Is gender a barrier for becoming an NGO leader? Evidence from a conjoint experiment in Nepal

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Abstract

Experimental studies on women's barriers to win political office have been burgeoning in the past years, but few studies look beyond politics. This study zooms in on the voluntary sector by mapping gender equality and leadership preferences in the NGO sector in Nepal. The degree to which NGOs are engines of gender equality or discrimination is important since leadership positions higher up in the political hierarchy often start with experience from the civil society sector. Our field interviews suggest that NGOs are still "a man's world" in Nepal, and we hypothesize that there is a preference for male candidates for NGO leadership. Within organizational studies, gatekeeping by leaders is an important explanation for why women do not make it to the top of organizational hierarchies. We therefore field a survey among NGO leaders in Nepal to map women's status among organizations, and we embed a conjoint experiment to test if gender is a barrier for becoming the chair-person. We find no support for the hypothesis that male candidates are preferred over female candidates, but our survey, combined with qualitative evidence from interviews, shows that women remain under-represented as leaders of NGOs. Our findings are promising for the future prospects of equality, suggesting that both male and female NGO leaders have internalized the imperative of gender inclusion and show no prejudice against women as such. Yet, structural factors combined with cultural expectations might prevent women from taking such roles, and is something to explore in further research on this topic.

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Introduction

Women made significant gains in terms of political representation in the last two decades. Still, there is an uphill path for women to reach the recognition and opportunities as their male counterparts. Moreover, gender inclusion is important at various levels of society, from the local sphere to the national context, and from civil society activism to formal politics, especially since representation at lower levels is likely a building blocks for representation at the top levels of political influence. Yet, the overwhelming majority of studies focus on women's access to political office, and we know less about women's (un)equal access to important leadership positions in civil society organizations. This study helps remedy this gap, by focusing on women's access to leadership in NGOs. We ask: Is gender a barrier for becoming an NGO leader?

The NGO sector in developing countries is of a significant size and scope, with a high inflow of donor money. Local NGOs perform significant tasks for the functioning and development of local societies, and they typically serve as the main representatives for marginalized groups and the fight against inequality. An important aspect is therefore the representation of marginalized groups *within* the NGOs themselves. In fact, the inclusion of women is shown to be key for sustainable development and good governance (Fine, Sojo, and Lawford-Smith 2020). If women are left out of leadership positions, organizations could have lower performance (Glass and Cook 2018), become less efficient (Knippenberg and Schippers 2007), have lower outreach, and they can reproduce sociopolitical inequalities.

Our study focuses on Nepal, a developing country with recent democratic development of institutions and a conflict past, where Maoist ideology played a big role. Caste is an important dividing line of society and poverty is widespread. In addition, there has been a high influx of international donors and agencies. As such, it is a unique context, but it also shares many of these features with other countries. The findings should therefore be of interest for donors who are funding projects in the development sector and collaborating with local NGOs.

The civil society is quite active in Nepal, which reportedly has around 50,000 active NGOs[1]. Nepal receives around 2 billion US dollars in annual foreign aid,[2] and part of this funding is channeled through local NGOs.[3] NGOs provide relief aid, education, cultural activities and engage in activism and political lobbying. Their impact on local communities is hence significant, so they also have important agenda-setting power. Although women often engage in grassroot activities and community work, anecdotal evidence and interviews with local activists in Nepal tell us that the organizational landscape is highly gendered, in the sense that men

[1]Source: https://kathmandupost.com/province-no-3/2019/08/29/more-than-half-of-nepal-s-total-ngos-are-in-province-3-and-most-of-them-are-in-the-capital

[2]Source: https://kathmandupost.com/money/2021/04/08/annual-foreign-aid-to-nepal-surged-26-87-percent-to-2-billion

[3]"Since 1991, foreign funds flowed directly to NGOs" https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28970/csb-nep.pdf

normally have the leading positions, and women are rarely seen in positions of leadership. "Women are just not seen as leaders", one of our interviewees told us when asked about how it was for her to be both a woman and an NGO leader. Census data on Nepal also shows that women have a much lower percentage of leadership positions in worklife. These observations, combined with a vast literature documenting women's barriers to leadership, we hypothesize that NGO leaders have preferences for a male leader.

To our knowledge, this is the first time that a survey and experiment on the election of NGO leadership candidates has been conducted at the *organizational* level. This unique situation allows us to examine the voting decisions of members within the leadership of the NGO itself. In our focus group discussions, representatives from different NGOs deliberated on their understanding of a member and a leader within an organization. Members of the NGO were understood as those who not only participate in protest activities but also contribute to the organizational work. Leaders within the organization were evidently recognized by the respondents, but were more challenging to define universally. This is because, depending on the size of the NGO, the leadership structure may vary in scale. For instance, all members of an NGO's Executive Committee were perceived as leaders, with these positions typically being elected by the NGO members for a certain period in most cases. It can be generally stated, however, that leaders within an organization are considered to be those members who take on organizational and management responsibilities in the higher hierarchies of the NGO. This includes the executive committee as well as management positions.

Together with our local partners, we sent a survey to around 6,600 active NGOs in Nepal that are members of the NGO Federation. 358 organization representatives participated and as part of the general survey also conducted a conjoint experiment to select candidates for a leadership position in their NGO. We randomly vary attributes of each candidate, such as gender, age, experience and family status. To our surprise, and contrary to our interviews with various NGO representatives on the ground, the results do not support our hypothesis that there is a male preference for leadership among NGO leaders. Quite contrary, we find that female candidates are 12 percentage points more likely to be selected than male candidates.

Literature review

Organizations have been found to be both the main cause and the main solution for social inequities (Acker 2006; Amis, Mair, and Munir 2020; W. W. Powell and Brandtner 2016; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). Research on organizations show that organizations might be relatively homogeneous, despite that diversity can be a comparative advantage for resources, skill sets and mobilization potential. Organizations might be more concerned with unity, trust, and reducing the costs of communication and coordination, and the risk of internal conflict. But apart from a more rational assessment of how diversity could benefit the group

(or not), biases and hidden preferences could come into play. Social attributes such as gender likely come into play, either consciously or subconsciously.

Across a variety of organizations and domains—the workplace, in business, and in politics—scholars have shown that patterns of inequality in leadership positions between men and women exist (Wängnerud 2009; Auster and Prasad 2016). Although each of these contexts are unique in some aspects, we can trace some key explanations for the gender gaps. A common lens to understanding women's under-representation is supply and demand (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Krook 2010). While supply concerns the availability of women who are eligible and willing to take on leadership roles, demand concerns the organization's willingness and desire to include women in the most powerful positions.

Yet, market analogies come short in explaining empirical patterns of inequality, unless we bring in gender as an analytical lens (Krook 2010). In this effort, scholars have pointed to gate keeping, gender norms, and stereotypes against women (Ellemers 2018). It is important to look not only on whether there are formal barriers to women candidates, but scrutinize the norms and implicit requirements. Understanding women's under-representation has also meant not only to study women—but flipping the question and asking, what explains the male persistence in positions of power.

