

Public Administration in Nepal: Practices and Propositions

Volume 1



Research and Consulting Service Department

Nepal Administrative Staff College

An ISO 9001:2015 Certified Institution

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Preface

Public administration constitutes the institutional expression of the state. It translates constitutional vision, public policy, and collective aspirations into concrete action, while shaping the everyday relationship between government and citizens. In contemporary governance, it is no longer viewed merely as a rule-bound apparatus of compliance, but as a dynamic system of public problem-solving, institutional coordination, policy learning, and citizen centered performance. This understanding is particularly relevant for Nepal, where federal restructuring, rising public expectations, demands for inclusion and accountability, and rapid technological change have placed new responsibilities on public institutions. The central challenge, therefore, is not only to reform administrative structures, but also to strengthen the institutional capabilities through which the state performs, learns, adapts, and earns public trust.

Public Administration in Nepal: Practices and Propositions, Volume I has been prepared in response to this need for systematic reflection. The volume seeks to document selected practices of Nepal's public administration while also offering propositions for reform, renewal, and future readiness. The term "practices" refers to the institutional arrangements, administrative experiences, reform initiatives, and operational realities that shape the functioning of public institutions. The term "propositions" refers to the analytical insights and reform-oriented ideas that may contribute to more capable, responsive, inclusive, and accountable governance.

The book presents public administration as an evolving domain shaped by institutions, people, values, knowledge, and technology. The chapters examine key dimensions of civil service

management and administrative reform, including recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, women's leadership, emotional intelligence, evidence-based decision making, and artificial intelligence. Together, they underline the need to move beyond fragmented reform efforts and to view public administration as an interconnected system.

A central concern of this volume is the persistent gap between formal policy and administrative practice. Nepal has introduced several legal, institutional, and policy reforms over time. However, their translation into improved performance, accountability, inclusion, and service delivery remains uneven. This book therefore encourages readers to examine not only the design of administrative reforms, but also their implementation, interpretation, and effects within real institutional settings.

The volume also recognises that administrative reform cannot be achieved through structural change alone. Effective public administration requires competent and motivated human resources, ethical and emotionally intelligent leadership, institutional learning, evidence-informed decision making, inclusive organisational cultures, and readiness to engage with emerging technologies.

This book is intended for policymakers, civil servants, public sector managers, researchers, faculty members, students of public administration, and all those interested in governance and institutional reform in Nepal. It is expected to serve as a reference for academic discussion, policy reflection, and further research. While the volume focuses on Nepal's civil service, many of the issues discussed here are relevant to broader debates on public sector performance, federal governance, state capacity, and democratic accountability.

We extend our sincere appreciation to all contributing authors for their scholarly engagement, professional insight, and commitment to strengthening the field of public administration in Nepal. Their chapters reflect diverse areas of expertise, yet they share a common concern for improving the administrative foundations of Nepal's democratic federal state.

We hope that *Public Administration in Nepal: Practices and Propositions, Volume I* will encourage critical reflection, scholarly debate, and reform-oriented thinking. The book does not claim to provide final answers to the complex challenges of public administration. Rather, it invites readers to engage with the questions, tensions, and possibilities that will shape Nepal's administrative future. If this volume contributes to informed policy choices, professional learning, and further research, it will have served its purpose.

Editorial Team

Public Administration in Nepal: Practices and Propositions, Volume I

Editorial

Public administration in Nepal has entered a period of profound institutional transition. The adoption of federalism, increasing demands for responsive service delivery, rapid technological change, expanding citizen expectations, and continuing pressures for inclusion and accountability have together reshaped the meaning, scope, and practice of public administration. Yet, despite the growing importance of the subject, scholarly and policy discussions on Nepal's public administration have often remained dispersed across academic writings, policy documents, reform reports, and donor supported studies. These bodies of knowledge have generated valuable insights, but they have not always been brought into a coherent conversation capable of linking institutional design, administrative behavior, human capability, evidence use, and technological transformation.

Public Administration in Nepal: Practices and Propositions, Volume I is an attempt to contribute to this conversation. The volume brings together six chapters that examine critical dimensions of Nepal's civil service and public administration, including recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, leadership, generational diversity, emotional intelligence, evidence-based decision making, women's leadership, and artificial intelligence. More than a compilation of individual studies, the book seeks to offer an integrated understanding of the administrative challenges and reform possibilities facing Nepal's public sector at a time when the state is expected to perform with greater responsiveness, professionalism, equity, and legitimacy.

The volume is grounded in the recognition that public administration does not operate in isolation. It rests upon multiple and interconnected foundations. The constitutional and legal foundation was fundamentally redefined by the Constitution of Nepal 2015, which transformed the country into a federal democratic republic and redistributed state authority across federal, provincial, and local levels. This restructuring has brought new opportunities for decentralised governance, but it has also created complex questions of personnel management, coordination, accountability, and administrative capacity. The historical and institutional foundation reflects the accumulated legacy of Nepal's bureaucratic evolution, where modern reform aspirations continue to coexist with entrenched procedural habits, hierarchical cultures, and informal practices. The human and demographic foundation points to a civil service undergoing generational transition, as experienced officials retire and younger cohorts enter public institutions with new expectations, values, and technological competencies. The political and social foundation recognises that public administration functions within a context shaped by coalition politics, federal dynamics, social diversity, and persistent inequalities related to gender, caste, ethnicity, class, geography, and region. The resource and capacity foundation draws attention to continuing constraints in finance, infrastructure, technology, professional capability, and institutional systems, particularly at subnational levels.

However, these foundations alone do not explain administrative performance. They are translated into practice through a set of operational dimensions that determine how public administration actually functions. The structural dimension concerns the organisation and distribution of authority within the federal system. The human resource dimension encompasses

recruitment, placement, performance management and motivation. The procedural dimension relates to decision-making processes, administrative routines, and service delivery mechanisms. The behavioural dimension highlights leadership, organisational culture, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and generational interaction. The knowledge dimension concerns the production, interpretation, and use of evidence in policy and administrative decisions. The ethical dimension addresses integrity, accountability, fairness, and public trust. The gender and inclusion dimension examines how institutions shape opportunities, constraints, and leadership pathways for women and other under-represented groups. The technological dimension considers the growing influence of digital governance and artificial intelligence on administrative systems, work processes, and the future of public service.

The central argument emerging from this volume is that many of Nepal's persistent administrative challenges arise not merely from weaknesses within individual sectors or systems, but from the missing linkages between them. Federal restructuring has altered the architecture of the state without sufficient alignment in personnel systems, capacity development, and accountability mechanisms. Recruitment reforms remain only partially connected to performance management and future skill requirements. Gender inclusion policies exist, yet informal institutional norms continue to shape leadership opportunities. Technological innovation is advancing faster than institutional readiness, ethical frameworks, and workforce preparation. These disconnects produce a pattern of fragmented reform, where interventions address symptoms in isolation while overlooking the relationships that determine administrative effectiveness.

It is precisely within these gaps that this volume makes its contribution. The chapters collectively connect recruitment to the quality of bureaucracy, performance appraisal to motivation and accountability, emotional intelligence to leadership effectiveness, women's leadership to gendered institutional norms, evidence to policy rationality, and artificial intelligence to administrative readiness. In doing so, the book moves beyond isolated analyses of administrative problems and offers a more integrated framework for understanding Nepal's public administration. It serves both as a diagnostic account of contemporary governance challenges and as a platform for imagining a more capable, responsive, inclusive, ethical, and future-oriented civil service.

The chapters are organized into three thematic clusters corresponding to the structural, behaviour and inclusion, and technological dimensions of Nepal's public administration. The first cluster examines the administrative foundations of civil service through recruitment and performance management. ***Recruitment and Selection in Nepal's Civil Service: Initiatives, Issues, and Imperatives***, contributed by Bishnu Prasad Lamsal and Pramod Niroula, argues that decades of recruitment reform have been reactive rather than strategic. The chapter identifies persistent concerns, including overreliance on written examinations, tensions between merit and inclusion, procedural delays, federal restructuring challenges, and limited use of modern assessment methods. Its contribution lies in demonstrating that recruitment is not merely an entry procedure; it is a decisive institutional mechanism that shapes the quality, composition, legitimacy, and future capability of the bureaucracy.

Anup Bhurtel's chapter, ***"Effectiveness of the Performance Appraisal System in the Nepalese Civil Service: Policy***

and Practical Realities,” examines the gap between formal performance appraisal mechanisms and their practical application. While appraisal systems are designed to support fairness, career progression, and organisational performance, the chapter shows that they often fail to distinguish clearly between high and low performers. Drawing on empirical evidence, it highlights how perceptions of fairness influence employee motivation and organisational citizenship behaviour. The chapter therefore underlines the need for a more objective, transparent, developmental, and performance-oriented evaluation system within the civil service.

Within the second cluster related to leadership perspectives, behaviour and inclusion, Bikalpa Pokhrel’s chapter, **“Developing Emotional Intelligence and Soft Skills for Effective Leadership,”** argues that emotional intelligence is not a peripheral personal quality but a core administrative capability. Public officials increasingly operate in complex environments involving citizen interaction, institutional pressure, political sensitivity, and organisational uncertainty. In such contexts, self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, communication, and relationship management become essential for effective leadership. By linking emotional competencies with leadership effectiveness, organisational resilience, and citizen trust, the chapter positions soft skills as a necessary component of public sector performance.

The chapter **“Women’s Leadership in the Nepali Civil Service: Gendered Institutions, Legitimacy, and Everyday Agency,”** by Anil Kumar Gupta and Geetanjali Upadhyaya, examines how gendered institutional norms shape women’s leadership opportunities in the civil service. The chapter moves beyond a numerical understanding of inclusion and explores the deeper

institutional, cultural, and behavioural barriers that women encounter in their career progression. At the same time, it highlights the agency of women civil servants who navigate these constraints through professional competence, strategic adaptation, and everyday leadership practices. The chapter makes an important contribution by linking women's leadership to institutional legitimacy, representation, and the broader democratisation of public administration.

The third cluster addresses evidence-based governance and technological transformation. Tara Prasad Kharel's chapter, ***"Evidence-Based Decision Making in Nepali Civil Service: Transitioning from Perception to Facts in the Nepali Civil Service,"*** advocates a shift from perception-driven decision making to evidence-informed governance. The chapter recognises that data, research, evaluation, and analytical reasoning are indispensable for improving policy quality and administrative accountability. At the same time, it identifies persistent barriers, including political interference, fragmented data systems, weak analytical capacity, limited institutional incentives, and insufficient use of research in decision processes. The chapter argues that evidence-based decision making requires not only data availability but also institutional culture, leadership commitment, and technical capability.

Concluding the volume, ***"The Future of Work in the Age of AI in the Nepali Civil Service,"*** by Shyan Kirat Rai and Gyan Laxmi Shrestha, explores the implications of artificial intelligence for public administration. The chapter examines how AI may transform administrative work, skill requirements, service delivery, decision support systems, and organisational structures. It also raises important questions of ethics, accountability, transparency, data

governance, and institutional readiness. By situating AI within the practical realities of Nepal's civil service, the chapter provides a forward-looking perspective on how public institutions can prepare for technological change while safeguarding democratic values and public interest.

Together, these contributions offer a multidimensional examination of Nepal's public administration, linking institutional structures, human capabilities, evidence use, and technological change to the broader challenge of administrative reform and state effectiveness. Collectively, the chapters reveal a central paradox of Nepal's public administration: while formal institutions, policies, and reform frameworks have expanded considerably, their impact on administrative practice remains uneven. This tension between institutional design and institutional reality emerges as the volume's unifying theme.

The most consistent finding across the chapters is the gap between formal rules and actual practice. Whether in recruitment, performance appraisal, training, or evidence-based policymaking, contributors show that reforms often fail to produce their intended outcomes. The problem lies not only in implementation deficits but also in entrenched organizational cultures, informal norms, and political influences that continue to shape bureaucratic behaviour despite changes in formal structures. A second recurring theme is the unfinished project of federalization. Several chapters demonstrate how the transition to a federal system has complicated personnel management, accountability arrangements, and capacity development. Federalism has created opportunities for more responsive and context-sensitive governance, yet the evidence suggests that many institutions remain insufficiently prepared to realize these possibilities.

Capacity constraints and unclear institutional roles continue to hinder effective adaptation. The chapters also converge on the importance of institutional learning. Across diverse topics, contributors call for a civil service that systematically generates knowledge, evaluates performance, learns from experience, and adapts to changing circumstances. The emphasis on evidence, reflection, and continuous improvement reflects a broader aspiration for a more accountable and knowledge-driven public administration.

Equally significant is the attention given to the human dimensions of governance. Leadership, gender, generational change, emotional intelligence, motivation, and professional agency are treated not as peripheral concerns but as central determinants of institutional performance. In doing so, the volume moves beyond purely structural explanations of administrative reform and highlights the role of human behaviour in shaping organizational outcomes.

The volume's principal strength lies in this breadth of perspective. By combining institutional, behavioural, and technological lenses, it broadens the scope of public administration scholarship in Nepal. Its attention to relatively underexplored themes, including generational diversity, emotional intelligence, gendered leadership, and artificial intelligence, introduces new directions for research and practice. At the same time, the volume reflects the emerging state of the field. Several chapters rely primarily on policy review and conceptual analysis rather than extensive primary empirical evidence. While these contributions provide valuable foundations, future research would benefit from deeper engagement with interviews, surveys, administrative datasets, and ethnographic observation. Greater dialogue across chapters would also strengthen the collection. Themes such as

federalization, institutional capacity, accountability, and political influence recur throughout the volume, yet they are examined largely in isolation.

Despite these limitations, the volume makes a significant contribution by bringing together diverse perspectives on the challenges and possibilities of administrative reform in Nepal. More importantly, it demonstrates that improving public administration requires not only better rules and structures but also stronger institutions, continuous learning, and greater attention to the people who animate the state. ***Public Administration in Nepal: Practices and Propositions, Volume I*** appears at an important moment. The civil service is being asked to do more, with greater complexity, under more scrutiny, and with fewer certainties than at any time in Nepal's modern history. The contributors take that responsibility seriously. They do not offer easy answers or quick fixes. Instead, they provide careful diagnosis, grounded analysis, and thoughtful proposals for reform. As the title discloses, this is a volume of practices and propositions. It does not claim to have the last word on any of the issues it addresses. Instead, it invites readers, policymakers, practitioners, scholars, and citizens, to engage with the questions that will shape the quality of public administration in Nepal for years to come. How should merit be defined and assessed in a federal, digital state? How can administrative institutions become more inclusive without sacrificing professional standards? How can performance appraisal support development rather than just compliance? How can emotional and generational intelligence strengthen administrative effectiveness? How can technology serve democratic values rather than undermine them? How can evidence replace patronage as the basis for administrative decisions? These are not just technical questions. They are

questions about the kind of administrative state Nepal wants to build and the kind of public service it deserves. This volume is an important step toward answering them. We hope it will encourage discussion, inform policy, and inspire further research on the administrative foundations of Nepal's democratic federal state.

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Editorial Team

Public Administration in Nepal: Practices and Propositions, Volume I

Recruitment and Selection in Nepal's Civil Service: Initiatives, Issues, and Imperatives

Bishnu Prasad Lamsal
Pramod Niroula

Abstract

Since 1951, Nepal has experienced a series of civil service reforms that have all claimed to create a more competent, meritocratic and representative administrative apparatus. Nonetheless, even with much institutional improvement: since the creation of the Public Service Commission to the introduction of reservation quotas and the process of federalization of government, the system still has structural flaws that overcast its performance. This chapter presents a critical and detailed discussion on how recruitment and selection practices in the Nepali civil service have evolved over the past 70 years, following the political and institutional forces that have influenced them. It argues that reforms have been episodic rather than systemic, driven more by political necessity than by any coherent vision of public administration. The chapter names five long-standing issues: an excessive dependence on memory-based written tests, an unresolved conflict between merit and inclusion, a painfully slow hiring process, the shocks of federal transition, and the low application of new assessment practices and technology. It is based on comparative administrative literature and current academic analysis, arguing that Nepal needs a fundamental re-orientation of its civil service recruitment; a re-defining of merit to include practical competence, improvement of assessment architecture, and creation of a civil service to serve a federal, digital, and pluralistic state.

Keywords: Civil Service Recruitment, Public Service Commission, Nepal, Merit, Inclusion, Competency-Based Selection, Federalism, Administrative Reform

Introduction

A longstanding principle in the study of public administration is that the nature of a state is determined in the end by the nature of its bureaucracy. In practice, development strategies, designs of the constitution and innovations in policy rely on the capacity, integrity and credibility of the civil service to translate intentions into action. On this regard, recruitment and selection are not common administrative activities. They are state-building actions that are constitutive in the sense that they help define who can have access to the state and how it can be used. The literature on civil service recruitment, both classic and contemporary, has consistently demonstrated that meritocratic recruitment has been one of the greatest determinants of good governance, effective institutional performance, and citizen trust (Dia et al., 1994, Evans & Rauch, 1999; Rauch & Evans, 2000; Rothstein, 2011). However, meritocracy is not always self-defining. It is always the product of the way a system measures merit and what it measures.

This disjuncture is especially apparent in Nepal's experience of civil service recruitment. The country has experienced significant political changes in the last seventy years, from the end of the Rana system in 1951, to the Panchayat period, the democratic opening of the 1990s, to the decade-long conflict, and the transition to a federal democratic republic in 2015. Different phases brought their own institutional pressures and reform programs. The Public Service Commission Nepal was slowly and steadily established as a major force in recruitment, contributing to the elimination of overt patronage and the standardization of the procedure. This is no small feat from a comparative governance standpoint. Even the most basic examination-based entry systems are difficult to put in place in many developing countries (World Bank, 2017; Grindle, 2012). Nepal has also implemented inclusion policies

and slowly started to use digital platforms in administration, showing some sort of institutional adaptation. At the same time, however, these reforms have not fundamentally altered the deeper logic of recruitment. Written examinations continue to be the dominant concept of merit, and frequently the capacity to remember and regurgitate answers and the technique of the examination holds greater value than the ability to analyse, to make a sound judgement or to show administrative ability. Inclusion policies have normatively been important, but they have at times been more beneficial for some groups within the marginalized groups than for the most severely constrained groups. Slow and cumbersome recruitment processes continue to cause attrition to more dynamic markets. The system is also now in a federal state, with unequal institutional capacities at different levels of government, which implies new types of asymmetries in administrative quality. These are not merely technical issues but reflect a broader design flaw in how recruitment is conceptualized within the civil service system. Building on this premise, the chapter adopts a qualitative, documentary-based analytical approach grounded in systematic review and interpretive policy analysis. It draws on a wide range of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, government reports, and international comparative studies on civil service reform. The analysis follows an iterative process of thematic synthesis, where recurring patterns in recruitment systems, merit definitions, institutional arrangements, and reform trajectories are identified, compared, and interpreted across contexts. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the chapter critically engages with existing evidence to build a structured argument about structural constraints and reform possibilities in Nepal's civil service recruitment system. On this basis, the chapter advances the argument in three interrelated ways. First, the reform of the Nepali Civil Service has been largely

reactive – driven by the constitution and political changes and not responding to a coherent and sustained theory of state capacity and administrative professionalism. Public Administration scholarship indicates that changes that are primarily political in nature, and typically happen at irregular intervals, often lead to the accumulation of changes in procedure while not necessarily increasing the overall effectiveness of the institutions (Peters, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Secondly, the current idea of merit is still limited and inadequate. It focuses on examination performance as the sole measure of ability, thus neglecting the relevance of competencies in behaviour, adaptive reasoning, communication and ethical judgement in public administration that are now required in greater measure in the modern world (OECD, 2023; OECD, 2017). Third, and most importantly, Nepal's federal transition has brought an unusual window of institutional opportunity. It has presented new coordination problems but has also provided room to rethink recruitment systems beyond their previous limitations of centralized administration. It is not just that Nepal doesn't have a merit-based recruitment system, but what kind of merit it is recruiting. The distinction matters. If the selection focus is on exam performance, then the bureaucracy that results will be one type, if it is on applied competency and public service ability, it will be another. In recent years, international practice has shown that more successful public sectors are those that have transcended the traditional test-based selection system for more holistic and competency-based recruitment structures (Bach & Bordogna, 2013; World Bank, 2021). The problem for Nepal is not to discard its existing system, but to question whether its concept of merit is adequately attuned to the requirements of a federal, developmental and citizen-centred state.

Evolution of Recruitment and Selection in Nepal's Civil Service

The Pre-Democratic Period: Administration as Privilege

Before 1951, Nepal did not have a civil service in any meaningful modern sense. The Rana oligarchy, who had exercised a monopoly of state power since 1846, regarded public administration as an extension of family and factional prerogatives. Appointments were arranged by personal relationships, family ties and loyalty to the ruling family. There was no competitive examination, no systematic classification of positions, and no independent oversight body. The idea of merit was not even a part of the state appointments vocabulary. This is significant not only as history, but because institutional customs and informal norms established during that period cast a long shadow. The concept that public office is a form of personal or group entitlement rather than a public trust did not disappear with the Ranas. It was very lasting and had a profound influence on the attitudes towards appointments, promotion and transfer for decades thereafter.

The Monarchical and Panchayat Era (1951–1990): Formalization Without Meritocracy

The first serious attempt towards modernizing public administration in Nepal was undertaken with the political changes of 1951. The state started building the formal structures of a merit based civil service, with the assistance of Indian advisors and subsequently through the assistance of various bilateral and multilateral partners. The Civil Service Act, (1956), together with the establishment of the Public Service Commission (PSC) under the Interim Government of Nepal Act (1951), marked an important step in the professionalization of Nepal's public administration (Shrestha, 2001; Jamil & Dangal, 2009). For the first time, public appointments were formally linked to qualifications and

competitive examinations rather than patronage and favouritism, strengthening merit-based recruitment and administrative impartiality (Joshi & Rose, 1966; Bista, 1972). However, following King Mahendra's dissolution of the elected government in 1960 and the institutionalization of the party less Panchayat system in 1962, the bureaucracy increasingly served the objectives of the monarchy, limiting bureaucratic autonomy despite the continued operation of the PSC and merit-based recruitment processes (Rose & Scholz, 1980; Whelpton, 2005; Bhattachan, 1997). As a result, political allegiance played no insignificant role in the promotion, and even the distinctions between administration and politics were often blurred. In his ethnography of Nepal, Caplan (1975) remarked that even those who were formally appointed to serve the state (the civil servants) functioned in a thicket of patronage and obligation, through which formal rules did not easily penetrate. The PSC thus became a formally meritocratic institution within a wider arena where informal influences continued to be strong. The administrative changes of the 1960s and 1970s did introduce significant structural changes, such as the division of civil servants into services, groups and sub-groups, which are still in place today. This specialization was supposed to produce a more qualified and competent bureaucracy, and it did, to an extent, establish career ladders. It also resulted in rigidities that proved to be troublesome later, as civil servants became too specialized and did not move easily laterally or learn from each other.

Post-Democratic Reform (1991–2006): Opening the Door

The Civil Service Act, 1993 marked a significant consolidation of Nepal's civil service framework by clarifying provisions related to examination, appointment, and promotion, and by reinforcing competitive examination as the principal entry mechanism into public service. However, it did not yet establish

a structured reservation quota system. Substantive affirmative action measures, including a formalized reservation framework for women (within a broader 33 percent inclusive reservation structure), were introduced later through amendments aligned with post-2007 administrative reforms. Nevertheless, the 1993 Act is important as an early stage in opening the civil service to inclusion, laying the institutional foundation for subsequent affirmative policies. This was a sign of the increasing awareness brought about by the women's movement and other international trends of gender equality that it was not possible to have a civil service that was almost entirely made up of men from the hill Brahmin and Chhetri castes and claim that it was representative and legitimate. While the extensions of these provisions during the next decade were slow and sometimes resisted, they implied that the question of civil service recruitment policy was legitimate in terms of the demography of the population. However, the period was not without its contradictions. Political instability (Nepal had over a dozen prime ministers from 1994 to 2006) limited the ability of civil service reform to achieve systemic change. Transfers and postings continued to be influenced by political connections. Although the examination system was competitive, it was criticized as being too descriptive and requiring memorization rather than analysis. The reservation provisions, while appreciated in theory, were too restrictive to have any significant impact on the demographic makeup of the service.

Inclusive Reform (2007 Onwards): The Promise of Representation

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2006) and the interim constitutional arrangements that followed it were the most important steps towards inclusion in the administrative history of Nepal. The Interim Constitution 2007 and later laws provided for significant quotas for women, Janajati (indigenous nationalities),

Madhesi, Dalit, people with disabilities, and remote area residents. The reservation quota was raised to 45 percent of the total number of civil service posts, a percentage that few countries have set at this level. This was, without question, a historic commitment. Historically, the Nepali civil service was already dominated by the minority group of hill Brahmin and Chhetri men who have enjoyed disproportionate access to education and public employment (Sharma, 2009; Bennett, 2005). This structural imbalance was being addressed by the expansion of reservations, in order to make the country's administrative machinery truly representative of the country's diversity. The outcomes were genuine, yet uneven. There have been significant increases in the representation of women in the civil service, especially at entry-level. Moreover, representation of Janajati and Madhesi communities within Nepal's civil service has increased significantly following the introduction of reservation policies. However, an important concern has emerged regarding the distribution of these opportunities within targeted groups themselves. Studies by Gururaj et al (2021), Rai (2022) and Bhul (2023) highlight the problem of "elite capture," whereby relatively educated, urban, and economically advantaged individuals within marginalized communities are more likely to secure reserved positions. As a result, the most structurally disadvantaged populations, including poor rural Dalit women and geographically marginalized groups, often remain underrepresented despite the existence of formal inclusion provisions. Thus, inclusive architecture has been designed in ways that create formal access, but not substantive inclusion.

Federal Reform (2015 Onwards): A System in Transition

Nepal's Constitution 2015 established a 3-tier federal system comprising federal, provincial and local. While it was a constitutionally transformative action, the implications of this

for civil service governance have been very complex to work out in practice. At the national level, appointments are made through the federal civil service, as outlined in the proposed Federal Civil Service Act (currently under development and not yet finalized); provinces have constitutional authority to establish their own civil service and PSCs. Local governments have taken on substantial staffing responsibilities. The transition has brought opportunities and immediate challenges. On the opportunity side, it has paved the way for a truly decentralized, community responsive public administration where service delivery staff are recruited by and held accountable to the communities they serve. On the challenge side, devolution of authority has been faster than development of institutional capacity. Many provincial PSCs are not yet fully functional, there are unresolved issues on staff adjustment and seniority and there are risks of fragmented standards and inconsistent practice due to several recruitment authorities (MoFAGA, 2021). In other words, Nepal is still amid a federal transition that will take at least another few years to stabilize. This is significant for recruitment and selection as it will affect the nature of provincial and local civil service for a generation because of the design decisions made during this formative stage.

Major Reform Initiatives: What Has Been Done?

The Public Service Commission: Nepal's Central Meritocratic Custodian

Public Service Commission (PSC) has a pivotal and positive role in the history of administration in Nepal. The PSC was created in 1951 and has been accorded with constitutional status in successive constitutions, making it the institutional benefactor of merit-based recruitment. In comparative terms, its record is truly remarkable: it has remained formally independent despite numerous changes of regime, avoided the most obvious forms

of political interference and established an examination system nationwide that extends to candidates throughout the country. The PSC holds exams in each service, group and sub-group, usually in three phases: an objective-type screening examination, a written descriptive examination and an oral interview/viva-voce. Additional elements, like group discussions or practical tests are required for certain jobs. The overall pass rates are competitive, and the examinations are popular with applicants, routinely handling hundreds of thousands of applications for a few thousand jobs each year. But the longevity and formal independence of institutions should not be equated with the fitness of the organization for the purpose. For decades, the PSC's examination system has remained largely unchanged in its fundamental structure. It is very much based on a model of knowledge testing that is suitable for a past era of administration but is no longer congruent with the requirements of modern public service. This is touched on in the challenges section, but it should be noted here: the PSC has been strong as a protector of procedural integrity, but not as dynamic as an innovator of assessment methodology.

Legal Instruments and Institutional Architecture

Over the decades, Nepal has developed a relatively extensive legal architecture for civil service governance, and this remains an important institutional foundation. Starting from the Civil Service Act of 1956, through the Civil Service Act of 1993, and more recently the Federal Civil Service Bill (under review), the state has progressively formalized rules governing appointment, promotion, transfer, discipline, and service conditions. In addition to this, the Public Service Commission Act (2066 & 2079) and the relevant constitutional provisions strengthen the PSC's role as an independent constitutional body which is tasked with merit-based recruitment. From a public law point of view, this mirrors the “juridification of bureaucracy” (Peters & Pierre, 2016;

Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), which is the process of increasingly formalizing personnel systems with the intention to reduce discretion and enhance procedural legitimacy. Yet, at the same time, the coherence of this legal framework is more apparent in the centre than its system-wide integration through federalism. Perhaps the greatest gap is in the differential development of provincial civil service law. Some provinces have been slower to adopt comprehensive civil service legislation; this has led to some institutional uncertainty in the federal system. Practical consequences of this delay are that it undermines the transparency of the recruitment process, creates overlaps between federal and provincial setups and hinders the development of a fully functioning subnational personnel system. Such transitional ambiguities are not uncommon in early-stage federations and are likely to endure if intergovernmental coordination is lacking and where there are gaps in subnational administrative capacity (Watts, 2008; OECD, 2017). The second constraint is the lack of a whole-of-government human resource management system that brings together recruitment, workforce planning, competency development, performance management and intergovernmental mobility. Currently, these functions are spread over different legal instruments and administrative directives, lacking a strategic architecture. By contrast, a growing number of OECD governments have integrated civil service legislation into wider HRM legislation, with a clear link between recruitment and long-term workforce planning and capability development (OECD, 2023). In Nepal, this fragmentation translates into legal provisions that tend to regulate procedures and not strategic workforce outcomes. But more significantly, the current legal system is silent on the substantive issue of what sort of civil servant the state wants to produce. Legislation clearly sets out procedural routes for entry and progression, but not enough in terms of competencies, behavioural standards or capability expectations to guide

recruitment and evaluation. This is a more general issue in public administration theory: legal rationality in personnel systems does not necessarily lead to functional effectiveness unless it is based on a model of administrative capability (Kettl, 2015; Lodge & Wegrich, 2014). That is, while the law of Nepal governs the process of recruitment to the civil service, it is much less clear regarding what the civil servants are expected to show in the system. This constraint is even more significant in a federal governance system in which the administrative functions vary considerably between federal, provincial and local levels. The lack of a common competency language in legal and policy frameworks means that recruitment alone can become a procedure that is standardized but substantively misaligned with functional realities. The result is a relatively strong procedural governance legal system, but a comparatively weak strategic human resource orientation. This is thus not about the lack of legal structure but about the lack of an integrated, capability-oriented legal-institutional design for civil service development. However, the future of strengthening the civil service system in Nepal will involve going beyond the procedural codification and towards the explicit incorporation of administrative competencies, workforce strategy and long-term institutional capacity into the governing law.

