled Shoes to School Boards: By Choice or By Chance?** Chautari Discussion Series: Education. 7 November 2017. Martin Chautari, Kathmandu, Nepal. • **Understanding Inclusive Governance in Nepal: Women in School Management Committees.** Presented at the DFC research seminar/workshop at KUSOED on 12 December 2017. • **An Ethnographic Study on Gender Inclusion in School Governance.** 2nd International Conference on Transformative Education Research and Sustainable Development (TERSD), 6-8 October 2018, Kathmandu University, Dhulikhel, Nepal. • **Women in School Governance: Coming to the Un/Known Territories.** Chautari Annual Conference, 21-23 April 2019. Martin Chautari, Kathmandu, Nepal. • **Fixing the 'Broken System'? Can Gender Inclusive School Governance Help?** UKFIET International Conference on Education and Development, 17–19 September 2019, University of Oxford, United Kingdom.

		Co-authored/Co-presented • Dhakal, R. K., Munakarmi, R., Khanal, K. P., & Hamal, S. (2018). **Promoting Research Integrity Through Student-Led Academic Integrity Movement: Evidence From Nepal.** Paper co-presented at the PRINTEGER European Conference on Research Integrity, February 5-7, 2018, Bonn, Germany. **Panel** • Dhakal, R. K., Khanal, K. P., Munakarmi, R., & Hamal, S. (2017). **Researching School Governance: Resource Usage, Accountability, and Inclusion in Nepali Community Schools**. Chautari Annual Conference, 23-24 April 2017, Martin Chautari, Nepal. • Pokhrel, T. R., Dhakal, R. K., Khanal, K., & Munakarmi, R. (2018). **Promoting School Integrity**, Innovation in Education Fair 2018, 25 August 2018, US Embassy Book Bus Project. Local Development Training Academy, Lalitpur, Nepal. **Keynote** • **Elitism in Educational Leadership: The Rise of a Necessary Evil?** Keynote addressed at the International Elitological Congress 2017: Elites and Leaders: Strategies of Forming Elites in a Modern University, 19-22 April 2017, Astrakhan State University, Russia.
6	**Organization of Conferences/ Colloquium/ Research Seminars**	• **1st International Conference on 'Transformative Education, Research and Development for Sustainable Future 2016'.** Co-organised by Kathmandu University School of Education. Dhulikhel, Nepal. • **First Scandinavian Interdisciplinary Conference on 'Innovation and Knowledge Transfer'.** Organised by Nepalese Scientific-Academic Panel (NepSAP) and Embassy of Nepal, Denmark. 20 May 2018, Technical University of Denmark, Lyngby, Copenhagen. • **2nd International Conference on 'Transformative Education, Research and Development for Sustainable Future 2018'.** Co-organised by Kathmandu University School of Education. Dhulikhel, Nepal. • **International Conference on 'Technical Vocational Education and Training for Employment, Income, and Job Quality 2019'.** Co-organised by Kathmandu University School of Education. Dhulikhel, Nepal.

7	**Paper Publications**	**Single Authored** 1. Dhakal, R. K. (2017). Going beyond fair treatment: Promoting gender-responsive education in Nepal. *Laingik Samabikas Shiksha, 18,* 139-145. 2. Dhakal, R. K. (2019). Promoting gender inclusive governance to deliver better education in Nepal. International *Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies, 6*(1), 83-95. https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v6i1p83 3. Dhakal, R. K. (2021). How are 'included' excluded and vice-versa: Negotiated participation of women in school governance in Nepal. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies, 7*(1), 16-33. https://doi.org/10.1177/23944811211020369 4. Dhakal, R. K. (2021). "When I stopped making sense, senses became clearer!" Meaning-making in ethnographic research. *The Caspian Region: Politics, Economics, Culture, 2*(67), 149-157. https://doi.org/10.21672/1818-510X-2021-67-2-149-157 (https://kaspy.asu.edu.ru/?lang=en). **Opinion Pieces in Newspaper/Magazine** 1. Dhakal, R. K. (2019, March). Educational leadership at the crossroads: Are we prepared for tougher times ahead? *Chelsea Wavelength, 9*(1), 28-29. 2. Dhakal, R. K. (2019, June 2). Rethinking Reform: Education in Innovation Era. *Nepal Education Times*, p. 8.
8	**Research Stay Abroad (more than three months)**	**Research Topic**: Inclusive School Governance in Nepal: An Ethnographic Inquiry **Host Institution**: School of Education, Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark **Residency**: DANIDA Fellowship Center, Copenhagen, Denmark **Period**: 27 January 2018 - 12 July 2018
9	**Other Engagement and Publications**	**Teaching/Course Facilitation** • **Writing for Professionals** [MPhil in Development Studies, 2016 Feb Batch, I Sem) • **Academic Writing and APA Support** [MSD,

