

Governance Dynamics and Gender Representation: Citizens' Perceptions and Institutional Practices in Kaski District, Nepal

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Publication Date: 2025/10/03

Abstract: This study investigates the effectiveness of local governance in Kaski District, Nepal, by analyzing citizen perceptions across urban and rural municipalities. The research was based on two primary objectives, such as to examine citizens' perceptions of service delivery, civic participation, and grievance mechanisms, and to analyze the variations in these governance practices between urban and rural settings and their implications for women's representation. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 111 respondents purposively selected across five local government units (Pokhara Metropolitan City, Madi, Annapurna, Machhapuchhre, and Rupa Rural Municipalities) through surveys, key informant interviews, and field observations. Findings reveal a significant urban-rural divide. Rural municipalities demonstrated higher citizen satisfaction, attributed to closer official-community ties, whereas the urban center struggled with bureaucratic inefficiencies. While grievance mechanisms were generally accessible, concerns over political favoritism were prevalent. Civic engagement was moderate but constrained for women by structural barriers like dual workloads, leading to a reliance on informal channels. The study concludes that effective local governance hinges not only on resources but on fostering inclusiveness, responsiveness, and trust. Strengthening genuine women's representation and ensuring equitable service delivery are crucial for achieving accountable governance.

Keywords: Governance, Local Governments, Citizen Perception, Service Delivery, Women's Representation, Urban-Rural Municipalities, Nepal.

How to Cite: Mohan Kumar Paudel; Ramchandra Baral (2025). Governance Dynamics and Gender Representation: Citizens' Perceptions and Institutional Practices in Kaski District, Nepal. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(9), 2317-2327. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25sep1339>

I. INTRODUCTION

The promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015 and the subsequent restructuring into a federal governance system marked a watershed moment in the country's political history. This transformation devolved significant authority and resources to local government units (LGUs), granting them both autonomy and responsibility in service delivery, planning, and community engagement (Shrestha & Poudel, 2019). As the closest level of government to citizens, LGUs now hold a central role in shaping governance experiences, particularly in terms of inclusivity, accountability, and responsiveness. While decentralization was envisioned as a means to enhance democratic participation and service effectiveness, the extent to which local institutions have fulfilled these expectations remains an open question (Smoke,

2015; Adhikari & Gellner, 2021). Globally, effective local governance is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic development and sustainable service delivery (Bouckaert et al., 2020). Studies emphasize that citizen satisfaction depends not only on the availability of services but also on the fairness, efficiency, and transparency of governance processes (Lapiente & Van de Walle, 2020). Within Nepal, this challenge is particularly pronounced, as LGUs must balance structural reforms with entrenched socio-political dynamics, including clientelism, elite dominance, and persistent gender and caste-based inequalities (Adhikari, 2025; Ojha et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, assessing the efficacy of local governance is both a policy imperative and an academic necessity, particularly in districts such as Kaski, where urban and rural municipalities exhibit diverse governance outcomes.

Local governments in Nepal are entrusted with delivering a wide array of public services, including education, health, sanitation, and infrastructure, as well as ensuring citizen inclusion in decision-making (Lamsal & Gupta, 2022). They are also tasked with institutionalizing participatory processes such as ward-level meetings, public hearings, and social audits (Gupta, 2021). However, empirical evidence indicates that the effectiveness of these mechanisms is uneven, raising concerns about the quality and inclusiveness of governance practices (Ojha et al., 2022).

Citizen satisfaction serves as a fundamental measure of governance legitimacy. Research shows that service quality is closely tied to responsiveness, hassle-free access, and promptness, whereas bureaucratic hurdles and corruption significantly erode satisfaction (Bouckaert et al., 2020; Lamsal & Gupta, 2022). In Nepal, Adhikari and Gellner (2021) observed that even with formal mechanisms in place, clientelistic networks often determine who benefits from services, undermining the principle of equal access.

Participation is another critical dimension of effective governance. While decentralization is expected to expand opportunities for citizen involvement, evidence suggests that engagement remains constrained by socio-economic inequalities and political patronage (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Fox, 2007). For instance, although public hearings are legally mandated, attendance and deliberative quality remain inconsistent across municipalities (Ojha et al., 2022). Women, Dalits, and other marginalized groups face structural barriers that limit their ability to participate meaningfully, despite constitutional guarantees of inclusion (Adhikari, 2025).

Complaint-handling systems provide another lens for assessing governance efficacy. Effective grievance redress mechanisms enhance accountability and trust (Andrews & Shah, 2005; Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). Yet in Nepal, many citizens perceive complaint systems as bureaucratic and politicized, with accessibility varying across municipalities (Lamsal & Gupta, 2022). Rural municipalities often rely on informal channels, which may improve responsiveness but risk reinforcing favoritism and weakening institutional impartiality (Adhikari & Gellner, 2021).