The Examination System: Written Tests as the Gateway

The civil service examinations in Nepal are broadly similar to the other South Asian countries: they consist of written examinations on subjects related to the service group (administration, engineering, health, forestry etc.) and general knowledge, current affairs and constitutional provisions. The written examination consists of two parts: an objective (multiple choice) paper which is used as a screening device and a descriptive paper with longer answers. This system has real merits. It is open, easily navigable for the candidate, and relatively clear and free from manipulation

on an individual basis, given access to preparation materials. The geographic access is further extended due to the expansion of online application. The procedural legitimacy arising from a competitive examination is not insignificant, given the lack of public confidence in state institutions. However, there are also significant and well-recognized weaknesses in the examination system. Descriptive papers, especially, encourage the regurgitation of textbook material and do not require analytical thought, judgment or practical problem solving. Coaching institutes have mushroomed in the big cities of Nepal, and the type of coaching that is provided is extremely formulaic, enabling perhaps more capable rural candidates who have no access to coaching and cannot afford to pay, to be outdone by well-resourced urban candidates. As noted by Schmidt and Hunter (1998), Lievens and Thornton (2005), and Chen et al. (2013) in their respective studies on personnel selection and civil service recruitment systems, even well-designed written knowledge tests may inadequately assess candidates whose strengths lie in competencies such as interpersonal judgement, communication ability, and situational problem-solving that are not easily captured through conventional examinations.

Inclusion and Reservation Policy: The Ambitions and the Limits

The reservation policy of Nepal is one of the most ambitious affirmative action models in South Asia. The 45 percent quota in six categories¹ indicates a definite constitutional dedication to social inclusion and representational justice. Its normative foundation is twofold. First, it is a reaction to historical

¹ Reservation across six categories is comprised of: Women (33%), Adibasi/Janajati (27%), Madhesi (22%), Dalit (9%), persons with disabilities (5%), and candidates from remote areas (4%)

marginalization by the state institutions, especially of women, Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesis, people with disabilities, and people living in geographically marginalized areas. Second, it is supposed to enhance the legitimacy and responsiveness of the public administration by making the civil service more reflective of the social diversity of Nepal. This dual logic of affirmative action has been acknowledged in comparative public policy literature as corrective and instrumental (Kymlicka, 2014; World Bank, 2022). The policy has produced noticeable and significant changes empirically. The number of women in the civil service has also grown tremendously since the early 2000s, especially at the entry and lower administration levels. Likewise, historically marginalized communities that have never been represented in competitive state hiring have increasingly joined the ranks of those in the public service. These are not symbolic changes but the actual restructuring of access to state employment and must be recognized as such. Comparatively, the growth of formal inclusion in Nepal follows the general patterns in the world of redistributive public employment in divided societies (UNDP, 2019). Meanwhile, though, the policy remains subject to what the literature terms the elite capture problem of affirmative action regimes. Categories of reservations in Nepal are widely sociologically determined. Consequently, Women includes people with broad class and caste distinctions, whereas Janajati includes groups with significantly different educational, economic, and regional endowments. Practically speaking, competition in these categories is biased towards the already comparatively advantaged in their respective groups, especially urban, better educated, and economically secure applicants. This means that the most structurally disadvantaged people in each category tend to be least able to enjoy the benefits of the reservation policy that they are supposed to. This trend is consistent with the findings of other settings including India, where affirmative action without

intra-group differentiation may replicate internal stratification, yet still enhance aggregate representation (Deshpande and Ramachandran, 2019; World Bank, 2022). Another weakness is the lack of institutionalized review mechanisms grounded in socio-economic and demographic indicators, including changes in population composition by caste, ethnicity, gender, and geography; disparities in educational attainment and access to higher education; labour market participation; income and poverty differentials; and civil service recruitment and promotion outcomes over time (UNDP, 2016; World Bank, 2018; Government of Nepal, 2019). Without such monitoring, affirmative action cannot remain static and must be periodically recalibrated in response to shifting demographic patterns, educational inequalities, and distributional effects in public employment. In the absence of these feedback loops, policies will tend to become politically embedded despite their distributive efficiency decreasing over time. In the case of Nepal, the absence of formal review cycle implies that changes in eligibility criteria, targeting mechanisms, or category design are not evidence-based, but ad hoc. This undermines the flexibility and the sustainability of the policy. The main question, however, is not whether reservation has enhanced inclusion, but whether it is targeting those most in need of structural support in a sufficiently specific and responsive way. A long-term sustainability of the Nepal reservation system will hinge on its capacity to strike a balance between political commitment to inclusion and institutional processes that will guarantee the ongoing learning, review, and improvement.

Digitization and E-Governance: Progress and Caveats

The implementation of the online application system in the Public Service Commission recruitment process in Nepal is a significant move towards the modernization of the administration. Applicants no longer must walk to district offices to hand in forms, notifications

and admission are being distributed electronically and some of the key elements of examination administration are being partially computerized. In terms of public administration, such reforms can be seen as part of a more general trend in the world towards e-governance, where digital technologies are employed to lower transaction costs, increase procedural efficiency, and enhance administrative transparency (Heeks, 2006; Dunleavy et al., 2006; OECD, 2020). In that regard, the reforms in Nepal are not shallow and meaningless. Meanwhile, though, the path of digitization is rather uneven and even disjointed. The fundamental recruitment process, especially the handling and publication of examination results, is still typified by excessive administrative delays. The time between the completion of examination and final recommendation can take a couple of months. This disjuncture is not merely procedural; it has distributional implications. The long process involves both the direct and opportunity cost to the candidate, particularly those in low-income backgrounds who cannot afford to wait in long queues without other jobs. Such delays are linked to both lower administrative responsiveness and lower perceived procedural legitimacy in comparative public personnel systems, both of which can influence the appeal of public sector careers (World Bank, 2019; Peters and Pierre, 2016). More specifically, digital technology in Nepal's civil service recruitment has largely remained confined to administrative front-end functions rather than transforming assessment practices. Online applications, electronic notifications, and digital payment systems reflect procedural digitization rather than substantive innovation in evaluation methodology (Public Service Commission, Annual Reports; Government of Nepal, 2019). At present, the use of online testing platforms, remote proctoring, and structured digital assessment tools remains limited, indicating that core examination processes continue to rely on traditional, paper-based methods despite broader e-governance ambitions

(OECD, 2020; Government of Nepal, 2019). Equally, interview processes are still largely face-to-face, traditional in nature with little adoption of structured scoring mechanisms or standardized behavioural assessment instruments. Algorithms or data-assisted recruitment methods, which are also being considered in public HRM systems to be used as application screening, competency mapping and assessment design, have not been organized yet in Nepal (Kellough and Nigro, 2002; Meijer and Bekkers, 2015). This administrative digitization and assessment innovation disparity is considerable. The digital-era governance literature suggests that digitization of current processes fails to bring the fundamental change to the sphere of public administration, but the redesign of the institutional logic, based on data-driven and integrated systems, does (Dunleavy et al., 2006). In the absence of such deeper integration, digitization may become procedural, not substantive, enhancing convenience, but not necessarily selection quality, validity, or fairness. Meanwhile, the limitations within which Nepal functions should also be taken into consideration. There is a geographic imbalance in digital infrastructure, and the digital divide of internet access and digital literacy persists in influencing candidate experiences. In these circumstances, the sudden or uncontrolled digitization may reproduce or even enhance the existing disparities in access to the publicly available jobs. Digital governance and development studies have long cautioned that digital transformation within unequal societies may create so-called digital exclusion unless active equity protection is implemented (van Dijk, 2020; Heeks, 2018). The issue, however, is not merely to digitalize the recruitment processes, but to create a calibrated and context-sensitive digital transformation strategy. This strategy would put efficiency gains first and equity issues directly on the agenda, so that technological modernization can empower and not disintegrate the accessibility, validity, and equity of the Nepal civil service recruitment system.

Persistent Issues: Why Reforms Have Fallen Short

The Examination Trap: When the Test Becomes the Goal

The most persistent structural weakness in Nepal's civil service recruitment is the "examination trap," where examinations evolve from a selection tool into the dominant logic shaping preparation, institutional design, and even the definition of merit. This pattern is not unique to Nepal; comparative evidence from Asia-Pacific bureaucracies shows that overreliance on examinations narrows merit into credential-based rather than competence-based selection (Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013). In Nepal, however, this exam centrality has become deeply embedded, shaping both candidate behaviour and institutional expectations in ways that constrain broader understandings of competence. This is visible in PSC preparation culture, where candidates spend months or years mastering guidebooks, past papers, and answer-writing techniques aimed at scoring rather than learning. Coaching institutions reinforce this orientation by standardizing responses on constitutional, administrative, and development topics. While relevant, this knowledge becomes the primary currency of success, displacing competencies such as policy judgment, ethical reasoning, citizen engagement, and adaptive problem-solving. As Heady (2001) notes, examination-driven bureaucracies risk developing internal logic detached from functional governance needs, producing examination success rather than administrative capability. The PSC system remains procedurally strong but reflects path dependency that limits innovation in defining merit. Empirical evidence further shows that while cognitive tests predict performance in some roles, their predictive power declines where interpersonal judgment, adaptability, and situational reasoning are essential (Schmidt and Hunter, 1998; Salgado et al., 2003). Public administration roles, particularly in the federal system, increasingly fall into

this category. More comprehensive assessment methods; such as assessment centres, structured behavioural interviews, and multi-method evaluations, demonstrate higher predictive validity for complex roles (technology, 2005; Campion et al., 2011), yet remain largely absent in Nepal. The result is a system that is procedurally rigorous but functionally under-informative. The challenge is not to abandon examinations, but to redefine their scope within a broader conception of merit aligned with administrative reality.

The Impoverished Conception of Merit

Beneath the examination trap lies a deeper conceptual limitation: merit is still narrowly equated with written test performance. While this ensures standardization and procedural fairness, it remains a limited proxy for the competencies required in a federal and service-oriented administration. Comparative public administration literature emphasizes that merit is socially constructed and evolves with governance needs (Klitgaard, 1986; Van der Meer and Raadschelders, 2015). Historically, examination-based merit systems reflected progressive-era assumptions that standardized testing could neutralize social bias. However, later research shows that educational inequality, socio-economic background, and access to preparation significantly shape outcomes, reproducing inequality under the guise of neutrality (Young, 1958; Lemann, 1999; Bourdieu, 1986). This has led to a global shift toward competency-based models. Modern civil services increasingly define merit as a combination of technical, behavioural, and cognitive competencies. Countries such as the UK, Australia, Canada, and Singapore explicitly link recruitment to structured competency frameworks rather than exam scores alone (Van Dorpe and Horton, 2011; Horton, 2000; Horton et al., 2002; OECD, 2017). Competence now includes applied knowledge, ethical reasoning, collaboration, and adaptability. In Nepal,

elements of competency thinking exist within institutions such as the Nepal Administrative Staff College, which has introduced competency-based training programs. However, these remain limited to post-entry capacity development rather than integrated recruitment design (NASC, 2018; World Bank, 2019). As a result, competency language exists without full institutionalization. Job descriptions remain largely administrative rather than operational tools linked to selection systems, creating a disconnect between role expectations and assessed competencies. This reflects a broader conceptual ambiguity regarding the type of civil servant the system aims to produce. In a federal governance context requiring coordination, specialization, and adaptive capacity, this lack of a coherent competency framework limits alignment between recruitment and functional needs. The issue is therefore not only measurement of merit, but its definition in relation to governance demands.

The Recruitment Cycle: A Crisis of Time

Nepal's recruitment cycle remains lengthy and unpredictable despite PSC efforts to introduce annual calendars (PSC Annual Reports; Jamil & Dangal, 2009). Delays occur across multiple stages: advertisement, testing, result publication, interviews, and final appointments, creating prolonged uncertainty for candidates and institutional inefficiency through unfilled vacancies. While each stage ensures procedural integrity, the cumulative effect is administrative congestion. Research on bureaucratic throughput shows that multi-stage systems generate cascading delays across the entire process rather than isolated bottlenecks (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). In Nepal, delays in one phase propagate through the system, slowing overall recruitment. For candidates, extended waiting imposes significant opportunity costs, particularly for those without financial security (World Bank, 2019). For institutions, delays reduce staffing capacity, increase

workload pressures, and weaken service responsiveness. They may also introduce selection bias, as candidates with alternative opportunities exit the pipeline earlier, while those with fewer options remain. International experience shows that calendar-based recruitment systems improve predictability and efficiency. Systems such as Singapore's civil service and the UK Fast Stream operate on fixed timelines supported by digital workflows (OECD, 2021; UK Cabinet Office, 2022). Predictable scheduling reduces discretion, enhances transparency, and strengthens institutional trust (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016). Recruitment speed, therefore, is not only administrative efficiency but a dimension of state capacity.

Federal Transition: The Architecture is Incomplete

Nepal's federal restructuring has fundamentally reconfigured administrative architecture, but implementation remains incomplete. The 2015 Constitution established a three-tier system requiring corresponding civil service structures; however, institutional readiness remains uneven. Provincial Public Service Commissions exist in all provinces but vary significantly in staffing, technical capacity, and operational maturity. Some rely partly on transitional federal arrangements, reflecting uneven decentralization typical of many federal transitions (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2018). This creates coordination challenges and administrative inconsistency. At the local level, capacity constraints are more severe. Despite constitutional authority over service delivery, most of the 753 local governments lack adequate HR systems to ensure merit-based recruitment. Literature shows that decentralization without capacity investment can produce either staffing deficits or politicized recruitment (Smoke, 2015; Manor, 2011). In Nepal, this creates tension between constitutional autonomy and administrative feasibility. International evidence indicates that weak local recruitment

systems can increase variability in merit standards and expose staffing decisions to informal political influence (Bahl & Bird, 2018). Therefore, strengthening provincial PSCs and establishing intergovernmental coordination is essential. A hybrid model, where local governments define staffing needs and provincial PSCs manage recruitment processes, offers a balanced approach (Khemani et al., 2005). Ultimately, federal civil service success depends not only on power distribution but on institutional capacity at each level. Without this alignment, federalism risks becoming asymmetrical, with constitutional design advancing faster than administrative capability.

Elite Capture and Inclusion Limits

Nepal's reservation system addresses historical exclusion but is increasingly constrained by intra-group inequality. While formal inclusion improves representation, benefits are often captured by relatively advantaged members within marginalized groups, producing uneven distributive outcomes (Mills, 1997; Fraser, 2008). This reflects a limitation of category-based aggregation, which assumes homogeneity within broad social groups. In reality, significant class, geographic, and educational differences exist within each category. As Deshpande (2011) notes, this can result in "creamy layer" capture, where better-off individuals disproportionately benefit from affirmative action. Comparative cases show partial responses: India's creamy layer exclusion, Brazil's socioeconomic criteria in university admissions, and South Africa's income-sensitive measures. These reforms suggest that secondary targeting can improve equity but introduces administrative complexity (Francis & Tannuri-Pianto, 2012; Bhorat et al., 2014; Seekings & Nattrass, 2015). Nepal has not yet systematically addressed intra-category inequality. Political constraints partly explain this, as inclusion categories form important political coalitions (Fraser, 2008). Nevertheless,

empirical review is necessary to assess who benefits, how benefits are distributed, and whether the most disadvantaged are reached. Without such analysis, inclusion risks becoming symbolically strong but structurally uneven.

Technology and Innovation: The Road Not Taken

Nepal's PSC has made progress in digitizing administrative processes such as online applications, notifications, payments, and result processing. However, assessment design remains largely unchanged from mid-twentieth-century written exam systems, creating a gap between procedural modernization and methodological stagnation. International practice increasingly uses advanced tools such as adaptive testing, simulations, structured video interviews, and AI-assisted evaluation systems, often under controlled conditions (OECD, 2021; Hunkenschroer and Luetge, 2022). These tools enhance predictive validity and reduce reliance on rote memorization. However, technological adoption carries risks. Algorithmic systems may reproduce structural inequalities embedded in historical data, particularly in contexts like Nepal with uneven educational and digital access. Issues of transparency, bias, and accountability remain central concerns (Raghavan et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). Therefore, reform should be incremental and evidence based. Initial adoption should focus on non-decisional applications such as item banking, exam analytics, and administrative automation. More advanced tools should be introduced gradually with strict oversight and validation. PSC should also establish a dedicated innovation unit for piloting and evaluating technologies. The core challenge is not technological adoption itself but ensuring that modernization enhances fairness and validity without undermining transparency and merit.

Future Directions and Policy Imperatives: A Reform Agenda for the Federal Era

Redefine Merit Through a National Competency Framework

The most important reform in Nepal's civil service recruitment is redefining merit through a more grounded competency-based framework. At present, merit is largely equated with performance in written competitive examinations administered by the Public Service Commission Nepal. While these exams ensure procedural uniformity and limit discretion in selection, they have gradually narrowed merit to what is most measurable rather than what is most valuable for public service delivery. This bias toward academic recall and exam strategy over behavioural and applied competencies creates a systematic underrepresentation of critical skills needed in modern public administration (World Bank, 2021; OECD, 2023). The result is a persistent mismatch between recruitment signals and workplace demands. A more realistic reform approach is to treat written examinations as necessary but insufficient within a broader competency-based conception of merit. In this framing, merit is not only what candidates know, but how effectively they apply knowledge within institutional constraints, respond to ethical dilemmas, collaborate within bureaucracies, and manage ambiguity. Recent public sector HRM literature emphasizes that high-performing civil servants combine cognitive ability with behavioural judgment, adaptive problem-solving, and public service motivation (OECD, 2023; Campbell & Wiernik, 2015; Perry & Wise, 1990; Wright & Grant, 2010; Lievens & Thornton, 2013). This is particularly relevant in Nepal's federal context, where governance is increasingly decentralized and complex. Accordingly, Nepal's recruitment architecture should gradually transition toward a structured competency-based framework. This should not be treated as a technocratic add-on but as a core reform agenda led by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and

General Administration in coordination with the PSC, provincial governments, and academic institutions. Reform design must move beyond document-based exercises and be grounded in empirical job analysis, workplace ethnography, and practitioner consultation. International evidence shows that competency frameworks are most effective when iteratively validated against real job performance rather than designed abstractly (Bach and Bordogna, 2013; OECD, 2023). Properly institutionalized, this improves selection validity and administrative adaptability.

Importantly, competence cannot be treated as a uniform construct. Different civil service roles require different skill sets and collapsing them into a single notion of merit risks producing technically qualified but functionally mismatched personnel. A tiered competency architecture is therefore necessary to reflect diversity across administrative, technical, regulatory, and policy roles. Such frameworks must remain transparent and periodically updated in response to digital transformation and evolving citizen expectations (UN DESA, 2022). When implemented, competency-based recruitment should reshape the entire recruitment chain. Job descriptions must be competency-defined rather than generic, examinations should integrate analytical reasoning, situational judgment, and ethical problem-solving, and interviews should be standardized using behavioural indicators. Evidence shows that competency-aligned selection systems better predict job performance than knowledge-based testing alone (Horton, 2000; Boyatzis, 2008; Campion et al., 2011). However, this reform is fundamentally institutional, requiring political commitment, cross-level coordination, assessor capacity, and cultural change within an exam-centric bureaucracy. Without a coherent redefinition of merit, other reforms will remain fragmented and limited. Ultimately, the key question is whether examinations can capture the diverse competencies required in a federal, complex, and citizen-oriented state.

Modernize Assessment Methodology

Nepal's recruitment system must diversify beyond its dominant reliance on written examinations. While written tests remain essential for procedural fairness, transparency, and large-scale accessibility, they are insufficient for assessing leadership, ethical reasoning, communication, collaboration, and applied problem-solving. A balanced system should therefore combine written examinations with complementary assessment tools. Structured behavioural interviews should be institutionalized, particularly for senior and managerial positions. Unlike unstructured interviews, these are competency-based and evaluated using standardized scoring rubrics. Evidence shows that structured interviews have higher reliability and predictive validity (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997). Similarly, case-based assessments can better evaluate analytical reasoning, policy judgment, ethical decision-making, and administrative adaptability by placing candidates in realistic governance scenarios. For leadership roles, assessment centres should be progressively introduced. These integrate simulations, role plays, group exercises, and presentations assessed by trained evaluators. Comparative research indicates that assessment centres are among the most reliable predictors of managerial performance (Thornton and Gibbons, 2009), despite being resource intensive. Implementation requires substantial capacity building within the PSC, including trained assessor pools, standardized evaluation systems, and design expertise. Without such capacity, alternative methods risk inconsistency or perceived bias. Reform should therefore be gradual, starting with pilot programs in senior recruitment, followed by systematic evaluation of reliability, feasibility, and credibility before scaling. Nepal's past reform experience suggests that iterative learning is essential for sustainability. Thus, diversification of assessment is not merely technical but part of broader institutional learning.

Reduce the Recruitment Cycle by Systemic Reform

The recruitment cycle in Nepal remains a persistent structural challenge. Despite PSC efforts to improve predictability through annual recruitment calendars, delays persist across examination, evaluation, and appointment stages due to procedural complexity and occasional postponements (Jamil & Dangal, 2009; PSC Annual Reports). These delays create uncertainty for applicants and impose institutional costs through prolonged vacancies, reduced responsiveness, and administrative strain, thereby weakening state capacity (Ingraham, Joyce, and Donahue, 2003). A more effective approach is a calendar-based recruitment system with fixed annual or biannual schedules and clearly defined timelines for each stage. The key issue is not technological sophistication but institutional discipline. Predictability in recruitment enhances transparency, workforce planning, and institutional trust (OECD, 2011; Peters and Pierre, 2004). It also strengthens internal accountability within the PSC through advance scheduling, performance benchmarks, and regular reporting. However, calendar reform must be complemented by capacity enhancement. PSC requires stronger human resources and digital infrastructure. While computerized scoring has improved efficiency, further gains can be achieved by expanding digital tools to include standardized descriptive assessment processes. However, efficiency gains must not compromise fairness or validity. Digital transformation is most effective when embedded within strong institutional safeguards rather than treated as standalone modernization (Dunleavy et al., 2006). Recruitment processes also need simplification. Multiple sequential stages often add delay without significantly improving selection quality. A leaner system with fewer, well-designed stages would improve efficiency while maintaining merit. Excess procedural layering tends to produce administrative stagnation without enhancing fairness or validity (Condrey, 2010). Ultimately, timely recruitment

is central to state capacity, especially in Nepal's federal context where institutional demands are already uneven and constrained.

Enhance Provincial and Local Recruitment Capacity

The effectiveness of federalism in Nepal depends heavily on the capacity of provincial and local governments to develop credible recruitment systems. Decentralization alone is insufficient without administrative institutions capable of sustaining professional staffing. State capacity, as Painter and Peters (2010) note, depends not only on political design but on administrative quality.

Provincial Public Service Commissions are therefore critical institutions. However, many still face shortages in staffing, infrastructure, technology, and technical expertise. These gaps require long-term institutional investment rather than short-term fixes. Capacity-building in competency-based testing, examination security, and assessment design is essential. Comparative federal experiences show that subnational institutions require sustained support during transition phases (Peters and Pierre, 2004). The PSC Nepal should play a coordinating and enabling role by sharing examination systems, assessment tools, digital infrastructure, and training resources. This would reduce inter-provincial disparities and strengthen institutional learning. At the same time, national minimum standards are necessary to ensure coherence in recruitment quality while preserving provincial autonomy. In federal systems, balancing flexibility and standardization is essential for legitimacy and professionalism (Ostrom, 1973). At the local level, capacity constraints are even more severe, increasing risks of politicization and inconsistency. Provincial PSCs thus serve as key intermediaries in ensuring merit-based recruitment. A coordinated model, where local governments define staffing needs while provincial PSCs manage technical recruitment

processes, offers a practical interim solution (Khemani et al., 2005). This preserves local autonomy while safeguarding merit and procedural integrity. Ultimately, Nepal's federal civil service must remain coordinated, standardized in core principles, and professionally coherent across levels.

Reform the Inclusion Framework

Reservation policy in Nepal reflects a democratic commitment to addressing historical exclusion. The civil service has long been dominated by privileged groups, while women, Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesis, persons with disabilities, and remote populations remain underrepresented. Reservation policy therefore represents a structural correction aimed at improving representativeness and legitimacy (Lawoti, 2005; Hangen, 2010). Representative bureaucracy theory supports this, arguing that public institutions are more legitimate when they reflect societal diversity (Kingsley, 1944; Selden, 1997). However, after nearly two decades, the inclusion framework requires systematic review. Key empirical questions include who benefits most from reservation policies, how representation has changed, and whether intra-group inequality persists. Such analysis should be evidence-based rather than ideological. Comparative research shows that affirmative action is most effective when periodically reviewed and adapted to outcomes (Sowell, 2004; Mosher, 1982). Reservation alone cannot eliminate structural inequality. Disadvantages rooted in education, geography, language, and economic conditions shape competitiveness long before examinations. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, cultural capital significantly determines access to opportunity. Therefore, quotas address only part of the exclusion problem. A broader inclusion strategy should include preparatory support, decentralized examination centres, financial assistance, mentorship, and digital learning access. Empirical research confirms that inclusion policies are most

effective when combined with capability-building interventions (Sen, 1999). Additionally, a formal review mechanism every five to seven years should be institutionalized to assess outcomes and adjust policy. This ensures inclusion remains adaptive rather than static, reinforcing both legitimacy and effectiveness.

Develop Human Resource Planning Capacity

Nepal's recruitment system remains largely reactive, focused on filling vacancies rather than strategic workforce planning. This limits the state's ability to anticipate future skill needs in a rapidly changing governance environment characterized by digitalization, federalization, and rising service expectations. Workforce planning is therefore a strategic governance function rather than a clerical exercise (Hou et al, 2000). Strategic human resource planning should be institutionalized within federal, provincial, and local governments. This involves forecasting staffing needs, identifying skill gaps, and aligning recruitment with long-term policy priorities (Armstrong, 2014). In Nepal's federal system, disparities in staffing and technical capacity make such planning especially urgent. This requires integrated human resource information systems capable of tracking workforce composition, skills, and retirement patterns (Condrey & Battaglio, 2007). However, data systems alone are insufficient; analytical capacity is needed to translate data into strategic decisions. International evidence shows that workforce planning improves administrative resilience during institutional transitions (Pynes, 2008). Ultimately, Nepal must shift from vacancy-driven recruitment to strategic workforce management aligned with evolving governance needs.

Use Technology Thoughtfully

Digital transformation offers significant opportunities for improving recruitment efficiency, transparency, and access. However, international experience shows that poorly designed

digital systems can reinforce inequality and undermine trust (Busuioc, 2021). Therefore, technological adoption must be gradual, regulated, and evidence based. Technology should be evaluated not only for efficiency but also for fairness and legitimacy (Black and van Esch, 2020). Recruitment systems carry constitutional responsibilities, making ethical and administrative validation essential. Transparency and accountability are critical; digital systems must be auditable and understandable to stakeholders. Lack of transparency in algorithmic systems risks bias and erosion of trust (O'Neil, 2016). Equity considerations are equally important due to Nepal's digital divide in infrastructure, literacy, and geographic access. Full digitization risks excluding disadvantaged groups. Therefore, implementation must be inclusive and incremental. Pilot-based adoption is advisable, beginning with urban areas and gradually expanding. Structured video interviews may improve efficiency in early stages, while AI should be limited to supportive functions such as item analysis, plagiarism detection, and bias monitoring. Evidence cautions against fully automated hiring due to accountability risks (Raghavan et al., 2020). PSC should establish a dedicated research and innovation unit to evaluate, pilot, and refine technologies. Technology must ultimately serve meritocracy, not replace institutional judgment. The central objective is not rapid digitization but the integration of technology in ways that enhance fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness.