2016 Aug Batch, I Sem)
- **Writing for Professionals** [MPhil in Development Studies, 2017 Feb Batch, I Sem)
- **Academic Writing and APA Support** [MPhil in Development Studies, 2019 Feb Batch, I Sem)
- **Academic Writing and APA Support** [MPhil in Development Studies, 2020 Feb Batch, I Sem)
- **Academic Writing for Graduate Students** [MTEVT, 2021 Aug Batch, I Sem)
- **EDUC514: Theory and Practice in Education** [MEd in Mathematics, 2021 Aug Batch, I Sem)
- **Academic Writing and APA Support** [MPhil in Development Studies, 2021 Feb Batch, I Sem)
- **EDTV521: Curriculum Development in TVET** [MTEVT, 2021 Aug Batch, II Sem]
- **EDUC600: Educational Dimensions** [MPhil in Development Studies, 2021 Feb Batch, I Sem)

Leadership of Academic Circles

- **KUSOED Integrity Alliance** (2016-2018)
- **PhD Research Colloquium** (Nov 2018-Dec 2019)

Design, Development and Report Production

- Dhakal, R. K., Niroula, G., Bhattarai, B., Pokharel, T. R., Bhandari, B., Rijal, R., & Gyawali, S. (2016). Design and development of **Student Academic Integrity Assessment Tools**. September 2016 – November 2016. KUSOED Integrity Alliance, Kathmandu University, School of Education, Lalitpur.
- Dhakal, R. K., Niroula, G., Bhattarai, B., Pokharel, T. R., Rijal, R., & Gyawali, S. (2017). Design and development of **One-day Integrity Teacher*:* A Training Manual for Teachers**. December 2016 – July 2017. KUSOED Integrity Alliance, Kathmandu University, School of Education, Lalitpur.
- Dhakal, R. K., Pant, B. P., Khadka, K. D., & Manandhar, A. (Eds.). (2016). **Program and Abstracts** (First International Conference on Transformative Education Research and Sustainable Development). https://bit.ly/3guhnWX
- Wagle, S. K., Dhakal, R. K., Luitel, B. P., Gautam, S., Pant, B. P., & Rai, I. M. (Eds.). (2016). **Proceedings of the First International Conference on Transformative Education**

Research and Sustainable Development. https://bit.ly/3cC2bpH

- Dhakal, R. K., Pant, B. P., & Gautam, S. (Eds.). (2018). **Program and Abstracts** (Second International Conference on Transformative Education Research and Sustainable Development). https://bit.ly/3xl441J
- Paudel, P. K., Dhakal, R. K., & Shrestha, M. (2019). **Program and Abstracts** (International Conference on Technical and Vocational Education and Training). https://bit.ly/3ggq8VB
- Dhakal, R. K., & Poudel, P. K. (Eds.). (2019). **ICTVET-2019: Proceedings** (Proceedings of the First International Conference on Technical and Vocational Education and Training).
- Dhakal, R. K. (2019). **ICTVET-2019: Conference Report** (Report of the First International Conference on Technical and Vocational Education and Training).

Working/Seminar Paper Presentations

- Dhakal, R. K., & Kandel, S. (2016). **Transformative Pathways to Teaching: Self-Narratives of Finding Place in Education.** Paper presented at the First International Conference on Transformative Education Research and Sustainable Development, 21-23 October 2016, Kathmandu University, Dhulikhel, Nepal.
- **Construction of Teaching Team Leadership in Open Education Programs: Reflections from Nepal.** Paper presented at EduXchange 2016: International Conference on Leadership and Innovation for the Future in Open and Distance Learning, 6-7 November 2016, Shanghai Open University, China.
- **Quality Assurance in Open and Distance eLearning in Nepal.** Paper presented at the seminar on Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning, 8 November 2016, Shanghai Open University, China.
- **Confronting the Dragons at the Door: A Call for Transformative Learning in Teacher Education.** Paper presented at the International Education Conference, 7-8 December 2016, Faculty of Education, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India.
- **Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Putting ELT into Perspective.** Paper co-presented with Gopal Bhattarai at the 22nd International

Conference of Nepal English Language Teachers' Association, 24-26 February 2017, Kathmandu, Nepal.

