Informal Grievance Handling Practices in the Nepali Civil Service: Evidence from Civil Servant Experiences

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Public administration often reveals a clear gap between the formal rules and informal practices that govern daily organizational life. This study explores this gap through

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the case of grievance handling in Nepali civil services. Interviewed civil servants reported that grievances are addressed primarily through informal, verbal channels rather than written or institutionalized mechanisms. This reliance on informality is not simply a cultural preference but a calculated response to formal systems perceived as ineffective, risky, and subject to patronage. Leadership practices that dismiss grievances or justify inequities as "tradition" further reinforce informal practices and undermine efforts toward merit-based reform. The Nepali case highlights that informal grievance handling remains a neglected aspect of public administration, which weakens procedural justice and institutional trust, even where formal systems exist. These insights are also relevant for understanding similar challenges in other transitional contexts, including post-socialist Europe.

Keywords: civil service, grievance handling, informal communication, justice, Nepal

1. Introduction[1]

Grievance handling is an essential part of organizational justice and the foundation for trust in public institutions. When employees have credible avenues to express their concerns, civil service organizations benefit from higher morale, stronger commitment, and better performance. Conversely, when grievances are ignored or handled inconsistently, the results are predictable: frustration, reduced productivity, and declining confidence in the institution (Danku et al., 2015; De-la-Calle-Durán & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2021). Effective grievance systems, therefore, support both personnel management and the state's wider commitment to fairness, accountability, and responsiveness. This value has helped make institutionalized complaint mechanisms a notable feature of improved government practice (Hossain, Joshi & Pande, 2024).

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Yet, despite this importance, research on grievance handling remains largely shaped by studies conducted in high-trust administrative settings. Much of this work focuses on formal grievance systems, which highlights codified procedures, timelines, and due process safeguards as primary tools for ensuring fairness (e.g. Bohlander 1989; Elbaz et al., 2022; Fryxell 1992; Gordon & Fryxell, 1993; Haraway, 2002; Hunter & Kleiner, 2004; Naagar & Kataria, 2021; Naagar & Saxena, 2025). A common assumption in this work is that when formal rules function well, employees will naturally rely on them. However, this assumption is not universal. In many public administrations, informal practices such as interpersonal appeals, verbal negotiations, and dependence on personal networks remain central to how employees seek redress. These tendencies raise concerns about the accountability, predictability, and practical functioning of administrative systems (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lipsky, Seeber & Fincher, 2003).

Nepal provides a unique case for examining grievance handling in a low-trust administrative environment, where formal mechanisms exist but are often perceived as fragmented, weakly enforced rules, or uncertain in outcome (e.g., Askvik, Jamil & Dhakal, 2011; Bhattarai & Gupta, 2023; Gupta, 2021; Jamil, 2019; Khanal, Gupta & Bhattarai, 2022; Shakya, 2009). Nepal's civil service reflects a combination of modern administrative reforms and persistent informal norms (Shrestha & Paudel, 2019; Jamil & Dangal, 2009). Civil servants work in settings shaped by political influence and hierarchical relationships. Although the government has introduced legal frameworks such as the Good Governance Act (2008), the Civil Service Regulation Concerning the Conduct of Employees of the Civil Service (2009), and grievance handling initiatives such as Hello Sarkar and Hello Health, these mechanisms are largely designed to address citizen complaints. Internal grievance systems for civil servants remain underdeveloped and are scattered across agencies. This institutional gap encourages civil servants to rely on informal channels, particularly for issues related to transfers, training, and career advancement. Such behaviour is not merely an administrative habit but a rational response to systems that lack credibility, predictability, or protection. Institutional theory reinforces this interpretation, which notes that informal practices tend to emerge when formal institutions are perceived as inaccessible, ineffective, or unsafe (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

While the literature highlights the importance of grievance handling for organizational justice and performance (Behrens, 2007; Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Euwema, Van de Vliert & Bakker, 2003; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Fryxell, 1992; Gor-

don & Fryxell, 1993; Klaas, 1989; Nurse & Devonish, 2007; Sheppard, Lewicki & Minton, 1992; Walker & Hamilton, 2011), it is largely oriented toward high-trust administrative contexts and formalized grievance procedures. How grievance systems function in administrations shaped by patronage networks, low institutional trust, and persistent gaps between formal rules and informal practices remain less explored. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative inquiry into the Nepali civil service, focusing on how civil servants interpret, submit, and navigate grievances in their everyday administrative lives. In this context, the study seeks to answer the following research question:

How do civil servants in Nepal navigate, interpret, and express grievances in an administrative environment where formal rules and informal practices interact?