Conclusion

The civil service in Nepal has evolved a long way back in the times of Rana oligarchy, when only a hereditary elite could occupy the roles at public offices. The creation of the Public Service Commission, the codification of competitive examination, the broadening of reservation policies and the continuing federal restructuring are real institutional accomplishments, which have been built up

through seventy years of frequently turbulent political history. This progress should not be disregarded or discredited. However, the central argument of this chapter is that the reforms undertaken so far have been insufficient to the challenge Nepal faces. They have dealt with symptoms; the worst kinds of patronage and exclusion but have not dealt with the underlying flaws in the logic of recruitment and selection itself. The system of examination measures the wrong things. The principle of merit is too limited. The process of recruiting is too slow. The inclusion framework is not perfectly focused. The federal architecture is not complete. And the application of modern methodology and technology of assessment is still way behind what is now possible and proved effective. The federal period provides the need and occasion of more basic reconsideration. This is necessitated by the size and nature of the administrative task Nepal currently has; managing a three-level federal system, providing a constitutional imperative of inclusion and good governance, and competing in talent in an economy where educated young Nepalis have more options than ever before. This opportunity emerges from the institutional fluidity of Nepal's federal transition, where provincial Public Service Commissions are still consolidating their mandates and operational capacities, federal civil service arrangements remain in a process of gradual refinement, and local-level recruitment norms are still evolving. Provided Nepal takes advantage of the opportunity by creating an authentic competency framework, modernizing its assessment system, restructuring the inclusion system on the foundation of evidence, shortening the recruitment process, and establishing HR planning capacity at all tiers of government, it can create a civil service that is capable of bearing the burden that its constitution imposes on it. Otherwise, it will keep on hiring individuals who excel in examinations to work in positions that demand much more than the ability to pass examinations can tell. The stakes are high. Nepal possesses

the resources, the constitutional mandate, and, hopefully, the political will to develop a competent, representative, and trusted civil service. What it needs now is the intellectual ambition to reimagine what recruitment and selection can and should achieve, and the institutional capacity to turn that reimagining into practice. The civil service Nepal has is not the civil service Nepal requires. Sealing that rift is one of the most significant administrative issues of the federal era.

AI Disclosure Statement

This chapter was developed with the assistance of generative AI tools for language refinement, structuring, and citation formatting. All conceptual framing, analysis, and final interpretations remain the sole responsibility of the author. The AI tool was not used to generate empirical data or alter substantive scholarly claims.

Declaration of Interest

The author declares no competing financial, institutional, or personal interests that could have influenced the analysis, interpretation, or presentation of this work.

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Effectiveness of the Performance Appraisal System in the Nepalese Civil Service: Policy and Practical Realities

Anup Bhurtel

Abstract

This book chapter evaluates how effectively the performance appraisal system works within Nepal's civil service by analysing core legislative policies and contemporary public administration literature. The study examines three major dimensions of the existing framework: its administrative structure, how evaluations work in practice, and the use of appraisal results. Moving beyond a simple summary, the chapter interprets the system's overall credibility regarding human resource development and decentralized public administration practices under the federal structure. The analysis reveals a significant gap between meeting basic rules and actual work outcomes. On a positive note, the uniform guidelines under the Civil Service Act 2049 and Civil Service Rules 2050 provide institutional predictability and successfully protect civil service promotions from outside political influence or party interference. However, relying too much on subjective scoring and broad evaluation criteria limits the system's utility. The study highlights that the appraisal process functions as a secret, one-way compliance exercise primarily geared toward securing promotions rather than fostering employee development or addressing training needs. Furthermore, uniform design fails to capture the distinct operational roles across the three tiers of government and completely omits performance indicators for inter-governmental coordination. The chapter synthesizes these challenges to outline a transition toward a performance-driven administration. It argues for the integration of objective key performance indicators, decentralized evaluation tools, the strict use of position-specific Terms of Reference (ToR), mandatory mid-term reviews, and explicit metrics that reward collaborative public value creation.

Keywords: Performance Appraisal, Civil Service, Organizational Justice Administrative Reform, Nepal

Introduction

Within the broader domain of performance management, performance appraisal (PA) is closely linked with employee performance and improvement in work behaviour. It identifies and measures the performance of individual employees with the motive of developing them and aligning their performance with the organizational goals (Aguinis, 2023). While performance management is a continuous and ongoing process in an organization, the PA process is usually carried out periodically as a formal interaction between the employees and supervisors (Zheng et al., 2012). PA is, therefore, understood as a process that involves motivation, communication, and social interaction in which immediate supervisors act as the most direct representatives of the organization in their interactions with employees. It represents a structured form of engagement between employees and the organization (Findley et al., 2000).

PA assesses job performance providing evidence on job design and serves as the pathway to key decisions regarding employee development, promotions, job simplification or job enlargements. It acts as a planning tool as well as a decisional tool. PA is considered important in public sector for public service delivery effectiveness consequently. Further to examining efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and commitment of the employees, studies (e.g. (Goh, 2012) have shown that performance measurement is also focused on addressing the issues of accountability and transparency within government organizations. It therefore holds substantial roles at individual and organizational level to create the public value.

Performance appraisal also plays an important role in the civil service of Nepal, where it is expected to assess employee performance, support professional development, and strengthen

accountability within the public administration system. The appraisal system operates within the legal framework established by the Civil Service Act 2049 BS (1993 AD) and the Civil Service Rules 2050 BS (1993 AD), including subsequent amendments. These provisions institutionalize performance appraisal as a mandatory mechanism for periodic evaluation of civil servants across different administrative levels. The appraisal results also influence key administrative decisions such as promotion and career progression. Given the significance of performance appraisal in public administration, understanding the credibility and effectiveness of this system remains an important area of scholarly and policy discussion.

Against this background, this study reviews the effectiveness of the performance appraisal system in Nepal's civil service through analysis of relevant policies and scholarly literature. The chapter examines three key aspects of the system: the structure of the appraisal framework, the appraisal process, and the use of appraisal results. It also interprets the credibility of the system from the perspective of employee development and public administration practices.

Methodology and Study Approach

This study uses an analytical, argumentative review backed by an evaluation of legislative provisions, official policy documents, and contemporary public administration literature. Unlike empirical research that relies on primary field-based data collection, this chapter employs a qualitative policy-review methodology to critically evaluate the systemic architecture of the performance appraisal framework in Nepal. To strengthen this structural critique, the qualitative policy analysis is integrated with secondary empirical findings from recent public sector datasets, allowing for the triangulation of legal provisions against statistical workplace

realities. The main objective is to identify structural problems within the current performance evaluation system and propose actionable pathways for performance-driven administration. The analysis examines how centralized administrative structures under older legislation interact with the broader governance mandates established by the Constitution of Nepal 2015.

The research process followed three main stages. The first stage involved a comprehensive textual analysis of core legal instruments, specifically the Civil Service Act 2049 and the Civil Service Rules 2050, which were analysed alongside constitutional provisions regarding inter-governmental cooperation among the federal, provincial, and local tiers. The second stage integrated a secondary literature review of peer-reviewed journals and public sector reports to examine theoretical concepts of organizational justice and public value creation against administrative realities. Finally, the study integrated qualitative insights from professional consultations with current and former officials of the Public Service Commission, Nepal. These consultations helped connect legal texts with practical operational realities, highlighting persistent issues. By matching these expert perspectives with established public administration theories, the study transitions from a descriptive summary of rules into an analytical critique of necessary legislative reforms for the current governance framework.

Regulatory Framework of Civil Service Performance Evaluation

The performance appraisal system of Nepal's civil service is governed by the Civil Service Act 2049 BS (1993 AD) and the Civil Service Rules 2050 BS (1993 AD), including subsequent amendments (Nepal Law Commission, 1993a; Nepal Law Commission, 1993b). These legal provisions establish the formal

structure for evaluating the work performance of civil servants across bureaucracy, covering employees from the assistant level to the highest administrative positions. Performance appraisal operates through a prescribed evaluation framework that records the duties performed by the employee and the outcomes achieved during the evaluation period. This process forms an integral part of the promotion system and carries significant weight in determining career advancement.

Under this framework, the process involves three distinct levels of assessment: the immediate superior acting as the supervisor, a reviewer, and a final review committee. The Act requires every employee to complete and register the evaluation form within seven days following the end of the fiscal year, and failure to meet this deadline results in a deduction of marks or other administrative consequences. Furthermore, the regulatory framework contains provisions designed to enforce accountability and procedural discipline. For instance, supervisors and reviewers must provide clear written justification when they assign exceptionally high or exceptionally low marks. These provisions aim to maintain consistency in the performance evaluation process while linking individual performance records directly to promotion and career development decisions within the civil service.

Structure and Content of the Performance Appraisal Form

Performance appraisal forms used in the Nepali civil service follow a largely standardized structure across administrative levels. Each form begins with an identification section that records basic administrative information about the employee, including their name, employee code, service group, position, current office, and the date of appointment to the post. The appraisal period follows the Nepali fiscal year, running from the

first of Shrawan to the end of Asar (mid-July to mid-July of the next year). The form also records the office that submits the appraisal and the date of submission, creating an administrative record that links the evaluation to a specific employee and reporting period. A common feature across these instruments is the section where employees report work completed during the evaluation period. The employee lists tasks assigned through formal work plans as well as tasks carried out through personal initiative. The form requires the employee to describe the progress of each activity and explain the reasons when any task remains incomplete. Most formats require the reporting of at least five activities, and these descriptions must relate directly to the job description and the annual program of the organization.

Another shared element across the forms is the structured scoring system. A uniform performance appraisal form is prescribed for all levels with a total value of 40 points. From this total weight, 62.5 percent (25 points) is allocated to the immediate supervisor, 25 percent (10 points) is assigned to the reviewer, and 12.5 percent (5 points) is given to the review committee. Supervisors assess employee performance using four main dimensions: quantity of work, cost efficiency, timeliness of completion, and quality of output. Each dimension carries a defined score, and the combined marks produce the overall performance result. A reviewer then examines the supervisor's evaluation and records an additional score within a smaller range. The evaluation scale classifies performance into categories such as excellent, good, satisfactory, and low, which correspond to defined percentage ranges. When marks exceed 95 percent or fall below 75 percent, the evaluator must provide a written justification.

The final stage of evaluation is conducted by a three-member review committee. For gazetted third-class officers and above, the committee is chaired by the concerned secretary and includes

a representative from the ministry responsible for managing the respective service group and a representative from the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration. The review committee assesses broader professional qualities related to the employee's role, including subject knowledge, judgment in work decisions, work capacity, initiative, and professional conduct. Although the overall structure remains consistent, several differences appear across administrative levels. Forms for higher-level gazetted officers include criteria related to policy analysis, negotiation ability, leadership capacity, and organizational management. Conversely, forms used for non-gazetted and classless employees include additional criteria related to workplace discipline and compliance, such as punctuality, honesty, adherence to rules, and the ability to follow directions.

Process of Performance Appraisal: Theory vs Practice in Nepalese Civil Service

The performance appraisal process traditionally entails several steps, moving from the establishment of standards to final managerial decisions. The process commences with setting performance standards, which Armstrong (2006) notes forms the foundation of performance planning and agreements. This phase requires gathering role profiles, setting clear objectives, and developing performance measures and assessment criteria. Performance measures are determined based on organizational policy, job descriptions, historical records, and achieved targets, making this step demanding in terms of planning and managerial competencies. The second step requires communicating those standards to employees. DelPo (2007) emphasizes that structured meeting preparation is essential for this communication, while Armstrong (2006) elaborates that this interaction should lead to a mutual performance agreement with the employee.

The third step in the framework involves measuring actual performance against the pre-established standards, which is usually carried out periodically, such as quarterly or semi-annually. The fourth step requires comparing the actual performance with the desired organizational or departmental outcomes. The fifth step involves formal feedback sessions where results are discussed. This phase includes carefully planned meetings between the employee and the supervisor. It is a highly sensitive phase because addressing poor performance can be challenging, prompting human resource scholars like Arthur (2008) to emphasize the need for supervisors to possess strong communication, persuasion, and listening skills. The final step is the translation of appraisal outcomes into administrative decisions, which can include positive incentives such as promotions and capacity growth, or punitive measures such as suspension (Grote, 2002). In theory, an effective process is pivoted around objective standards and regular, open communication.

In the Nepalese civil service, this process follows a structured administrative cycle that begins with the employee recording their completed work during the evaluation period. The completed form is submitted to the immediate supervisor within the specified period after the end of the fiscal year. The supervisor reviews the employee's report, evaluates performance according to the defined scoring criteria, and records the initial marks. The form then moves to the reviewer, who examines the supervisor's assessment and records additional comments or adjustments, providing a second level of verification. Finally, the review committee examines the appraisal record and assigns marks for professional qualities and work behaviour.

The rules specify clear timelines for completing each stage of the evaluation. Gazetted civil servants undergo both semi-

annual and annual performance evaluation, focusing on work targets and activity progress, whereas non-gazetted employees undergo annual evaluation only. According to the regulatory calendar, employees must submit their self-assessment forms to the supervisor within seven days following the end of the fiscal year. Supervisors are expected to complete their assessments by the end of Shrawan (mid-August), after which the reviewer completes the evaluation within the next 15 days. The review committee then conducts the final examination and forwards the results to the promotion committee secretariat and the Public Service Commission by the end of Bhadra (mid-October). These deadlines ensure that performance evaluations are completed systematically to inform personnel decisions for the upcoming fiscal and promotion cycles. If a civil employee fails to submit the evaluation form, the rules allow the allocation of only partial marks for that year in the promotion evaluation.

Critical Analysis: Performance Appraisal, Employee Performance, and Public Value

Regulatory Foundations and Institutional Purpose

The performance appraisal system in Nepal's civil service is structured primarily to manage promotions, maintain administrative control, and ensure personnel accountability. Under Section 24A of the Civil Service Act 2049, performance evaluation is a core part of the promotion system, accounting for 40 percent of the total marks required for career advancement (Nepal Law Commission, 1993a). This direct legal connection shifts the main purpose of the appraisal away from continuous employee development, turning it instead into a high-stakes tool for securing promotions. Consequently, the operational focus remains fixed on meeting legal requirements rather than developing human resource potential.

To maintain orderly administrative and promotion cycles, Rule 78 of the Civil Service Rules 2050 establishes strict timelines, requiring civil servants to submit their evaluation forms within seven days after the fiscal year ends (Nepal Law Commission, 1993b). On a positive note, evaluating performance using general criteria like quantity, quality, timeliness, and cost aligns in principle with the service delivery and transparency goals of the Constitution of Nepal 2015. Furthermore, this formal regulatory framework establishes a highly predictable and standardized environment across the entire state bureaucracy. By enforcing uniform reporting timelines and clear documentation, the regulations prevent arbitrary personnel management and protect civil servants from unfair decisions. This structural predictability ensures baseline institutional stability, creating a reliable legal record that serves as a clear basis for career tracking. However, because the system prioritizes paperwork over actual performance, the practical reality reflects a centralized compliance model that struggles to improve public service delivery.

Insulation from Political Influence and External Interference

A defining strength of the established performance appraisal framework is its capacity to insulate the careers of civil servants from outside political pressure and party interference. By legally linking promotions to fixed points under Section 24A of the Civil Service Act 2049, the state creates a clear administrative separation that guards the bureaucracy from political favouritism. Because the evaluation sheets and their designated points are managed through regular administrative channels, guided by the specialized Review Committees mentioned under Section 24A (3) of the Act, the promotion system remains closed to the direct influence of changing political leadership. This institutional

design ensures that career advancement within the civil service is determined by internal administrative evaluations rather than external alignment, safeguarding the core principles of a merit-based, neutral bureaucracy and maintaining stability during political transitions.

Methodological Ineffectiveness and the Consequences of Subjective Forms

Although the legal framework sets a strict timeline for evaluations, the actual usefulness of the system is restricted by its design. The absence of clear and updated job descriptions, the limited use of measurable performance targets, inadequate requirements for documenting completed work, and the insufficient assessment of actual work outcomes are some of the key methodological drawbacks in the performance appraisal system in the Nepali civil service. The appraisal therefore relies on subjective judgment rather than objective tools, focusing on how a supervisor perceives an employee instead of measuring actual work output.

The Institutional Absence of Measurable Indicators

The key ineffectiveness of the current performance appraisal system is rooted in its operational reliance on broad, non-quantifiable parameters. This systematic gap in objective measurement is widened by a major mismatch between policy design and administrative practice regarding the foundations of job execution. The civil service legal framework contains provisions that require the employer to provide clear Terms of Reference (ToR) to every employee upon placement (Nepal Law Commission, 1993a). In practice, however, this mandatory provision is rarely implemented, and well-structured job descriptions are often absent. Without a functional, updated ToR, employees work without specific, written boundaries,

and supervisors lack a solid benchmark to grade performance. This operational gap transforms what should be an empirical assessment based on pre-established targets into exercise based largely on personal impressions and end-of-year assumptions. The system also does not adequately require employees to submit documentary evidence of completed work as part of the appraisal process. In the absence of verifiable records, performance ratings are often based on general perceptions rather than demonstrated accomplishments.

When an evaluation format lacks quantifiable standards and relies on the personal discretion of supervisors or reviewers, it generates psychological and behavioural consequences within public organizations. In an environment that lacks objective benchmarks, assessments become highly vulnerable to personal biases and leniency errors. Supervisors frequently utilize maximum scores as an administrative shield to avoid interpersonal friction, maintain a favourable image among team members, and protect the promotion eligibility of their subordinates (Bhatta, 2024). While this practice of inflating scores may foster short-term harmony and basic employee satisfaction within an office, it creates severe long-term negative consequences for the workforce.

The widespread distribution of top marks results in a high concentration of maximum scores that fails to distinguish exceptional performers from underperformers. When the system treats all levels of effort equally, the actual high contributors to the department become deeply demotivated. Furthermore, this measurement gap skews employee behavioural incentives. Instead of focusing energy on maximizing tangible work outcomes, optimizing public service efficiency, or initiating organizational improvements, civil servants become motivated to invest their efforts into managing interpersonal relationships with their

immediate superiors to secure high marks. Empirical testing using structural equation modelling confirms that while behavioural drivers like employee engagement ($\beta = 0.094$) and organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.113$) significantly predict higher productivity among Nepalese civil servants, the performance appraisal system fails to provide any such motivational or performance-enhancing incentive (Thapa, 2025).

Theoretical Paradigms versus Empirical Realities in Appraisal Methodology

Modern human resource management in the public sector requires evaluation methods that match the specific duties of different public roles. It demands moving away from once-a-year grading toward an ongoing process that balances employee accountability with continuous skills development. Highly structured positions require objective-oriented frameworks like Management by Objectives to align individual outputs with broader institutional targets (Bacal, 2004). Conversely, behaviour-driven or interactive roles require Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales to combine qualitative incidents with quantitative metrics, grounding assessments in observable actions (DeNisi, 2005). For complex administrative posts, multi-source feedback mechanisms like 360-degree reviews gather performance data from supervisors, peers, and subordinates to eliminate single-source subjectivity (Armstrong, 2006). Selecting and combining these diverse methodologies is vital for encouraging superior performance, providing legal defensibility, and ensuring procedural transparency within public personnel decisions.

When evaluated against these theoretical frameworks, the performance appraisal system of the Nepali civil service reveals a clear gap between theory and practice. The state bureaucracy

relies on a single, standardized rating form that completely omits contemporary evaluation models like behaviourally anchored scales, objective-targeted frameworks, or multi-source feedback mechanisms. This approach ignores empirical evidence in public management literature. As argued by Landy and Farr (1980) and later expanded by Murphy (2008), when public organizations fail to use different, target-driven evaluation methods, the appraisal tool can no longer measure actual work quality or behavioural change. By using a uniform template that lacks practical differences, the Nepali civil service relies on a superficial tool that records procedural compliance but fails to evaluate or build genuine competence.

This structural simplicity leaves the appraisal process highly vulnerable to common cognitive errors found in human resource literature. Because the evaluation form lacks clear checkpoints like behaviourally anchored indicators, it consistently suffers from leniency errors, central tendency patterns, and recency effects. Bol (2011) demonstrates that basic rating forms invite leniency errors because supervisors use maximum marks as an administrative shield to avoid workplace conflict and protect the promotion eligibility of their subordinates. Furthermore, Moers (2005) highlights that the complete absence of peer, subordinate, or citizen reviews allows personal biases to remain unchecked. This leads to an artificial clustering of top scores, transforming the process into a routine exercise where paper compliance replaces genuine talent identification. Consequently, the performance appraisal functions primarily as an ad-hoc task that fails to reduce measurement bias or support long-term organizational development.

The Disconnect Between Documented Scores and Public Value

At the organizational level, this subjective approach creates a problematic gap where individual appraisal scores appear exceptionally high while the organization as a whole struggles to meet its goals (Sharma, 2026). This structural flaw makes accurate talent identification difficult, distorts administrative records, and severely compromises the link between documented appraisal outcomes and actual public service delivery.

Another limitation is that the appraisal system gives limited attention to the actual outcomes of employees' work. While activities and assigned tasks may be considered during evaluation, there is insufficient assessment of whether those efforts contribute to organizational objectives, improve service delivery, or generate meaningful public value. Because the scoring system is disconnected from real-world data, observing higher average scores across a department does not indicate that the public is getting better or faster service. The link between the appraisal and actual service delivery is broken. In the end, using these non-measurable forms means that the performance appraisal process becomes a paper-pushing exercise that satisfies procedural compliance but fails to address the genuine needs of public service seekers whom the civil service is meant to serve.

Ineffective Link with Career Progression

The common experience that almost all employees receive nearly full marks has reduced their trust in and motivation toward the performance appraisal system. Although existing legal provisions require performance appraisal results to be considered in promotion decisions as well as transfers, assignment of

responsibilities, opportunities for study and training, exposure visits, and other personnel management functions, these provisions have not been consistently implemented in practice. As a result, factors such as seniority often carry greater weight than performance appraisal outcomes in determining career advancement. Consequently, the appraisal system has had a limited influence on employee career progression, despite the policy expectation that it should serve as an important basis for a broad range of human resource management decisions.

The Mismatch of a Uniform System in a Federal Structure

In the government system of Nepal, performance appraisal formats are centralized and applied indiscriminately across all public roles, irrespective of the three tiers of government. This uniformity creates a significant measurement limitation within the evaluation forms, leading to distinct practical issues across the state bureaucracy. The administrative architecture of Nepal's three-tier federal structure demands highly specialized, context-dependent duties across federal, provincial, and local levels (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020). Yet, the current framework enforces identical appraisal formats for civil servants of similar ranks, regardless of their vast differences in actual work duties, environments, and goals. The principle of a uniform, single format fails to recognize that a single design cannot fit the diverse needs of modern public administration.

Figure 1: Outcome of Centralized Uniform Performance Appraisal Form

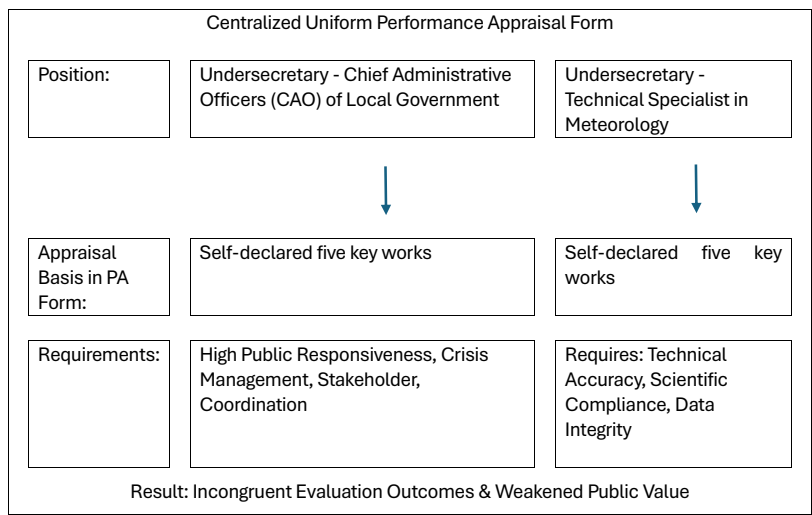


Figure 1 demonstrates a pertinent example in which an administrative chief of a local government is required to handle politically complex, service delivery issues and highly dynamic public management tasks that require prompt community responsiveness, stakeholder coordination, and crisis management. Conversely, a technical specialist of a similar rank, such as an officer within the meteorology department, is required to operate under rigid scientific protocols where performance is defined by technical accuracy, instrument calibration, and data integrity. Utilizing an identical, generalized appraisal form to evaluate both positions is fundamentally flawed. This rigid uniformity ensures that the specific competencies, technical risks, and unique performance demands of distinct operational sectors remain entirely uncaptured. This problem is intensified because performance management across local and provincial levels remains basic and almost entirely informal, leaving public institutions without a genuine culture of objective appraisal, and

individual job descriptions completely lack clear performance baselines (Provincial and Local Governance Strengthening Programme [PLGSP], 2025).

The limitations of this centralized appraisal model become even more evident when examining the broader federal transition mandated by the Constitution of Nepal 2015 (Nepal Law Commission, 2015). The constitution establishes a decentralized state structure with clear boundaries and distinct functional roles for federal, provincial, and local authorities. Local governments engage directly with citizens and manage immediate localized public service functions that demand flexibility. Provincial authorities occupy an intermediate space focused on regional development and inter-district coordination. Meanwhile, the federal level concentrates on national policy formulation, statutory oversight, and macro-level administrative governance (Acharya & Chandrika, 2020). However, despite these clear structural shifts, the performance appraisal system has failed to undergo necessary administrative adjustments, remaining tethered to an older, centralized administrative tradition. This delay is primarily caused by the long wait in passing the Federal Civil Service Act, which has created a legal gap and forced provincial and local levels to rely on fragmented, ad-hoc personnel rules (PLGSP, 2025). By expecting a single evaluation template to measure performance across these vastly different governmental tiers, the state uses an instrument that cannot distinguish between policy-making outputs at the centre and practical work at the local level. Consequently, the centralized appraisal model fails to justify or accurately measure true functional performance within a three-tier state, ultimately misaligning institutional rewards with the actual competencies required for effective local and provincial governance.

In addition to ignoring sector-specific and tier-specific duties, the centralized uniformity of the current framework creates a significant barrier to inter-governmental coordination. A defining characteristic of any successful federal system is the necessity for strong vertical and horizontal coordination between neighbouring offices, as well as collaboration between local, provincial, and federal institutions. Effective public service delivery in a federal context frequently depends on joint policy implementation, collaborative resource sharing, and continuous information exchange across administrative lines (Acharya, 2021). However, the existing performance appraisal forms focus almost exclusively on individual outputs generated within an isolated office or unit. The scoring criteria contain no specific dimensions, indicators, or provisions to evaluate, recognize, or reward a civil servant's contributions to collaborative administrative efforts or inter-governmental partnerships.

This gap creates an immediate operational conflict between the collective objectives of federal governance and the individualistic criteria used to assess personal performance. When promotions and career progression are tied directly to isolated tasks within a single office, civil servants are systemically discouraged from investing time and effort into broader collaborative networks. Employees naturally prioritize narrow, easily quantifiable administrative duties that yield direct points on their specific evaluation sheets, while vital vertical and horizontal coordination efforts remain ignored. By neglecting collaborative behaviour, the uniform appraisal system prevents the civil service from functioning as an integrated network, directly constraining the capacity of the bureaucracy to support collective public value across the three tiers of government.

Organizational Justice in Civil Service Performance Appraisal

Organizational justice theory provides an established academic framework for evaluating how employees perceive the fairness of human resource practices, particularly performance evaluations (Greenberg, 1986). Public sector employees directly link the credibility of the performance appraisal system to overall institutional fairness, which ultimately determines their level of institutional trust and workplace commitment (Jacobs et al., 2014). This concept of organizational fairness is traditionally divided into three interconnected dimensions: procedural justice, which concerns the equity and structural integrity of the evaluation process itself; distributive justice, which relates to the fairness of the final outcomes, recognition, or scores received; and interactional justice, which covers the quality of interpersonal treatment, respect, and feedback provided by managers during administrative procedures (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1990). In public organizations, high perceptions across these fairness dimensions are critical because they generate positive workplace attitudes, strengthen organizational commitment, improve overall job satisfaction, and reinforce long-term work engagement among personnel (Ghosh et al., 2014). A critical analysis of the performance appraisal system in Nepal reveals major challenges regarding these fairness dimensions, particularly when contrasting regulatory objectives with administrative practice. On a positive note, the Civil Service Act 2049 and Civil Service Rules 2050 provide a clear, legally mandated timeline and structured forms that give a baseline level of procedural standardization. This uniform structure ensures that every civil servant undergoes a formal review process, which prevents completely unfair decisions and maintains an organized historical record for promotion tracks. However, a major structural deficiency of the system is the complete lack of interactional fairness. By

legal design under the current rules, the performance appraisal process functions strictly as a one-way, confidential mechanism where evaluation forms and the marks assigned by supervisors are never communicated back to the employees. Because there is no statutory requirement for regular performance feedback or open dialogue, supervisors do not have to justify their scores to subordinates, making interactional justice entirely inapplicable within the current framework. This lack of interaction directly undermines both the procedural and distributive credibility of the appraisal system, turning it into an isolated administrative exercise. Without feedback loops, employees cannot verify if the core elements of procedural fairness, such as accuracy and bias suppression, are genuinely maintained during the scoring process (Zapata-Phelan et al., 2009). Furthermore, because the evaluation remains a hidden administrative process, employees lose the opportunity for correctability, leaving them with no formal channel to contest low or inaccurate scores. This secret process heavily damages distributive fairness. When performance outcomes are kept secret until promotion lists are published, employees frequently perceive the final results as distorted by favouritism rather than actual merit. When civil servants realize that their work is evaluated through an opaque and subjective process, their work motivation drops, and the system fails to encourage positive workplace behaviours like innovation and mutual cooperation (Latham & Pinder, 2005). This degradation of fairness and operational utility is empirically confirmed by recent public sector data from Nepal, which reveals that the current performance appraisal framework has a completely negligible and statistically non-significant impact on actual employee work outputs ($\beta = 0.011$, $p = 0.787$) (Thapa, 2025). Because evaluations are disconnected from objective workplace contributions, the documented scores fail to drive performance, leaving appraisal as a decoupled administrative task. These structural uniformity

flaws generate distinct procedural and distributive injustices when viewed through an organizational justice framework within Nepal's federal structure. Applying an identical evaluation template across federal, provincial, and local levels fails to address the real work situation and the spirit of federalism, as it judges localized service delivery roles by the same generic parameters used for central policy-making ministries. Furthermore, by completely omitting metrics for vertical or horizontal coordination, the system creates a distributive imbalance; it fails to reward or recognize employees facilitating critical inter-governmental partnerships, rewarding narrow, isolated office compliance instead. As Harrington and Lee (2015) emphasize, when procedural rules fail to adapt to structural transitions, employees experience a profound sense of institutional injustice that restricts their collective capacity to generate public value across the three tiers of government.