Empirical insights from Kaski District illustrate these dynamics. Service delivery evaluations show that 44.14% of respondents rated services as “Good,” 27.03% as “Average,” and 14.41% as “Poor.” Rural municipalities such as Rupa and Annapurna reported higher satisfaction compared to Pokhara Metropolitan City, which received more “Poor” and “Very Poor” ratings. Similarly, participation in public hearings was moderate, with 36.94% reporting “occasional” attendance and 27.93% “frequent” participation, though 10.81% had “never” attended. Grievance reporting was rated as “Very Easy” or “Easy” by 60.36%, yet nearly one-fourth of respondents still described the process as “Difficult” or “Very Difficult.” These findings resonate with broader global patterns in which smaller administrative units often exhibit greater responsiveness due to closer citizen–state proximity (Smoke, 2015; Bouckaert et al., 2020). Despite substantial progress in decentralization and scholarly engagement with

governance in Nepal, several critical research gaps remain. First, while numerous studies have examined local government reforms in broad terms (Shrestha & Poudel, 2019; Ojha et al., 2022), limited empirical evidence exists on how citizens themselves evaluate service delivery, participation, and complaint mechanisms within specific districts such as Kaski. Existing research often emphasizes institutional structures without adequately capturing lived experiences of service recipients. Second, while citizen participation has been widely discussed, its effectiveness in influencing actual decision-making outcomes remains underexplored. Studies highlight the persistence of elite dominance and clientelism (Adhikari & Gellner, 2021), yet there is insufficient understanding of how these dynamics interact with gender, caste, and class to shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion in participatory forums. Third, grievance redress mechanisms in Nepal are often described in normative or institutional terms, but empirical assessments of their accessibility and responsiveness are scarce. The few available studies (Lamsal & Gupta, 2022) suggest that bureaucratic bottlenecks undermine grievance reporting, yet district-level variations remain poorly documented.

Finally, comparative studies between rural and urban municipalities are limited, even though preliminary evidence, including findings from Kaski District, suggests significant variation in governance efficacy across different contexts. Understanding these contrasts is essential for designing context-sensitive policy reforms that strengthen accountability and inclusivity. Addressing these gaps is vital not only for enhancing theoretical understandings of local governance but also for informing practical reforms in Nepal’s evolving federal landscape. By focusing on citizen satisfaction, participation, and complaint mechanisms, this study provides a nuanced assessment of governance efficacy in Kaski District, thereby contributing to both academia and policy discourse.

II. REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

Citizen satisfaction is a widely used indicator for assessing the performance and legitimacy of local governments. Studies consistently highlight that satisfaction is shaped by both objective service delivery and subjective perceptions of quality, responsiveness, and fairness. For instance, Romero-Subía et al. (2022) applied an American Customer Satisfaction Index–based model to municipal services and found that perceived quality and perceived value strongly mediate the link between service delivery and citizen loyalty. Similarly, Bostancı and Erdem (2020) employed fuzzy modeling to demonstrate that satisfaction varies considerably across service sectors, suggesting that municipal performance cannot be generalized. Other comparative research underscores the importance of communication and transparency in shaping satisfaction. James and John (2007) found that providing clear information about local policies enhances trust and satisfaction. Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003) also noted that citizen evaluations of public services are not only influenced by efficiency but also by expectations and prior experiences.

In contexts of decentralization, Van Ryzin (2007) highlighted that perceptions of procedural fairness weigh as heavily as substantive outcomes in predicting satisfaction. These findings suggest that for local governments such as those in Kaski District, both objective improvements (e.g., roads, sanitation, education services) and subjective experiences (clarity of information, responsiveness, fairness) shape citizens' reported levels of satisfaction. Governance experiences differ markedly between urban and rural areas. Bhusal (2023), in a study of rural Nepal, emphasized the "primacy of informality," showing that informal, community-based channels often substitute for formal mechanisms in enabling citizen participation and problem resolution. This helps explain why rural municipalities may record higher satisfaction despite limited resources, while urban counterparts with more formalized systems may face citizen frustration due to bureaucratic distance. Other cross-national studies support this observation. Smoke (2015) argued that decentralization reforms often produce uneven outcomes, with rural governments relying heavily on personal relationships, while urban governments depend more on institutional capacity. Similarly, Connerley and Duncan (2018) noted that rural settings often foster face-to-face accountability, but urban contexts face challenges of scale and anonymity, which may erode citizen trust. These dynamics resonate with Kaski's case, where rural municipalities such as Rupa and Annapurna appear to score better on satisfaction compared to Pokhara Metropolitan City, suggesting that informality and proximity play significant roles in shaping governance experiences.

Civic participation is a cornerstone of good governance, yet its quality and inclusivity remain contested. Studies have shown that participation is often irregular and stratified along socioeconomic lines. For example, Bhusal (2023) demonstrated that marginalized communities in Nepal often rely on informal forums rather than formal ward assemblies. Gaventa and Barrett (2012), through a meta-analysis of participatory governance, concluded that while participation can increase civic efficacy and accountability, the outcomes are highly context-dependent and not automatically equitable. Angius and Van Thiel (2024) further noted that participatory mechanisms enhance satisfaction only when perceived as substantive, rather than tokenistic. Cornwall (2008) similarly argued that "invited spaces" of participation often serve as symbolic gestures unless they genuinely redistribute decision-making power. Research by Fung (2015) reinforced this, showing that participatory forums succeed when designed to balance inclusiveness, deliberative quality, and linkages to policy outcomes. For Nepal specifically, studies by Adhikari (2014) and Shrestha and Koirala (2022) highlighted persistent barriers to participation, including gender norms, caste hierarchies, and information asymmetry. These findings help interpret the "Occasional" participation patterns in Kaski, where citizens attend selectively based on perceived efficacy and personal constraints.