Answering this question provides new insights into how grievance handling functions in Nepal and in other administrative systems where formal reforms coexist with deeply rooted informal norms. The findings indicate that grievances are addressed primarily through informal, verbal channels rather than through written or institutionalized mechanisms. These findings resonate with broader comparative debates on organizational justice, informality, and bureaucratic behaviour, particularly in transitional and post-socialist contexts such as Croatia and parts of Central and Eastern Europe, where public sectors continue to grapple with strengthening the rule of law and merit-based governance (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). By examining how civil servants navigate, interpret, and express grievances in everyday administrative settings, this study contributes evidence to discussions of procedural justice and workplace informality, and shows that assumptions derived from high-trust environments often fail to capture lived administrative realities across diverse governance systems.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: section two reviews the existing literature, section three outlines the methodological approach, section four presents and discusses the findings, and section five concludes with implications, limitations, and further directions for research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Grievance Handling

A grievance refers to any dissatisfaction or complaint that an employee raises regarding their work or workplace. It may be formally presented to a supervisor or remain unspoken. Grievances typically arise when employees perceive treatment as unfair, unjust, or unequal, even when such concerns may not be objectively verifiable. In the civil service, grievance handling extends beyond a routine administrative procedure; it reflects organizational health, the quality of employee-management relations, and levels of institutional trust (Daud et al., 2013; Meyer, 1994). Unresolved grievances related to management policies, working conditions, or interpersonal conflict can lower morale, reduce productivity, and weaken both organizational performance and public sector legitimacy (Hunter & Kleiner, 2004). In contrast, effective grievance handling can strengthen trust, improve job satisfaction, and enhance institutional credibility (De-la-Calle-Durán & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2021; Onyebuchi & Eke, 2019).

Existing scholarship, largely developed in Western administrative contexts, has focused primarily on formal grievance systems (Euwema, Van de Vliert & Bakker, 2003; Gordon & Fryxell, 1993; Klaas, 1989; Lewin & Peterson, 1988; Walker & Hamilton, 2011). These systems emphasize standardized, transparent, and quasi-legal procedures for resolving disputes (Bohlander, 1989). The underlying assumption is that a well-designed formal system provides the most legitimate channel for employees to express concerns and seek justice, with failures attributed mainly to deficiencies such as weak communication, limited awareness, or inconsistent enforcement (Obiekwe & Eke, 2019).

However, this literature reveals a major blind spot: overreliance on formal grievance systems. In practice, many organizations, including the civil service of Nepal, rely heavily on informal, verbal, and relationship-based mechanisms such as interpersonal appeals, ad hoc negotiations, or decisions by superiors. While some studies acknowledge that a low number of formal complaints may reflect fear of reprisal or lack of trust in formal systems (Cortina & Magley, 2003), it has yet to be explored how informal grievance systems function or what their dominance means for fairness, accountability, and institutional trust. This issue is especially important in transitional and post-socialist administrations, where entrenched hierarchies, politicization, and fragile institutional trust often undermine the credibility of formal systems (Giljević, Lalić Novak & Lopižić, 2021; Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Koprić, 2019; Meyer-Sahling, 2004; Meyer-Sahl-

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ing & Mikkelsen, 2016). In such environments, informal grievance handling is not a step toward formal resolution but is often the primary and final method of dispute management.