Synthesizing the Path Toward Results-Based Governance

Structural Simplification of the Review Mechanism

To address these limitations, the institutional architecture of the appraisal process must undergo a planned reform, starting with a shift from top-down monitoring to multi-source input. The current setup involves three levels of processing: an immediate supervisor, a reviewer, and a specialized review committee. While this multi-layered framework was originally designed as an administrative check against personal bias, in practice it has become an unnecessary bureaucratic burden. The officials serving in the review committee are often not personally acquainted with the employee being appraised. This three-tiered chain often functions as a formal routine where scores are inflated without deep reflection, wasting valuable administrative time.

To streamline the process and increase its validity, the current hierarchical review chain should be compressed. The administrative evaluation should rely on a more consolidated review mechanism that draws data directly from a 360-degree performance appraisal model (Armstrong, 2006). Instead of relying solely on the hidden score given by a senior official, the updated mechanism must formally integrate performance inputs from subordinates, peers, and public service seekers. Incorporating multiple viewpoints reduces individual supervisor bias and changes the core nature of accountability. Civil servants will no longer focus entirely on pleasing their immediate superior; instead, they will have a direct structural incentive to maintain cooperative relations with peers, manage subordinates effectively, and remain responsive to the needs of the citizens they serve. In this restructured framework, the traditional multi-layered review chain is bypassed, and a single review committee or central evaluation authority can process the multi-source data directly.

Accord Due Value to Performance in All Career Development Opportunities

To solve the breakdown between work outcomes and career advancement highlighted earlier, the civil service must systematically align appraisal results directly to all key career milestones. True career development must extend far beyond an upward promotion. First, selection for domestic and international training programs, study leaves, and exposure visits must be legally restricted to employees who meet clear, objective performance benchmarks over consecutive years. As emphasized by Armstrong (2006), performance appraisal outputs achieve their highest organizational utility when they are directly integrated with personal development plans, ensuring that advanced training is treated as an earned, strategic investment rather than a routine administrative favour.

Second, institutional rules must use performance records to guide strategic transfers and key assignments. High-performing officers should be intentionally placed in roles that match their demonstrated strengths, which may include complex service delivery or policy roles. Conversely, employees with low appraisal scores should be systematically nominated for performance improvement training to bridge their capability gaps. Linking appraisal records directly to these broader development and retention tracks is essential; as Arthur (2008) points out, this active integration is what maintains the overall credibility and trust of the workforce framework. By ensuring that every human resource choice gives real, measurable value to documented work quality rather than simple time-served seniority, the state can transform the appraisal from an isolated paperwork hurdle into a dynamic, merit-based career tracking framework.

Operationalizing Job Foundations: From Formality to Practice

Transitioning to a results-based framework requires the civil service to shift away from generalized evaluation templates that treat all administrative and field roles identically. The principle of uniform design is fundamentally unsuited for a modern bureaucracy that demands flexible and context-sensitive performance. Nepal must move entirely away from a one-size-fits-all model and adopt flexible, customized appraisal formats that address the real-world situation and change based on the specific requirements of different operational sectors and distinct administrative environments. To build a governance model built on public accountability, this shift must address underlying practical limits, acute technical human resource vacancies, and underdeveloped localized legal frameworks (World Bank, 2019).

This change must begin with the strict enforcement of existing legal provisions that have been neglected in practice. The state must move from a culture of administrative formality to active execution by ensuring that every employee receives a functional Terms of Reference (ToR) upon assignment. The ToR must not remain a passive paper statement. Instead, it must be used directly to construct clear Key Performance Targets (KPTs), Key Result Areas (KRAs), and quantifiable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) tailored to each position (Armstrong, 2006; De Bruijn, 2003; Jowett & Rothwell, 1988). By tying the appraisal criteria directly to position-specific indicators, the evaluation tool moves from subjective guesswork to objective measurement.

Institutionalizing Continuous Performance Dialogue and Justice

To restore organizational justice and rebuild internal workforce motivation, the performance appraisal system must change from a secret, one-way decision into an interactive process. To satisfy the demands of interactional and procedural fairness, the evaluation results and the scoring criteria used by supervisors must be communicated openly to the employees, allowing them the opportunity to provide written justifications, explanations, and evidence regarding their performance (Colquitt et al., 2023; Ho, 2025). The system must establish a formal requirement for continuous performance dialogue, giving civil servants a structured space to view their feedback and discuss progress (Bhurtel & Adhikari, 2016).

This open feedback loop is already supported by existing policy designs, but it requires full institutional implementation across all tiers of personnel. The current rules contain a provision for a six-month mid-term performance review, which was intended to identify operational challenges and provide corrective

feedback before the main annual evaluation. The state must strictly operationalize this six-month review as a dynamic, mandatory tool for performance correction rather than a routine check. Furthermore, this mid-term requirement must be actively implemented for non-gazetted officers, who make up a massive portion of the frontline service-delivery workforce and are frequently ignored during developmental coaching. When frontline staff are included in regular performance dialogues and given clear mid-year adjustments, the developmental purpose of the appraisal is restored, allowing employees to actively correct their work performance and behaviours before the final annual scoring.

Realigning Appraisal with National Reality and Coordination Metrics

The appraisal system must be legally restructured to match the federal realities mandated by the Constitution of Nepal 2015. Since the state administrative authority is now divided among federal, provincial, and local levels, a centralized appraisal model managed under older rules no longer fits. To overcome this, the federal government must expedite the enactment of the overarching Federal Civil Service Law to establish a clear statutory foundation, allowing subnational units to develop customized evaluation tools backed by explicit written job descriptions and performance baselines (PLGSP, 2025). The appraisal framework must be thoroughly revised to reflect federal system requirements, giving provincial and local governments the necessary administrative autonomy to design evaluation tools that match their specific local development priorities and service delivery needs.

Crucially, this decentralized framework must establish explicit appraisal dimensions that measure and reward both horizontal

and vertical inter-governmental coordination. New, specific indicators must be introduced to evaluate how effectively an employee facilitates cross-jurisdictional collaboration, shares administrative data, and supports joint policy implementation between different tiers of government. When these collaborative efforts are explicitly recognized and rewarded on evaluation sheets, civil servants will no longer be discouraged from building networks outside their immediate office. Realignment encourages employees to look beyond narrow, isolated office tasks and actively contribute to integrated public value creation.

Furthermore, given that local governments manage direct frontline public services, the appraisal system should incorporate bottom-up accountability tools like citizen scorecards, standardize results-based training across national and provincial academies, and link these outcomes to a single, digital personnel database to ensure merit-based promotions (PLGSP, 2025). By transforming the appraisal framework from a closed instrument of central control into an open, results-based management tool, Nepal can build a highly motivated, responsive, and collaborative civil service capable of delivering effective governance.

Conclusion

This study shows that the performance appraisal system within the Nepal civil service operates between formal legal compliance and the functional needs of a federal state. The framework under the Civil Service Act 2049 and Civil Service Rules 2050 successfully establishes structural predictability, enforces administrative control, and maintains a uniform record for career tracking. These features prevent completely arbitrary decisions and effectively protect employee promotions from outside political influence or party interference. However, the institutional reliance on this centralized compliance makes it difficult to improve employee

performance or generate real public value. Because the system prioritizes broad, non-quantifiable criteria over clear benchmarks, evaluations frequently depend on the personal judgment of supervisors. This lack of objective measurement metrics turns the appraisal process into a routine paperwork hurdle. Instead of acting as a strategic tool for professional growth, the system functions primarily as a formal requirement for securing promotion points. To build a civil service that is genuinely performance-oriented, result-oriented, citizen-focused, and effective, the state must prioritize comprehensive performance management, which relies on performance appraisal as its key instrument. Consequently, there is no alternative to making this appraisal system well-structured and properly institutionalized within the public administration.

To meet the governance standards established by the Constitution of Nepal 2015, the civil service must transition from a compliance-oriented model toward a decentralized, results-based framework. The administrative realities of a three-tier government require flexible, specialized appraisal formats that match specific sectoral duties, moving away from a single uniform design. Furthermore, the evaluation framework must integrate explicit criteria to measure and reward horizontal and vertical coordination across federal, provincial, and local institutions. When the appraisal system fails to recognize inter-governmental collaboration, civil servants naturally ignore collaborative networks in favour of isolated office routines. Rebuilding institutional trust and public service effectiveness requires strictly implementing clear job foundations like the Terms of Reference (ToR) to create quantifiable performance indicators. Additionally, the civil service must change the appraisal into an interactive process by enforcing the six-month mid-term review for all tiers of personnel, ensuring continuous performance dialogue. Shifting the appraisal process away from rigid administrative control toward objective output

measurement will allow Nepal to transform its performance management framework into a functional tool for public value creation.

Declaration on Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used a generative Artificial Intelligence named Gemini to improve language flow, verify sentence structure, and ensure copy-editing precision. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the final text and the accuracy of the underlying literature analysis.

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Developing Emotional Intelligence and Soft Skills for Effective Leadership

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Abstract

In an era of rapid technological shifts and heightened public scrutiny, the traditional paradigm of leadership, centred primarily on technical expertise and formal authority, is proving insufficient. This article explores the critical role of emotional intelligence (EI) and soft skills in fostering effective leadership. By synthesizing foundational ability-based models with competency-driven frameworks, the paper illustrates how EI serves as both an internal regulatory mechanism and a relational tool for fostering effective leadership. The discussion delves into key psychological theories to explain how leaders' emotional intelligence directly affects organizational goals and citizen trust. Furthermore, the article addresses the importance of group emotional intelligence, arguing that team effectiveness hinges on shared norms of trust and psychological safety. Moving beyond theory, the paper proposes practical developmental frameworks and tools to embed emotional competence into daily work. Ultimately, the article argues that developing EI is not merely a personal endeavour but a strategic imperative for building resilient, transparent, and legitimate institutions in a global environment.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Effectiveness, Soft Skills, Public Administration

Introduction

Leadership is understood in many ways, and no single sentence can fully capture its meaning. This is because leadership is expressed differently across contexts, institutions, and cultures. Even so, most definitions agree on one central idea: leadership is a process of social influence through which individuals or groups

are guided toward shared goals (Northouse, 2021). It is not simply a personal trait or a formal position of authority. Rather, leadership connects vision to action through communication, relationships, and decision-making. Seen in this way, leadership is not only about giving direction but also about working with people in ways that encourage cooperation, commitment, and shared purpose (Kotter, 1990; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Contemporary organizational environments further intensify these demands. Technological change, accelerated information flows, and increasing public visibility have raised expectations for responsiveness, transparency, and ethical conduct. In such settings, leaders frequently need to manage ambiguity, conflict, and competing values while maintaining the motivation and cooperation of diverse stakeholders (Kruse, 2013). Managing these complex interpersonal dynamics requires more than traditional strategic intellect; it demands a high level of emotional capability.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has thus been an area of study for academics and researchers, and it offers a useful lens for understanding how leaders navigate these changing demands. Emotional intelligence refers to the capacity to perceive, use, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and others so that emotion supports, rather than distorts, thinking and behavior (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). In practice, emotional intelligence influences whether leaders recognize early signals of stress and resistance, choose constructive regulation strategies, and communicate in ways that build trust and reduce defensiveness. Evidence from various studies supports the relevance of emotional intelligence in organizational contexts. Emotional intelligence is meaningfully related to job performance, particularly in work characterized by interpersonal interaction and emotional labor (O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011; Joseph & Newman, 2010).

This growing importance of emotional and social capability is also reflected in wider global discussions on the future of work. The World Economic Forum identifies resilience, flexibility, leadership, and social influence among the skills that are becoming more important, and it also notes the rising importance of creative thinking, resilience, agility, and social influence. This suggests that social and self-management skills will become increasingly important in the future (World Economic Forum, 2025). Similarly, the OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills emphasizes that population-level life outcomes are linked to abilities such as cooperation, emotional control, and open-mindedness (OECD, 2023). These trends show that effective leadership now requires more than technical knowledge or administrative control. It also requires the ability to work with people, build trust, adapt to change, and guide teams through uncertainty. Therefore, emotional intelligence and soft skills should be seen not as optional extras, but as central components of leadership development.

This argument is equally relevant for public sector leadership. Public institutions operate under legal constraints, political contestation, and moral accountability. Their performance is judged through public-value outcomes such as fairness, responsiveness, integrity, and trust. In Nepal, this is particularly significant because public leaders are expected to deliver services reliably while engaging citizens whose expectations of transparency and timely responses are rising. A simple example is a citizen visiting a public office for a routine service and becoming frustrated because procedures are unclear or communication is dismissive. In such cases, the behavior of public officials matters as much as the process itself. Emotional intelligence and soft skills therefore shape not only internal management and staff performance but also citizen trust, service experience, and institutional legitimacy. This conceptual paper covers the

foundations of emotional intelligence and leadership. It explains how emotional competence influences leadership outcomes and proposes practical ways to develop emotional intelligence as a core leadership capability.

Conceptual Foundations of Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

Emotional Intelligence as Ability and Competence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a construct in psychology that first emerged as a set of skills related to the perception, understanding, regulation, and effective use of emotions. Salovey and Mayer (1990) introduced emotional intelligence as a set of capacities related to accurate appraisal and expression of emotion, effective emotion regulation, and the use of emotion to motivate planning and action. Mayer and Salovey (1997) later clarified this approach by describing emotional intelligence as a multi-branch model focused on perceiving, facilitating, understanding, and managing emotion. In this view, emotional intelligence is treated as a form of information processing, as individuals differ in their accuracy in detecting emotional cues, their effectiveness in interpreting emotional meanings, and their skill in regulating emotional responses to meet situational demands.

In addition to this ability-based approach, mixed and competency-based models have also sought to describe emotional intelligence through behavioural competencies relevant to organizational settings. Goleman (1996) popularized emotional intelligence by highlighting self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills as components associated with workplace effectiveness. His work focuses mainly on organizational contexts, which makes it especially relevant for understanding EI and leadership effectiveness in this domain. Goleman argued that EI is a critical predictor of personal effectiveness, workplace

performance, and leadership success. This model emphasizes that emotional competencies can be developed and are essential for managing oneself and interacting effectively with others (Goleman, 1996). The five components of EI identified by Daniel Goleman are described in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Five Components of Emotional Intelligence at Work (adapted from Goleman, 1996)

Component	Concise description (conceptual)	Illustrative hallmarks in leaders
Self-awareness	Recognizes one’s emotions, values, and limits; understands their effects on judgment and behavior.	Accurate appraisal of strengths and gaps; openness to feedback; grounded confidence.
Self-regulation	Manages impulses and disruptive emotions; maintains composure and integrity while adapting to change.	Emotional steadiness; ethical reliability; conscientious follow-through; flexibility.
Motivation	Internally driven to pursue meaningful goals with persistence and initiative; treats setbacks as learning.	Achievement focus; commitment to mission; optimism; proactive effort.
Empathy	Understands others’ feelings and viewpoints; anticipates needs and responds with care and fairness.	Perspective-taking; attention to stakeholder needs; develops others; inclusive stance.

Component	Concise description (conceptual)	Illustrative hallmarks in leaders
Social skill	Builds and sustains effective relationships to mobilize people and ideas; communicates and influences well.	Clear, two-way communication; conflict facilitation; coalition-building; teamwork and networking.

In the same way, other researchers have examined mixed models, which are sometimes criticized for conceptual overlap with personality and motivation. Yet, they remain influential because they translate emotional capacities into observable behaviour and development targets that organizations can train and assess as needed (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008; O’Boyle et al., 2011). In practical contexts, the most useful approach is to treat emotional intelligence as both capacity and application: capacities enable leaders to process emotional information, while competencies reflect how leaders use those capacities in real interactions. This dual view of EI as both capacity and applied competence is especially useful for leadership development in Nepal, where organizations increasingly require leaders who can translate self-awareness and relationship management into observable workplace behavior. Recent Nepali evidence from commercial banks, IT firms, academic institutions, and multi-sector workplaces suggests that self-awareness, relationship management, empathy, and related EI dimensions are positively associated with leadership effectiveness and employee performance (Hamal et al., 2025). In this sense, the ability-based and competency-based traditions need not be treated as competing frameworks; rather, they can be read together as offering complementary guidance for how leaders may be

assessed and developed in context-specific organizational settings.

Leadership as Social Influence and Relational Practice

Leadership theory has gradually moved beyond trait-based explanations to place greater emphasis on process, context, and relationships. In widely used frameworks, leadership is understood as influencing a group toward a common goal through direction-setting, alignment, and motivation (Northouse, 2021). Kotter (1990) further distinguishes leadership from management by arguing that leadership creates movement through vision, alignment, and inspiration, whereas management provides stability through planning, organizing, and controlling. This distinction remains useful, but in practice the boundary is not always clearly drawn. Contemporary organizations, especially public institutions, require both adaptability and operational continuity, which means that influence must often be exercised alongside managerial responsibility.

Building on this, relational perspectives refine the discussion by emphasizing that influence does not rest only on formal position or personal traits. Uhl-Bien (2006) argues that leadership emerges in the social processes through which people construct meaning and organize collective action. Similarly, Fairhurst (2007) emphasizes that leadership is enacted through language, framing, and interaction, not only through formal authority. This shift is especially relevant in public institutions, where cross-boundary coordination, negotiation among stakeholders, and trust-building with citizens are central to everyday practice. A purely positional view may explain compliance, but it does not fully explain commitment, cooperation, or sustained trust. For instance, a public office may have clear rules and hierarchy, yet

still perform poorly if communication is dismissive, concerns are ignored, or staff feel unable to speak openly.

In local governments of Nepal, sectional heads, municipal executives, elected representatives, and frontline staff often depend on persuasion, coordination, and trust rather than command alone, especially when planning, budgeting, grievance handling, and service delivery cut across formal roles. Evidence from Nepal shows that transparency, responsiveness, and public participation significantly shape trust in local government, which suggests that relational leadership is not merely an interpersonal virtue but a practical condition for administrative legitimacy (Han et al., 2024). This is also why relational leadership deserves emphasis, because positional authority may secure procedural compliance, yet without communicative credibility and responsive engagement, it rarely generates durable trust or voluntary cooperation.

Emotional intelligence fits naturally within these accounts because emotions influence both the content and the process of leadership. Leaders' emotional expressions can signal urgency, confidence, or concern, and they shape how followers interpret events. The Emotions as Social Information (EASI) model proposes that emotional expressions influence others through inferential routes and affective reactions, and that these effects depend on context, power dynamics, and appropriateness (Van Kleef, 2009). Leaders therefore need emotional skills not only to manage themselves but also to manage the social consequences of emotional communication.

Measurement and Conceptual Challenges

Despite its popularity, EI remains debated in both research and practice. A central issue concerns measurement and conceptual clarity. Ability-based measures treat emotional intelligence as

performance on emotion-related tasks, whereas self-report and mixed models treat it as perceived competence or a bundle of competencies. These approaches can yield different results because self-perceptions are influenced by personality, confidence, and social desirability (Joseph & Newman, 2010). For leadership development, this debate suggests that organizations should avoid relying solely on self-report measures and should incorporate behavioural observation and feedback when assessing EI growth. This measurement issue is particularly important when EI is examined through a relational-leadership lens. A leader may score highly on self-reported empathy or social awareness, yet if staff remain silent in meetings, junior colleagues avoid dissent, or citizens continue to experience dismissive frontline behavior, relational leadership is not being enacted in practice.

A second challenge concerns cultural and role expectations. Emotional display rules differ across cultures and institutions, meaning that the same emotional expression may be interpreted as appropriate in one setting and inappropriate in another. Public sector leadership also includes role obligations that constrain emotional display, such as neutrality and procedural fairness. Emotional intelligence development should therefore emphasize situational judgment, ethical boundaries, and context-sensitive communication rather than a single preferred emotional style.

A third challenge concerns the risk of treating emotional intelligence as a moral label. Emotional intelligence is a capability, not a guarantee of ethical intent. Leaders may use social skills to persuade for good or ill. For this reason, emotional intelligence development is most defensible when anchored to public values such as integrity, fairness, respect, and accountability, and when development programs include ethical reflection and safeguards against manipulation (OECD, 2024).

Emotions at Work: Affective events and Emotional Labour

A deeper understanding of emotions at work helps leaders apply EI with precision. Affective Events Theory (AET) proposes that workplace events such as feedback, interruptions, conflicts, recognition, and perceived injustice generate affective reactions that shape attitudes and behavior over time (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). This perspective matters because it highlights that emotions are not random and often arise from patterned events and systemic conditions. For example, repeated last-minute changes to priorities may generate chronic frustration among teams, and inconsistent decision-making may generate anxiety and cynicism. Leaders who focus only on individual attitudes might miss these event-level drivers.

Public sector roles also involve emotional labor, meaning the effort required to manage emotional display in accordance with role expectations. Frontline staff may need to remain calm and respectful when citizens are distressed, angry, or confused, while also following procedures and maintaining neutrality. Such situations are particularly relevant in Nepal, where citizen expectations are high and services are often perceived as slow and burdensome. Voices of dissatisfaction are especially strong regarding complicated processes, unfriendly behavior by service providers, and costly services (Pokharel, Adhikari, & Dahal, 2017). Emotional labor is not inherently negative, as it can support professionalism and fairness. However, when emotional labor is intense and unsupported, it can lead to exhaustion and reduced service quality, which can ultimately decrease trust. Leaders can use emotional intelligence to recognize emotional-labor demands, normalize debriefing after difficult encounters, and design realistic workloads that reduce unnecessary strain in teams (Gross, 2015; OECD, 2024). In Nepal, this is particularly

relevant in places like public hospitals and citizen-service points, where officials are expected to remain calm and respectful even when dealing with frustration, confusion, or social exclusion. Ethical leadership, therefore, requires more than emotional display; it requires using emotional regulation to preserve dignity, fairness, and trust in public interactions.

AET also suggests a practical diagnostic habit: leaders can map common affective events in their unit and ask which ones are preventable. If staff morale drops, the question is not only how to motivate people, but also which recurring events are creating anger, fear, or humiliation. Reducing preventable affective events, such as avoidable public criticism, unclear instructions, or unpredictable approvals, can be as important as teaching individuals to regulate their reactions. In this sense, emotional intelligence includes systems thinking to support leaders in shaping contexts that produce better emotions, better decisions, and better service outcomes.

Emotional Intelligence and Soft Skills for Leadership Effectiveness

Why Soft Skills are Important

Soft skills have gained recognition alongside technical skills because many organizational outcomes depend on cooperation rather than mere compliance. Leaders often need to work through influence across professional boundaries and to motivate and coordinate people who do not report directly to them. In these situations, the quality of communication, listening, negotiation, and conflict management directly affects whether work is completed on time and to an acceptable standard. Global skills forecasts reinforce the practical importance of these capacities. The World Economic Forum identifies analytical thinking among the most important skills, while also emphasizing the

rising demand for resilience, flexibility, leadership, and social influence (World Economic Forum, 2025). These trends align with the argument that technical skills must be combined with self-management and relational skills if leaders are to translate knowledge into measurable outcomes.

From an emotional intelligence perspective, soft skills are the behavioural expression of emotional information processing. For instance, empathic listening requires perceiving and interpreting emotional cues; constructive feedback requires skilful management of defensiveness and careful framing; and conflict resolution requires both self-regulation and social awareness. When soft skills are weak, technical expertise can be undermined by unnecessary escalation, misunderstanding, and loss of trust, leading to delays and repeated cycles of conflict. This critical interplay between the two dimensions of competence can affect both individual career trajectories and organizational performance (Prathyusha, 2025). Soft skills may therefore be understood as the practical expression of emotional intelligence in action.

Emotional Intelligence, Performance, and Work Attitudes

Research indicates that emotional intelligence is positively associated with organizational outcomes, although the strength of this relationship should not be overstated. O’Boyle et al. (2011) found that emotional intelligence is positively related to job performance; however, the moderate size of this association suggests that EI represents only one of several factors influencing performance. Similarly, Joseph and Newman (2010) propose a cascading model in which emotion perception facilitates emotional understanding, which in turn supports emotion regulation and ultimately contributes to performance. This perspective is important because it suggests that the value of EI is not uniform

across all occupations. Rather, emotional intelligence appears to be especially relevant in roles that involve emotional labor, interpersonal interaction, and coordination. EI should therefore be understood not as a universal predictor of performance, but as a context-dependent capability whose contribution is shaped by role demands and broader organizational conditions.

Emotional intelligence is also associated with work attitudes that can influence performance over time. Drawing on a meta-analysis, Miao et al. (2017) report a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction, while also suggesting that this relationship may be mediated by job resources. In practical terms, emotionally intelligent employees and leaders may be better equipped to develop supportive relationships, access information and assistance, and maintain their well-being under pressure. Within the academic sphere, these capacities closely align with soft skills such as communication, teamwork, empathy, adaptability, and self-management, which are increasingly regarded as essential for leadership development and professional effectiveness. This connection is particularly relevant because it highlights how emotional intelligence extends beyond performance outcomes to support the interpersonal and behavioural competencies valued in both educational and professional contexts. Such mechanisms are especially important in public institutions, where retention, commitment, and discretionary effort can directly affect service reliability.

In leadership contexts, emotional intelligence helps explain variation in the effectiveness of common leadership behaviour. Transformational leadership, for example, emphasizes inspiration, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, all of which involve emotional communication and relational attention (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Leaders who lack emotional awareness

may struggle to provide credible inspiration or personalized support, while leaders with strong emotional skills may be better able to motivate without coercion and to maintain morale during periods of change.

Public Sector Leadership, Trust, and Citizen Experience

Public leadership operates within political contestation, institutional constraints, and heightened moral accountability. While integrity and execution matter across sectors, public leaders are often evaluated through trust, ethical conduct, and social outcomes rather than market performance (Klier, Dillon, Blackburn, & Mansour, 2025). Job context also shapes leadership style, and evidence suggests that public managers often use more participative approaches than private-sector managers because of stakeholder complexity and institutional dynamics (Hansen & Villadsen, 2010).

Emotional intelligence also supports the enhancement of public value by translating administrative values into day-to-day behavior. Leaders who regulate stress and plan realistically can reduce overpromising and delays, which supports reliability. Leaders who acknowledge concerns and respond promptly improve perceived responsiveness, even when resolution takes time. Leaders who explain reasons in plain language and invite questions strengthen openness and perceived fairness. These dimensions are central drivers of trust in public institutions (OECD, 2024).

Public administration also functions through interdependence. Services depend on cross-unit coordination, discretionary judgment, and communication routines; when soft skills are weak, coordination costs rise, and problem detection is delayed. By contrast, small interactional qualities, such as a timely first response, a respectful tone, and a clear explanation of next steps,

can reduce frustration even when procedures remain complex. The contrast with many private organizations is instructive. Private firms can sometimes offset weak relationships through incentives, branding, or exit options, whereas public institutions must preserve legitimacy under conditions of compulsion, unequal power, and universal service obligations. For that reason, emotional intelligence has greater civic significance in the public sector. It supports not only internal leadership but also the credibility of complaint handling, service counters, inspections, and community engagement. Leaders who create responsive, intelligible, and respectful service environments help convert administrative authority into public trust.

Team Learning and Psychological Safety

A prominent leadership challenge is enabling learning and experimentation in environments where mistakes can carry consequences. Psychological safety is especially relevant in such contexts because it describes a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Edmondson (1999) shows that psychological safety is associated with team learning behavior and can mediate the relationship between team context and performance. Leaders can thus foster psychological safety through the way they respond to questions, errors, and bad news.

EI contributes to psychological safety by shaping leaders' moment-to-moment reactions. Leaders with stronger self-regulation are less likely to punish or ridicule mistakes in ways that create fear. With stronger empathy, they are more likely to notice when people withdraw or become silent. When they have stronger social skills, they are more likely to structure discussions so that quieter members contribute and dissenting views are treated respectfully. These behaviours can improve risk detection, strengthen ownership at work, and reduce the likelihood that

problems remain hidden until they become public failures. A simple workplace example can clarify this: when junior staff in a public office feel safe to report errors or raise concerns, teams learn earlier and perform better, highlighting the importance of psychological safety in translating leadership behavior into stronger work outcomes.

Ethics, Power, and the Boundary Between Influence and Manipulation

Because emotional intelligence improves influence, it also raises ethical questions that leaders should address explicitly. Influence is not inherently problematic, and leadership requires persuasion and coalition-building. On the other hand, the same skills that enable constructive influence can also be used to pressure or manipulate. In public institutions, this ethical boundary is especially important because public officials hold delegated authority and must treat citizens fairly. Trust is strengthened when people believe decisions are made using consistent criteria and explained transparently rather than through favouritism or emotional pressure (OECD, 2024).