Accountability and transparency are closely tied to citizen perceptions of governance efficacy. Andrews and Shah (2005) stressed that accountability mechanisms must be institutionalized across multiple levels of government to be

effective. Bovens (2007) conceptualized accountability as both an evaluative and relational practice, requiring transparency of decision-making and enforceable consequences. Empirical studies in South Asia reinforce these insights. Mishra (2019) found that Nepali citizens often mistrust local governments due to weak enforcement of accountability provisions, despite formal legal frameworks. Likewise, Acharya and Zafarullah (2018) argued that transparency initiatives in Nepal are often procedural rather than substantive, limiting their effectiveness in rebuilding citizen trust. These studies suggest that in Kaski District, governance challenges may stem not only from resource constraints but also from weak institutionalization of accountability practices, leading citizens to perceive gaps between formal commitments and actual responsiveness.

Grievance redress systems (GRMs) are critical for ensuring responsiveness and sustaining citizen trust. Hossain et al. (2023), in a review of GRMs in the Global South, found that many such mechanisms are ornamental, existing on paper but lacking the political will or resources for implementation. Joshi (2017) also emphasized the political nature of complaint systems, arguing that their effectiveness depends on both citizen mobilization and elite incentives. Other case studies provide comparative perspectives. Fox (2015) showed that accountability interventions succeed when they combine "voice" (citizen demand) with "teeth" (state capacity to respond). Peixoto and Fox (2016) demonstrated that technology-enabled feedback mechanisms can enhance accountability only when embedded within responsive institutions. In the Nepali context, Adhikari (2021) reported that complaint systems are often inaccessible to disadvantaged groups, reinforcing social inequities. These findings align with Kaski's data, where a majority find grievance procedures "easy," but a significant minority report difficulty, likely reflecting uneven functionality across municipalities. Scholars increasingly call for mixed-method approaches in studying governance efficacy. Van Ryzin (2011) argued that survey-based satisfaction indices capture only surface-level attitudes, which need to be supplemented with qualitative inquiry. Similarly, Joshi and Houtzager (2012) emphasized ethnographic and participatory methods to capture informal and relational dimensions of governance often missed in quantitative surveys. For Nepal, Bhusal (2023) and Acharya (2019) highlight that citizen perceptions are deeply embedded in social norms and cultural practices, suggesting that quantitative measures should be triangulated with qualitative insights. This methodological pluralism is essential for unpacking the "average" satisfaction and "occasional" participation patterns found in Kaski District.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive and analytical research design that combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The descriptive aspect was used to document and interpret citizens' perceptions of local governance services, civic participation, and grievance mechanisms, while the analytical dimension examined variations across local government units and their implications for women's representation in governance. By

adopting a mixed approach, the study was able to capture both measurable patterns and the contextual realities shaping governance in Kaski District of Nepal.

The research was conducted in Kaski District of Gandaki Province, which is characterized by a mixture of urban and rural settlements. The study specifically focused on five local government units: Pokhara Metropolitan City (PMC), Madi Rural Municipality (MadiRM), Annapurna Rural Municipality (ARM), Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality (MRM), and Rupa Rural Municipality (RRM). These municipalities were deliberately chosen to capture variations between urban and rural governance structures, population density, service delivery challenges, and institutional capacity. The study population consisted of citizens residing in these five local government units who were recipients of local government services. Since it was not possible to include the entire population, a sample of 111 respondents was selected. Respondents were proportionally distributed across municipalities, with 45 from Pokhara Metropolitan City, 17 from MadiRM, 16 from ARM, 18 from MRM, and 15 from RRM. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to ensure representation of both men and women, as well as individuals of different age groups, caste/ethnic backgrounds, and socio-economic categories. This method was particularly important given the study's focus on women's representation, as it allowed for targeted inclusion of female respondents whose voices might otherwise be underrepresented.