This study addresses this neglected dimension by examining grievance handling in the Nepali civil service. Instead of treating Nepal as an isolated case, the study uses it as an analytical vantage point to illustrate how informal practices persist alongside formal administrative reforms. The Nepali experience highlights a broader comparative puzzle: the coexistence of formal rules with enduring informal practices in public administration. This coexistence is not unique to Nepal. It is also evident in several European contexts, including Croatia and other EU member states, where strengthening the rule of law and limiting informalism remain central objectives of public sector reform (Koprić, 2018; Koprić, 2019; Marčetić, Manojlović Toman & Lopižić, 2024; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016).

2.2. Grievance Handling in Nepal

People have legal entitlement to file complaints, express grievances, and seek redress or compensation when administrative decisions violate their rights (Navaratna-Bandara, 2013). A grievance redressal system therefore requires a functioning process for receiving, reviewing, and resolving complaints, one that is formally authorized and embedded in public institutions through law or regulation (Hossain, Joshi & Pande, 2024). Effective internal grievance redressal is a core element of modern, merit-based public administration. It safeguards organizational justice, supports employee morale, and helps identify systemic weaknesses in administrative practices. However, grievance handling in civil services presents a paradox. Nepal has invested in a relatively strong system for addressing citizen complaints. However, it lacks a comparable institutional framework for its own civil servants. This gap in legislation and procedure pushes civil servants to rely on informal channels.

The Government of Nepal's focus on external accountability is reflected in several legal provisions, including the Good Governance (Management and Operation) Act, 2008, which requires agencies to set up mechanisms such as complaint boxes and public notices to improve transparency and responsiveness to citizen concerns. Likewise, the Civil Service Regulation Concerning the Conduct of Employees of the Civil Service (2009) requires civil servants to handle public complaints responsibly. These provisions have been put into practice through initiatives like the "Hello Sarkar" hotline run by the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers, which has been replicat-

ed by other ministries (e.g. "Hello Health" at the Ministry of Health and Population and the "Hello Home Ministry Grievance Hearing Unit"). Some ministries have also introduced ad hoc measures, such as appointing nodal officers or establishing small grievance units. However, these efforts remain fragmented, lack uniform standards, and have no legal authority to deliver impartial or binding decisions. While these mechanisms can strengthen accountability to citizens, the mechanisms are primarily outward-facing and do not address workplace grievances raised by civil servants.

The absence of a comprehensive internal framework has been further reinforced by delays in enacting the Federal Civil Service Act, as mandated by the 2015 Constitution. Although a draft bill has passed the House of Representatives, its final adoption and implementation remain pending, which results in a prolonged legal vacuum in grievance redressal for civil servants. The contrast with the private sector is particularly instructive. The Labour Act (1992) provides employees with a structured, multistage process for resolving disputes, including bilateral negotiation, mediation through the Labour Office, and, where necessary, adjudication by a specialized labour court. Even collective grievances are governed by provisions for mediation, tripartite negotiation, and lawful strike action. The existence of such protections outside the civil service highlights a governance gap. While non-civil-service employees benefit from legally guaranteed grievance mechanisms, civil servants lack an equivalent framework under the Civil Service Act (1992). Consequently, they are often compelled to raise grievances informally with immediate supervisors. This reliance on verbal complaints produces inconsistent outcomes, fosters favouritism, and creates fear of reprisal, discouraging civil servants from raising legitimate concerns. Politically affiliated trade unions often step in to fill this void, acting as de facto grievance handlers for their members. Although they provide representation, their involvement politicizes administrative issues such as transfers, promotions, and disciplinary actions, where political loyalty often outweighs merit. This dynamic undermines institutional integrity and reinforces patronage networks.

Nepal's grievance-handling framework is therefore fragmented and imbalanced. It prioritizes citizen redress while neglecting the equally important need for a fair, transparent, and credible system through which civil servants can raise workplace grievances. This gap forces civil servants to rely on informal and political channels. Such reliance undermines administrative justice, weakens organizational effectiveness, and erodes employee trust. It is precisely this disconnect between formal institutional silence and everyday administrative practice that this study seeks to address.