What we can observe across organizations in various domains, women have typically been included at lower levels within organizations, but it has not automatically translated to increased access to leadership and high-level positions (Bass and Avolio 1994; Tharenou 1999; Alice H. Eagly and Sczesny 2009). Data from ILO shows that the female share in management positions worldwide is around 27 percent, a number that has barely moved since 2000.[4] Scholars have talked about a glass-ceiling for women, a metaphor for the invisible barriers hindering women in climbing the ladder inside an organization (Kulik and Rae 2019; G. N. Powell and Butterfield 2015).[5]

One explanation for women's under-representation in leadership positions is gender stereotypes (Alice H. Eagly and Sczesny 2009), which speaks to people's perceptions of men vs. women and and the qualities associated with masculinity and femininity. "Men are stereotyped as strong and active – decisive, independent,masterful, assertive, rational, objective,self-confident and self-competent (Eagly1987; Heilman 1997). Women, on the other hand, are stereotyped as warm and expressive, including concerned with others, friendly, unselfish, emotional,nonobjective, insecure, indecisive and dependent" (Tharenou 1999). What people typically associate as feminine leadership traits have historically been less valued, compared to masculine traits. These invisible assumptions make it harder for women to move up into leadership positions (Heilman 2001). But on top of that, research shows that women who display such masculine traits risk being punished for that, as they move out of the roles ascribed to women, as suggested in role congruity theory (Alice H Eagly and Karau 2002).

[4] https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/women/

[5] Numerous other metaphors also exist, such as the glass cliff, the glass wall, etc.

Another explanation for the gender gap is that women have less "social capital" in organizations (Tharenou 1999). In male-dominated organizations, women have more minor roles in the network. According to one study, the assumptions of organizational cultures are so gendered in nature that male values are ingrained and male ways programmed and taken for granted (Marshall 1993). Other works support this notion, pointing to the importance of "homo-social capital" in creating and maintaining informal networks (Elin Bjarnegård and Melander 2011). This leads to a cycle of men selecting men: "Men's similarity to the managerial hierarchy leads to their advancement to upper management and executive ranks, and women's lack of advancement. Homosocial reproduction operates" (Tharenou 1999).

While these topic have been studied across sectors with various methodological approaches, the most clear tests of a causal link between prejudice and lower demand for women has been achieved through experimental designs, which suffer less from social desirability bias. One of these research agendas focus on the context of elections, testing whether there is a gender bias in people's evaluations of candidates for political office. Due to the historical under-representation of women and gendered perceptions about leadership and public positions, most existing studies hypothesize that there should be a gender bias in favor of men. However, the results of the various studies do not show such clear support for this assumption. Certain studies provide supporting evidence for a subtle male bias, as indicated by Blackman and Jackson 2021 and Ono and Yamada 2020. Conversely, other research suggests a slight preference for women among voters, as demonstrated by Clayton et al. 2020; Berz and Jankowski 2022; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019. A meta-study that synthesizes numerous factorial experiments concludes an overall advantage of around 2 percentage points for being a woman (Schwarz and Coppock 2022).

Yet, among some of the studies that find a preference for women, it is found that voters seem to prefer a woman candidate with a combination of attributes that is rarely a viable candidate to political office in real life (Clayton et al. 2020). In addition, women are expected to adapt to gender roles while simultaneously displaying more 'masculine' qualities, a difficult balancing act. Academics have examined gender stereotypes to reveal disparities in expectations for women and men seeking political office or holding positions of authority (Brooks 2011; Dolan 2010; Schneider and Bos 2014). For example, they have demonstrated that the activation of stereotypes, such as perceptions of women as emotional and sensitive, can impact assessments of female candidates, deeming them unsuitable for office (Bauer 2015). A related experimental literature exists within business and management (Eckel, Gangadharan, et al. 2021), showing that there are gendered patterns in both how women and men evaluate themselves (women under-estimating their abilities, men exaggerating them) and in how others evaluate women and men differently. For example, studies find that in leader selections, women are perceived as more risk-averse than men (Eckel and Grossman 2021).

Yet, a popular conception that lacks statistical backing is that women dominate the volun-

tary sector. We have not found databases that systematically cover gender and leadership in NGOs or civil society organizations, but we have insight from specific contexts. For example, a report from Poland's Institute of Policy Affairs suggests that "the belief that women dominate the not-for-profit third sector is not altogether true. The findings show that non-profit organisations do have a high percentage of women employees and volunteers, but men are more likely to be in key management positions. The data also show that negative phenomena such as the 'glass escalator' and the 'sticky floor' may be a factor in non-governmental organisations."[6] Similarly, a survey of 328 not-for-profits in India showed that there was a dominance of men as leaders, and this gap grew larger for bigger NGOs with larger budgets.[7]. In one of the bigger surveys on nonprofit organizations, a similar patterns emerges [8] That the voluntary sector has a gendered division of labor, where women are more likely in lower-level positions, also finds resonance in studies of social movement organizations and activists, documenting how women do the "shitwork" such as practical tasks, while decision-making, strategy and other prestigious tasks are occupied by men.(Dodson 2015; Thorne 1975; Craddock 2019).

In sum, a non-exhaustive review of this literature leads to mixed results, but importantly, context seems to matter: both the type of organization and the country under scrutiny. Seeking political office is a type of public position with the highest bar, an unlikely pathway for most people. Civil society work represents a lower-level opportunity for gaining experience and having an impact on local-level development in societies. Moreover, the candidates that end up on the ticket for the ballot box might typically have started out their political career with lower-level community work and organizational experiences. We add to this literature by testing for the first time gender biases within NGOs with experimental methods in a non-Western contexts. The social, political and normative context in these cases is not comparable with studies of commercial enterprises or the election of members of parliament.

Theoretical arguments

We turn to theorizing how gender impacts leadership selection in a context outside formal politics or business (which the majority of gender and leadership studies center around), and by studying the organizational level and their leaders, rather than the level of (random) individuals. For the arguments, we have to take into consideration the local context, which in our case is Nepal, a developing country with a high level of inequality. Before we elaborate on our theoretical assumption in the case of Nepal, we develop our general argument from the literature.

[6] https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/resources/article/2012/gender-equality-non-governmental-organisations

[7] https://www.livemint.com/Companies/busG56HnYK2a6TeU9xcuSO/Even-in-the-nonprofit-sector-women-are-getting-left-behind.html

[8] https://www.bu.edu/library/news/2016/03/24/2015-guidestar-nonprofit-compensation-report/

NGOs as an organization type might have some unique features which have implications for understanding inclusion. First, they are typically more informal than other organizations such as enterprises or political parties. This means that some processes, such as electing a new leader, are less institutionalized. Second, while many organizations might have routines in place and a protocol for electing leaders, the de facto process happens in private conversations prior to the formal election. Third, in contrast to political parties, NGOs do not have to attract an electorate, and they do not need to appeal to female voters (which is often a main engine for why political parties have become more focused on women's issues and promoting female candidates). NGOs, fourth and finally, are voluntary-based. Thus, it might be even more important to ensure high trust and smooth flow. A homogeneous leadership group might be important for efficacy and internal trust, and an environment of free communication. This increases the importance of having social capital.

Organizational work in civil society can be an important step of the career ladder, and it is therefore important to understand which candidates more likely get filtered out at this level. It is unclear how the findings on voters' preferences in existing work translates to the NGO context, and in this study we specifically focus on demand by the organizations themselves, not voters. The decision of who gets access and takes on a leadership position within NGOs lies considerably at the discretion of the organization itself: organizations have the agency to choose which leaders they want to support, and who they accept into their ranks.