The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of information. Primary data were gathered through structured questionnaires, key informant interviews (KIIs), and field-level observations. The questionnaire was designed with both closed and open-ended questions covering citizens' evaluation of service delivery, participation in public hearings, ease of grievance reporting, and perceptions of inclusiveness. Key informant interviews were conducted with elected representatives, municipal officials, and women leaders to obtain deeper insights into governance practices and challenges. Field observations complemented these tools by documenting how citizens interacted with municipal offices, how women participated in public events, and whether local facilities were accessible to different groups. Secondary data were collected from government records, municipal reports, academic articles, and published literature relevant to local governance and women's political participation in Nepal. The collected data were processed and analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Responses from the structured questionnaires were coded, tabulated, and presented in frequency distributions and percentage tables to identify patterns across municipalities. Descriptive statistics were employed to interpret these patterns. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically, providing context and depth to the numerical findings. To enhance the validity and reliability of results, triangulation was employed by cross-verifying insights from different data sources and methods. Finally, ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. All respondents were informed about the academic nature of the study, and their participation was

entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained before conducting interviews or administering questionnaires, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Data collected were used solely for academic purposes, ensuring that the dignity and privacy of participants were respected at every stage of the study.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

➤ Results

• *Public Perception on Women's Representation in Local Governance of Kaski District*

The public's perception of governance is profoundly influenced by the scale and intimacy of administration rather than a simple urban-rural binary. The higher satisfaction in rural municipalities like Rupa and Annapurna points to a potential governance advantage in smaller, more cohesive units. Here, the qualitative data implies a governance model where officials are more accessible, community needs are more homogeneous, and the feedback loop between citizens and their representatives is shorter and more direct. This fosters a sense of responsiveness and accountability that translates into positive perceptions, even if absolute service levels (like infrastructure scale) are lower than in the urban center.

Conversely, Pokhara Metropolitan City (PMC) faces the inherent challenges of urban governance. The mixed and more critical assessments reflect the difficulties of managing a large, diverse population with complex, competing demands. The perception here is likely shaped by bureaucratic delays, impersonal service delivery, and the higher expectations that come with urban living. The presence of "Very Poor" ratings in PMC, absent in several rural municipalities, indicates pockets of significant discontent, suggesting that some groups may feel marginalized or underserved by the larger administrative machinery. Furthermore, the significant proportion of "Average" ratings across the district is a critical qualitative finding. It represents a substantial segment of the population that is passively satisfied but not impressed. This neutrality indicates a perceived adequacy of services but also a clear opportunity for improvement. Converting this passive acceptance into active approval would require targeted interventions addressing specific, contextualized grievances—such as road infrastructure in Madi or administrative disputes in Annapurna. The variation between Machhapuchhre (with its notable dissatisfaction) and the other rural municipalities further underscores that "rural" is not a monolith; each unit faces unique institutional and geographic challenges that directly shape citizen experience.

In essence, the perception of women's representation in local governance is inextricably linked to the perceived performance and responsiveness of that governance. The data implies that where local governments are seen as effective and accessible, a characteristic more readily associated with the smaller rural municipalities in this study, public trust and satisfaction are higher. This creates a virtuous cycle where positive perception reinforces the

legitimacy of the governing body, regardless of its urban or rural setting. The key takeaway is the necessity for context-sensitive governance strategies that prioritize direct

accountability and tangible outcomes to strengthen citizen trust.

Table 1 Performance of Local Government Services

Local Government Units	Response Categories					Total
	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor	
Pokhara Metropolitan City	3	16	15	6	5	45
Madi Rural Municipality	2	8	4	3	0	17
Annapurna Rural Municipality	1	11	3	1	0	16
Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality	1	7	4	6	0	18
Rupa Rural Municipality	4	7	4	0	0	15
Grand Total	11	49	30	16	5	111
Percent (%)	9.91	44.14	27.03	14.41	4.51	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 provides an overview of how citizens across five administrative units in Kaski District assess the performance of local government services. The evaluation covers key sectors such as health, education, sanitation, infrastructure, and other essential areas. A total of 111 respondents were surveyed, with responses categorized into five levels: Excellent, Good, Average, Poor, and Very Poor. At the district level, the findings show a generally favorable view of service delivery, though with room for improvement. Nearly 44.14% of respondents described services as “Good,” while 27.03% rated them as “Average.” A smaller number, 14.41%, rated services “Poor,” whereas 9.91% felt they were “Excellent.” Only 4.51% considered them “Very Poor.” These figures suggest that while many citizens are satisfied, a significant minority still experience shortcomings in service delivery.

Patterns become clearer when the data is broken down by municipality. In Pokhara Metropolitan City (PMC), which accounted for the largest group of respondents (45 out of 111), ratings were mixed. Sixteen people rated services as “Good” and 15 as “Average.” However, dissatisfaction was also visible, with six respondents rating services as “Poor” and five as “Very Poor.” Only three participants considered the services “Excellent.” These results reflect the challenges of urban governance, where larger populations, complex needs, and bureaucratic processes make service delivery more difficult. Madi Rural Municipality (MadiRM) recorded more favorable results. Out of 17 respondents, two rated services “Excellent,” eight “Good,” and four “Average.” Only three respondents described them as “Poor,” and none selected “Very Poor.” This points to moderate satisfaction and a functioning system that avoids severe discontent. In Annapurna Rural Municipality (ARM), satisfaction levels were even higher. Of 16 respondents, 11 gave a “Good” rating, one marked “Excellent,” and one marked “Poor.” No one reported “Very Poor.” These results highlight relatively effective governance and positive citizen perceptions. Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality (MRM), however, reflected mixed views. Out of 18 participants, seven rated services as “Good,” four as “Average,” and four as “Poor.” Additionally, two respondents selected “Very Poor,” and just one chose “Excellent.” These findings suggest inconsistent service delivery and highlight ongoing governance issues.