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3. Study Method

A qualitative approach was used to explore grievance-handling practices in the Nepali civil service. This approach provided detailed, context-specific insights (Limb & Dwyer, 2001; Creswell & Poth, 2016) into how civil servants interpret rules, manage organizational expectations, and navigate procedures in real settings. Such depth is essential for understanding the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours (Gupta, 2019; Gupta, Bhandari & Manandhar, 2020) that shape grievance processes. Since qualitative inquiry captures complex social dynamics and the contextual factors that influence administrative behaviour, it is well-suited for analysing how grievance mechanisms operate in practice, rather than only how they appear in policy documents.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases. Five civil servants were chosen based on three criteria: (1) full-time employment as Section Officers, a gazetted officer position in Nepal's civil service; (2) a minimum of five years of continuous service, and (3) direct experience with administrative grievance mechanisms in central-level organizations in the Kathmandu Valley. The small sample size reflects the study's emphasis on depth rather than statistical generalization. Accordingly, the study does not seek to make broad generalizable claims; instead, it contributes to an in-depth exploration of grievance-handling practices within the civil service and their implications for organizational justice in public administration. This focus on detailed, experience-based accounts aligns with qualitative research standards that prioritize conceptual richness and thematic saturation over numerical breadth (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016).

Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their rights as research participants. Informed consent was obtained verbally during the initial telephone contact and reconfirmed immediately before each interview. Confidentiality was emphasized, and participants were assured that no identifying information would appear in any publications. To protect privacy, each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code (e.g., R1, R2), and all references to names, offices, and organizational units were removed from the interview transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on an encrypted, password-protected device accessible only to the research team. Participants were also reminded that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time. These procedures reflect established principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and ethical data management (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 1. *Interview Guide*

– Can you describe your current position and main responsibilities in the organization?
– How long have you been working in the civil service?
– From your experience, how would you describe the work environment in your organization?
– When you face a problem at work, how do you usually express it or raise your concerns?
– Can you explain why you prefer this method of expressing grievances?
– What, in your view, are the advantages or disadvantages of verbal versus written complaints?
– Have you ever hesitated to submit a formal written grievance? If yes, what factors influenced your decision?
– In your experience, how timely are grievance responses in your organization?
– How do organizational leaders usually respond when employees raise concerns or complaints?
– Can you recall a situation where leadership acknowledged a grievance but did not take meaningful action? What happened?
– Have you or your colleagues ever raised grievances related to fairness or equal treatment? What was the response?
– Despite challenges, what keeps you motivated to continue working in the civil service?
– Do you feel hopeful that grievance-handling practices can improve? Why or why not?
– Is there anything else about grievance handling or workplace concerns that you think is important, but we have not discussed?

Source: Authors.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted in Nepali, using a semi-structured interview guide and locations selected by participants to ensure privacy and comfort. The guide ensured consistency across interviews and included open-ended questions with follow-up probes aligned with the research question. It covered participants' experiences with grievance mechanisms, perceptions of fairness, organizational norms surrounding complaints, and perceived barriers to resolution (Table 1). The interviews were conversational in style, which encouraged detailed narratives and allowed follow-up questions to deepen the discussion where relevant (Gupta & Sigdel, 2024). With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Recordings were transcribed immediately after each interview, and transcription was treated as an early stage of analysis to facilitate close engagement with the data (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999).

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, a systematic method for identifying and interpreting recurring patterns across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012). The analysis began with repeated readings

of the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the data, followed by the generation of initial codes capturing meaningful concepts. These codes were then refined and organized into broader thematic categories reflecting shared patterns across participants. The themes were reviewed and adjusted to ensure internal coherence and clear distinction from one another. Throughout the analytic process, a detailed audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions, theme development, and interpretive reflections. Interview quotations were organized under the emerging themes and examined closely to generate meaning.

In addition to interview data, relevant policy documents were reviewed, including the Good Governance (Management and Operation) Act 2064, the Civil Service Regulation Concerning the Conduct of Employees of the Civil Service 2065 (2009), and the Labour Act 2048 (1992), among others. These documents provided complementary insights that helped contextualize and enrich the analysis of grievance-handling practices within the civil service.