In NGOs, members of the leadership themselves are therefore important gatekeepers within organizations. They typically have a lot of influence, and might pull the strings or be central in preparing who succeeds them (@). We know from the management literature and research on small groups that people tend to hire people who are similar to themselves (@). That is why, studies on individual-level preferences are interesting, but they might come short in understanding why women are selected or not, if that selection happens by a small group of leaders. Based on this general theoretical foundation, we expect that *members of the management level in NGOs play a decisive role in the selection process and that they likely to select candidates for leadership roles who are similar to themselves*.

Leaders of NGOs in Nepal

As this is an assumption developed out of the general literature, it needs to be sharpened for the context of NGOs in Nepal. In the following, we argue that (i) the general inequality in Nepal and (ii) the inequality observed in NGOs are reasons why we assume a male dominance in the leadership functions of NGOs. Our discussion of gender inequality in Nepal is based on general research and data. Looking more closely on the NGOs, our knowledge of NGOs and their members is based on several trips to Nepal, during which we interviewed various activists and organization representatives from civil society. These interviews took place with

representatives from different civil society fields, such as ethnic groups, women's organizations, human rights activists, in and outside Kathmandu Valley. We also conducted two focus group discussions with NGO representatives in Kathmandu and Dhulikhel in direct preparation for the survey. These were supplemented by further individual interviews and an intensive exchange with our local partner organizations.

Since the end of the conflict in Nepal, and the end of the monarchy, women have improved their representation in politics significantly (Yadav 2016). Gender quotas were implemented in the interim constitution in 2007, and later in the constitution of 2015. In fact, women have held a representation of around 33 percent in the years since (B. R. Upreti, D. Upreti, and Ghale 2020), and the influx of women in positions of political power has had a positive impact on women's opportunities and expanding the roles ascribed to them (Yadav 2023).

However, the improvement in the political representation of women has not been reflected in other important areas of life. For example, aggregate-level statistics show that Nepali women are less included than men in other societal domains, such as in the workforce.[9] The proportion of women who are employed in decision-making and management roles in government, large enterprises and institutions is only 14 percent, and 10 percent of private firms has a female top manager. Vulnerable employment among women is over 90 percent (compared to 69 pct of the male workforce). These structural factors, such as women's lower access to prestigious and skilled jobs, can influence the supply of female candidates, but it can also influence the ideas and perceptions that people have about women's abilities. Furthermore, in Nepal, most unpaid work in the household such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children is still done by women. This means not having much time at the end of the day, and it means that for certain times of the day, typically in the evening, women are prevented from traveling anywhere. Again, it could impact not only whether women are available, but also the willingness of NGOs to select women as leaders.

Patterns of gender inequality also exist in the culture: "Nepal is also a highly patriarchal and caste-based society influenced by Hindu religion, whereby women have a subordinate status" (Xheneti, Karki, and Madden 2019). "Changes have been made over the years to reduce gender discrimination by furthering the rights of women to parental property and land. However, in almost 80% of the Nepalese households, women still do not own any property" (ibid.) In a study of female entrepreneurs in Nepal, Xheneti, Karki, and Madden 2019 find that most of the women needed to negotiate and get consent from their husband before entering business. They also faced negative reactions for neglecting their families and household obligations, and emphasized the need for flexibility, many of them setting up the business nearby or in the home.

In combination, the gendered division of work-life, women's invisible work in the home, and a patriarchal culture, likely results in an environment where Nepali women face many of the same barriers and stereotypes that have been found to shape leadership dynamics in other

[9] All gender statistics available at https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/nepal/

context (favoring men, devaluing women) also in the NGO sector.

We now take a closer look at the gender roles in the NGO field in Nepal based mostly on our own fieldwork. The fight against gender inequality seems to play a major role for many NGOs. Numerous NGOs are committed to improving women's rights and equality in politics, society and the economy. This impression was also confirmed in our survey of NGOs: 90 percent of all NGOs surveyed stated that they are active in the fields of "gender" or "women".

Yet, a report on the NGO in Nepal sector specifically states that "Women-based NGOs are generally headed and staffed by women although, in other NGOs, women's representation is negligible" (p. 4, https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28970/csb-nep.pdf). We observed similar gendered patterns in the specific field of NGOs that we survey in this study while doing field research. Including the two focus groups in Nepal in September 2023, prior to running the experiment, as suggested by other studies.[10] From our insights from several prior field trips to Nepal, including Kathmandu and more rural districts, we have reason to believe that gender biases are important for understanding who has the power within organizations. We have rarely met female NGO leaders when interviewing representatives from the sector. One of our informants, a female NGO leader, told us: "Women are just not seen as leaders".[11]

The challenges of assuming a leadership position within an NGO, according to statements from various female interviewees, constitute both normative and practical hurdles. For instance, interviews with female activists from an ethnic organization revealed instances of discrimination by male members within their NGOs, deliberately excluding them from leadership roles.[12] Additionally, discrimination among women's organizations themselves was reported, where certain tasks within the NGO were equated with specific skills that women from certain ethnic backgrounds were precluded from.[13]

But practically, hurdles for women have also been revealed in our interviews. The crux seems to lie in the expectations of what a leader in an NGO must be willing to commit to. Many of the NGO board meetings take place in the late afternoon or evening, allowing working individuals to attend these unpaid events. One issue, as reported in interviews, is the household responsibilities of women, which necessitate their presence in the evenings. Furthermore, it is seen as costly and unsafe for women to travel alone in public transportation late at night after the event – and a taxi is often too expensive.

The challenges of enabling women to participate in evening events are therefore cultural, safety-related, and also financial in nature. When young children are added to the equation, for whom mothers are responsible, the assumption of leadership roles in NGOs – as well as in other fields – becomes practically impossible for many (young) women. Many of the interviewees recognize this as a problem in achieving equality. At the same time, we observed a sense

[10] As stated by (Clayton et al. 2020), "in retrospect, we would have benefited from conducting our focus groups first, rather than alongside our survey experiment".

[11] Interview, 04/05/2023

[12] Interview, 19/03/2018

[13] Interview, 20/03/2018

of powerlessness in the conversations, acknowledging the circumstances as they are. After a female leader of an NGO shared her own story regarding the aforementioned issues, she responded to the question of whether the meeting times under her leadership had been shifted to times when women could participate by stating that this was not the case. She saw no possibility for the NGO itself to make this happen, as these requirements would be placed on members by all NGOs.

Moreover, from interviews and focus group discussions, it became clear that the importance of the members of the leadership in the organization and having informal support is of key importance when selecting the new chair-person. Although many organizations have procedures for electing the leader, in which all paying members can vote, our insights from interviews with NGO leaders informed us that most of the time, the unofficial selection happens before the formal election. In this unofficial process, the importance of having the group's trust, and the person's feasibility and influence on the organizations is key. As reflected in the literature review, gender indirectly influences who is being trusted in organizations, which is reflected in the literature on "homo-social capital" (E. Bjarnegård 2013). Since our field observation is that men still dominate the leadership, this could mean that men continue to recruit men.[14]

In a nutshell, our theoretical argument is based on the assumption that leaders in NGOs are selected by gatekeepers in the person of existing leaders. This is due to the necessary level of mutual trust, which is particularly important for organizations such as NGOs that rely heavily on the volunteerism and motivation of their members. There are many indications that men dominate the leadership circles of NGOs in Nepal, as outlined above. Based on this observation, our hypothesis[15] is as follows: *There is a general preference for male over female candidates for chair-person.*

Data and methods

We conducted a survey in Nepal in the period October to December 2023. The survey included questions on the organizational features, in addition to an embedded conjoint experiment. We developed and tested the structure and questions of the survey and the experiment together with our local partner organizations and on the basis of focus group discussions.[16] In contrast to most other experimental studies in this field, we wanted to test our argument about which candidates members of the NGO leadership would choose as gatekeepers in their organizations.