Rupa Rural Municipality (RRM) emerged as the most positively rated unit. Of 15 respondents, four rated services as “Excellent,” seven as “Good,” and four as “Average.” Crucially, no one rated services as “Poor” or “Very Poor.” RRM recorded the highest number of “Excellent” responses, making it the strongest performer in terms of public satisfaction.

The comparison suggests an urban–rural divide in service delivery. Surprisingly, rural municipalities such as RRM, ARM, and MadiRM achieved higher levels of citizen satisfaction than the urban center of PMC. This may be because smaller municipalities are more localized and responsive, making it easier for officials to connect directly with citizens and address community-level concerns. In contrast, urban areas like PMC face problems of overcrowding, administrative delays, and higher service demands, which lower satisfaction levels. Despite generally favorable results, the analysis also reveals important obstacles. MadiRM continues to face infrastructure limitations, especially unpaved roads, which directly affect access to essential services. Similarly, disputes over the location of municipal offices in ARM and MadiRM have delayed governance improvements, showing how institutional challenges reduce service efficiency. Another recurring theme across municipalities is the relatively high number of “Average” responses (27.03%). This group represents citizens who are neither highly satisfied nor very dissatisfied. Converting these neutral perceptions into positive ones will require targeted strategies such as improving infrastructure, reducing administrative delays, and making service delivery more inclusive and accountable.

Hence, the data presents a picture of moderate but uneven satisfaction with local government services in Kaski District. Rural municipalities such as RRM and ARM stand out as positive examples, while PMC and MRM face more critical assessments. These differences reflect both contextual challenges and governance practices. Overall, the findings underscore the need for context-sensitive approaches that account for population size, geography, and institutional capacity to improve service delivery and strengthen citizen trust in local governments.

• *Structural Barriers to Civic Engagement in Kaski's Local Governance*

Analysis of civic participation in Kaski District reveals that engagement in public hearings is moderate but inconsistent, shaped more by structural constraints than by citizen willingness. While occasional participation is most common, a significant urban-rural divide exists. Urban areas like Pokhara Metropolitan City show higher frequent attendance due to better access, but rural municipalities face deeper challenges. The primary barriers are practical: time poverty due to agricultural and domestic workloads, and the out-migration of youth, which disproportionately impacts

women who bear a double burden of labor. These practical constraints are compounded by a perceived ineffectiveness of formal hearings. Citizens often view these forums as bureaucratic, preferring direct, informal contact with representatives, a preference underscored by the fact that attendance often hinges on tangible incentives like allowances. This indicates a fundamental mismatch between institutional processes and community realities. For engagement to be truly inclusive, governance must adapt with flexible timing, gender-sensitive approaches, and alternative formats that respect citizens' time and preferred communication channels.

Table 2 Civic Participation in Municipal Public Hearings

Local Government Units	Response Categories				Total
	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	
Pokhara Metropolitan City	13	12	12	8	45
Madi Rural Municipality	7	5	2	3	17
Annapurna Rural Municipality	4	9	3	0	16
Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality	1	8	8	1	18
Rupa Rural Municipality	6	7	2	0	15
Total	31	41	27	12	111
Percentage	27.93	36.94	24.32	10.81	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The findings in Table 2 illustrate different degrees of civic participation in public hearings across five local government units in Kaski District. Out of the 111 respondents, the highest proportion reported attending hearings “Occasionally” (36.94%), followed by “Frequently” (27.93%), and “Rarely” (24.32%). A smaller number, 10.81 percent, had never taken part in such events. These results indicate that while public participation is taking place, it is unevenly distributed, with a notable group of people remaining disengaged. Pokhara Metropolitan City (PMC) accounted for the largest number of participants, with 40.54 percent (45 of 111) of the total responses. Among these, 13 individuals reported participating “Frequently,” and 12 participated “Occasionally.” This comparatively high rate of involvement can be linked to the urban setting, where population density, better infrastructure, and stronger institutional arrangements create more opportunities for civic interaction. By contrast, Madi Rural Municipality (MadiRM) and Rupa Rural Municipality (RRM) contributed smaller numbers, 15.32 percent and 13.51 percent, respectively. Even so, MadiRM recorded 7 frequent participants, and RRM had 6, reflecting moderate levels of engagement. However, MadiRM also showed some exclusion, with 3 respondents reporting that they had never attended.

Annapurna Rural Municipality (ARM) had the largest proportion of respondents reporting “Occasionally” (9 people), suggesting periodic participation influenced by local conditions or issue-specific interests. Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality (MRM) showed a more diverse pattern, with equal numbers of respondents (8 each) reporting “Rarely” and “Occasionally,” reflecting irregular engagement and possible uncertainty about the value of such hearings. Despite relatively strong participation in the “Occasionally” and “Frequently” categories, the 12 respondents (10.81%) who

had never attended public hearings highlight challenges of access and inclusiveness. These gaps are not incidental but likely linked to social, political, geographical, and institutional obstacles that restrict citizen involvement. Insights from field observations provide further clarity, particularly in rural settings.