4. Findings

The findings of this study are organised into six themes: primacy of informalism, arbitrariness of urgency, systemic neglect and arbitrary authority, performance of concern, normalisation of inequity, and conditional optimism alongside resilience of professional duty. These themes were derived from the interview data, as outlined below.

4.1. Primacy of Informalism: Verbal Grievances as a Default Mechanism

A key finding of this study is that grievance expression in the Nepali civil service is overwhelmingly informal. Most civil servants rely on direct verbal communication as their primary and often only means of raising concerns. Instead of using formally documented procedures, civil servants routinely voice concerns directly to supervisors or sometimes to colleagues. Informalism is not merely a matter of convenience. It shapes the entire grievance environment by influencing which issues surface, how they are interpreted, and whether they receive any action at all. As one civil servant noted:

> I usually express grievances verbally rather than recording them formally in the system. My colleagues and I rarely submit written complaints. Most

> grievances are related to transfers, training opportunities, and especially foreign training (Interviewee #R2).

This reliance on verbal expression is driven by a mix of institutional distrust, perceived risk, and sociocultural norms. Formal channels are widely perceived as bureaucratic, ineffective, and unlikely to produce timely or fair outcomes. A written complaint creates a permanent record, which many civil servants avoid due to fears of reprisal or being labelled as troublemakers in a rigid hierarchy. In contrast, verbal appeals are perceived as safer, more direct, and more adaptable to the dynamics of superior-subordinate relationships. Cultural preferences for face-to-face dialogue reinforce this tendency, offering an immediate, albeit often superficial, sense of being heard.

Issues most often raised verbally, such as transfers, domestic and foreign training opportunities, and promotions, involve high-stakes decisions viewed as discretionary and influenced by personal connections. Civil servants rely on informal lobbying and verbal appeals because they see formal mechanisms as opaque, weakly enforced, and incapable of limiting managers' discretion. Thus, the mode of grievance submission reflects not only habit but also a calculated adaptation to the perceived rules of the game. While verbal complaints provide a quick and accessible outlet for frustration, their dominance has corrosive effects in the long term. The absence of formal records keeps grievances invisible to the wider system, blocking the identification of recurring problems and preventing the collection of evidence for reform. It also entrenches a culture of discretionary power, where outcomes depend less on codified rules and more on managerial goodwill or political influence than on codified rules. Informalism may function as a short-term safety valve for discontent, but it ultimately undermines accountability, erodes trust, and obstructs the establishment of transparent and equitable grievance-handling systems.

4.2. Arbitrariness of Urgency: Timeliness as a Reflection of Perceived Legitimacy

The findings indicate that grievances can sometimes be resolved quickly. However, the timeliness of resolution is inconsistent. It largely depends on how management perceives the importance or sensitivity of a particular complaint. This dynamic produces a dual-track system in which some grievances are addressed promptly, while others remain unresolved for extended periods. This situation leads to widespread dissatisfaction among civil servants. As one civil servant stated:

> When formal grievances are registered, they are resolved quickly. Important issues are addressed promptly (Interviewee #R1).

Grievances are prioritized not according to transparent criteria but based on managerial judgment, which introduces subjectivity into the process. For civil servants whose issues are not deemed critical, delays are experienced not only as administrative inefficiency but also as a denial of legitimacy. One civil servant shared this frustration:

> I was dissatisfied because the grievance was not resolved on time, and the response I received was impractical. It was discouraging to see that the seriousness of this issue was not acknowledged (Interviewee #R5).

This experience shows that delays are harmful because they convey disregard. Late, dismissive, or impractical responses communicate a lack of recognition of the grievance itself. Civil servants interpret such responses as a devaluation of their concerns, which in turn weakens morale, lowers organizational commitment, and erodes trust in management. In this context, timeliness is not only a matter of administrative efficiency, but also a symbolic marker of institutional respect. A prompt response signals that grievances, and by extension, employees are taken seriously. Conversely, prolonged delays or superficial resolutions imply that the issue is not worthy of meaningful consideration.