- **Influencing Policymaking Structures and Processes Through Research Evidence: How Researchers Can Inform the Policy Process.** Research2Policy Workshop. Centre for Educational Research, Innovation and Development (CERID) and Nepal Economic Forum (NEF), 3-4 July 2017, CERID, Kathmandu.
- **Everything's a Little Mad Here! Locating Learning Spaces in a New Education Paradigm**. 10th Annual Asian Dynamics Initiative (ADI) Conference, 18-20 June 2018, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark.
- **Technical and Vocational Education and Training Through Open and Distance Learning in Nepal: Prospects and Challenges.** International Conference on Technical Vocational Education and Training for Employment, Income, and Job Quality, 11-12 September 2019, Kathmandu University, Dhulikhel, Nepal.
- Dhakal, R. K., & Bhattarai, G. (2020). **Evidence-Informed Policymaking: Role of Higher Education Institutions in Nepal.** Presented at the 21st Annual International Conference on Achieving Excellence in Higher Education, 4-5 January 2020, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya College, New Delhi.

Membership of Professional Associations

- **International Forum of Researchers in Education (IFORE)** (Life Member: Nepal R/1)
- **British Association of International and Comparative Education (BAICE), UK.** (Member, 16 March 2018 - 15 March 2019)
- **International Society of Managing & Technical Editors (ISMTE)** (24 October 2018 till date)
- **Journal of the NATE** [National Association of Teachers of English] Russia), Focus on Language Education and Research (FLer), (International Board Member, 8 December 2017 till date) https://www.nate-russia.ru/page-3/page-9/index.html
- **Social Inquiry: Journal of Social Science Research**, (Executive Editor, Academic, 15 January 2019 till date. https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/sijssr/index

Other Fellowships/Awards

- **Shanghai Open University Visiting Scholar Fellowship.** 30 October – 12 November 2016. Shanghai Open University, Shanghai, China.
- **UKFIET Conference Bursary.** 17–19 September 2019, University of Oxford, United Kingdom.

Other Publications

Single-authored

- Dhakal, R. K. (2016). Making transformation happen: Turning stumbling blocks into road to success [**Editorial**]. *Journal of Education and Research, 6*(1), 1-5.
- Dhakal, R. K. (2016). Responsible practice of research: Safeguarding research integrity and publication ethics [**Editorial**]. *Journal of Education and Research, 6*(2), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.3126/jer.v6i2.22144
- Dhakal, R. K. (2017). "Confronting the Dragons at the Door": A Call for Transformative Learning in Teacher Education. *Journal of Education and Research, 7*(2), 54-69. https://doi.org/10.3126/jer.v7i2.21247
- Dhakal, R. (2019). The politics of education policymaking in Nepal [**Editorial**]. *Journal of Education and Research, 9*(1), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.3126/jer.v9i1.28787
- Dhakal, R. K. (2019). A dialogue on social inquiry: Expanding our understanding of sociological thinking [**Editorial**]. *Social Inquiry: Journal of Social Science Research, 1*(1), 1-7. https://doi.org/10.3126/sijssr.v1i1.26912
- Dhakal, R. K. (2020). Decline in the moral foundations of Nepali politics [**Editorial**]. *Social Inquiry: Journal of Social Science Research, 2*(1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.3126/sijssr.v2i1.28902
- Dhakal, R. K. (2020). Charting a new foreign policy direction: Will it deliver better? [**Editorial**]. *Social Inquiry: Journal of Social Science Research, 2*(2), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.3126/sijssr.v2i2.33042

Co-authored

- Dhakal, R. K., & Pant, B. P. (2016). Assessment of teacher education curricula in Nepal: An ICT perspective. *International Journal of Innovation,*

Creativity and Change, 2(3), 108-121. https://www.ijicc.net/images/Vol2iss3/2Teacher_Ed_and_Nepal_May_2016.pdf

- Dhakal, R. K., & Bhandari, B. (2019). Situation analysis of open and distance e-learning teacher preparation in Nepal. *Jamia Journal of Education, 5*(2), 29-35.
- Pandey, R., & **Dhakal, R. K.** (2019). Visit Nepal year 2020: Some imperatives. *Social Inquiry: Journal of Social Science Research, 1*(1), 94-108. https://doi.org/10.3126/sijssr.v1i1.26919
- Parajuli, M., Gautam, S., **Dhakal, R. K.,** Bajracharya, J., Paudel, T., Acharya, L., & Paudel, P. (2020). Engaging displaced Nepali workers in post-COVID-19 situations: A call for action [Editorial]. *Journal of Education and Research, 10*(2), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.3126/jer.v10i2.32717