A practical safeguard is to align emotional-intelligence practices with organizational outcomes, public values, and accountability routines. Leaders can commit to reason-giving standards for decisions and to documentation that shows how criteria were applied. They can also adopt power-aware habits, such as asking junior staff for input first, speaking last in meetings, and explicitly inviting dissent (Uhl-Bien, 2006). These behaviours reduce the risk that emotional skill becomes a tool for silencing disagreement.

Ethical EI thus requires respect for privacy and human dignity. In this context, empathy should not be understood as emotional intrusion, but rather as the capacity to recognize that individuals

have inner lives and to respond with care, fairness, and restraint. This boundary is important in leadership, where emotional understanding must be exercised responsibly to ensure that influence does not become manipulation. Organizations can also reinforce these ethical limits by integrating ethics modules into leadership development and by adopting values-based competency frameworks, such as public service leadership models (Partnership for Public Service, 2025). Taken together, these practices highlight that ethical leadership depends not only on emotional awareness and interpersonal skill, but also on the responsible use of power, accountability in decision-making, and sustained respect for others.

Developing Emotional Intelligence and Soft Skills in Leaders

Leadership development debates often revolve around innate traits and learned skills. In practice, leadership capability is better understood as a combination of personal tendencies, experience, and deliberate practice. Emotional intelligence is especially suitable for leadership development because it can be translated into specific behaviours and routines that leaders can practice and refine over time (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008).

Numerous studies support the claim that emotional competence can be improved. Nelis et al. (2009) report that emotional intelligence can be increased through training and that improvements are linked to well-being. Hodzic et al. (2018) reviewed multiple training studies and concluded that emotional-intelligence interventions show positive effects, with stronger outcomes when programs emphasize practice and follow-up. Kotsou et al. (2011) further demonstrated that improving emotional competence can yield benefits for well-being and relationships and that gains can persist when follow-up is included. These

findings suggest that development efforts should be designed as skill-building processes with follow-up rather than as one-off information sessions.

A practical development framework popularized by Daniel Goleman groups emotional intelligence into four domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management, with twelve competencies (Goleman, 1996). The subsections below present routines and micro-practices within each domain. The guiding principle is that emotional intelligence becomes durable when it is embedded in repeated contexts such as meetings, service interactions, supervision, and decision communication.

Strengthening Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to recognize one's emotional states, values, and triggers, and how these factors affect judgment and behavior. Becoming self-aware is the first step toward effective self-management and functions as an early-warning system for leaders. It helps leaders notice when stress, ego threat, or frustration is affecting interpretation and decision-making in the organization. Leaders who lack self-awareness can confuse emotion with evidence, overestimate certainty, or misinterpret dissent as disloyalty (Bridges, 2024). Some research in Nepal suggests that organizational leadership should foster a culture of self-awareness to strengthen employee empowerment, enhance work engagement, and promote greater enthusiasm in the workplace (Thapa et al., 2023). It is therefore important to promote self-awareness for effective leadership.

A practical self-awareness routine is neutral labelling. Leaders can identify and briefly name the emotion and the trigger in neutral language, such as “feeling anxious because the deadline

is unclear” or “feeling irritated because I believe the process is being ignored.” Labelling creates psychological distance and can reduce emotional intensity, making regulation easier. A second routine involves separating facts from interpretation. Leaders can list observable facts, then list interpretations, and finally test at least one alternative interpretation. This practice aligns with reappraisal strategies emphasized in emotion-regulation research (Gross, 2015).

A third routine involves short reflection after emotionally charged encounters. Leaders can use a “React, Reason, respond” note with prompts such as: What did I feel? What story did I tell myself? What response would better reflect my values and goals next time? Over time, these routine builds pattern recognition. Leaders can then begin to observe common triggers, such as being caught unprepared in meetings, being criticized in public, or feeling the pressure of deadlines. This method is especially effective in public-sector settings, where citizen trust and reliable service are key performance indicators. The aim is not to eliminate emotion but to develop a clear map of how emotion influences one’s leadership behavior.

Strengthening Self-Management

Self-management is generally understood as the ability to regulate emotions and impulses so that behavior remains aligned with personal goals, values, and role responsibilities. Within emotional intelligence, self-management includes several related capacities, such as self-regulation, self-motivation, self-responsibility, commitment, and self-trust. Together, these capacities help leaders remain composed, goal-directed, accountable, and confident in difficult situations. The most visible manifestation of self-management in leadership occurs

when leaders are confronted with complaints, conflict, or missed deadlines. Research on emotion regulation suggests that regulation involves identifying the need to regulate, selecting an appropriate strategy, and implementing that strategy effectively. The choice of strategy also has important consequences (Gross, 2015).

Self-management often requires ethical self-regulation. Leaders may experience pressure to react defensively or to over assert their authority. The development of emotional intelligence should therefore include reflection on power and one's role. Leaders can try speaking last during meetings, asking one open-ended question before sharing their views, and acknowledging uncertainty when the evidence is not fully conclusive. Such actions indicate maturity and can alleviate anxiety among team members. In this sense, self-management is closely linked to ethical leadership because it supports restraint, fair judgment, and responsible decision-making under pressure.

Various techniques can enhance self-management. A useful strategy is the “Pause, Breathe, Choose” method. This method is mainly associated with meditation and well-being (Beheshti, 2022), but it can also support self-management. In this method, leaders pause briefly, take two slow breaths, and then select one intention, such as clarify, calm, or correct. The break creates space and allows thinking to re-engage with the context, minimizing impulsive remarks. In high-pressure situations, leaders can ask themselves a grounding question: “What result do I want from the next two minutes?” This helps maintain focus on desired outcomes.

Reappraisal cues can also serve as a useful resource. Cognitive reappraisal is an emotion-regulation technique that involves identifying and transforming negative thought patterns into more

constructive ones. By altering how people perceive situations, they can reduce negative emotions, making it easier to address triggers skilfully and maintain emotional balance (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, 2011). Using this approach, leaders may ask, “What constraint might explain this action?” or “What would a reasonable next step look like?” These prompts redirect attention from personal threat to problem-solving. Additionally, leaders need to recognize that self-management is affected by exhaustion and workload. Basic resilience practices, such as focusing on one to three essential tasks, incorporating brief movement breaks, and preparing for one challenging discussion each day, can reduce emotional volatility over time.

Strengthening Social Awareness

Social awareness is the ability to perceive others’ emotions, perspectives, constraints, and unstated risks accurately. Social awareness helps leaders diagnose problems more effectively and tailor communication to audience needs. This is especially pertinent in hierarchical settings where people might not feel comfortable speaking out. When leaders fail to notice withdrawal, silence, or subtle resistance, they may assume agreement, only to encounter problems later. Social awareness also supports inclusive leadership. Leaders can check understanding by asking team members to summarize what they heard and by inviting open questions. This reduces misunderstandings that might later turn into conflict.

In teams, leaders can design voice-friendly meetings by using two minutes of silent writing followed by round-robin sharing so that each person speaks at least once. Such practices are also consistent with psychological-safety research, which shows that leader behavior shapes whether people take interpersonal risks such as asking questions and reporting errors (Edmondson,

1999). Three-tiered listening is another effective practice for enhancing social awareness. Leaders pay attention to substance, feelings, and needs. Content represents the message's facts, emotion reflects the individual's feelings, and needs indicate what the individual seeks, such as understanding, assistance, resources, or fairness. Such layered listening can help decrease defensiveness and improve team performance (Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl, & Whitworth, 2011).

Strengthening Relationship Management

Relationship management is the practical ability to use emotional insight and interpersonal skill to build cooperation, navigate disagreement, and restore trust when it is strained. In leadership practice, emotional intelligence becomes most visible in this domain because it shapes how leaders communicate decisions, handle tension, and respond when expectations are not met. It also influences the quality of the working climate, including job satisfaction and commitment, which affect retention and discretionary effort over time (Miao, Humphrey, Qian, & S., 2017). In other words, relationship management is not an additional leadership feature; rather, it is a central mechanism through which leadership intentions become lived workplace experiences.

For effective decision-making and communication, respect for other team members is essential. Leaders can first acknowledge concerns respectfully, then explain the rule and rationale, and ground the decision in facts and criteria. This strengthens relationships by demonstrating empathy and fairness. Respect for others incorporates elements such as empathy, care, autonomy, information-sharing, recognition of individuality, dignity, and attention to needs (Dickert & Kass, 2009). Leaders can then offer feasible next steps, such as required documents,

timelines, or appeal pathways. This approach reduces perceived arbitrariness and supports fairness and openness, which are key drivers of trust (OECD, 2024). In citizen-facing contexts such as public administration, leaders can also model this script and train supervisors to use it consistently.

Feedback is an important tool for strengthening interpersonal connections within leadership. Feedback supports emotional intelligence by sharpening self-awareness and facilitating self-regulation in everyday interactions, thereby strengthening relationships. When leaders seek feedback and respond to it constructively, they convey respect and empathy, which encourages colleagues and teams to engage in honest dialogue and collaborate over the long term (Stone & Heen, 2015). This is even more pronounced within psychologically safe settings, where individuals perceive it to be acceptable to take interpersonal risks, such as voicing concerns, acknowledging errors, or offering candid observations. This atmosphere of openness cultivates learning behaviours that strengthen professional relationships (Edmondson, 1999). Structured strategies such as multisource (360-degree) feedback systems can further enhance relationship-building, provided that leaders interpret the data constructively, acknowledge the need for change, establish explicit goals, and take visible action, because improvement depends on how leaders interpret and apply feedback rather than on the feedback mechanism alone (Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005).

Embedding Emotional Intelligence in Daily Work

Emotional intelligence development is an ongoing process and is most sustainable when related practices are embedded in daily routines rather than treated as separate from work. First, leaders can identify a small number of recurring contexts where emotional

skill matters most, such as periodic staff meetings, performance conversations, complaint handling, and cross-unit coordination calls. They can then apply specific techniques to each context.

For example, leaders can begin meetings with a clear purpose statement, invite feedback early by asking what may have been overlooked, and conclude with a clear summary of decisions and responsibilities. In supervisory roles, leaders can conduct a brief check-in to ask about workload, barriers, and support needs before proceeding to evaluation.

Building Team Effectiveness through Group Emotional Intelligence

All leaders want efficient and effective teams that can handle assigned tasks and deliver the expected outcomes. Team effectiveness has long been an area of interest for researchers, and numerous studies have examined it. These studies show that teams are more productive and creative when they demonstrate strong coordination, collaboration, and participation. However, such interactive and collaborative behaviours are often difficult to achieve and sustain. Three basic conditions are needed to achieve team effectiveness: mutual trust among team members, a sense of group identity, and a sense of group efficacy—that is, a belief that team members are more effective working together than apart (Urch Druskat & Wolff, 2015). These studies therefore suggest that emotions are central to these conditions and that they are strengthened when groups develop emotional intelligence. Group emotional intelligence can be understood as a collection of skills that enables a group to regulate emotions effectively by establishing group-level norms that help members manage emotions while carrying out their responsibilities and achieving assigned outcomes (Ghuman, 2011). It involves bringing emotions to the surface and understanding how they affect the team's work.

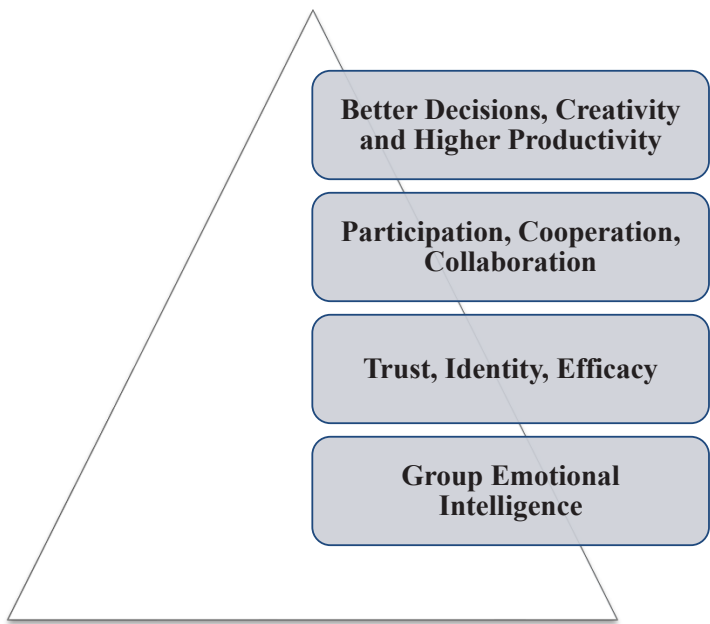
Leaders need to understand that team effectiveness also requires managing emotions at the group level, not just the individual level. By deliberately selecting and developing norms that shape how members interact with one another, collaborate, and deal with others outside the group, teams help create their own working context. Groups can develop self-reinforcing, constructive relationships, strong emotional attachments, efficient interaction processes, and greater effectiveness by implementing norms that enhance group emotional intelligence (Urch Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Group emotional intelligence is not built easily; it is painstaking work. Each member needs to consider emotions from other members' perspectives before decisions are taken. When team members work together over a longer period, they often use informal words and cues to understand one another and respond to situations. This can be understood as a shared vocabulary that team members can interpret easily. Such informal interactions are important for team effectiveness because human relationships matter greatly. Evidence from Nepal also supports this emphasis on team processes, as teamwork, trust, and working environment have been shown to contribute positively to organizational productivity in commercial banks.

Moving from individual emotions to group emotions, another aspect of effective teams is cross-boundary relationships, that is, working with emotions outside the group. In an organizational setting, multiple teams work together toward the broader goals of the organization. Highly efficient teams may create close emotional ties within the group yet remain inattentive to other teams in the same office. In such situations, each team needs to stay aligned with the broader organizational context and act accordingly. Such cross-boundary group emotional intelligence takes time to develop, but it is not impossible. Here, the role of leaders is crucial. Leaders must encourage teams to recognize

and respect the perspectives and emotions of other teams. Information-sharing and psychologically safe interaction are important for cross-boundary emotional intelligence.

Urch Druskat and Wolff (2015) proposed a model of team effectiveness built on the application of emotional-intelligence concepts at the group level.

Figure 1: Team Effectiveness Model by Urch Druskat and Wolff.



Effective teams are built on the foundations of group emotional intelligence. Emotionally intelligent groups cultivate trust, identity, and efficacy, which enable participation, cooperation, and collaboration and, in turn, support better decisions and higher productivity. For leaders, this model can be used to build effective teams by managing emotions within the team. Effective

leadership therefore requires leaders not only to be emotionally intelligent themselves, but also to build emotionally intelligent teams.

Coaching, Mentoring, and Modelling as EI Accelerators

Emotional intelligence development is accelerated when leaders receive coaching and observe credible role models. Coaching helps translate theoretical concepts into specific behaviour that can gradually become habitual responses. A simple coaching format includes the leader describing an event, evaluating the emotions and assumptions involved, and selecting an alternative response for next time. This method can support both self-awareness and self-regulation.

Mentoring supports relationship management and sound judgment. When senior leaders model respectful behavior, it sets a useful example for others to follow. Because leadership is enacted in the moment, modelling is often more effective than instruction alone.

In settings where staff interact with citizens, behavioural modelling is especially important. When supervisors use calm language, apologize when needed, and explain rules without blaming citizens, frontline staff are more likely to learn the same habits. This contributes to a service culture that citizens experience as respectful and fair, which is essential for building trust in public offices.

Common Pitfalls in Emotional Intelligence Development and How to Avoid Them

Programs aimed at developing emotional intelligence frequently fail not because the concepts are flawed, but because their design does not take organizational constraints and adult-

learning realities into account. Treating emotional intelligence as a one-time session is an early mistake. Research on interventions shows that participants achieve better results when they practice skills, receive feedback, and participate in follow-up support rather than simply attend lectures (Hodzic, Meinecke, Botella, Holling, & Zenasni, 2017; Kotsou, Nelis, Grégoire, & Mikolajczak, 2011). In organizational settings, interruptions are frequent and priorities tend to shift, so sustained follow-up may not always be practical. When follow-up is absent, motivation to develop EI can quickly decline. A practical mitigation strategy is to convert learning into routines that must be used in real work, such as a meeting-opening script, a complaint-handling template, or a feedback structure, and then review progress in short cycles.

A second pitfall is over-reliance on self-assessment reports. Self-ratings can be useful for individual reflection, but they are vulnerable to social desirability bias and inaccurate self-perception, which is itself an aspect of limited self-awareness. People often want to present themselves in socially desirable ways, and ratings can therefore be biased (Joseph & Newman, 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2011). If programs are evaluated only through self-report, results can look positive even when behavior does not change. A practical mitigation is to use multisource and behavioural data, such as 360-degree feedback, observed behaviour, and service indicators that reflect citizen or client experience.

Another pitfall is confusing emotional intelligence with constant positivity and optimism. Leadership often requires communicating urgency, disappointment, or firm boundaries. The key question is not whether leaders express negative emotions, but whether such expressions are proportionate, purposeful, and appropriate to the role (Van Kleef, 2009). A practical way to avoid this pitfall

is to teach leaders to choose an intention before speaking—such as clarify, correct, invite, or support—and to align their tone, nonverbal cues, and words with that intention.

A fourth pitfall is ignoring workload and basic recovery. Emotion-regulation capacity is often reduced when leaders and team members are exhausted, whether for personal or professional reasons. Gross (2015) emphasizes that regulation is a process with costs and consequences. When people are depleted, they often revert to habitual reactions. Leadership development should therefore include realistic workload planning, short recovery routines, and boundary-setting practices that reduce chronic strain. This scenario is especially common in public administration, where leaders often work under constant pressure due to tighter rules and limited resources.

The final pitfall is failing to address power dynamics in organizations. This is especially common in hierarchical contexts such as the public sector, where people may comply outwardly while withdrawing inwardly. Leaders can then mistakenly interpret silence as agreement. Relational leadership theory suggests that leadership emerges through social processes of meaning-making and interaction, meaning that leaders must intentionally structure opportunities for voice (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Building systems that encourage disagreement, reward early risk reporting, and respond non-punitively to bad news are practical ways to reduce this risk and increase psychological safety.

Conclusion

The evolution of leadership from a technically driven command-and-control function to a relational and adaptive practice has made emotional intelligence a central leadership capability rather than a peripheral soft trait. As this article has shown, emotional

intelligence enables leaders to perceive and regulate emotions, communicate with clarity and respect, respond constructively to conflict, and build the trust-based relationships that collective action requires. In public administration, these capacities are especially important because leadership is judged not only by internal efficiency but also by how institutions are experienced by citizens in terms of fairness, responsiveness, integrity, and transparency.

A key argument of this article is that emotional intelligence is not an inborn quality reserved for a few individuals, but a learnable and developable set of abilities and competencies. When embedded in everyday routines such as meetings, supervision, complaint handling, feedback, and cross-unit coordination, emotional intelligence strengthens decision-making, reduces avoidable conflict, and improves the quality of professional interactions. In this sense, EI directly contributes to better service delivery: it helps leaders and teams respond with greater consistency, empathy, clarity, and timeliness, all of which shape citizen experience and perceptions of institutional reliability.

The article also demonstrates that emotional intelligence matters beyond the individual leader. Leaders who cultivate psychological safety, acknowledge emotional labor, and build group emotional intelligence create teams that are more cooperative, more willing to share concerns, and better able to learn, adapt, and coordinate across organizational boundaries. These conditions improve organizational effectiveness by strengthening collaboration, performance, and problem-solving capacity while reducing the hidden costs of silence, mistrust, and burnout.

Most importantly, emotional intelligence has public value. In citizen-facing institutions, trust is built not only through formal

rules and policy intent, but through daily interactions that signal whether people are being treated with dignity, fairness, and care. Leaders who use emotional intelligence ethically—anchored in accountability, respect, and transparency—help convert administrative values into lived institutional practice. Therefore, developing emotional intelligence is not simply a matter of personal leadership growth; it is a strategic investment in public trust, better service delivery, and more effective and legitimate organizations.

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Women's Leadership in the Nepali Civil Service: Gendered Institutions, Legitimacy, and Everyday Agency

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Abstract

Women's leadership in the Nepali civil service has gradually increased. However, increased representation does not necessarily translate to substantive leadership authority. This chapter explores how gendered institutional norms shape the experiences and leadership practices of women in senior administrative roles. Based on qualitative interviews with eight women Joint Secretaries, the findings show that gendered portfolio allocation, unequal access to information, limited access to informal networks, and masculine expectations of leadership constrain women's administrative authority. Despite these constraints, women leaders mobilize procedural expertise, strategic adaptation, and professional support networks to assert their authority. This chapter argues that advancing gender equality in public administration requires attention not only to recruitment and promotion but also to the bureaucratic structures through which leadership authority is recognized, exercised, and sustained.

Keywords: Civil service; Gender, leadership; Nepal; Women

Introduction

Over the past two decades, representative bureaucracy has received growing attention in public administration scholarship, particularly in debates on diversity, legitimacy, and institutional reform (Bradbury & Kellough, 2008; Groeneveld & Van de Walle, 2010). Within these debates, diversifying the civil service is framed not only as a matter of equity, but also as a means of enhancing

state legitimacy, improving governance, and strengthening democratic inclusion. These efforts are increasingly linked to the advancement of women's leadership within the state, based on the expectation that greater representation will allow women to participate more actively in decision making and leadership. Nepal presents a compelling case. Following the end of the Maoist conflict and Nepal's transition to a federal democratic republic (Gupta et al., 2025), the government introduced major institutional reforms. The most significant was the 2007 amendment to the Civil Service Act of 1993 (Government of Nepal, 2007), which established reservation quotas for women and historically excluded groups. These reforms have significantly altered the demographic composition of the bureaucracy and increased the number of women in administrative and leadership roles. Women constituted only 8 percent of the civil service in 2003, rising to 15 percent in 2010, 18 percent in 2015, and 29.2 percent in 2025. At the leadership level, women held 8.4 percent of Joint Secretary positions in 2025 (Department of National Personnel Records (Civil), 2025). However, the literature consistently shows that descriptive representation does not automatically translate into substantive influence, authority, or leadership within bureaucratic systems (Keiser et al., 2002; Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017). This gap raises a fundamental question about how inclusion translates into the actual practice of women's leadership in civil services.

This question becomes more complex when examined through the lens of gender and leadership. Feminist scholarship argues that organizations are not neutral but gendered institutions in which the definitions of competence, leadership, and professionalism have historically been aligned with masculine norms (Acker, 1990; Stivers, 2002). These norms shape not only access to positions but also how leadership is enacted and evaluated after women attain these positions. Consequently, women entering civil services often face environments where their legitimacy as

leaders may be questioned, and their authority evaluated through gendered expectations (Guy & Newman, 2004; Sabharwal, 2015). This dynamic is reinforced by the well-documented concept of role incongruity, whereby leadership is often associated with masculine traits, placing women in a persistent double bind, and they are perceived as less authoritative or judged negatively when they assert their leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The challenge, therefore, is not simply gaining access to leadership roles, but exercising and sustaining leadership within gendered institutional constraints.

These dynamics are particularly visible in Nepali civil service contexts, where gendered organizational norms intersect with deeply rooted institutional and social hierarchies that shape leadership trajectories. Historically, the state apparatus has been largely dominated by upper-caste male elites (Acharya, 2017; Tamang, 2000). This dominance has contributed to the structural and cultural barriers to women's participation and leadership. Although post-conflict reforms have expanded formal access, they have not fully transformed underlying institutional logics. Consequently, women's entry into civil service, particularly leadership roles, represents not only occupational mobility but also an attempt to exercise authority in a space that has been historically shaped by patterns of exclusion. While formal policies promote equality, everyday bureaucratic practices are often influenced by unwritten norms, social networks, and recurring forms of interaction that can shape access to information, mentorship, and decision-making (Helmke & Levitsky, 2012).

Despite substantial documentation of structural and institutional barriers, scholarship remains comparatively limited in its treatment of how women practice leadership in bureaucratic systems daily. Existing research has often focused on representation, quota reforms, administrative culture, and broad patterns of inequality,

while paying comparatively less attention to the ways in which women leaders interpret, negotiate, and enact authority within these institutional settings (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Gupta et al., 2019; Jamil & Dangal, 2009; Paudel, 2018; Sabharwal, 2015; Upadhaya & Kwon, 2023). While this body of work is important for identifying systemic constraints, it offers relatively little insight into how women actively engage with and navigate these constraints in their everyday roles as leadership figures. This limitation is particularly significant in hierarchical civil service contexts, where leadership is often exercised through subtle and strategic practices rather than overt resistance. Against this backdrop, this study asks the following question: How do gendered institutional dynamics and bureaucratic norms constrain the administrative and intellectual authority of women leaders in the Nepali civil service? How do these women exercise their agency to navigate these constraints? This question shifts attention from women's representation in leadership positions to the lived experience and practice of leadership by examining how leadership authority is constructed, recognized, and contested in everyday bureaucratic life, and how women actively negotiate these processes. This study provides a qualitative analysis of women's leadership in the Nepali civil service and demonstrates how administrative and intellectual authority is not simply granted but is actively constructed and negotiated by women leaders working within gendered institutional settings.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature, followed by a description of the study's methods. The findings section then presents and discusses the results. The final section concludes the study and outlines its implications.

Literature Review

Public administration has long been grounded in the Weberian understanding of bureaucracy as rational, hierarchical, and formally neutral (Weber, 1978). However, feminist organizational scholarship has long challenged this assumption, showing that bureaucracies are not disembodied systems, but institutions structured through gendered assumptions that shape authority, legitimacy, and everyday practice (Acker, 1990; Stivers, 2002). Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations shows that apparently neutral arrangements, such as job structures, promotion systems, and career trajectories, are often aligned with masculine norms. In public administration, these norms appear in the construction of the ideal administrator as decisive, emotionally detached, and instrumentally rational (Guy & Newman, 2004; Stivers, 2002). Such traits are culturally coded as masculine, which creates a structural misalignment between femininity and leadership. This misalignment generates what role congruity theory identifies as a persistent evaluative bias: women are judged as less suitable for leadership, and when they enact leadership roles, are often evaluated more negatively than men for comparable behaviours (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Brescoll, 2016). The consequence is not simply underrepresentation but a systematic constraint on women's ability to claim and exercise administrative and intellectual authority.

This dynamic is reinforced by the enduring cultural association between leadership and masculinity, often captured by the "think manager–think male" phenomenon (Schein, 2001). Although leadership models have evolved to value relational and collaborative styles, women may still be evaluated less favourably when they enact such traits. This tendency reflects the persistence of gender stereotypes in leadership assessment

(Heilman, 2001). Scholarly studies reflect this tension. While some research suggests that women are more likely to adopt transformational and participatory leadership styles (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2007), other studies report limited or no significant gender differences in overall leadership effectiveness (Noor et al., 2011; Oshagbemi & Gill, 2003). This inconsistency points to an important insight: the issue is not inherent differences in leadership capacity but the gendered evaluation of leadership itself. Women leaders often work within a narrow band of acceptable behaviour and navigate a persistent double bind in which assertiveness may invite backlash, while relational leadership may be perceived as less authoritative (Catalyst, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007). In bureaucratic contexts, where authorities are closely tied to hierarchy and control, this double bind can constrain both administrative decision-making power and the recognition of intellectual contributions to work.

These dynamics are further intensified in South Asian bureaucratic contexts, where institutional histories and social hierarchies amplify the gendered exclusion. Bureaucracies across South Asia have been shaped by colonial administrative legacies that emphasized hierarchy, control, and elite traditions (Alavi, 1972; Potter, 1996). These institutional features often intersect with patriarchal social norms, which have historically restricted women's access to positions of public authority (Agarwal, 1988; Goetz, 2001; Zafarullah, 2000). In Nepal, the state apparatus has historically developed within a patriarchal, social, and political order (Gupta et al., 2021). This historical system shaped both the boundaries of participation and prevailing norms of legitimacy. Consequently, women's presence in the civil service represents not only numerical inclusion but also a challenge to the historically entrenched power structures. Bureaucratic authority in such contexts is not only formally allocated but also socially constructed; therefore, it is unevenly accessible.

Policy reforms based on affirmative action, such as quota systems, have increased women's representation in civil services globally and in Nepal, and have gradually expanded their presence in senior leadership roles. However, women entering civil service through quota reforms may face heightened scrutiny or assumptions about their merit, as quota policies can activate adverse stereotypes about female leadership (Upadhaya & Kwon, 2023). In practice, this can create legitimacy challenges that limit their ability to influence decisions, shape policy agendas, and command institutional respect. The gap between formal inclusion and substantive authority is often sustained through informal institutional dynamics that structure everyday bureaucratic life. Organizational research highlights that access to influence is often mediated through informal networks and social capital, in addition to formal merit (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Ibarra, 1992). Informal interactions, workplace social networks, and extra-work social expectations can shape advancement opportunities, although some of these spaces may be less accessible to women because of organizational norms and broader societal expectations (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). The persistence of male-dominated informal networks may restrict career mobility and reduce access to influential relationships, information flows, and informal decision-making processes (Connell, 2006; Ibarra, 1992). Thus, authority within bureaucracies arises not only from formal positions but also from embedded social relations that often remain gendered.

These structural and informal constraints are reinforced by broader sociocultural expectations that shape women's professional trajectories. Across contexts, women continue to bear a disproportionate share of family and caregiving responsibilities, which can affect their career continuity, availability for leadership roles, and advancement opportunities (Ahmed & Jahan, 2018; Bihagen & Ohls, 2006; Groeneveld, 2009).