[14]Importantly, we do not think that NGOs do not care about women. Most NGOs that we have met in the field have gender policies and they work, directly or indirectly, with topics that are relevant to women. At the same time, there is a big difference between including women at lower levels of the organization, including management and day-to-day tasks. For this type of work, women typically are wanted, but only up to a certain level of the hierarchy.

[15]We have preregistered the hypothesis and the design of the study on OSF.

[16]We thank the Centre for Social Change (CSC) team, namely Prakash Bhattarai, Pawan Roy, and Susmita Puri for their invaluable support in all aspects of the survey. We would also like to thank the NGO Federation Nepal for their support and the opportunity to send the survey via their membership list.

This posed the challenge that we did not want to conduct a survey at the individual level, but at the *organizational* level.

The respondents were presented to a hypothetical recruitment scenario for chair-person to their organization. The introduction text reads:

Imagine that in your organization, you are in the process of selecting a new chair-person.

In the following, we will present you with TWO CANDIDATES, and ask you to pick the person you find most suitable for the position. These two candidates are different across a set of attributes. Please assume that both candidates have been member of your organization for a couple of years. Both are willing and motivated to become the leader. You will repeat the task 5 times.

Bear in mind that this is a hypothetical scenario, and the candidates we display might not be directly relatable to your organization. We still ask you to pick the one you find most suitable for leadership. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer. Let's begin!

They were then presented to candidate pairs and asked to choose which profile they find most suitable for organizational leadership. We included five attributes, and randomly manipulated the levels of each attribute: gender, age, prior experience, family status, and income. Given the limited pool of respondents, we had to keep the design simple, with two levels for each attribute, as shown in Table 2.[17] [more about why we chose these attributes]. We also made sure that all possible combinations of the attributes made logical sense (e.g. the age of the candidate and the age of their children). The respondents repeated the choice task five times, in line with recommendations in the method literature (Auspurg and Hinz 2015), and to avoid fatigue and risk that respondents drop out of boredom.

The survey was sent out exclusively to leaders of NGOs via an umbrella organization, the NGO Federation Nepal, which has around 6,600 NGOs as member organizations. The criteria for being a member of the umbrella include being "legally registered, self-governed and politically non-partisan". Moreover, the members should be "committed to the empowerment of poor and excluded communities, and are working transparently and accountably using demo-

[17] One of the variables we have omitted is caste, which in Nepal is one of the strongest distinctions by social status. While the most ideal option would be to specify and randomize caste as one of the attributes, it is nearly impossible to think about only two levels in terms of caste (e.g. a low and high caste) that hold a universal meaning for all respondents. Each caste brings with it a series of other connotations, such as resources, social status and suitability, and would make many of the candidate profiles seem unrealistic to the respondents. The inclusion of caste would thus obfuscate the results, unless we had made the design much more complex, which in turn would require an unrealistic number of respondents. We contend that if the respondents would implicate caste for the candidate profiles, they most likely envision that the candidates are from a caste who is acceptable to them and their organization, especially since we make the assumption in the scenario that the candidates are recruited from the organizational base. Unless the combinations of attributes make people think systematically of a particular caste, caste should not influence the results. While caste is indeed an important attribute for understanding discrimination in organizations, also in its intersection with gender, it is a topic for future studies.

cratic governance approaches and are not preaching religion" [18] Given the formal requirements to be legally registered means that the NGO we surveyed have a certain number of members, as well as documentation of this.[19] In essence, we are confident that the organizations we targeted were active and 'real' groups. We received a total of 385 responses for the experiment.

The cooperation with the NGO Federation enabled us to contact active NGOs in all regions of Nepal directly. However, this does not mean that we have a representative sample of NGOs in Nepal. This is difficult to achieve as there is no body in the country that has an accurate overview with contact information of all active NGOs in the country. This limitation should be taken into account when interpreting the results. At the same time, we believe that the members of the NGO Federation are exemplary for those NGOs in the country that are primarily committed to various social issues in society. With all due caution, this is a unique opportunity to take a comparative look at the world of NGOs.

The invitation to the survey was directly sent to all members by the NGO Federation. In this email, the collaboration between different partners and the objective of the survey were explained. Since the experiment itself constituted only a small part, the explanation of the survey primarily focused on capturing the situation of NGOs in Nepal. The individual questions and their translations were developed with the assistance of local partners prior to the survey. In order to achieve the highest possible response rate and to accommodate those who do not speak English, the survey could be completed online in both English and Nepali. Out of these 6,600 potential NGOs, 385 organizations participated in the survey and completed our experiment. This corresponds to a response rate of nearly 6 percent.[20]

The demographic distribution of respondents can be viewed in Table 1. As shown, we received responses from all the seven districts in Nepal, and our respondents vary in age but with a majority in their 40s or 50s. We observe already in the composition of respondent gender that there is a large majority of men responding to our survey on behalf of the organization that they represent. Although we cannot know for certain that the respondent has the most responsibility or highest leadership position within the NGO, it is at least an indication of the gendered power imbalance within organizations, and it corresponds to the patterns we have seen in the field. We can look at the roles of each respondent in Figure 1, divided by gender of the respondent, and observe that most form part of the leadership group (management, executive) in NGOs.

Before turning to the results of the conjoint experiment, we examine the descriptive patterns of gender inclusion in the NGOs that responded to our survey. In Figure 1, panel (a), we firstly

[18]The full criteria are available at https://www.ngofederation.org/

[19]See this report for a more detailed description of the necessary steps to register as an NGO in Nepal https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28970/csb-nep.pdf

[20]When designing the experiment, we relied on power calculations for determining the number of respondents needed to test the hypotheses. We used the calculation tool for conjoint experiments provided by Lukac and Stefanelli (2020). We estimated getting 500 respondents. Since the response rate was a bit lower than expected, this increases the risk of Type II error. We therefore had to drop our hypotheses on interactions, and we simply explore how gender interacts with the other attributes without making firm conclusions.

Table 1: Demographic distribution of the respondents

Group	N total	Percent %
Female respondents	91	
Male respondents	327	
Age 16-20	8	
Age 21-30	46	
Age 31-40	137	
Age 41-50	140	
Age 51-60	54	
Age 61	15	
Koshi	83	
Madhesh	96	
Bagmati	97	
Gandaki	33	
Lumbini	78	
Karnali	54	
Sudurpashchim	82	

observe the share of women members in the NGOs. On this metric, NGOs appear gender-balanced: A majority of organizations has at least 40 percent women among the members.[21] Further, as shown in panel (b), virtually all NGOs have women on the executive board, but this is unsurprising given the legal requirement of representation to register formally as an NGO in Nepal. Finally, most NGOs in our survey ticked off for working on the topic "women" or "gender". This does not mean that they focus predominantly on gender, as most NGOs work on several topics, but it at least shows that they have a gender focus as one of several priorities. In total, these insights show that women play important roles in NGOs and that most NGOs care about equality is a topic.