Many residents in these areas face time constraints due to farming and household duties, while younger family members often migrate to cities or abroad for education and work. As a result, older adults and women bear heavier workloads, leaving them with limited time and flexibility to participate. These limitations are gendered as well.

Women, in particular, carry the dual responsibility of domestic labor and agricultural work, restricting their mobility and making participation in public forums more difficult. This reflects how structural inequalities shape opportunities for engagement. Local officials also reported that attendance at public hearings tends to rise when snacks or allowances are provided. Without such incentives, interest declines, suggesting that many citizens view hearings as less meaningful or effective. Instead, residents often prefer direct and informal interactions with elected representatives, such as through phone calls or visits to ward offices, to voice concerns ranging from social to environmental issues. This preference for informal engagement highlights the importance of personal relationships, local political culture, and trust in shaping how citizens interact with governance structures. It also reflects a perception that formal hearings are bureaucratic and less effective compared to direct communication. While informal channels allow for quicker responses, they risk undermining the principles of collective dialogue, transparency, and accountability that public hearings are designed to promote.

Overall, the evidence shows that participation in public hearings is shaped less by willingness and more by structural, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Barriers related to time, gender, geography, and perceptions of effectiveness all intersect to determine participation levels. Strengthening inclusive governance, therefore, requires adapting public hearings to community needs by introducing flexible timing, gender-sensitive approaches, civic awareness initiatives, and alternative participatory formats that can broaden engagement and ensure more equitable representation.

• *Accessibility and Inequity in Local Grievance Redressal Systems*

The data on the ease of reporting complaints and receiving responses in Kaski District reveals a system that is generally functional for the majority, yet marked by significant accessibility gaps and perceptions of bias. Overall, a combined 60.36% of respondents find the process "Easy" or "Very Easy," indicating a baseline level of effectiveness in local grievance mechanisms. However, this positive perception is unevenly distributed. A notable urban-rural

paradox emerges: while Pokhara Metropolitan City has greater institutional resources, it also has the highest proportion of citizens (over 31%) reporting the process as "Difficult" or "Very Difficult," likely due to bureaucratic complexity and population pressure. In contrast, rural municipalities like Annapurna and Machhapuchhre show higher satisfaction, benefiting from more direct, interpersonal access to local representatives.

Beneath these geographic disparities lies a more critical issue of fairness. Field observations indicate that while trust in elected representatives is generally high, the grievance process is potentially compromised by perceptions of political favoritism. This suggests that accessibility is not just a logistical matter but also a political one, where impartiality is questioned. The central challenge, therefore, is not only streamlining bureaucratic procedures but also ensuring that complaint resolution is equitable and free from partisan bias. Strengthening trust requires institutional reforms that guarantee fair treatment for all citizens, irrespective of their political affiliations.

Table 3 Civic Ease in Reporting and Receiving the Responses

Local Government Units	Response Categories					Total
	Very Easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	Very Difficult	
Pokhara Metropolitan City	6	15	10	9	5	45
Madi Rural Municipality	2	10	1	3	1	17
Annapurna Rural Municipality	2	12	0	2	0	16
Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality	0	10	2	6	0	18
Rupa Rural Municipality	4	6	2	3	0	15
Grand Total	14	53	15	23	6	111
Percentage (%)	12.61	47.75	13.51	20.72	5.41	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3 provides an in-depth overview of how citizens in five local government units of Kaski District perceive the process of filing complaints and receiving official responses. Based on feedback from 111 service recipients, the data highlights both strengths and challenges in the accessibility and responsiveness of local governance systems. At the overall level, most respondents expressed satisfaction with the process. Specifically, 14 individuals (12.61%) described the process as Very Easy and 53 (47.75%) rated it Easy. Together, these categories comprise 60.36% of all respondents, showing that a majority of citizens consider grievance reporting and response mechanisms relatively manageable. However, 15 respondents (13.51%) gave a Neutral response, pointing to inconsistent experiences or uncertainty regarding how complaints are addressed. In contrast, 23 respondents (20.72%) found the process Difficult and 6 respondents (5.41%) rated it Very Difficult. This combined 26.13% indicates that a considerable minority still faces obstacles in accessing timely and fair complaint resolution.

When broken down by municipality, differences between urban and rural governance structures become evident. In Pokhara Metropolitan City (PMC), the largest and most urbanized unit, experiences were diverse: 6 respondents selected Very Easy, 15 Easy, 10 Neutral, 9 Difficult, and 5

Very Difficult. More than 31% (14 of 45 respondents) described the process as Difficult or Very Difficult, suggesting that complex administrative procedures, population pressure, and bureaucratic inefficiencies may hinder accessibility despite greater institutional resources. In comparison, several rural municipalities demonstrated higher levels of satisfaction. In Annapurna Rural Municipality (ARM), 2 respondents rated the process Very Easy and 12 Easy, with only 2 reporting Difficult and none selecting Very Difficult. Similarly, Machhapuchhre Rural Municipality (MRM) recorded largely favorable results, with 10 out of 18 respondents (56%) selecting Easy and 2 selecting Very Easy.