In many South Asian contexts, these expectations are particularly pronounced and reinforce the perception that women are less suited to demanding administrative roles (Ahmed & Jahan, 2018; Ansari, 2018; Shrivastava, 2015; Singh, 2018; Zafarullah, 2000). Such perceptions may translate into reduced opportunities, limited access to high visibility assignments, and slower career progression. Simultaneously, women who attain leadership positions often face heightened scrutiny and organizational resistance, particularly in male-dominated settings, where their advancement may challenge established hierarchies (Bawa & Sanyare, 2013; Sabharwal, 2015; Singh, 2018). These dynamics illustrate how gendered institutions extend beyond organizational boundaries and embed bureaucratic experiences in wider social structures.

Study Method

We adopted a qualitative research design to explore women's leadership in the Nepali Civil Service. This approach aligns with our focus on how senior women administrators understand, navigate, and respond to gendered institutional environments. Rather than treating leadership as a set of predefined variables, we conceptualized it as a socially embedded and institutionally mediated practice shaped by formal structures and informal norms. This study is grounded in an interpretive paradigm (Gray, 2009; Ryan, 2018) that assumes that organizational realities are constructed through interaction, experience, and meaning making. This perspective is well-suited to the Nepali bureaucratic context, where formal administrative rules coexist with informal practices and relational dynamics within the Nepali bureaucracy. In this context, gender functions as both a structural condition and lived experience. This approach helps capture the variation, ambiguity, and contradictions in participants' insights while also identifying broader institutional dynamics.

We focus on the Nepali civil service as the study setting to examine gendered leadership. As a hierarchical and rule-based system undergoing gradual reform, it reflects both continuity and changes in institutional practices. Despite formal commitments to gender inclusion (Government of Nepal, 2007), women remain underrepresented in senior decision-making positions (Acharya, 2017). We focus on women at the Joint Secretary level, a senior administrative rank linked to policy influence, managerial authority, and inter-organizational coordination. This focus allows us to explore how leadership is practiced in complex institutional settings, where women leaders work at the intersection of political mandates, bureaucratic procedures, and organizational cultures.

We employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify information-rich participants relevant to our research questions (Patton, 2015). We selected eight women Joint Secretaries based on their seniority, length of service, and involvement in policy and managerial roles. Given the small number of women at this level in the Nepali civil service, this sampling approach was necessary and suitable. The participants represented diverse institutional backgrounds, including education, law, foreign affairs, health and food safety, and agriculture, forestry, and environmental sectors. Although they were serving in different ministries and agencies at the time of the study, their career trajectories spanned a wide range of governmental institutions and administrative contexts. Their professional experience ranged from approximately 15 to 30 years of civil service, with expertise in general administration, diplomacy, legal affairs, public health, food regulation, agricultural administration, and technical governance. The participants also had diverse educational backgrounds, holding master's, professional, and doctoral degrees. This variation enabled us to capture a broad range of institutional experiences while maintaining an analytical focus on women in senior leadership positions. The number of participants reflects the qualitative

emphasis on depth, contextual richness, and insight into senior leadership experiences rather than statistical representation (Gupta & Sigdel, 2024; Patton, 1990, 2002). Because this study focuses exclusively on women serving at the Joint Secretary level, the findings should be understood as reflecting the experiences of the interviewed women Joint Secretaries in the Nepali civil service.

We collected data through in-depth interviews, which are suitable for exploring leadership practices and professional experiences in institutional contexts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This method allowed participants to reflect on their career paths, organizational challenges, and experiences of gendered dynamics, and allowed us to probe the emerging themes. We conducted interviews primarily in Nepali in settings that ensured privacy and reduced the constraints of professionalism. All participants provided informed consent before participation. Most interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. In one case, where recording was not permitted, we relied on detailed field notes taken during the interview. Data collection proceeded iteratively until thematic saturation was reached, that is, when additional interviews generated little new thematic information, and no substantive changes were made to the coding framework (Guest et al., 2006). We also maintained field notes throughout the research process to document contextual observations, interactional dynamics, and early analytical reflections that informed the subsequent data collection and interpretation.

We analysed the data using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006). We began by reading the transcripts several times to become familiar with our data. We then generated initial codes inductively, focusing on recurring themes, experiences and institutional dynamics in the participants' narratives. The coding

process included both descriptive and interpretive elements, which allowed us to focus on what the participants reported and how they interpreted their experiences. We then organized the codes into broader categories and themes by examining the relationships within and across the codes. We focused on themes related to institutional constraints, informal norms, leadership practices, navigation, and adaptation strategies. The analysis was iterative and involved ongoing movement between the data, emerging codes, and conceptual interpretation. This process kept the findings grounded in the participants' views, while supporting theoretical development. We used analytic memos to document coding decisions, refine themes, and develop emerging arguments, which strengthened the transparency and rigor of the study.

We followed the established ethical standards for research involving human participants. We obtained informed consent from all participants and provided clear information about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Given the senior positions of the participants and the limited number of women at this level, confidentiality was a key concern. We removed identifying information from the transcripts and reports, including organizational details, when necessary, to prevent participant identification. We used pseudonyms and general descriptors to present the findings. All data were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. Throughout the study, we remained attentive to the participants' time, professional responsibilities, and perspectives, and we aimed to represent their experiences accurately and responsibly.

Findings

Portfolio Allocation and the “Soft” Sector Bias

Advancement to the rank of Joint Secretary in the Nepali civil service does not automatically lead to equal access to administrative power, as authority remains unevenly distributed through gendered portfolio allocations. Although the formal system appears to be merit-based, informal logic continues to shape these assignments. Administrative domains are implicitly classified as “soft” or “hard,” and women are more often directed toward the former than men are. This reflects an institutional tendency to align societal gender roles with bureaucratic functions, which reinforces gender hierarchy. Participants consistently reported being assigned to sectors such as social welfare, human resources, and general administration positions. These areas are often seen as extensions of women’s ‘natural’ roles. One participant stated, “Usually I get soft office[s]” (Interview 3). These assignments were not neutral. They influence access to resources, visibility, decision-making authority, and long-term career progression. “Soft” sectors hold administrative importance but remain politically peripheral and provide limited opportunities for engagement in high-stakes policy decisions or large-scale resource management.

The contrast becomes clearer in “hard” sectors, such as finance, infrastructure, and security. These domains involve technical expertise, crisis management, and control over major resources. Such features align with the dominant expectations of leadership within the bureaucracy. These sectors offer key opportunities to demonstrate competence and build institutional credibility. When women are excluded from these areas, they are kept away from spaces where leadership is visible and valued. This shows that formal inclusion does not guarantee an influence. Women may be

present in “hard” sectors but remain outside the core decision-making processes that shape their career advancement.

The gendered nature of portfolio allocation becomes more apparent when women assume roles that challenge these institutional expectations. The experience of a participant who worked as a Chief District Officer (CDO) illustrates this. This position involves security, crisis response, and continuous authority and is widely viewed as masculine. Her appointment faced direct resistance from political actors and the senior officials. They questioned her ability to manage emergencies, particularly at night. She described this perception as “women vs CDO” (Interview 1). This response shows that the issue was not individual competence but a perceived mismatch between gender and role expectations of the job. Institutional actors drew on social assumptions regarding women’s mobility, safety, and domestic responsibilities to question their legitimacy. Gendered expectations function within the bureaucracy and influence power access. To address this resistance, the participants relied on sustained and visible performance. She explained, “I had to gain their trust by working... we have to work harder than male counterpart[s]” (Interview 1). This reflects a structural expectation rather than a personal choice. Women in “hard” sectors must demonstrate not only competence but also their right to occupy such positions. Authority is not granted by position alone; it requires continuous proof of capability.

This reflects broader institutional dynamics. Women in “soft” sectors face marginalization because of their limited exposure to power. Women in “hard” sectors face scrutiny and conditional acceptance from male colleagues. In both situations, portfolio allocation shapes leadership practices and how leadership is judged. It also affects the formation of leadership identities.

Leadership is often linked to control over high-stakes, resource-intensive areas. Women in “soft” sectors may struggle to be recognized as serious leaders. Women in “hard” sectors must distance themselves from gendered expectations to align with dominant norms. One participant described this experience as “like climbing the mountain with a heavy weight on,” which reflects the constant effort required to prove competence (Interview 1).

This creates a structural double bind. The acceptance of “soft” portfolios can lead to typecasting and limited career progression. Entry into “hard” portfolios requires sustained overperformance to counter institutional doubts. In neither case do women experience leadership on equal terms as male leaders. Their authority is conditional and negotiated. Portfolio allocation is a subtle but powerful mechanism that reproduces gender inequality in the Nepali civil service. It directs women toward fewer influential domains and subjects them to greater scrutiny when they enter male-dominated sectors. Thus, the bureaucracy maintains a gendered distribution of power while preserving the appearance of neutrality. In this context, leadership depends not only on rank but also on access to roles through which authority is defined, practiced, and recognized.

Information Asymmetry and Administrative Obstruction

In civil service, information is not only a technical resource; it is a key means through which power is exercised. The findings show that information control is not neutral within the Nepali civil service. It is embedded in informal, male-dominated networks that shape access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making processes. In this context, information asymmetry acts as a mechanism that disadvantages women leaders. Participants shared that information, particularly related to training opportunities, career-enhancing assignments, and procedural

updates, often circulated informally before reaching official channels. These early exchanges usually remain within trusted networks that are often male dominated. Consequently, women may receive information late, in an incomplete form, or not at all. One participant described her experience with an international training opportunity in Israel. She noted that “this information was hidden” and that she only learned about it when “2–4 days [were] left” before the deadline (Interview 5). This example shows how timing can restrict access. Even when formal procedures remain unchanged, delayed information limits the ability to participate on equal terms. Opportunities that appear to be formally open become difficult to access in practice.

When women attempt to address these barriers, additional difficulties may arise in administrative processes. In the same case, the participant independently secured funding from the Ministry of Finance. However, the nomination process has created new challenges. The official letter sent to the embassy did not clearly state her name and instead referred to an “Undersecretary.” This complication affected her visa application. She described the situation as a “hassle to prove” her identity and questioned the intent behind the nomination (Interview 5), stating, the key issue here is not a single administrative error. Routine procedures such as unclear documentation and delays can create obstacles. These conditions place a heavier burden on those who already face disadvantage.

These dynamics also affect everyday authority within organizations. Participants described situations in which subordinates bypassed formal reporting lines and weakened their authority. One participant, working as a Director General, reported that her subordinates escalated a routine staffing issue directly to the parent ministry without informing her (Interview 6). Such actions may occur in civil services. However, participants

viewed this as part of a wider tendency to question or bypass the authority of women leaders more easily. These experiences show that a formal position does not always guarantee effective control over information and decisions.

Women leaders, therefore, invest additional effort to access information, verify procedures, and maintain oversight. Tasks that others may take for granted require more time and attention. In response, the participants described several strategies to address this issue. They built their own informal communication channels, monitored administrative processes closely, and took on direct roles in documentation and coordination. These strategies help manage immediate challenges but require additional labour inputs. Routine administrative work has become increasingly time-intensive and mentally demanding. This reinforces the broader theme across the findings. Women often need to perform at higher levels to remain effective in their jobs. When access to information is uneven and procedures cannot be assumed to function smoothly, they must remain highly attentive. Their role includes not only decision-making but also the continuous checking and correction of administrative processes.

Institutional Blindness to the Female Body

Research on gendered organizations shows that organizations are not neutral structures but are built on implicit assumptions about the ideal worker (Acker, 1990). In the Nepali civil service, this ideal closely aligns with a male life course. It assumes uninterrupted availability, physical mobility, and freedom from primary caregiving responsibilities. The findings show that this assumption is embedded in organizational culture, infrastructure, operational practices, and career pathways. Consequently, women's embodied reproductive and caregiving responsibilities remain insufficiently accommodated within institutional designs

and workplace arrangements (Gupta et al., 2019; Martin, 2000). This lack of recognition is evident in the physical infrastructure of the government offices. Several participants recalled that, especially in the early stages of their careers, basic facilities did not accommodate women. One participant who joined the service in 2002 (2059 BS) described the discomfort of using shared restrooms and the constant “hesitation” it created in their daily work (Interview 2). Another participant noted that separate facilities were not necessary because there were few women. These experiences indicate that bureaucratic spaces were not designed with women in mind.

Some of these gaps have improved over time. However, institutional responses to women’s embodied needs remain uneven, especially in roles that demand high levels of physical and time commitment. This is evident in departments that function on a 24-hour basis. One participant who oversaw a weather forecasting division explained that despite a significant number of female staff, there were no adequate arrangements for women working the night shifts. There was no safe transportation or health-sensitive support. She referred to cases where women experienced serious health consequences, including miscarriages, which she linked to demanding work conditions and limited institutional support (Interview 6). Responses to such risks are often handled at the individual level rather than through formal policies. The participant explained that she personally advised pregnant staff to take precautions, such as avoiding physically demanding travel. This indicates that the responsibility for managing risk shifts from the organization to individual leaders, instead of being addressed through systematic measures.

These issues also affect career progression. They appear as maternal penalties. In a system that equates commitment with continuous availability, maternity and childcare are treated as

interruptions rather than normal life events. One participant recalled that male supervisors discouraged assigning important responsibilities to women who had recently taken maternity leave. As one participant stated, “Do not give these girls who take maternity leave a place in my section” (Interview 4). These perspectives have direct consequences. Women returning from maternity leave may be excluded from key assignments or decision-making roles. They often need to rebuild their credibility within the organization. Temporary absence related to reproduction can, therefore, lead to longer-term marginalization.

Similar constraints appear when accessing professional development. Institutional expectations regarding study leave and training assume that civil servants have limited domestic responsibilities or robust support systems. These conditions are more accessible to men than to women. One participant described the difficulty of completing her PhD abroad while managing childcare, without institutional support. The extended duration of her program and the need for unpaid leave reflected a mismatch between institutional expectations and lived realities. She noted, “If things are this difficult for me, then I wonder how difficult [it] is for the rest [of the] female[s]” (Interview 7). These experiences point to a broader issue. Organizational structures disadvantage those whose life circumstances do not align with the assumed norms. In response, the participants described strategies based on endurance and self-adjustment to the situation. Many chose to manage discomfort, limit disruption, and continue working under the existing conditions rather than seeking formal support. This often requires absorbing additional physical, emotional, and logistical demands without challenging the system itself. These responses reflect both resilience and constraint. They allow women to remain in the system but also leave institutional gaps unchanged.

Gendered Frictions of Inter-Agency Collaboration

Contemporary public administration emphasizes collaboration and network governance to address complex policy challenges (Gupta & Lamsal, 2023). The findings show that within the Nepali civil service, inter-agency collaboration is constrained not only by structural fragmentation but also by deeply embedded organizational culture. Participants described a strong sense of bureaucratic territoriality, where authorities were closely tied to controlling institutional domains. This logic affects all actors, but women leaders experience it in ways shaped by gendered expectations of power and authority. Participants often described resistance to collaboration in terms of individual and institutional “ego.” One participant stated that “ego factor[s] play a role” and noted that such dynamics were “more with male[s]” (Interview 8). She explained this further by asking, “Who is dominant, who is more powerful, why should we collaborate?” (Interview 8). This suggests that collaborations are not always beneficial. This may be considered a loss of control rather than a way to improve outcomes.

This orientation influences the reception and implementation of initiatives. A participant working in the weather forecasting division described her attempt to establish a formal coordination mechanism with the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority to strengthen the monsoon response. Despite the clear operational benefits, the initiative did not progress. She explained that senior actors showed reluctance because they feared that sharing information could reduce their department’s relevance. She described this concern as a “fear of losing [their] job” (Interview 7). This example shows how institutional self-interest can override collaboration, even in areas where it is critical. This also reflects the difficulty in moving beyond silo-based practices.

For women leaders, these challenges are shaped by how authority is recognized across organizations. Participants noted that cooperation from other agencies depends not only on formal positions but also on informal recognition of authority. One participant stated that “interagency coordination is weak” and added that as female leaders, “others don’t obey us” and may not respond to requests for representation (Interview 8). This indicates that authority in inter-agency settings is not consistently acknowledged. While hierarchy supports coordination within organizations, cross-agency collaboration depends more on informal legitimacy than on formal legitimacy. When gendered assumptions influence these perceptions, women leaders face additional barriers in securing cooperation from male subordinates.

Intellectual Invisibility in Decision-Making Spaces

Structural barriers, such as portfolio allocation and information asymmetries, shape access to power. The findings also reveal a more subtle form of inequality within spaces that women have already occupied. In formal decision-making settings, female Joint Secretaries are present, but their intellectual contributions are not always recognized or taken forward. This reflects the condition of intellectual invisibility, where participation does not necessarily lead to influence. Participants described a clear gap between being allowed to speak and being heard meaningfully. One participant stated, “I do get space in meeting[s], but I always wonder if my ideas get materialized or not... I get space to speak, but whether I am actually heard” (Interview 7). This highlights an important aspect of leadership that extends beyond access. It concerns whether ideas shape discussions and outcomes.

Participants also described the need for additional validation of their contributions. Their ideas were sometimes received with

hesitation until others, often male colleagues, supported them. One participant explained that when she proposed an idea, she often felt the need to “validate with somebody else to confirm that my idea is good” (Interview 7). This suggests that credibility is not evenly distributed. The acceptance of ideas depends not only on their content but also on who presents them. Recognition and ownership issues also appeared in the interview data. Some participants described situations in which their ideas were not acknowledged during discussions but were later repeated by others and then accepted. While such situations can occur in many contexts, participants viewed them as part of a broader issue in which their contributions were less likely to receive credit due to their gender. Over time, this can reduce confidence and limit active participation in discussions.

These experiences shape women’s engagement in decision-making. Some participants reported a shift toward more formal and documented communication. They relied on written inputs, evidence-based arguments, and recorded recommendations to create a clear record of their contributions. This approach helps make their ideas visible and attributable to the administrative processes. However, this strategy also influences the perception of leadership. A greater reliance on documentation and procedural clarity may be interpreted as rigidity or excessive caution, especially in environments that value informal interactions and quick consensus. Therefore, efforts to secure recognition can affect how leadership styles are judged.

Strategic Navigation and Quiet Agency

While the preceding themes highlight the structural constraints on women’s leadership in the Nepali civil service, the findings also point to a more subtle but important dynamic. Women are not passive in these conditions. They engage in strategic navigation

that allows them to function effectively within the system and, at times, to influence it in subtle ways. This agency is rarely direct or confrontational in its approach to the problem. It develops through careful and context-specific practices that help women maintain authority, build legitimacy, and achieve administrative outcomes in an environment that does not fully support them. A key aspect of this agency is the strategic use of formal rules and procedures. In settings where informal networks are often excluded, women leaders rely on formal structures as a source of legitimacy and protection. Participants described grounding their decisions in documented processes and emphasizing procedural correctness to reduce challenges to their authority. As one participant explained, she approached issues through “issue-based” and “function-based” reasoning and demonstrated authority “with actions, not words” (Interview 1). This approach shifts authority from personal influence to institutional mandates and helps stabilize leadership when positional authority is questioned.

Simultaneously, the participants showed flexibility in their engagement with institutional norms. They did not reject the system. Instead, they adapt to it in a selective manner. This includes adjusting communication styles, managing emotional expressions, and modifying leadership approaches based on the context. Several participants described regulating their emotional responses to avoid negative interpretations. One participant noted, “I feel that as I am emotional, then many take advantage of it... we need to keep limits in certain things” (Interview 7). This reflects a careful reading of the institutional environment and a deliberate effort to align behaviour with expectations to remain effective in the long term.

Another important aspect of agency is creating informal support mechanisms. In areas with limited institutional provisions, particularly concerning gender-sensitive issues, women leaders

often take the initiative personally. Participants described advising junior female staff on managing health risks and handling workplace challenges in demanding environments. These actions are not formally recognized but contribute to a more responsive working environment through daily practice. The participants also showed agency in managing information and visibility. In response to the risks of marginalization or loss of recognition, they used strategies such as written communication, detailed documentation, and formal recordings of their contributions. These practices help protect their intellectual input and strengthen their credibility in the system. Some participants also described efforts to build professional networks, even within constraints related to social expectations and time.

This form of strategic navigation often remains outside the scope of formal recognition. It does not directly challenge institutional norms and does not always lead to visible or structural changes. However, it allows women to operate effectively within existing constraints and, in some cases, to influence practices over time. In this context, leadership involves not only formal authority but also the ability to understand the system, anticipate challenges, and respond with deliberate adaptation. These findings point to a form of quiet agency embedded in bureaucratic practice. Women leaders continuously balance compliance and assertiveness. They decide when to conform, act, and adjust their behaviour. This process varies across individuals and contexts but reflects a consistent effort to work within institutional structures that were not designed for them.

Discussion

The findings show that women's entry into senior leadership positions in the Nepali civil service does not translate into equivalent access to administrative authority. Promotion to the

Joint Secretary level indicates that some formal barriers associated with the “glass ceiling” have been reduced. However, women’s experiences reveal the persistence of horizontal constraints that limit their substantive influence. This gap between rank and authority reflects the continued function of informal norms and gendered organizational practices that shape power exercise. In this sense, the Nepali case aligns with and extends the concept of “glass walls,” whereby horizontal segregation and gendered allocation of authority continue to reproduce inequality even after women attain senior positions (Miller et al., 1999; Sabharwal, 2015; Sneed, 2007).

This dynamic is particularly evident in portfolio allocation. Women are disproportionately concentrated in sectors such as social welfare, human resource management, education, and health, whereas resource-intensive and politically influential portfolios are more closely associated with masculine forms of authority. Similar dynamics appear in the Indian Administrative Service, where women are often steered away from portfolios such as finance, defence, and home affairs toward ministries coded as “soft” (Singh, 2018). Such allocations are not merely administrative decisions but reflect gendered assumptions regarding leadership and competence. Women are often perceived as better suited to roles involving care, welfare, and relational work, which aligns with communal leadership stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Although these sectors are administratively important, it often carry less organizational influence and fewer opportunities to access strategic resources, high-profile assignments, and influential networks. Consequently, women may face structural constraints in acquiring the visibility, experience, and political capital that facilitate their advancement within the administrative hierarchy (Burt, 1998; Ibarra, 1993). The findings suggest that gendered portfolio allocation shapes not only where women

lead, but also the forms of authority available to them within the bureaucracy.

However, the unequal distribution of authority extends beyond portfolio assignments. Even when women attain senior positions, their ability to exercise influence is often shaped by their access to organizational resources that underpin decision-making. Among these resources, information is particularly important because it affects access to opportunities, policy processes, and institutions. The findings show that information does not circulate evenly across the bureaucracy but is often mediated through informal networks and relationships in the ministry. Although information is formally expected to flow through bureaucratic channels, participants described how access is often mediated through informal networks. These networks reflect homosocial tendencies and similarity-based trust dynamics, whereby information circulates more readily among those perceived as similar (Kanter, 1977). Delays, omissions, and procedural ambiguities can therefore limit women's access to opportunities and influence without overtly violating formal rules. The findings point to a form of bureaucratic obstruction in which routine administrative processes undermine authority while maintaining the appearance of procedural neutrality. This extends existing accounts of gendered leadership barriers by demonstrating how inequality is reproduced through everyday bureaucratic practices, rather than solely through formal exclusion.

These dynamics are further reinforced by the persistence of the ideal worker norm within the civil service. Despite claims of neutrality, organizational expectations often align with male life patterns characterized by uninterrupted career paths, geographic mobility, and limited caregiving responsibilities. In the Nepali context, this is reflected in workplace infrastructure, expectations of constant availability, and limited accommodation

for reproductive and caregiving responsibilities. Similar things have been observed across South Asian bureaucracies (Ahmed & Jahan, 2018; Ansari, 2018; Haider & Hayat, 2025; Khair et al., 2019; Shrivastava, 2015) Maternity and caregiving responsibilities may interrupt the expected career trajectory and contribute to what Correll et al. (2007) describe as the motherhood penalty. This penalty often appears informally through perceptions of reduced commitment rather than through explicit policies. Women returning from maternity leave may be sidelined from key assignments and decision-making roles in the workplace after their absence. Similarly, formally gender-neutral policies related to training, mobility, and career development may therefore reproduce inequality when they do not account for uneven domestic responsibilities (Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). In this way, organizations maintain an appearance of neutrality while shifting the burden of adjustment onto individual women.

The limits of women's authority are also visible in inter-agency settings, where formal hierarchies carry less weight than do relational legitimacy. Although collaborative governance is often presented as a mechanism for addressing complex policy problems (Agranoff et al., 2012; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Gupta & Lamsal, 2023), the findings indicate that collaboration is shaped by the gendered relations of power. Authority depends not only on formal position but also on access to networks, trust, and informal legitimacy (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). Because women often have more limited access to networks that generate such resources (Ibarra, 1993), their ability to mobilize cooperation may be constrained. Requests for coordination or information sharing may be delayed or ignored, suggesting that compliance depends not only on position but also on gender. Similar patterns appear in India and Bangladesh, where women are described as highly committed and effective, yet continue to face biased evaluations, limited trust, and uneven career rewards (Mahapatra & Gupta,

2013; Zafarullah, 2000). Efforts to build cooperation may therefore be interpreted as weaknesses rather than capabilities.

Even within formal decision-making arenas, the influence of women remains uneven. The findings indicate a gap between participation and recognition, where women's contributions are overlooked, delayed, or appropriated. Fricker's (2007) concept of testimonial injustice helps to explain this dynamic, as credibility is often shaped by identity-based assumptions. Within civil service settings, gender functions as a status characteristic that influences perceptions of competence and authority (Ridgeway, 2011). Consequently, women's ideas may gain acceptance only after endorsement by male colleagues, while the appropriation of ideas can limit their recognition and access to reputation-based forms of influence. Similar challenges appear among women civil servants in India and Bangladesh, where women often need to continually demonstrate competence and legitimacy (Shrivastava, 2015; Singh, 2018; Zafarullah, 2000). Over time, such experiences may discourage women from speaking up and reduce their visibility in organizations' decision-making processes.

In response, women leaders develop strategies that allow them to navigate institutional barriers while maintaining professional legitimacy. One important strategy involves relying on formal rules, documentation, and correct procedures. Grounding decisions in formal processes strengthens authority within the legal-rational structure of bureaucracy (Portillo & DeHart-Davis, 2009). Participants also described adapting their communication styles, managing emotional expression, and using documentation to secure recognition for their contributions. These practices reflect forms of agency that operate within existing institutional arrangements, rather than directly challenging them. Similar strategies have been observed among women civil servants in other South Asian contexts (Ahmed & Jahan, 2018; Shrivastava,

2015; Singh, 2018; Zafarullah, 2000). Women also create informal support systems and mentoring relationships that provide alternative channels for knowledge sharing and professional support (Fletcher, 2000). However, these strategies have limitations. While they may enable women to function effectively within existing structures, they do not necessarily transform the institutional conditions that create inequality. Instead, they often shift the burden of adaptation onto individuals, while institutional norms remain unchanged. This dynamic is consistent with Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of the patriarchal bargain, wherein women develop strategies to navigate constraints without fundamentally altering the underlying system. Women's leadership, therefore, remains characterized by a form of inclusion that is meaningful yet constrained, where formal advancement coexists with continuing limitations on substantive authority.

Conclusion and Implications

Although women have increasingly entered senior administrative positions, their presence does not automatically translate into substantive leadership authority. The experiences of women leaders show that authority is shaped not only by formal rank but also by gendered institutional norms that influence access to influential portfolios, information, informal networks, and decision-making. Bureaucratic practices that appear neutral often reproduce existing hierarchies by privileging masculine leadership ideals and established power relations. At the same time, women leaders demonstrate that institutions are not static arenas of constraint. Through strategic adaptation, professional competence, and everyday negotiation, they create space for influence and challenge the limits of symbolic inclusion in the workplace. Women's leadership in this context is, therefore, both enabled and constrained by the same institutional environment.

The implications for public administration are evident. Efforts to advance gender equality in civil service can move beyond recruitment targets and promotions to address the organizational conditions through which authority is recognized and exercised. The findings suggest that formal inclusion alone is unlikely to alter the gendered patterns of authority. Women continue to be concentrated in particular portfolios, excluded from informal information channels, and face difficulties in securing recognition for their contributions to decision-making processes. They also function within organizational arrangements that inadequately account for caregiving responsibilities and the reality of work. In this regard, more transparent approaches to portfolio assignment, formalized procedures for communicating professional opportunities and nominations, and institutional practices that make contributions to policy deliberations more visible and attributable may help address some barriers identified in this study. Such changes would not only broaden access to positions and opportunities but also strengthen the conditions through which leadership authority is exercised, recognized, and sustained. These considerations are relevant not only for Nepal but also for other bureaucratic systems seeking to translate women's formal inclusion into substantive leadership authority.

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Evidence-Based Decision Making in Nepali Civil Service: Transitioning from Perception to Facts in the Nepali Civil Service

Tara Prasad Kharel

Abstract

In this section, an attempt is made to analyse the movement of Nepalese civil service from a traditional, discretionary, and perception-based governance system to a new form of governance based on Evidence Based Decision Making (EBDM) that can be considered as the basis for efficient, accountable and responsive public administration. It discusses the theoretical evolution of the concept of Evidence-Based Decision Making, focusing especially on the transition from the system of subjective assessments and political will to scientific research, administrative statistics, and consultations with stakeholders. The paper presents the practical application of evidence-informed policy, which takes into account both empirical evidence and social values and moral considerations. It also examines important analytical tools, such as CBA and M&E, as the ways of enhancing policy development, resource management, policy implementation monitoring, and results evaluation. In addition, the paper analyses the process of administrative reform in Nepal in the period after adopting federalism according to the constitution of Nepal 2015, which increased the number of planning tasks at 753 local governments, thus increasing the necessity for evidence-based decision-making system. However, there are challenges despite the existence of new trends in digital governance, health information systems, and integration of data at the local level because of the presence of politics, fragmented information systems, lack of analysis skills, and the culture of non-utilization of evidence. This study suggests that sustainable EBDM needs strengthening institutions, digital innovations, increased data literacy, civil service reforms based on performance, and links between research and policies.