The experiment was placed before the survey questions on diversity to avoid priming the respondents. After the conjoint, we asked a series of questions aimed at mapping the inclusivity of organizations, including women's presence among the executive board and among the members, and which topic(s) the organization worked on.

We also included a series of statements that tap into questions of inclusion: We asked the respondents to indicate agreement/disagreement with statements on the importance of diversity, flexibility, and career prospects. In addition, we asked respondents to rank different leadership qualities, qualities that in previous research has been linked to masculine and feminine associations. The exact wording of each of these questions is laid out in the Appendix.

The responses from the experiment were aggregated into a candidate-dataset, where the total N is 3850.[22] We analyze the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE) (Hainmueller,

[21] Some are entirely composed of women. Women's organizations are excluded in the causal analysis.

[22] We exclude the responses from the organizations with 100 pct women. That means we have 3600 observations in the main analysis.

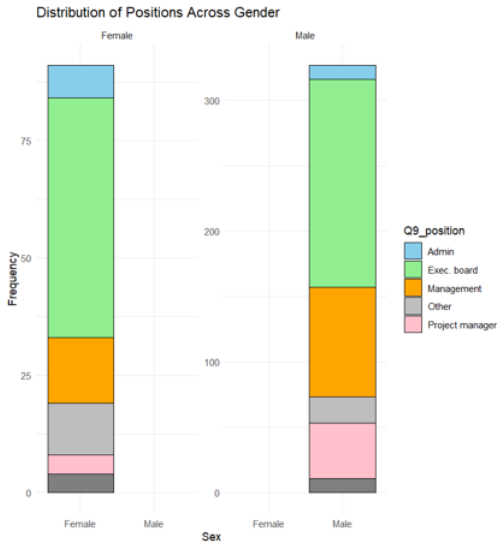
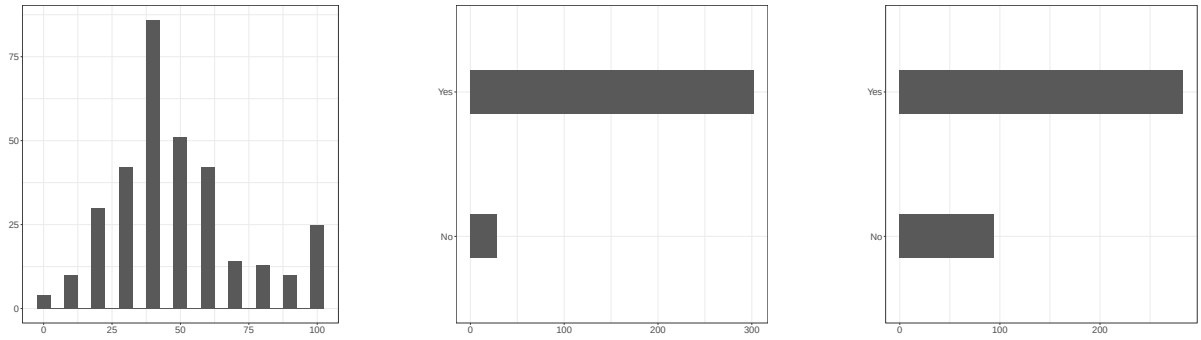


Figure 1: Leadership positions by gender

Table 2: Dimensions and levels of the candidates presented

Dimensions	Levels
Age	37 46
Gender	Man Woman
Resources	Family with average income Family with high income
Skills	No information Has been the chair-person in another organization
Family status	Married with two adult children Married with two small children



(a) What is the % of women among the NGOs members?

(b) Are women represented among the executive board?

(c) Does the NGO work on the topic "women" or "gender"?

Figure 2: Descriptive patterns of women's representation among the surveyed NGOs

Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). AMCE represents the change in the probability of choosing one option due to a one-unit change in a particular attribute level. The critique of AMCE is that we could observe a positive effect of being male vs. female, yet it is possible that respondents who prefer men are below fifty percent, but that the share who prefer men hold these preferences more intensely (Abramson, Koçak, and Magazinnik, 2019). In addition, we therefore estimate the Marginal Means (MM). They represent the average outcome (probability of choosing a specific option) "across all appearances of a particular conjoint feature level, averaging across all other features". In forced choice conjoint designs with two profiles per choice task, MMs by definition average 0.5 with values above 0.5 indicating features that increase profile favorability and values below 0.5 indicating features that decrease profile favorability. Calculation of MMs entail no modelling assumptions, they are simply descriptive quantities of interest. [23]

The experiment was submitted for evaluation and approved by the Ethics Committee at University Duisburg-Essen. Several measures were undertaken to maintain as much privacy as possible for the respondents. Firstly, in the survey, we asked for the organization name, but this information was only used for detecting duplicate responses and was deleted after completion of the data collection and replaced with a numeric code. Moreover, respondents could withdraw from the survey after they started it, but we informed them that we would collect the data for respondents that did not complete the entire survey. The survey was not sent out directly from us, but via the NGO Federation, which helped ensure trust in the survey. Respondents could choose to take the survey in Nepali or English language.

Results

We now turn to the results from the quantitative analysis. We estimate the causal effect of gender on candidate choice with AMCE, which represents the change in the probability of

[23] For all analyses, we used the cregg package in R, by Leeper 2020.

choosing one option due to a one-unit change in a particular attribute level. The results are visualized in Figure 3. Contrary to our hypothesis that there is a positive effect of being male, there is a significant reduction in the probability of selecting the candidate when going from female to male.

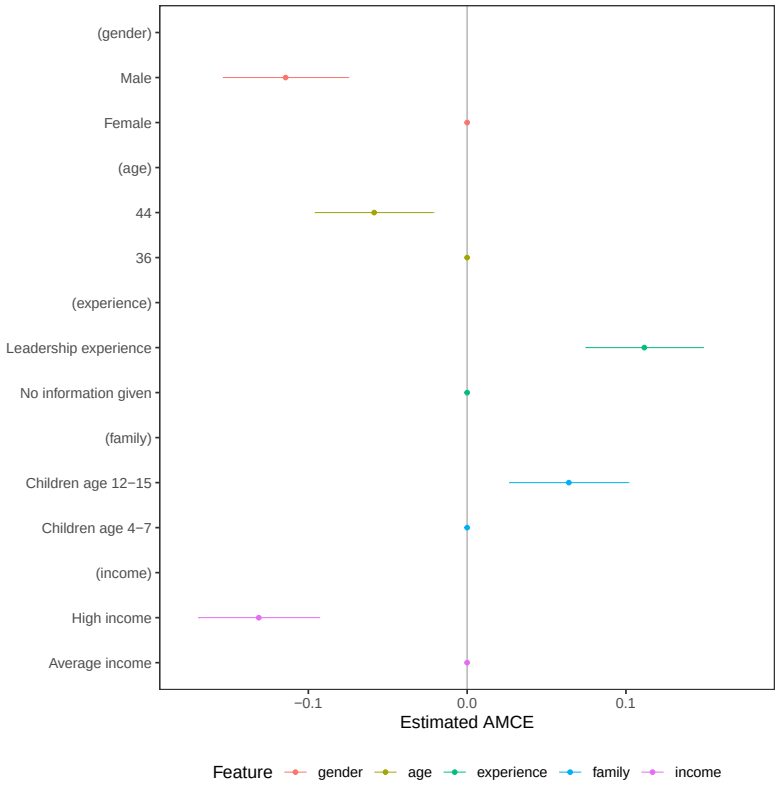


Figure 3: The causal effect of candidate attributes on preferred candidate for chair-person