While 6 respondents still reported Difficult, the absence of Very Difficult ratings indicates stronger accessibility compared to urban areas. The case of Madi Rural Municipality (MadiRM) presents moderately positive outcomes. Out of 17 respondents, 2 rated the process Very Easy, 10 Easy, 3 Difficult, 1 Very Difficult, and 1 Neutral. This reflects general accessibility but also highlights persistent challenges for a minority of citizens, possibly linked to weaker infrastructure or limited administrative efficiency. In Rupa Rural Municipality (RRM), the distribution was relatively balanced: 4 respondents selected Very Easy, 6 Easy, 2 Neutral, and 3 Difficult, with no reports of Very Difficult. Although the majority were satisfied, some

difficulties remain evident. Comparative analysis reveals an interesting paradox: urban residents, despite living closer to established administrative institutions, face more obstacles in grievance reporting due to systemic bottlenecks, while rural residents often benefit from closer proximity to local representatives and more direct engagement. However, rural areas are not free from challenges, as occasional structural and resource limitations still create difficulties for some citizens. Field-level observations further support these findings. In most municipalities, citizens reported a high degree of trust in their elected representatives and often preferred to bring complaints directly to them rather than through formal bureaucratic channels. This interpersonal approach seems to enhance responsiveness and strengthen trust in local leadership. However, several respondents raised concerns about political favoritism, noting that some representatives appeared to prioritize complaints based on party affiliation. Such practices undermine fairness and risk alienating citizens who do not identify with dominant political groups.

In sum, the data illustrates both achievements and shortcomings in local grievance mechanisms across Kaski District. While a majority of citizens find the process functional and accessible, the persistence of challenges, particularly in urban areas like PMC and in cases of political bias, demonstrates that significant improvements are still necessary. The findings emphasize the need for governance reforms that reduce bureaucratic hurdles, strengthen impartiality, and ensure more equitable access to complaint resolution for all citizens, regardless of political alignment or place of residence.

➤ Discussion

This study set out to examine public perceptions of women's representation and the broader functioning of local governance in Kaski District, with a particular focus on service delivery performance, civic participation, and accessibility of grievance mechanisms. The findings reveal a complex and multi-layered picture of governance effectiveness: while there are encouraging signs of responsiveness, citizen participation, and localized accountability, significant disparities persist across municipalities, service domains, and modes of engagement. These disparities demonstrate that governance outcomes are shaped not only by the availability of financial and institutional resources but also by the quality of leadership, inclusiveness of decision-making, and the social relationships that underpin everyday interactions between citizens and their local governments.

The analysis of service delivery (Table 1) indicates that local governments in Kaski District are generally meeting citizen expectations, yet the variations across municipalities highlight the unevenness of governance outcomes. Nearly three-quarters of respondents rated services as either Good (44.14%) or Average (27.03%), suggesting a moderate level of satisfaction with service delivery. Importantly, these findings show that a substantial segment of the population acknowledges the functionality of local governance institutions, but many remain unconvinced of their efficiency

or responsiveness. A closer look at the distribution of responses reveals that the urban hub—Pokhara Metropolitan City (PMC) registered lower satisfaction than several rural municipalities. In PMC, nearly one-fourth of respondents rated services as Poor or Very Poor (24.44% combined), signaling higher dissatisfaction in the urban setting. In contrast, smaller municipalities like Rupa (RRM) and Annapurna (ARM) received more positive assessments, with no respondents assigning them a Very Poor rating. These results are striking because they challenge conventional assumptions that urban municipalities, endowed with greater resources and administrative capacity, naturally provide better services. Instead, the findings suggest that smaller rural municipalities often benefit from closer interactions between citizens and elected representatives, more direct lines of accountability, and reduced bureaucratic bottlenecks. For example, the ability of residents in rural municipalities to directly approach their local officials fosters a sense of responsiveness and trust that appears less prevalent in the highly populated and bureaucratically complex environment of PMC. Nonetheless, rural governments are not free from challenges: limited infrastructure in municipalities like Madi and disputes over municipal office locations illustrate how institutional constraints and logistical issues directly affect the quality and accessibility of services. The sizable proportion of respondents rating services as merely Average (27.03%) also deserves careful consideration. This group represents a “silent middle”—citizens who are neither fully satisfied nor deeply dissatisfied with governance performance. Their neutral stance may reflect ambivalence, skepticism, or unfulfilled expectations, and converting this group into positively engaged and satisfied citizens is critical for improving governance legitimacy. Addressing this issue will require targeted reforms that emphasize not only efficiency and inclusivity but also the visibility of government responsiveness.