Keywords: Evidence-Based Decision-Making, Digital Governance, Data-Driven Policy-Making, Public Administration

Introduction to Evidence-Based Decision Making

The term evidence-based decision making (EBDM) describes an analytical and logical model for making decisions. It refers to the process through which policies, programs, legislation, or administrative initiatives are developed and adopted by utilizing the best quality of evidence in decision-making processes rather than subjective judgment, political considerations, ideology, tradition, or personal views. This notion entails that decisions are made taking into account the highest-quality evidence gained from scientific studies, statistics, administration data, monitoring programs, evaluations, consultation with stakeholders, and experiments or pilots. Unlike subjective policy decisions, which may lack accountability, evidence-based decision making ensures effectiveness, efficiency, and results.

The history of evidence-based decision-making dates back to evidence-based medicine in the late twentieth century when clinical decisions were based not only on medical knowledge but also on scientifically established facts and controlled experiments (Nutley et al., 2007). Later on, the concepts of evidence-based practice found their way into various fields, namely public administration, education, law enforcement, environmental regulation, development strategy, and procurement of public goods (Nutley et al., 2007). In this respect, governments and international bodies called on using policies that were based on empirically verified evidence to enhance the quality of governance and the efficiency of public administration.

By definition, EBDM is associated with the gathering, evaluation, interpretation, and utilization of empirical evidence in the policy process (Pawson, 2006). More specifically, the use of evidence encompasses such stages of the policy cycle as problem identification, data analysis, alternatives comparison, selection

and implementation of chosen policies, and further review of the outcomes. In terms of evidence types, EBDM relies on both scientific data and non-scientific sources.

Researchers differentiate between "evidence-based" and "evidence-informed" decision-making practices. According to the former concept, the process of decision-making is predominantly influenced by objective evidence, while the latter takes into account the impact of political goals, ethics, societal values, institutional capabilities, and other factors that influence the process of policy selection. As such, it is virtually impossible to base the process of policy-making exclusively on scientific evidence due to the complexity of the decision-making process in general. Therefore, contemporary research is inclined to apply the term "evidence-informed policy" to describe the practical reality of evidence utilization (Head, 2016).

The role of evidence-based decision making has become increasingly significant in modern governance due to the increased level of complexity that faces governments today. The financial resources available to states are finite, and citizens expect their governments to be transparent, efficient, and responsible in their spending. EBDM is instrumental in identifying which policies produce desirable results, which programs need expansion, which ones need to be shut down, and how resources could be allocated more efficiently. By using evaluations and reliable indicators, governments can avoid policy failures, eliminate unnecessary expenses, and improve the results of services provided (Nutley et al., 2007; Sutcliffe & Court, 2005).

The use of EBDM is also conducive to organizational learning and adaptive governance. By analysing policy results and taking what is learned from such analysis into account when developing new policies, organizations can better adapt to changes and

new developments. For instance, pilot projects and experiments enable governments to try out their policy initiatives and learn from such experiments prior to wide implementation.

While EBDM can be highly beneficial for decision makers, there are numerous challenges associated with the use of this approach. Policymakers could be constrained in the use of evidence-based policymaking due to lack of good-quality data or research, political pressures, bureaucratic opposition, or problems translating sophisticated research studies into practice. In addition, evidence might be challenged, inadequate, and subject to interpretation. Another concern with evidence-based policymaking is the possibility that an overemphasis on technical evidence will crowd out other considerations, including democratic discussion and ethical issues (Pawson, 2006; Head, 2016).

As public administration becomes more modern, EBDM has increasingly emerged as a key ingredient of good governance and effective policy analysis. Several international agencies, including the World Bank, the OECD, and the UN, recommend evidence-based governance principles as an important approach for improving development outcomes and governance accountability (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005; OECD, 2020). With growing adoption of digital governance, big data analytics, and performance management, the role of evidence-based practices in public decision making is likely to become even more prominent.

The EBDM Framework: Tools and Methodologies

Evidence-informed decision-making depends on an organized framework that uses varied types of evidence, systematically incorporates the evidence throughout the process, and utilizes analysis techniques in order to achieve better results.

Types of Evidence

Evidence-based decision making should make use of varied types of evidence in place of using a single type. Literature suggests that evidence involves more than research, including scientific knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, and value-based knowledge. It includes statistical data, administrative data, experiments, citizen views, expert opinions, and contextual data.

The wide definition of evidence goes beyond the usual research evidence and includes systematic inquiry for gaining knowledge, which could also include policy assessments. Good evidence is credible, relevant, reliable, and current. Authors state that there is a need for various types of evidence at various stages of policymaking, and reliance on just one type will render the efforts ineffective (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005; Nutley et al., 2007; OECD, 2020).

Evidence and processes of integration vary from one stage to another, and evidence should compete with many other factors, including political considerations, institutional capabilities, time constraints, and other stakeholders' interests. This process is always political and never straightforward. The systematic integration of evidence will lead to better, more informed decision-making and adaptive governance (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005; Nutley et al., 2007; OECD, 2020).

Analytical Tools: Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) and Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) frameworks.

Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA)

Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) refers to an analytical technique that seeks to establish whether there is an excess of expected benefits from a policy, program, project, or investment compared to its

costs. As an important tool in evidence-based decision making, it enables analysts to rank alternative policy strategies in terms of the amount of net social benefit that each strategy would create. In essence, CBA places costs and benefits in monetary units whenever feasible to facilitate assessment of the economic efficiency and desirability of policy choices. Cost-Benefit Analysis has applications in both policy making and developmental planning through identification of projects whose implementation maximizes the well-being of the population concerned. This includes consideration of direct and indirect costs, as well as short-run and long-run benefits. Consider an example involving infrastructure development where costs related to construction are weighed against anticipated economic advantages, job creation, environmental effects, and social benefits, among others. The significance of CBA cuts across all stages in the policy cycle. Policy formulation stage sees its usefulness in comparing alternative solutions. The decision-making stage relies on CBA as a source of information for determining the economic feasibility of various options. The implementation and evaluation stage sees it used to evaluate outcomes based on pre-set benchmarks. In this way, CBA acts as an important tool for promoting value for money in government spending.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Frameworks

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks refer to structured systems that are put in place for the purposes of monitoring, assessing, and enhancing performance of policies, projects and programs. M&E frameworks supply decision makers with continuous information about whether the planned activities are taking place as envisaged and whether they have produced the desired results. Monitoring refers to the ongoing systematic gathering of information regarding inputs, activities, outputs and

immediate effects of these inputs and activities. Monitoring allows decision makers to track performance, detect implementation problems and make necessary adjustments. The main concern at monitoring stage is whether activities are taking place as planned and whether targets are being met. Unlike evaluation, an M&E approach is a periodically conducted examination of a policy or program's relevancy, effectiveness, efficiency, impacts, and sustainability. An M&E assessment is aimed at establishing the extent to which the implemented action led to expected outcomes, why certain results have been reached, and what could be learned to develop more appropriate policy actions in the future.

The elements of an efficient M&E system include objectives and expected results of the intervention; performance indicators; baseline data and targets; methods and mechanisms for collecting and reporting data; M&E roles and responsibilities; and feedback and learning processes. The concepts of CBA and M&E can be viewed as related tools for the practice of evidence-based decision making. CBA contributes to ex ante analysis by providing policymakers with the ability to forecast the results and potential implications of various policy options. M&E systems provide policymakers with information that helps assess real-life performance of the implemented policies.

CBA and M&E contribute to imparting credibility on policy decisions; increasing accountability in resource management; efficient allocation of budgetary and institutional resources; measuring policy performance and impacts; policy-related learning and adaptive management; and policy evaluation for further reforms. In modern governance, international bodies like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank (WB), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD), and the United Nations (UN) have been emphasizing that CBA and M&E are vital aspects of results-oriented management and evidence-based policy making. It is the combination of these two that ensures the effectiveness of public policies, both in design and execution, through evidence-based continuous improvement.

The Nepali Context: From Ad-hocism to Systems

Historical Legacy: From the “Parcha” System to Patronage-Based Decision Making

In the past, Nepal has witnessed a governance process characterized by centralized decision-making processes, informal influence structures, and patronage governance. Most of the public appointments, transfers, allocation of resources, and development activities depended on political contacts and informal recommendations known as the “Parcha” system. The practice meant that most of the decisions were based on political approval, contacts, and directives from powerful people and not necessarily on technical assessments and objective evidence (Lamichhane, 2020). This has been attributed to the existence of patron-client structures in the governance processes due to the fact that historically, Nepal was characterized by centralized state structures where the decision-making powers lay within the central political authorities. In this case, the formulation of policies and implementation of development programs was done without any assessment or evaluation of the situation using statistical data (Lamichhane, 2020). One of the challenges facing the governance reform process in Nepal is how to move from discretion and political decision-making processes to more institutional arrangements that emphasize evidence and monitoring.

The Federal Shift: Constitutional Transformation and Evidence-Based Local Governance

An important change took place following the enactment of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 when the country shifted its governance structure from being a unitary country to being a federal democratic republic. The Constitution established three constitutional tiers of government – federal, provincial, and local governments. Moreover, it formed 753 local governments, each with a broad range of powers relating to planning, budgeting, service provision, local infrastructure, education, health, and economic development (World Bank, 2020). Federalism brought about changes in governance by transferring decision-making power closer to citizens. Local governments became accountable for determining development priorities, preparing periodic plans, budget allocation, and delivery of public services according to their needs. Decentralization meant that there was increased need for evidence-based planning as local governments had to substantiate their plans and expenditures using demographic information, socio-economic factors, community consultations, and developmental assessments (The Asia Foundation, 2021).

Another example where the constitution contributed towards the institutionalization of governance mechanisms is through the encouragement of citizen participation, local accountability, and inclusive development planning. This was important because of the increased importance of using evidence in policy making as local governments would require data to prioritize their projects, measure the need for such projects, and assess their success (World Bank, 2020). On another note, the civil service has recently been under the spotlight as reforms have been undertaken to foster greater professionalism and performance. For instance, there is a proposal to pass a new bill titled the "Federal Civil Service Bill,

2024." As per its title, it seeks to create a professional, effective, and accountable civil service that can conduct evidence-based service delivery at all governmental tiers (Radio Nepal, 2024).

Legal Foundations: Good Governance and Transparency Frameworks

The shift towards evidence-based governance also receives support from the legal framework of Nepal, which includes Good Governance (Management and Operation) Act 2008. This legislation has been passed with an aim to foster transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, integrity, and efficiency in the sphere of public administration (Nepal Law Commission, 2008). According to the preamble of this Act, public administration should be oriented towards serving citizens and should be characterized by accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and participation (Nepal Law Commission, 2008). Moreover, according to Section 3 of this Act, all administrative functions must be carried out in accordance with good governance principles across the country (Nepal Law Commission, 2008). The Act provides for such good governance principles as rule of law; transparency; accountability; professional ethics and integrity; decentralization; public participation; responsiveness; and inclusiveness (Nepal Law Commission, 2008). It is especially important that the Act promotes such important principles of good governance as transparency and procedural accountability. Specifically, the Act requires that public officials adopt decisions based on prescribed procedures, explain their administrative decisions, and ensure accessibility and understandability of decisions taken (Lamichhane, 2020).

Moreover, there is a provision of Right to Information Act 2007, Public Procurement Act 2007, and Local Government Operation

Act 2017 which ensures access to information, transparency in government expenditure, participatory practices of citizens, and accountability in local governance thus creating institutional environments conducive to evidence-based governance (Lamichhane, 2020). Thus, the development of governance in Nepal has been towards formalization from informal practices of patronage through establishment of an organized system based on constitutional federalism, accountability through law, transparency, and evidence-based governance. Though there have been implementation challenges, but nevertheless, the process of constitutional reform in 2015, civil service reform, and good governance principles altogether can help make the transition to evidence-based governance in public administration.

Examples of EBDM in Action in Nepal

Federal Civil Service Reform and Merit-Based Administrative Restructuring (2025–2026 Bill Process)

One of the current examples of evidence-informed governance in Nepal is the Federal Civil Service Bill development initiative, an attempt at professionalizing public administration in the context of the newly formed federal system of governance. The bill was passed by the House of Representatives in 2025, then continued progressing through the National Assembly, having undergone several amendments and incorporating provisions concerning retirement age, recruitment ratio, cooling-off periods, and other reforms (Kathmandu Post, 2025a; Kathmandu Post, 2025b). The reform seeks to establish greater professionalism in civil service by promoting merit-based recruitment practices and preventing political interfering in administrative affairs. At the same time, the reform entails structural changes, such as establishing a framework for performance agreements between top-level officials and competency-based staff requirements. These

provisions are supposed to improve performance indicators and contribute to results-based management in line with increasing the influence of evidence over administrative decision-making processes (World Bank, 2020). This is an example of EBDM via evidence-informed institutional reform based on performance assessments and federal implementation needs.

Integrated Data Management System (IDMS) in Local Government Planning

The application of EBDM can be seen very clearly in practice through the use of IDMS that is utilized by some cities and municipalities such as Birgunj Metropolitan City and Lekbeshi Municipality. It was introduced to deal with the problem of fragmentation of administrative data to enhance evidence-based planning. The IDMS brings together different municipal sectors' data such as population, health, education, infrastructure, and financial information into one integrated digital database. With such a digital database, local governments are able to produce data visualization dashboards and analytical reports on their planning and budgeting activities related to development projects (Open Knowledge Nepal, 2023).

An example would be how the municipality of Lekbeshi uses IDMS to compile sectoral data to identify areas that require investment in infrastructure. Such a process eliminates the element of subjectivity in decision making and budgeting process (Open Knowledge Nepal, 2023). Here we see an example of moving away from conventional methods of municipal governance to more data-driven planning and budgeting processes.

Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) in Public Health Policy

One of the best illustrations of evidence-based policymaking in Nepal is represented by the application of Nepal Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS), regularly carried out by the Ministry of Health and Population together with external stakeholders. NDHS surveys generate nationally representative data on fertility and mortality rates, maternal health, child health, nutrition, and access to medical care. The information gathered through NDHS surveys is widely applied by researchers and decision-makers to reveal health inequities and design appropriate interventions. For example, using data generated by NDHS surveys, it was established that there are large differences in childhood immunization among wealth quintiles and levels of maternal education, which became the basis for designing interventions addressing the problem (Acharya et al., 2019).

Likewise, findings based on NDHS surveys are used to develop interventions aimed at addressing such areas as maternal health, family planning, and nutrition. The longitudinal evidence provided by NDHS surveys allows comparing the situation in different time periods and assessing the progress achieved (Ministry of Health and Population [Nepal], 2022). This case represents a good illustration of EBDM institutionalization, with policy being shaped based on systematic evidence.

Digital Transformation and AI

National AI Policy (2025/26): Emerging Role of Predictive Analytics in Governance

The adoption of digital governance by Nepal has been increasingly integrating AI and data analytics in public financial management and inter-administrative coordination processes. The upcoming

National AI Policy (2025/26) will be a landmark initiative towards institutionalizing AI technology in governmental affairs to enhance efficiency and predictability, and evidence-based decision-making within governmental organizations. While the policy is still nascent and in the process of implementation, the strategic directions that have been laid out in the policy indicate the application of predictive modeling in important ministries like the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA). In the Ministry of Finance, predictive algorithms are being employed in tasks like revenue forecast, expense tracking, and macroeconomic forecasting using past financial information.

In the same vein, MoFAGA has been considering the use of analytical systems to improve fiscal transfers between government institutions, performance of local governments, and efficiency in service delivery. The goal is to enhance the accuracy of planning and minimize resource allocation inefficiencies through evidence-based forecasting systems. This is consistent with the current global practice of using AI-enabled analytics by governments for the purpose of policy simulations and risk assessment among other things, leading to evidence-based decision making (OECD, 2021; World Bank, 2021).

The Open Data Movement in Nepal: Strengthening Transparency and Research Access

The use of open data as part of digital transformation in Nepal can be described as an essential pillar because it is designed to support evidence-based policy formulation. The concept involves releasing of government data to members of the public, researchers, civil society, and even those from the private sector in machine-readable forms. Important institutions such as NSO and different ministries have started releasing different sets of data covering issues such as demographics, health, education,

agriculture, and finance among others. Platforms such as National Data Portal, besides other specialized data systems, are intended to foster transparency, independent research, and greater accountability in public administration. The provision of data promotes the ability of researchers and policymakers to carry out independent analyses and verify data claims as well as provide alternatives for improving policies. Collaboration is fostered between the government and different external stakeholders such as universities, think tanks, and developmental agencies. Open data ecosystems play a critical role in enhancing governance results through improved transparency, innovation, and evidence-based decision-making, according to the World Bank (World Bank, 2022).

With regard to the implementation of an open data policy, Nepal can benefit greatly from such policies in the context of its federal structure, which will enable municipalities and provinces to easily have access to standardized datasets for decision-making. Nevertheless, some problems might still occur, including the fragmentation of data, poor interoperability, inconsistencies in data quality, and the unwillingness of organizations to share their datasets.

Challenges and Barriers

Although there is an increasing interest in EBDM in the governance processes of Nepal, a number of obstacles have been encountered in adopting EBDM effectively. They include political considerations conflicting with technical evidence, poor data collection systems, and lack of analysis skills within government agencies.

Political Interference: Evidence vs. Political Expediency

Among other factors that hinder EBDM in Nepal, political interference in administrative and policy-making process is one

of the major ones. Policy decisions made by the government of Nepal are frequently dictated by political gain in the short term, by electoral considerations and political influence. Thus, there appears to be a contradiction between political expediency that implies visible and immediate gains for electorate and an evidence-based approach that entails long-term thinking and technical considerations. It can happen so that despite the availability of solid evidence, it might be selectively considered or completely ignored due to certain political and electoral reasons. Research conducted regarding governance in Nepal reveals that politicization of the bureaucracy and frequent changes in the personnel of decision-makers affect policy stability and evidence-based decision making (World Bank, 2020; Asian Development Bank, 2022).

One example where evidence seems not to matter at all in the face of political expediency concerns the Melamchi Water Supply Project, "a National Pride Project" aimed at the diversion of 170 million litres of water each day using a 26-kilometer tunnel. This project was intended to mitigate water shortages in the valley of Kathmandu that have persisted for many years. Though the project saw almost 30 years of delay on account of administrative difficulties, a real crisis arose in 2020-2021 during its implementation. Namely, by the middle of 2020, the key part of the project – a diversion tunnel – was finally put in place. However, under strong political and public pressure, the managers of the project were compelled to deliver water to the taps of Kathmandu right away. Yet, in accordance with international engineering practices, any large tunnel for water security requires gradual filling in the course of careful testing, when all variations in pressure need to be monitored. In addition, it should be noted that the bulkhead gates for controlling the pressure of the diverted water should be properly tested as well before full implementation. Nevertheless, political urgency took precedence over scientific facts. The

political authorities demanded immediate and spectacular proof of tangible progress. On July 14, 2020, the tunnel was quickly flooded. As a result of insufficient testing of the gate according to the usual standards of safety, the essential gate failed within the tunnel. The ensuing gush of water led to the destruction of a vehicle, death of two project employees, including a top engineer, and long-term system shutdown. However, ignorance of the scientific facts did not end with the accident associated with the operation of the tunnel. The independent geologists and scientists had been warning for decades about the vulnerability of the headworks site at Ambathan to disastrous natural events. Nevertheless, such warnings were regarded as minor matters as compared to the need to proceed with the implementation of the current engineering project. Indeed, the dramatic consequences followed shortly after June 2021 when massive flash flooding hit the Melamchi river basin just a few months after the water arrived in Kathmandu through a temporary arrangement. The disaster entailed burying the head works in meters of mud and rubble, damaging bridges, and making the permanent infrastructure useless for future monsoons. The project is therefore left with no other option but to redesign its intake structure completely and at huge costs.

Data Integrity and the “Silo Effect” in Government Systems

Data quality and its availability, integrity, and integration into systems within governmental organizations remain another serious problem. On the local level, there are issues with poor systems for collecting, analysing, and reporting data which impacts the effectiveness of planning and evaluation. One more crucial aspect concerns the problem of the so-called “silo effect” when ministries, departments, and local administrations use their databases which are incompatible and not integrated. According

to The World Bank, data systems in the country are still undergoing development and need better integration, standardization, and implementation of technological solutions to improve decision-making (World Bank, 2021). In such a way, the lack of good data systems prevents the decision makers from working effectively and obtaining necessary and reliable information.

The “Bring Your Own Paper” Paradox present in Nepali bureaucracy demonstrates how the absence of government data integration causes inconvenience to citizens. An applicant seeking a driving license, passport, and national identity card will have to provide similar biometric details and documents concerning their citizenship, but to separate government bodies. Despite being from the same government, the system run by the Ministry of Home Affairs in respect to the verification of citizenship and national identities and the system used by the Department of Transport Management for issuance of driving license do not facilitate the sharing of data through any mechanism. Therefore, while information may easily be verified using technological means, manual verification is sometimes needed due to the inability of the systems to work harmoniously, thereby creating additional work and causing inconvenience for citizens.

Capacity Gaps: Limited Data Literacy in Public Administration

Another issue is related to the limited ability of public officials to make sense out of available data. Senior officials working within government agencies are typically well versed in analog approaches in terms of administrative procedures and methods of decision making based on experience rather than the application of digital technologies and the analysis of statistical data. The difference in approach to administration is the gap between analog governance and the functioning principles of modern

digital governance that rely heavily on statistical skills, data literacy, and the interpretation of predictive analytics. According to the results of OECD governance assessment, successful implementation of evidence-based decision-making depends on two factors – availability of data and institutional capacity to utilize it in a proper way (OECD, 2017). In Nepal, the latter factor suffers from limited training in data analysis, lack of evidence incentives, and absence of technical personnel capable of using statistical information to improve decision-making. Limited capacity to implement evidence-based policy-making becomes apparent at the local governance level where new institutions created as a result of federalism are lacking adequate human and professional resources.

A key hurdle faced when implementing data-driven governance in local government organizations stems from the understanding of data as a protected administrative commodity instead of an openly available resource for the community's use. Fieldwork by Accountability Lab Nepal in the training pilot sessions brought into the spotlight a "misconception of data ownership" among government officials who preferred locked-down file formats. An anonymous participant said that "public data should not be in forms that others can easily manipulate," showing that the preference was for un-editable file formats such as PDF, which is non-editable and difficult to analyse, as opposed to machine-readable CSV and JSON files (Accountability Lab Nepal, 2024). This shows that the defensive attitude to information management within a bureaucratic environment means that the move to implement true data-driven governance cannot succeed until there is a change in how local government officials view data.

Summary of Limitations for EBDM

However, despite the significance of using evidence in decision making, it alone cannot be taken as a sufficient solution to all

challenges of policymaking. It is not true that any evidence leads to better decision making due to political, institutional, organizational, and interpretive considerations involved in its use. Thus, EBDM should be considered a political and institutional endeavour rather than a technical process as it involves producing, selecting, interpreting, and applying the evidence in specific contexts (Head, 2016).

The first limitation is that evidence could be disregarded, selectively used, or even exploited. Political considerations could cause policymakers to utilize certain kinds of evidence to pursue their goals while disregarding other evidence. In such circumstances, the key question becomes "Whose evidence counts?" The evidence presented by governmental institutions, international organizations, scientists, and citizens could be considered differently depending on their political status. According to Pawson (2006), evidence cannot be separated from the context where it is produced and used; the meaning of evidence emerges in social, political, and institutional settings.

This constraint is especially applicable in the case of Nepal, which is characterized by complicated politics in governance. While there may be sound evidence on an issue, the evidence does not necessarily ensure that the issue gets enough policy consideration if doing so brings about political costs. For instance, there is ample data available through the nationally representative survey known as the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), concerning maternal health, nutrition, fertility, and health inequalities. Nonetheless, while this information exists, it does not necessarily mean that the politically challenging issues are given sufficient policy consideration (Ministry of Health and Population [Nepal], 2022).

The other limitation lies in the premise that more data will lead to more informed decision-making. Data could be incomplete, outdated, misinterpreted, or acquired from weak institutional frameworks. Evidence available to the municipalities in Nepal may have been compromised by factors such as poor data quality at the local level, disjointed information systems, and inadequate analysis capabilities. A municipality could have lots of data yet lack the capability to analyse trends and priorities. Hence, evidence-based governance not only requires data but also an ability to analyse it correctly and apply it properly (Head, 2016).

Moreover, evidence itself could be non-neutral. Various methodologies, criteria, and analysis frameworks may give rise to different interpretations of the same evidence. A policy intervention could be technically efficient based on cost-benefit analysis; however, there might be issues of inequity, exclusion, or sustainability. Hence, the policymakers are expected to weigh the technical evidence against ethical considerations, local wisdom, democratic values, and stakeholder views. Indeed, as stated by Head (2016), evidence-informed decision-making is an interaction of research evidence, political judgement, and practice.

Future Directions and Recommendations

Institutionalizing Research and Strengthening Evidence Institutions

An important future direction that could make evidence-based decision making stronger in Nepal is the institutionalization of research into national policy-making processes through the establishment of effective institutions. The National Planning Commission (NPC) of Nepal plays a vital role in formulating national policies, preparing development plans, and prioritizing projects in the country. Improvements in the capacity and effectiveness of the NPC as a body that conducts research,

gathers data, and coordinates national development processes will greatly increase the quality of evidence gathered for national planning. Another institution whose role is instrumental to the capacity of civil servants in implementing public policies in Nepal is the Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC). Increasing the effectiveness of the role played by NASC in developing capacities through research, training, and policy advice would help to narrow down the gap between academic research and administrative decision-making process. Evidence-informed governance studies have noted the importance of well-functioning intermediary institutions in providing the necessary policy inputs from research findings (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2021). The integration of the policy cycle with academic institutions and think-tanks will help to systematically incorporate the results of scientific research in the processes of policy formulation and review.

Incentivizing Data Use and Performance-Based Governance

The other aspect is the linking of evidence utilization with incentive structures within the administration itself. There are numerous instances where the collection and processing of data are merely considered procedural measures within any government system including Nepal. Therefore, the future reforms within the civil service can incorporate an element wherein the officials' careers or performance evaluations are linked to their effective use of evidence when designing policies or implementing them. It may include promotion opportunities and career advancement for those who make effective use of data in policy making, implementing the projects that have been monitored successfully, and achieving concrete outcomes from such initiatives. It is a similar reform strategy being adopted worldwide to strengthen the public sector through results-based management performance systems (World Bank, 2020).

Citizen-Sourced Evidence and Participatory Data Systems

One promising development in the field of evidence-based governance is citizen-provided data through digital and mobile platforms. The idea behind it is that citizens are not merely consumers of services provided by government but are active participants in generating governance data ecosystems. Citizen-provided evidence may include live reporting of service delivery problems, infrastructure deficiencies, public health challenges, environmental changes, and even assessments of governance performance at different levels. Live-reporting systems, grievance platforms, and participatory mapping techniques can serve as valuable sources of data to be used by governments along with more formal information systems for administrative purposes. International practice shows that the use of crowdsourced data can bring considerable advantages to service provision by increasing responsiveness, transparency, and accountability as long as proper verification of the collected data is performed (World Bank, 2022). In Nepal, scaling up such systems at the municipal and provincial level may positively impact the process of local governance in the federal context. However, there is a number of key concerns related to the process of using citizen-provided data.

EBDM Readiness Checklist for Nepalese Public Institutions

The list that follows below can be considered as an example of a simple check list for the purpose of measuring the preparedness of a ministry, department, or local government organization for adopting EBDM. It does not serve as a measurement or diagnostic instrument. Rather, it should be used as a reflection tool for identifying weaknesses in order to improve upon them. Five major dimensions are covered in the list.

Table 1: EBDM Readiness Checklist

S.N.	Assessment Questions	0 Points (Not/Weakly)	1 Point (Partially)	2 Points (Well)	Score
1	Is there a consistent process for obtaining reliable performance data?	Negligible and infrequent	Rarely complete or consistently updated	Data systems in place with up-to-date performance data	
2	Do leaders have basic skills and knowledge about data analysis and interpretation?	Unskilled in data analysis and interpretation	Skills or occasional training available	Skilful at analyzing and interpreting data	
3	Are policies made based on evidence obtained from research, monitoring, or evaluations?	Policies mainly based on personal experience or instructions	Evidence occasionally used in planning and reviewing policies	Evidence-based approaches consistently employed in policy making and implementation	
4	Is there an effective data system with interconnected systems and procedures?	Data systems not linked together	Some systems integrated and information shared	Sound systems for data sharing and interlinking in place	

S.N.	Assessment Questions	0 Points (Not/Weakly)	1 Point (Partially)	2 Points (Well)	Score
5	Is there a culture of performance measurement and lessons learned in improving future programs?	Monitoring is limited to compliance and reporting	Some evidence of performance monitoring, evaluation, and lessons learned	Regularly monitored, evaluated, learn, and improve based on performance results	

Table 2: Scoring Interpretation

Total Score	EBDM Readiness Level	General Interpretation
0–2 points	Ad hoc	Decision-making occurs primarily through experience, administrative procedure, or pressing considerations.
3–4 points	Emerging	There is some practice of evidence-based policy, but there is no consistency to its implementation, which relies solely on individuals or particular projects.
5 points	Integrated	The collection, analysis, and application of evidence have become integral components of decision-making processes.