We also interpret the effect of the other attributes. Respondents have a preference for the young candidate, around 5 percentage points more likely to choose the candidate when going from 44 years to 36 years, which also surprised us.[24] As expected, respondents prefer the candidate with experience: This increases the likelihood of selecting the candidate with around 11 percentage points, compared to no information. We furthermore observe that there is, as expected, approximately a 5 percentage points higher preference for the candidate with children of a higher age, compared to the candidate with younger children. Finally, respondents prefer the candidate with average income. The likelihood of selecting the candidate decreases by approximately 12 percentage points when going from average income to high income. This was also surprising, but it could be that respondents have certain negative connotations to people with high income, especially since the NGOs surveyed typically work on improving the

[24]This is surprising, as individuals under 40 are still considered youthful in Nepal. One explanation could be that the respondents were, on average, relatively young. Another possible explanation is that the age differences between 36 and 44 years are not sufficiently meaningful. A larger age gap might have yielded different results. However, based on interviews regarding possible reasons for discrimination against women in leadership positions, we wanted to inquire about children of different ages. After discussions with our partners, these age constellations were the only way to depict a realistic scenario of women (and men) with children at specific ages.

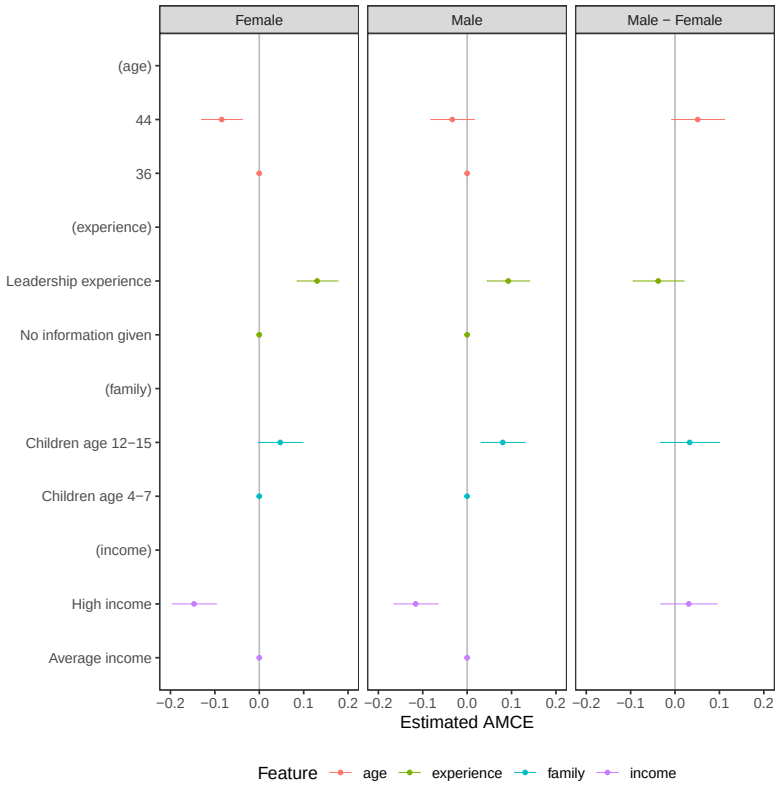


Figure 4: The effect of candidate attributes on preferred candidate for chair-person, interacted with gender

situation of marginalized groups and not the rich.

We explore how gender interacts with the other attributes in Figure 4. These graphs show that the penalty or reward for other attributes such as age, experience and family status do not seem to vary substantially between male and female candidates. The differences in effect size is not statistically significant.We are cautious to draw the conclusion that gender does *not* interact with other variables based on the statistical power, and we leave this up to further research.

The problem with AMCE is that it does not tell us the absolute preferences for candidates by gender, they only tell us the relative effect of gender. It is possible that a majority prefer men but those who prefer women have a much stronger preference for women. We therefore also look at the descriptive preferences, as calculated by marginal means.

The marginal means, visualized in Figure 5, confirm the preference for female candidates. In the candidate choice task, the female candidate was picked around 55 percent of times.

We explored subgroup patterns at the level of respondent or organizational characteristics. First of all, do male and female respondents evaluate the candidates differently? Here, we do see some clear gendered patterns: Female respondents (who only represent 25 percent of the total number of respondents) have a substantially higher preference for female candidates than what male respondents have. Although there is a slight positive change for female candidates among the male respondents, it seems clear that the large part of the reward for female can-

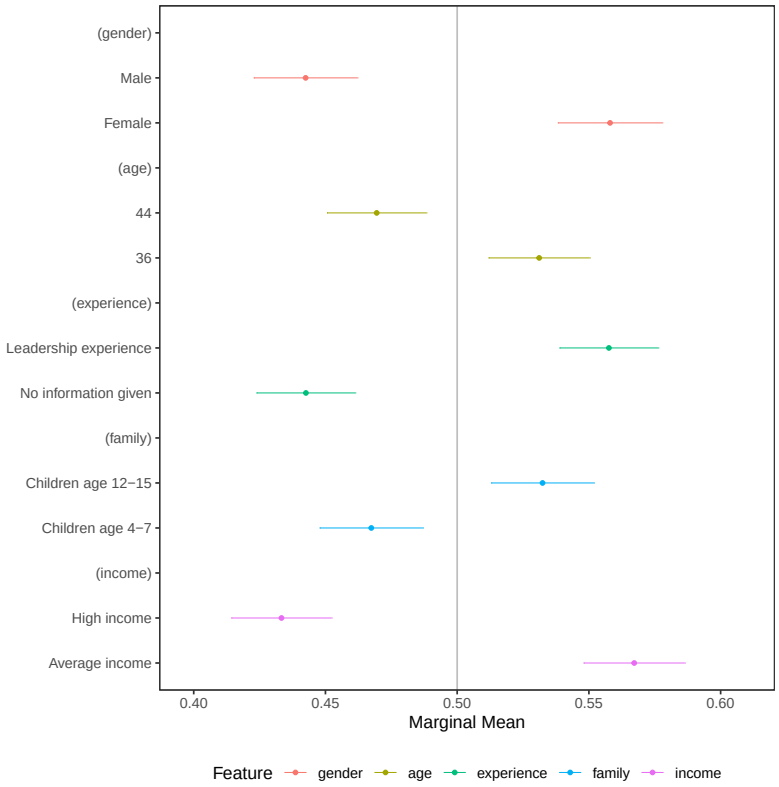


Figure 5: Marginal means

didates are driven by the female respondents. We provide an additional test of this argument by slicing the respondents into two groups, those who have below fifty percent women and those above fifty percent female members. Here, we see similar patterns as with the respondent gender: The female preference is substantively higher among majority-female NGOs.

We also compared NGOs with low and high female membership, as well as those with high resources compared to low resources. We also checked if there were differences between NGOs receiving international funding vs the rest. No specific patterns were detected.

Complementary evidence

As the results regarding various questions demonstrate below, the previously assumed male dominance is not reflected in the conjoint experiment. Moreover, women and gender issues seem to play a larger role than we had assumed, but gender imbalance is still evident in the survey responses, and our field research. We complement the findings by exploring the additional survey questions that we included in the hope that it could indirectly tell us something about women's status in NGOs.