Patterns of civic participation (Table 2) offer further insights into the functioning of democratic processes at the local level. A majority of respondents reported attending public hearings either Occasionally (36.94%) or Frequently (27.93%), confirming that such forums remain central to citizen–government interaction. Yet, nearly one-fourth of respondents attend only Rarely and approximately 11% have Never participated, indicating that barriers to inclusive participation persist across the district. The urban center of PMC reported relatively high attendance, supported by better infrastructure, stronger institutional arrangements, and perhaps greater awareness of governance processes. However, rural municipalities exhibited more diverse participation patterns. Annapurna, for instance, showed the highest proportion of “occasional” participants, suggesting that engagement may be driven by issue-specific or context-specific concerns rather than consistent involvement. Machhapuchhre, on the other hand, revealed irregular participation, reflecting local variations in awareness, leadership outreach, and community mobilization. Qualitative insights highlight important social and economic barriers to participation. Women, in particular, face structural disadvantages due to the dual pressures of household responsibilities and agricultural labor. Migration of younger

populations, especially men seeking employment opportunities abroad further reduces household capacity to participate in community affairs, leaving behind groups with fewer resources and less mobility. The reliance on incentives such as travel allowances or refreshments to attract participants reveals an underlying problem: many citizens may perceive hearings as ceremonial events with limited real influence over decision-making.

Another critical observation is the growing preference for informal modes of engagement, such as personal conversations, phone calls, or direct visits to representatives. While this reflects a high degree of trust in local leaders and the importance of interpersonal relationships in Nepali society, it simultaneously risks undermining the principles of transparency, inclusivity, and collective accountability. If formal mechanisms are bypassed in favor of personal networks, governance processes may become more vulnerable to favoritism, clientelism, or elite capture. Therefore, strengthening the credibility and perceived effectiveness of public hearings is essential to ensure that citizen voices are not only heard but also meaningfully incorporated into policy and service delivery processes. The study also assessed perceptions of grievance reporting and resolution mechanisms (Table 3), which serve as critical channels for ensuring accountability and responsiveness. More than 60% of respondents rated the process as Easy or Very Easy, signaling that local governments in Kaski District are generally approachable. However, more than one-fourth described the process as Difficult or Very Difficult, with PMC respondents reporting the greatest levels of dissatisfaction. This paradox, greater institutional resources in urban centers coupled with higher levels of frustration highlights the risks posed by bureaucratic inefficiencies, larger population densities, and more complex administrative hierarchies.

In rural municipalities such as Annapurna and Machhapuchhre, higher levels of satisfaction were observed, primarily due to citizens' ability to directly contact elected representatives. This finding again emphasizes the value of interpersonal governance, where accessibility and personal trust are perceived as more important than formal institutional procedures. Nevertheless, this reliance on personal relationships introduces risks of selective responsiveness and political favoritism. Reports of grievances being addressed based on partisan or personal ties undermine principles of fairness and universal access, which in turn erodes trust among marginalized and politically unaffiliated groups. Ensuring impartiality in grievance redressal remains a key challenge for building sustainable governance legitimacy.

Taken together, the findings portray local governance in Kaski District as moderately effective but marked by unevenness in performance, participation, and inclusivity. Rural municipalities, despite limited financial and infrastructural capacity, often achieve higher levels of citizen satisfaction due to their smaller scale and closer social proximity between leaders and constituents. Urban centers like PMC, though equipped with more resources and institutional frameworks, face greater dissatisfaction owing

to bureaucratic hurdles, systemic inefficiencies, and a sense of detachment between officials and the citizenry. Civic participation, though relatively strong in numerical terms, is constrained by gendered roles, socio-economic burdens, and perceptions of limited effectiveness of formal platforms like public hearings. Similarly, while grievance mechanisms are broadly accessible, their effectiveness is hampered by favoritism and politicization. The persistence of “average” or “neutral” assessments across service delivery and grievance mechanisms points to a substantial share of the population that remains unconvinced about the quality of governance reforms and the responsiveness of institutions.

The study, therefore, underscores that effective local governance is not solely dependent on material resources but equally on institutional culture, accessibility, inclusivity, and the cultivation of citizen trust. The experiences of municipalities like Rupa and Annapurna illustrate the potential of localized, socially embedded governance models that emphasize responsiveness and direct engagement. Conversely, challenges in PMC highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms that reduce bureaucratic barriers, enhance transparency, and improve service delivery efficiency. Moving forward, strengthening women's representation, ensuring the impartial functioning of grievance mechanisms, and broadening meaningful civic participation will be critical steps in deepening accountability and building durable trust between citizens and local governments in Kaski District.

V. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that local governance in Kaski District is moderately effective, with citizens generally satisfied but still highlighting notable gaps. Rural municipalities such as Rupa and Annapurna received more positive evaluations than the urban center, Pokhara Metropolitan City, where larger populations and bureaucratic complexity created dissatisfaction. Civic participation in public hearings was relatively active but limited by structural and gender-based barriers, with many citizens preferring informal channels over formal forums due to perceptions of greater effectiveness. Grievance redressal mechanisms were considered accessible by most, yet challenges of political favoritism and procedural delays persisted, particularly in urban areas. Overall, the findings suggest that while progress has been made, governance in Kaski remains uneven, shaped by contextual differences between rural and urban units, as well as by issues of access, inclusivity, and impartiality. Strengthening women's representation, ensuring gender-sensitive participation, and improving fairness and transparency are essential to deepen accountability, enhance trust, and build more inclusive local governance.

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