Conclusion

EBDM represents a paradigmatic change in governance in Nepal from a traditional discretionary approach towards a regime that relies on empirical evidence and performance measures. The need for this approach has become imperative since the country is transitioning from a traditionally centralized form of governance to a federal system that calls for improved institutions, transparency, and accountability. The progress in the governance domain in Nepal demonstrates that there is greater recognition of the importance of evidence in the process of decision-making through constitutional federalism, growth of local governance institutions, good governance laws, and digitalization. Tools such as demography studies, administrative databases, and evaluation systems have become essential for policy making and execution in Nepal. Yet, challenges such as political meddling, selective use of evidence, lack of coherent information infrastructure, and weak analytical capabilities pose problems in using EBDM. Future prospects for EBDM in Nepal involve strengthening the production of evidence as well as stimulating its demand. As far as the former is concerned, organizations, such as the National Planning Commission and various academic institutions, need to improve their skills and capacity for producing and disseminating relevant evidence. At the same time, creating incentives for political elites, public servants, and local governments to use evidence throughout their decision-making activities would help address the latter concern. The digital revolution and artificial intelligence can provide some ways to achieve the aforementioned goal by building data systems and using citizen-driven data. At the same time, this process needs to be governed by appropriate standards and capacity-building efforts. The role of EBDM in politics is to enhance, not replace decision-making. Evidence-based governance requires investments in organizational capacity, professional skills, data systems, and social legitimacy,

which implies a transition from haphazard decision-making to accountability and evidence-based policymaking.

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The Future of Work in the Age of AI in Nepali Civil Service

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the way people work across various sectors. Public sector is also not an exception to this with the surge of AI development, which has changed nature of work. AI is reshaping administrative processes, decision-making systems and public service delivery processes. Nepal has adopted federal structure with three tiers of government functioning at federal, provincial and local level. Thus, the civil service institutions in Nepal operate within a complex federal structure and evolving digital governance ecosystem, where the adoption of AI presents both opportunities and challenges. Literature argues that AI is more likely to augment public sector jobs rather than replace them.

This chapter examines the implications of AI for the future of work in Nepal's civil service, focusing on task transformation, organisational capabilities, governance, and workforce skills. It proposes strategic interventions to help Nepal's federal, provincial and local governments prepare for AI-enabled public administration.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Future of Work, Public Administration, Digital Governance, Civil Service Transformation

Introduction

The emerging dominance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has triggered profound debates about future of work in both the private and public sectors. Private sectors are exploring, developing and

utilizing AI to enhance their growth and productivity. Governments around the world are sceptic but are increasingly exploring AI technologies to improve administrative efficiency, policy analysis, and service delivery. The concept of 'AI-enabled government' has become central to contemporary public administration discourse with the application of AI affecting the multiple dimensions of public sector. Despite the advantage of AI application, it can also threaten citizens' privacy and social equity due to its potential biases(Al-Ansi et al., 2024; Y.-F. Wang et al., 2024).

AI technologies like machine learning, natural language processing, and generative AI demonstrated the potential to automate routine tasks, support in complex decision-making, and improve the quality of public services (Nikiforova et al., 2026). AI systems are proficient in accomplishing tasks done by humans in different sectors, including the analysis of data, administrative processes, and decision-making. AI can and have significantly changed how government employees perform their duties by enhancing analytical capabilities and supporting data-driven governance (Kulal et al., 2024). At the same time, use of AI introduces challenges related to ethics, accountability, workforce preparedness, and institutional capacity (Ancillo & Teresa, 2025). The OECD presents a vision for a flexible, rewarding, and forward-thinking public service. Governments must use a data-driven strategic plan to cope with uncertainty while identifying emerging leadership and digital capabilities to be forward-looking. Segregation of organisational divisions, facilitating remote work, and promoting a culture of constant learning through reskilling and upskilling are needed for flexibility, including the adoption of diverse employment models to attract specialized talent. The notion of the 'future of work' concerns the evolving dynamics among technology, employment, and organisational structures. The change here denotes alterations to tasks, required skills, operational procedures, and organisational culture. The

Government must be able to equate policies with this vision to support public employees.

AI is rapidly changing public administration globally. Governments now use AI to move from reactive policies to proactive, data-driven systems. This shift creates ‘smart governance’ that improves institutional efficiency and transparency. However, this transformation also introduces complex, ethical, and institutional challenges. Emerging policy frameworks now focus on balancing innovation with responsibility. These frameworks include tools like algorithmic audits, impact assessments, and multidisciplinary ethics committees. Ultimately, AI should serve the collective good and uphold human dignity (Fatmawati, 2025).

The question about future of work in civil service in the age of AI is relevant for developing country like Nepal. After the adoption of federalism in 2015, Nepal has expanded administrative responsibilities across federal, provincial, and local governments. Civil service is fundamental in the execution of policies, public resource distribution, and service delivery. In the circumstance with the increase in demand for governance conditioned to efficient, effective, transparent, and citizen-centric, the assimilation of emerging technologies has a great impact on how the public sector should operate in the future. Initiatives like the Digital Nepal Framework (DNF) and growing e-government services in Nepal underline the accelerating recognition of the digital transformation, though the integration of advanced technologies like AI is still in its early stages, as constraints have challenges in implementation with the inadequacy of infrastructure, regulatory deficiencies, and workforce. Civil servants must perform multiple functions such as policy formulation, service delivery, digital governance, and citizen engagement. Emerging AI technologies have the potential to support these tasks but also require new competencies, mental models, policy environment, business

practices, and institutional reforms. The current landscape represents a tension between high-level policy ambition and ground-level readiness. While the government has set goals to become a computational power exporter, the civil service remains constrained by infrastructure gaps and a pervasive skills shortage.

The UN envisions a move toward ‘invisible government’, which involves fully automated, data-driven services that require little human interaction. Success will depend on strong data security, private-sector collaboration, and a human-centred approach to technology (UN, 2022). This chapter examines how AI may transform the future of work in the Nepali civil service and discusses the policy and organisational reforms necessary to prepare the public sector workforce for taking the leverages for public service upgradation in the era of AI technology.

Conceptualizing the Future of Work in the Age of AI

AI and the Transformation of Work

AI is a transformative force reshaping global public administration. Governments are using it to boost productivity, responsiveness and accountability. Key benefits include automating repetitive tasks and providing personalised public services. AI also supports disaster management and enhances fraud detection in complex systems (OECD, 2025). AI represents a new generation of general purpose technologies that has capability to reshape economy and organization structure, comparable to electricity or steam engine in transformative potential (Mayer et al., 2025). Earlier waves of automation primarily affected manual and routine work, but AI has the potential to influence cognitive and analytical tasks performed by knowledge workers. Research shows that 30% of all works could find 50% of their occupation’s tasks disrupted by generative AI, which mainly includes computer and mathematical, office and administrative support, business

and financial operations, architecture and engineering, legal, arts, design, entertainment, sports, media and educational instructions (Kinder et al., 2024). The transformation of work by emergence of AI does not necessarily imply widespread job losses but can instead place people in more rewarding and higher value jobs. The integration of AI contributes to sustainable practices and entrepreneurial opportunities, enhancing business innovation and environmental efficiency by automating repetitive activities while enhancing human capabilities in more complex tasks. The workers from many fields have increasingly viewed AI as a value-added element in their jobs rather than a threat, particularly in sectors focusing on engineering, technology and sustainable development (Dwivedi et al., 2021; K. H. Wang & Lu, 2025). According to OECD policy brief, AI will transform job structures rather than eliminate entire occupations emphasizing on human-AI combinations, where technology functions as partner rather than replacement for workers (OECD, 2026). This concept is relevant in public sector, where many tasks involve judgement, interpretation, and interaction with citizens which activities are difficult to fully automate and replace by technology. It is essential to develop literacy on AI in the public sector human resources to foster innovation in service delivery which in turn can support the governance and sustainable development (Dhakal et al., 2025).

AI in the Public Sector Workforce

The adoption of AI in public sector is increasing globally. The integration of AI into the public sector workforce represents one of the most consequential shifts in modern governance system. AI technologies are being used increasingly in areas such as policy analysis, predictive analytics, public service delivery, fraud detection, document processing, risk monitoring and citizen engagement systems establishing data driven governance

system (Liang et al., 2025; OECD, 2025). The work adaptability of the public employees is improved as AI supports them to enhance creativity and manage complex tasks more effectively. AI is a cornerstone of digital transformation in the public sector. Governments are using AI to improve efficiency and citizen engagement. However, technology alone is not enough. Success depends on the ability of civil servants to use these tools ethically and effectively. The automation of administrative tasks such as document drafting, meeting summarization, and data processing with the use of AI allows civil servants to focus on higher-value activities such as strategic analysis and policy development (Zhang & Yu, 2025). AI algorithms can process vast datasets from public health records and environmental studies, identifying critical trends that might go unnoticed too, while generative AI can automate routine administrative tasks, freeing up workers to focus on more complex responsibilities (Deloitte, 2025). In tax administration, fraud detection, and citizen service delivery, AI-powered automation is reducing processing times and improving accuracy. Research on public sector jobs and automation reflects that AI tools can significantly increase productivity by reducing time spent on routine administrative work (Resh et al., 2025). Consequently, this reflects the future of government work is likely to involve collaboration between human expertise and AI systems before moving towards complete automation.

The Hungarian National AI Strategy (2021) highlights the importance of education and continuous learning. It encompasses training initiatives for managers and public officials via platforms such as the Pro Bono portal. Although Hungary has made strides, it continues to encounter obstacles, including a lack of ICT professionals and the necessity to tackle disparities in digital access. Ultimately, developing a workforce prepared for the future demands sustained investment. Governments need to

strike a balance between fostering innovation and implementing ethical safeguards such as transparency and accountability. By focusing on human-centred development, the public sector can ensure that AI contributes positively to society. This approach transforms public services into more resilient and inclusive institutions (Belényesi, 2025).

Emerging AI Applications in Public Administration

Governments across the world are experimenting with AI to enhance administrative capacity. The integration and use of AI in public administration can lead to significant improvements in efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Some of the major applications are:

Policy Analysis and Decision Support

AI systems have the capacity to process large datasets to generate insights for policy formulation. Governments are moving from reactive to proactive service delivery with the support of predictive models. These models can help governments to anticipate future economic trends, identify social risks, predict infrastructure maintenance needs, optimize public transport, and improve policy outcomes. By utilizing machine learning and natural language processing, policymakers can now identify early signals of public issues, simulate the potential impacts of various policy interventions, and perform rigorous evaluations before implementation (OECD, 2025). The AI-driven tools enable governments to transition from reactive management to proactive, formulate data-informed strategy by automating administrative tasks and uncovering subtle patterns such as economic trends or public sentiment that would otherwise remain undetected (Data to Policy, 2025).

Public Service Delivery

The integration of AI into public service delivery is fundamentally reshaping how governments interact with citizens, moving beyond simple efficiency gains toward more proactive, citizen-centric, and personalised service models (OECD, 2025; SmartDev, 2025). The government platforms are AI enabled to automate service delivery processes, which allow citizens to access government services efficiently and seamlessly. By leveraging tools such as predictive analytics, generative AI for document automation, and automated inquiry systems, public sector agencies are successfully streamlining bureaucratic workflows, optimizing resource allocation, and providing real-time responses to community needs (Deloitte, 2025; SmartDev, 2025; Snowflake, 2025). AI powered chatbots and virtual assistants provide instant reply to citizen inquiries and support administrative workflows like form-filling and service navigation, thus allowing the officials for more complex works (Mishra et al., 2024). The transition to AI-enabled services depends on ensuring that technology augments rather than replacing human judgement, fostering a culture of continuous learning and responsible innovation within government institutions (Ash Center, 2024; SmartDev, 2025).

Administrative Automation

AI systems can automate the routine tasks like document drafting, data entry, monitoring and compliance. In public sector occupation, AI could support 41% of administrative tasks making the work of the officials easy and reforming the work style (Kinder et al., 2024). AI tools such as intelligent document processing, chatbots, and robotic process automation (RPA) are increasingly deployed to handle tasks like form filling, invoice processing, scheduling, and email triage, thereby freeing civil servants to focus on more complex, judgment-intensive activities (Numerous AI, 2026; IBM, 2024; Deloitte, 2025). By analysing large

volumes of unstructured and structured data, AI also supports faster information retrieval, anomaly detection, and workflow optimisation, which enhances responsiveness and reduces errors in administrative workflows (OECD, 2025; IE Insights, 2025).

Data Driven Governance

Government generates and stores huge number of public records during the public service process. Records containing complex data sets can be analysed with the help of AI to identify data patterns, which supports evidence-based policy making for better governance. AI in combination with technologies like blockchain can be used to strengthen cybersecurity and ensure transparency in public data and services. AI techniques such as predictive analytics, natural language processing, and machine-learning models are being deployed to automate data discovery, classification, and lineage tracking, thereby improving data quality, security, and regulatory compliance across public-sector datasets (Lumenalta, 2024; Iniox, 2023; Coherent Solutions, 2024). By processing large volumes of real-time and historical data, AI-augmented governance systems support more accurate risk assessment, fraud detection, and resource-allocation decisions, particularly in areas such as public health, taxation, and environmental management (EPathUSA, 2025; SmartDev, 2025).

Implications for the Nepali Civil Service

Nepal faces major challenges in the use of AI. These include inadequate infrastructure, high costs, and lack of quality data. Ethical risks like deepfakes, misinformation, and job displacement are also significant concerns. To manage these, the government will enact new laws focused on data security and algorithmic accountability (Government of Nepal, 2025). Nepal has made strides in digital governance, advancing from a paper-based form

of governance toward digital governance through the Digital Nepal Framework (DNF), though issues of the digital divide, ethical AI adoption, and inclusiveness remain persistent challenges. Despite these challenges AI will have following implications for the Nepali Civil Service.

Transformation of Administrative Tasks

Nepal entered federal system in 2015 with three tiers of government at federal, provincial and local level. This demands repetitive administrative tasks at different levels of government. With the release of ICT Policy, 2015 and Digital Nepal Framework (DNF), 2019 the process of transforming administrative processes to digital has started. Despite various initiatives for digital transformations, many administrative tasks within civil service are still manual and digitally isolated. With the help of AI technologies there will be transformation in the way government handles the tasks of record management, procurement monitoring, budget analysis, citizen service request and policy drafting. Once the routine tasks are automated the civil servants can dedicate their time to policy innovation, stakeholder engagement, and program evaluation to leverage the public organisations strategically. Few examples on how AI can transform the administrative tasks in Nepal are as follows.

In the current government context of Nepal, the government offices at all tiers must maintain vast volumes of physical records that includes land records, birth/death registrations, tax records, meeting minutes, circulars and correspondences. These documents are stored either manually or in disconnected digital silos. Soon AI can be used for intelligent document scanning and classifications, where AI-powered Optical Character Recognition (OCR) can automatically read and extract key data fields from the scanned paper documents written in Nepali or English and file

them into correct digital category without manual entry. The use of AI can make search and retrieval smart, where civil servants can ask question in plain Nepali (e.g., “*Show me all citizenship dispute records of Lalitpur district from 2080.*”) and an AI system retrieves relevant document instantly. Not only documenting and searching, but AI will also help in automated archiving by flagging outdated or duplicate records. The system suggests archival or deletion actions based on government retention policies thus updating both the physical and digital storages.

Another use of AI can be in tracking and recording teacher attendance in local schools of Nepal. The traditional manual task done in attendance registers can be automated to reduce errors, inconsistencies and time-consuming data compilations. Schools have started using the Integrated Educational Management Information Systems (IEMIS) provided by Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD), Ministry of Education and Sports which is still evolving. AI can be introduced for intelligent automation where the biometric verification of the teacher and students is done with facial recognition, which can be touchless and the data can be directly integrated into a centralized system. The data can be used for anomaly detection where the algorithms analyse attendance patterns over time. If a teacher consistently arrives late, leaves early or has unusual attendance records, AI can flag these anomalies for administrative review. This helps to move towards proactive monitoring and intervention than simply doing record-keeping. AI can generate real-time reports on attendance, punctuality and leave patterns across schools, districts and nationwide which provides valuable insights for policymakers to understand teacher presence, identify areas needing support and allocate resources effectively. Eventually the AI verified data can be integrated with payroll system automating the salary disbursement process more accurately and reducing manual reconciliation effort and potential discrepancies.

Another prominent use of AI in Nepal can be AI-powered chatbot in the Nagarik App, which can guide applicants through the process, answer frequently asked questions, help fill out forms and provide real-time status updates. The Nagarik App is an integrated portal that acts as a unified front-end, which pulls data and services from individual ministry systems and authenticates citizens via a single login. In this the chatbot can be trained in standard operating procedures and documentation from each ministry. This reduces the burden on frontline administrative staff and improves applicant experience through intent recognition to map user's question to the correct ministry workflow, even if the user doesn't know which ministry handles it.

Changing Skill Requirements

The AI driven transformation of work in public sector will require new competencies among civil servants. Future public sector professionals will need skills on digital literacy and data analytics, AI governance and ethical oversight, critical thinking and policy analysis, collaborative problem solving and adaptive leadership. With the replacement of routine tasks by automation soft skills like creativity, communication, and adaptability becomes more significant skills for the officials to navigate complex work environment, foster innovation and build resilient and adaptable teams capable of thriving amidst technological change and disruption (Babashahi et al., 2024).

Organisational Transformation

Working environment is important to foster a new culture and technology. The integration of AI into the work process of public organization requires significant changes in organisational culture and institutional processes. Public organisations must transition from traditional bureaucratic structures into more adaptive and knowledge driven institutions. The organisations

should be ready for data driven decision making systems, digital workflow management, intergovernmental information sharing and collaborative governance models. Authority is no longer purely human-centric. Instead, it has become a ‘hybrid’ process. Humans and machines now work together in a collaborative decision ecosystem. This helps improve predictive accuracy and resource allocation. Yet, it also blurs the lines of traditional bureaucratic accountability and professional judgment. This is possible with the idea of learning organisations in government, where organisations continuously adapt to new technological and societal challenges.

Ethical and Governance Challenge

AI has transformative potential but its adoption in the public sector raises significant ethical and governance challenges like algorithmic bias, data privacy risks, lack of transparency and accountability gaps. Ethical risks are a primary concern. Algorithms may reflect historical social biases found in training data. This can lead to unfair treatment or discrimination against vulnerable groups. Additionally, machine learning models are often opaque. This ‘black box’ nature makes it difficult for citizens to understand or contest automated decisions. To protect public trust, governments must ensure ‘algorithmic accountability’ and transparency. There is lack of relevant data from marginalized communities like Dalits and Madhesi due to the digital divide created by economic conditions. Despite having constitutional rights, these communities are described as ‘digital ghosts’ without the tools, training, or data-laden background to engage with a society increasingly dominated by ICT and moving towards the use of AI (Biswokarma, 2022; Thapa, 2026). The algorithmic bias risk of AI can be observed here, where a community absent from digital systems cannot generate the data that AI models would need to serve them accurately, and is simultaneously unable to

access, contest, or benefit from AI-driven government services even where those services exist.

Accountability and Transparency

AI acts as a black box, which hides its decision making process and the derivative of the conclusion thus reducing trust and accountability of the system (Egwuatu, 2025). With the prominence of AI in government, it can influence the government decisions questioning the transparency and accountability. To maintain public trust government should ensure that AI based decisions are explainable and subject to oversight. The AI systems can perpetuate or magnify existing societal biases found in training data, which results in unfair treatment.

Data Governance

AI is heavily dependent on data availability and quality. Governments have their own policy regarding data infrastructure, interoperability, data privacy and protection so there is always challenge related to data governance. There is always risk of improper handling of sensitive personal information and potential surveillance abuse. Rapid technological advancement can outpace the development of specific laws for governing AI usage, creating compliance issues in data governance.

Institutional Capacity

Limited technical capacity, weak data governance and institutional resistance to change are major barriers to AI adoption in government (Nikiforova et al., 2026). Nepal needs to strengthen digital infrastructure and data governance frameworks for the successful and responsible adoption of AI in government. Government should have clear policies, frameworks, and ethical guidelines to incorporate AI in their work for which institutional capacity is must.

Preparing the Nepali Civil Service for the AI Era

Nepal ranked 150 out of 193 countries in the Government AI Readiness Index 2023, scoring just 30.77 overall, with weaknesses in the technology sector pillar (Oxford Insights, 2023). This indicates the necessity of government to respond to catch up with the changing global trend. Preparing the Nepali Civil Service for the AI era involves implementing the National AI Policy 2025, focusing on digital literacy, AI training to upskill bureaucrats for digital competence, and infrastructure development to enhance governance. Key initiatives include opening the National AI Centre, training thousands of professionals, and establishing ethical guidelines to ensure secure, transparent, and efficient public service delivery. Implementation is often hindered by governance capacity gaps. Many institutions lack the necessary infrastructure, funding, and skilled staff. There is also a heavy reliance on external vendors, which can reduce institutional autonomy. For AI to succeed, public servants must improve their digital literacy and ethical awareness. Nepal's public sector workforce faces the challenge of resolving the tension between leveraging AI to enhance service delivery and reduce bureaucratic inefficiency, while simultaneously investing in capacity development so that civil servants are equipped to work alongside rather than be displaced by intelligent systems. The 'National Commitment' by the government formed after the election following the Gen-Z movement further raised the stakes, declaring the IT sector a national strategic industry and aiming to export AI services within five years. Central to this new architecture is the AI Regulation Council and a National AI Centre, designed to ensure that adoption remains ethical, safe, and human-centric.

AI readiness at federal, provincial, and local levels

The foundational policy chain that has built up to current AI readiness level of Nepal are ICT Policy 2015, Digital Nepal

Framework 2019, National Cyber Security Policy 2023 and National AI Policy 2025. The AI readiness of Nepal's public sector is moderate hindered by skill shortage, inadequate infrastructure and regulatory constraints (Timilsina, 2025). The seven provinces of Nepal represent intermediate tier of AI readiness, considering the situation that provincial line ministries and departments mirror the federal structure. Provincial level institutions vary significantly in their digital capacity. Provinces with urban centers like Bagmati Province (Kathmandu) and Gandaki Province (Pokhara) have relatively better ICT infrastructures than provinces such as Karnali and Sudurpashchim, where internet connectivity and digital literacy are severely constrained (Bhatta, 2026). Nepal Telecommunications Authority (2025) reported that approximately 91% of Nepal's population has access to internet services. Due to geographical difficulty the reliability of services at hilly and mountain regions is always challenging, which is a direct constraint in AI readiness at provincial and local level, limiting the use of cloud-based AI tools. The lack of digital literacy among the target group directly hinders the benefit they can get from the digitised public services. There are notable differences in AI perception and preparedness between the federal and local level employees where local employees were less confident and less informed about AI's potential role (Mahat, 2024). The AI Policy 2025 released by federal government positively indicates the need for capacity-building programmes at all tiers. The practical challenge is translating that intent into funded, time-bound action at the provincial and local levels. As of now in Nepal there is the largest gaps at provincial and local levels in AI readiness, and the largest potential gains reside in those tiers.

Developing an AI-Ready Public Workforce

National AI Policy 2025 focuses on investing towards upskilling and reskilling the AI-related skills among the civil servants

through training. The civil professionals should be developed through continuous professional development programs focusing on digital literacy, data analytics and AI ethics. This will empower civil servants to use AI for data analysis and policy design; they can also use their skill in automating repetitive tasks like content extraction and fraud detection. Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC) can play a key role in developing AI capacity among government officials.

Strengthening Digital Infrastructure

To ensure effective AI adoption in government there must be robust digital infrastructure. National AI Centre officially inaugurated on 10 November 2025, by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology will act as a hub for AI advancement in government to boost digital transformation of Nepal and improve public service delivery. The digital infrastructures should include integrated government data systems, secure cloud computing platforms, digital identity and service delivery platforms.

Promoting Innovation in Public Administration

Innovation is a continuous process so government should create environment to encourage experimentation with AI through pilot projects and innovation labs. National AI centre must function as an innovation centre to refine the use of AI in public administration. Initiatives like this can help identify practical applications of AI in administrative process thus simplifying the process. At present government can start by using AI chatbots and virtual assistants to provide quick, 24/7 public information, legal aid and citizen feedback analysis. Also, government can plan to use predictive analytics in disaster management (forecasting climate, landslides and droughts), agricultural planning and health diagnostics. The increasing use of AI is a concern in employment and generation of new types of jobs for which the coming generation must be ready

Establishing Ethical AI Governance

Use of technology should align with democratic values and citizen rights. Hence, the public sector AI system should be governed by the AI governance frameworks to ensure transparency, accountability, and fairness in algorithmic decision making. This will create trust in the use of AI by the government among the citizens to foster further innovation. Before AI can be responsibly deployed in Nepal's civil service, there must be data protection act, which governs the method of citizen data collection, storage and use. At present, Nepal lacks the European Union's landmark type of data privacy and security law, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). At present there are Individual Privacy Act 2018, Individual Privacy Regulation 2020, National Penal Code 2017, Electronic Transaction Act 2008 and Data Act 2022 that governs data privacy in a fragmented way. The data privacy act is necessary to manage the protection and safe use of personal information held by public bodies or institutions, and to prevent encroachment on the privacy of every person. Currently, Nepal does not have a dedicated data protection authority or regulatory body responsible for administration and enforcement of privacy matters. This is a challenge in Nepal's civil service as there is currently no independent body to audit, certify or penalize the misuse of AI systems that processes citizen data. Deploying AI on top of an unregulated data environment exposes both the citizen and the state risks, which cannot be remedied by current system.

Future Scenarios for AI in Nepali Civil Service

Nepal is a young federal state that must overcome challenges to incorporate AI in civil service. The Nepali civil service can move towards transforming public service delivery through automated, data-driven governance and digital public service ecosystem.

Administrative Augmentation

The integration of AI can trigger a reconfiguration of the public sector workforce. AI system can automate the routine tasks of public administration to support civil servants and enhance their decision-making skill. AI can be used to analyse large datasets, make public service delivery efficient, and improve efficiency in tax and legal administration. Routine operational roles such as manual data entry, records management, and basic customer support face a high probability of automation. Civil servants are increasingly expected to transition from ‘doers’ routine tasks to ‘reviewers’ of automated processes, utilizing tools like generative AI tools to synthesize complex policy documents.

Data-Driven Governance

AI can be used to perform analytics on huge number of datasets from various public sectors that helps in policy formulation and public service management. It is transformative shift in public administration, offering the capacity to enhance efficiency, personalize public services, and improve decision-making through the automated analysis of vast datasets (Pusba, 2024; Sleepy Classes, 2024). Public sector can leverage the strengths of predictive analytics and digital tools to transform policy making process evidence based by reducing the operational costs. The data generated at government offices will be used to predict the service need and service delivery mechanism. Research suggests that for AI to contribute positively to public service delivery, governance models must evolve to prioritize data integrity and ethical oversight while addressing structural barriers like legacy IT systems and digital inequality (Criado et al., 2025; OECD, 2025).

Digital Public Service Ecosystem

The digital public service ecosystem is undergoing a paradigm shift as AI enables governments to transition from reactive,

siloes administration to proactive, integrated, and citizen-centric service delivery (ICTWorks, 2025; OECD, 2025). It is an integrated network of technology, regulations, and stakeholders including governments, citizens and the private sector that enables the delivery of efficient, citizen-centric services. By embedding AI technologies such as predictive analytics, natural language processing, and automated process management into digital public infrastructure, agencies can personalize service pathways, reduce bureaucratic friction through automated form completion, and optimize resource allocation based on real-time demand (Elastic, 2026; OECD, 2025; Torrey Harris, 2025). This ecosystem can form the backbone of AI initiatives to improve the public administration across federal, provincial and local governments. Yet the challenge is the digital divide that exists between Kathmandu and the rest of the country.

Conclusion

AI is not merely a technological upgrade but a transformative force. Rather than replacing human roles, AI is more likely to augment administrative functions by automating routine tasks and enhancing data-driven decision-making. This allows civil servants to focus on higher-value and strategic responsibilities. However, realizing these benefits requires more than technological adoption. It demands a comprehensive shift in skills, organisational culture, governance frameworks, and institutional capacity. Nepal's federal structure adds further complexity, making coordinated efforts across all tiers of government essential. While challenges such as limited infrastructure, ethical risks, and data governance gaps persist, strategic investments in digital capacity, continuous learning, and robust regulatory mechanisms can enable a responsible and effective AI transition. NASC can take the responsibility to enhance the capacity of government employees in understanding AI and its implementation in public services

through training. Further NASC can also be developed as Centre of Excellence for AI to support Government of Nepal.

The utilization of AI in public sector raises questions about its impact on employment, as automation may result in job loss and the need for public servants to acquire new abilities and training. An AI system deployed in Nepal's civil service today would operate in a legal environment with no enforceable data protection oversight. These systems would be trained on or interact with a population where rural and marginalized citizens are structurally underrepresented in the underlying data. This would risk inheriting and digitizing pre-existing caste and ethnicity-linked exclusion from citizenship documentation and service-access patterns that are already well documented in Nepal's own legal and human rights literature. This does not mean AI should not be pursued in Nepal's administration but it does mean that there has to be operational data protection authority with enforcement power, the rural connectivity gap has to be reduced that determines whose data and whose needs an AI system will actually see and the algorithmic bias towards rural and marginalized citizens has to be taken care of. Ultimately, the future of work in Nepal's public sector will depend on its ability to embrace a human-centred, ethical, and innovation-driven approach, ensuring that AI serves as a tool for inclusive, transparent, and citizen-centric governance.

Limitation

The discussion and ideas outlined herein are forward-looking and currently lack empirical backing. Consequently, the idea is preliminary and intended to stimulate discourse rather than serve as prescriptive guidance. Further investigation, supported by quantitative pilot studies, is required to validate these to derive specific findings in context of Nepal.

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