Firstly, the respondents were asked to pick the two most important qualities of a leader, from a list of qualities where each element listed could have gendered connotations. With this question, we can explore whether the respondents prefer leadership skills that are typically

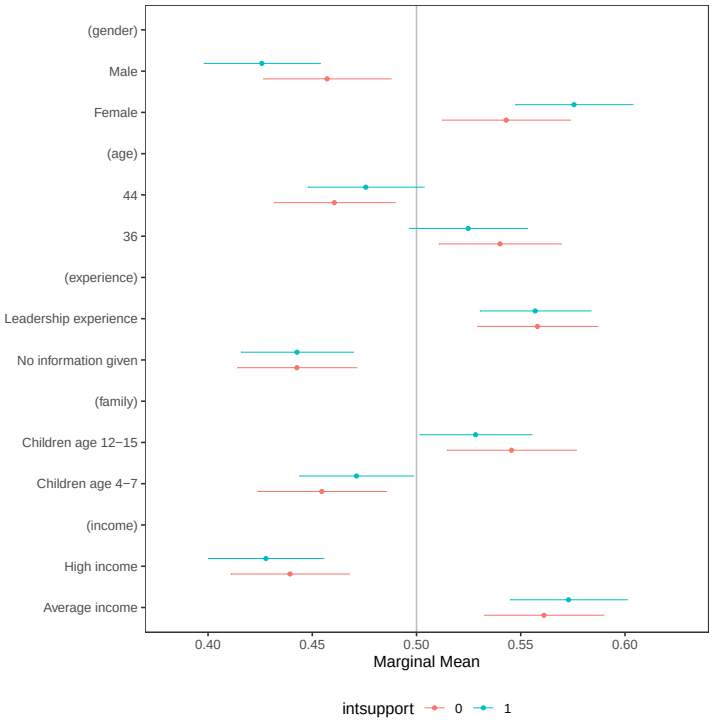


Figure 6: Respondent gender and evaluation of candidate attributes

associated as masculine traits, or whether they prefer skills that people associated with feminine leadership style, something which is emphasized in the vast literature on gender and leadership. As shown in Figure 8, persuading others about their opinion (masculine leadership trait), and listening to the perspectives of others (feminine leadership trait), are the two most important qualities according to the respondents. In other words, our respondents prefer both leadership qualities that associate with women, and associate with men (although we did not test whether our respondents actually have such gendered associations). Interestingly, almost nobody picked natural authority and respect–typically associated with men–as the most important leadership quality. In combination, this provides mixed evidence of gendered leadership preferences, and points to possible future research.[25]

We furthermore asked the respondents whether they agree with the statement that diversity makes NGOs more likely to receive funding. This is a more instrumental way of thinking about gender inclusion (and other groups). We observe in Figure 9, panel (a), that most respondents agree with the statement that diversity in membership is instrumental for receiving funding. This could explain why most of them have women as one the topics they work on. Another statement we asked for their opinion on, was whether organizations should provide flexibility on meeting times for candidates that are not available around the clock. This aspect could be

[25]Originally, the question on leadership skills was intended to be used in the analysis, and the question was designed as ranking task. We quickly discovered that this was too cognitively demanding, and we therefore had to change the logic after the survey was open. We instead asked respondents to pick the two most important qualities. Unfortunately, this means we have data that is too aggregated to meaningfully divide the respondents into two groups, feminine vs. masculine preferences.

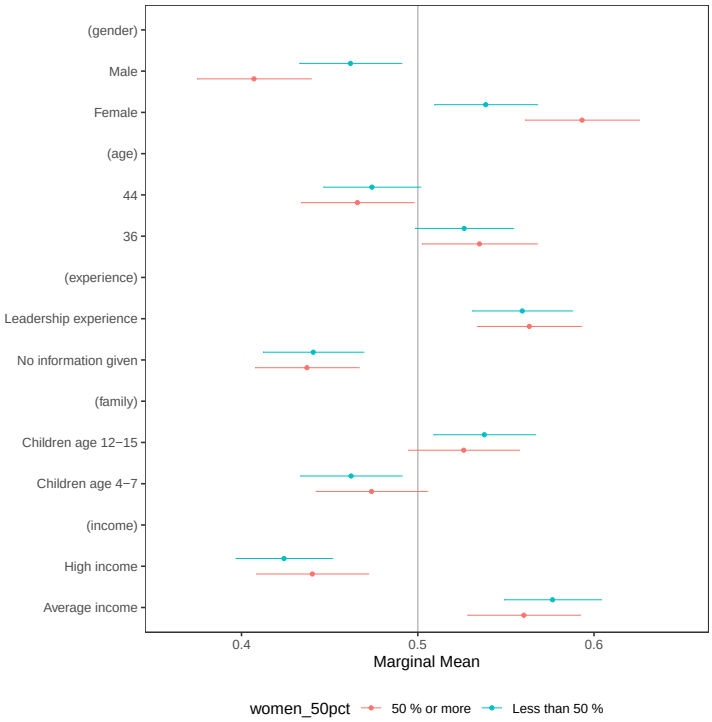


Figure 7: % Female members in NGO and evaluation of candidate attributes

important for women's ability to assume leadership in NGOs. In Figure 9, panel (b), we see that most respondents agree that NGOs should provide flexibility, but we still notice a relatively big chunk of respondents (almost one third) who strongly disagree with this view. Although only indirectly related to gender, this could mean that it is harder for women to become leader.

Discussion

In a nutshell, and contrary to our hypothesis, we do not find any bias against female candidates. On the contrary, female candidates were more likely to be picked than the male. This finding is

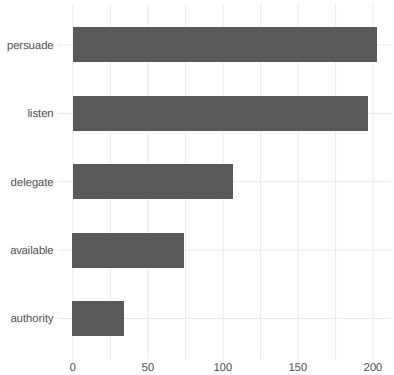
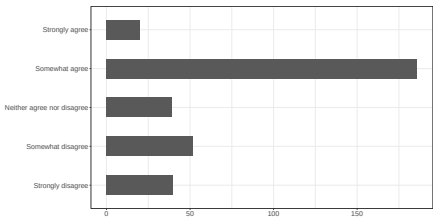
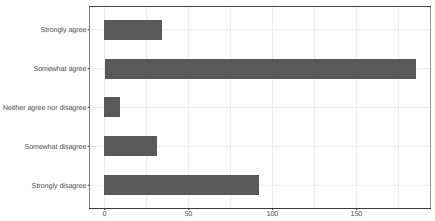


Figure 8: "What are the two most important qualities/skills of a chair-person?"



(a) "Organizations that have a diverse membership base are more likely to get funding"



(b) "Organizations should adjust their meeting times and provide flexibility for candidates who cannot meet at all times during the day or week"

Figure 9: Respondents' opinions on statements about NGOs, indirectly relevant for gender

not only driven by women's organizations, also male leaders display favorable attitudes toward female candidates. As such, the underlying preferences of NGO leaders are not discriminatory against women.

Some explanations for this could be the strong expectation from the society and political system. Nepal has since the new constitution in 2015 implemented strong policies on gender inclusion, which are reinforced both internally (the legislation) and externally (international donors). This has been a top down approach of gender mainstreaming, and the results suggest that these norms have been internalized by the organizations and their leaders. We also see the results of this political effort in terms of the topics they work on (90 percent mentioned women or gender) and the number of organizations with women on executive board (also more than 90 percent).

Existing studies on other cases that also, somewhat surprisingly, do not find confirmatory evidence of a male preference, caution against concluding that gender imbalances mainly stem from women's unwillingness to seek political office (Clayton et al. 2020). One explanation is that there could be underlying assumptions among the respondents, assumptions that are not made explicit in experiments. For example, if presented with a woman and a man who have equal skills, resources and experience, people might think of this woman as a 'super woman' who works harder than most other and possess a special personality type, and that she has worked harder than the man to get there. This could also be an alternative explanation for our findings.

Still, the question remains, why do we meet so few female NGO leaders in the field? Why were only one fourth of the respondents who took the survey female? Are there not enough women wanting to become leader, or are structural factors preventing viable candidates? Previous literature points to both explanations, but also their interaction. Previous studies show that although respondents on average don't have any preferences for men, they prefer women with unrealistic attributes, such as women with children but with a lot of experience and time. In Malawi, voters discriminated against women who did not have children, because this went against the prevailing gender norms (women ought to have children), but at the same time, in the same context women with children would have full responsibility for the children and thus

would not have the necessary time and opportunity to run for political office. Other studies document a clear gender gap in political ambition, but this is in turn explained by the existing gender norms in society. For politics, Fox and Lawless Fox and Lawless 2014 points to early socialization processes where girls are assigned different and less agentic roles compared to boys. Butler and Preece 2016 show that another reason for why women are less likely to seek office is that women are more likely to believe party leaders will provide female recruits less strategic and financial support than male recruits. Again, a result of an already existing under-representation of women, which makes it more difficult for women to navigate a system dominated by men.

While we can only speculate whether these theories hold for the context of NGOs in Nepal (most existing work look at other contexts), we know that Nepal still has clear gendered distribution of labor. In Nepal, most unpaid work in the household such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children is still done by women. The results from this experiment has shown that the respondents prefer the candidate with the more grown-up children, but we could not say anything clearly about an interaction effect where women are punished more for having small children. Future research could test alternative wordings for this dimension. For example, one could specify the hours that each candidate has at their disposal, i.e. the hours left after all household work, care-work for children, and a paid job. That would more explicitly test the family-status barrier for men and women.

With these gendered structures in the household in mind, women candidates might still be interested in assuming leadership if they were given the necessary adjustment and flexibility. This could be an important option that NGOs provide, and could make a positive change also in the absence of major changes in the distribution of household work (which will take longer time and institutional reform). It is therefore promising that we find that the majority of respondents support the statement that NGOs should provide flexibility for candidates who cannot meet at all times during day. At the same time, X pct chose "disagree strongly", i.e. they think that the NGO's needs go before that of the individual candidate's (see Figure 9, panel (b)). This is a challenge for NGOs if they really want to diversify their leadership.

The selection of chair-person is a simplification of a realistic recruitment scenario within an NGO, and we do not include all potential features that could shape the respondents' candidate preferences. Gender interacts with several other factors, as shown by the existing literature on masking effects and other interactions where women are held to other standards than men, break or conform to gender roles, or where assumptions are being made about women's abilities when these are not specified. Future research should experiment with different attributes. For example, the importance of personality traits. And for Nepal specifically, the question of caste and how it interacts with gender. It would also be interesting to look more in-depth into age, because our results surprised us in that there was a higher preference for the younger candidate among the respondents. We were also surprised that for a leader, the lowest ranked quality was

to have authority and respect.

We provided a first glance at the NGO sector and women's representation among leadership by surveying NGOs in Nepal. The findings are limited to this scope, and some selection issues should be mentioned. The sample of NGOs that responded to our survey is not completely unbiased. Although they displayed variation in geographic region they represented, and worked on a variety of topics, our sample does by definition not include NGOs for religious groups, or conservative agendas. It might be that the results change if we could get responses from a more conservative set of organizations. It is also likely that among those who received an invitation to the survey, we are more likely to get responses from those NGOs that are more progressive, dynamic and successful – and at the same time more likely to have more inclusive attitudes. Those without resources, without for example the technical skills to take on online survey, were less likely to respond, and these might in turn hold more traditional views on leadership and gender.

Conclusion

Is gender a barrier for becoming an NGO leader? In our experiment of NGO leaders in Nepal, we do not find evidence of individual-level biases preventing women from taking leadership. On the contrary, our respondents expressed a significant positive reward for female candidates.

Our sample of respondents is unique in that it covers distinct organizations, not individuals. Those who took the survey not only took the survey on behalf of themselves, but also on behalf of the organization. Our direct questioning of the gatekeepers give the survey much more validity than if we asked the general population about their preferences for leadership, and is more indicative of the actual behavior of the NGOs.

Our survey at the same time reveal patterns of inequality. In 76 percent of the organizations that responded, the leader who responded was male. This, coupled with our field observations and interviews, clearly show that women are not yet included to the same degree as men.

The lack of discriminatory preferences among our respondents are promising for improving the gender balance in organizations and civil society, as it suggests that there is demand for women as leaders. At the most basic level, women are not discriminated by internalized attitudes. Still, we see that on average, respondents prefer candidates who have older children and candidates with leadership experience. This hints at the importance of other factors, such as inequality within the household (women disproportionately burdened with taking care of the home and the family), inequalities in work experience, and other structural factors.

Our results are confined to an elite population of NGO leaders. It might be that this group of people hold more progressive views on gender and leadership abilities than the general population. A majority of the NGOs who responded to our survey had listed women or gender as one of the topics they care about. A majority of them also had at least 40 percent female

members. In the quest for funding, they are also more exposed to donor requirements, which typically focus on gender balance. It would be interesting for further work on this topic to explore whether the Nepali population in general hold similar views.

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Survey questions

In your opinion, what are the most important skills of a leader? Below we list different leadership skills, and we ask you to please pick the two most important qualities.

- Is able to explain and persuade others of his/her point of view.
- Always listens to the various opinions and perspectives of others.
- Delegates tasks and responsibilities.
- Has natural authority and respect.
- Is always present and available for the organization.

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

- Organizations should adjust their meeting times and provide flexibility for candidates who cannot meet at all times during the day or week.
- Becoming a chair-person is an important stepping stone for becoming a politician.
- Organizations that have a diverse membership base are more likely to get funding.

What are the topics that your organization focuses on? Choose as many categories as you want.

(Multiple topics listed, including "Women" and "Gender")

If you think about the people in your membership, what is the estimated proportion of the following groups? Please give your best estimate in percentage (%)

(Sliders from 0-100 % for Women/People under 30/Dalits)

Which of the following social groups are currently represented by one or more person as member of the organizational executive board? Please tick all that apply.

(Several groups listed, "Women" one of them)

Survey experiment

Vignette:

> Imagine that in your organization, you are in the process of selecting a new chair-person.
>
> In the following, we will present you with TWO CANDIDATES, and ask you to pick the person you find most suitable for the position. These two candidates are different across a set of attributes. Please assume that both candidates have been

member of your organization for a couple of years. Both are willing and motivated to become the leader. You will repeat the task 5 times.

Bear in mind that this is a hypothetical scenario, and the candidates we display might not be directly relatable to your organization. We still ask you to pick the one you find most suitable for leadership.

Remember, there is no right or wrong answer. Let's begin!