4.3. Systemic Neglect and Arbitrary Authority: Institutional Barriers to Justice

The weakness of grievance handling in the Nepali civil service is not only procedural but also rooted in two interrelated barriers: institutional neglect and arbitrary authority. These forces create an environment in which scarce resources, fear, and subjective decision-making render the grievance process both dysfunctional and untrustworthy. The first barrier, institutional neglect, is characterized by chronic underinvestment and weak oversight. Grievance handling is not treated as an administrative priority, leaving it poorly resourced and inadequately supported. Moreover, existing oversight mechanisms often generate fear and risk aversion, rather than fostering meaningful accountability. As one civil servant shared:

> The organization is making efforts to find solutions, but progress remains stagnant despite attempts to manage finances. Monitoring bodies also create a sense of fear when dealing with them. A lack of resources and materials further contributes to these challenges, and in some cases, decision-making biases may also play a role (Interviewee #R3).

This testimony indicates that monitoring bodies are perceived less as supportive institutions and more as punitive threats. In such an environment, civil servants are reluctant to formally document problems, which reinforces a culture of silence, rather than encouraging problem-solving.

The second barrier is the arbitrary authority exercised by organizational leaders. In the absence of clear and enforceable procedures, grievance-related decisions depend heavily on managerial discretion rather than on codified rules. This undermines the foundations of a merit-based civil service. One civil servant described this experience as follows:

> At times, we are unable to work because of obstacles, delays, or unnecessary issues. In such situations, it does not feel like civil service to me. Here, the organization chief decides how to handle matters based on their own perspective, and whether their approach works for me depends on how I feel about it (Interviewee #R4).

The statement "it does not feel like civil service" captures a fundamental breakdown in bureaucratic norms. Instead of predictable, rule-based processes, grievance resolution becomes a matter of personal negotiation and subjective alignment. This environment fosters favouritism, inequality, and the perception that justice depends on relationships rather than on rights.

Systemic neglect and arbitrary authority reinforce one another through mutually damaging cycles. Limited resources and weak institutional support hinder the development of robust procedures, while the absence of such procedures enables leaders to exercise discretionary power with minimal oversight. This cycle erodes civil servants' trust, discourages the use of formal complaint mechanisms, and leaves structural problems unaddressed. What should function as a safeguard for fairness and accountability instead becomes a fragile and distrusted system, ultimately undermining the credibility of the civil service itself.

4.4. Performance of Concern: Leadership Inaction and the Erosion of Legitimacy

A key feature of dysfunction in the Nepali civil service grievance process is the lack of strong leadership and accountability. The problem is not only neglect but also the trivialization of civil servants' concerns and the failure to turn acknowledgement into action. This creates a cycle of frustration that delegitimizes the grievance system in the eyes of civil servants. The first stage of this failure is the dismissal of grievances as trivial issues. Civil servants repeatedly reported that their concerns were not taken seriously,

which signalled disrespect and invalidated their experiences. As one civil servant noted:

> The organization's leadership has been ineffective in addressing the grievances. Adequate support is needed to improve the situation. Too often, leadership fails to give grievances the attention they deserve and treat them lightly (Interviewee #R5).

Treating grievances "lightly" constitutes a subtle yet powerful form of administrative dismissal. Genuine concerns are reframed as minor or unreasonable, which shifts responsibility from leadership to employees. This reframing blocks resolution and fosters resentment within the organization. Even when grievances are formally acknowledged, they often enter a state of administrative limbo. Leaders express concern but fail to follow through. This results in performative accountability, symbolic gestures without substantive action. As another civil servant noted:

> The individual responsible for addressing grievances has not taken the issue seriously. This forces us to raise it repeatedly. These concerns are often acknowledged but implementing them remains a challenge (Interviewee #R2).

This cycle of acknowledgement without resolution is often more damaging than outright rejection. Initial recognition raises expectations, while continued inaction erodes trust over time, leading to cynicism and disengagement. The situation also exposes a breakdown in the chain of accountability, as no effective mechanisms exist to hold decision-makers responsible for unfulfilled commitments. Leadership inaction thus lies at the core of grievance-handling failures. When leaders trivialize complaints or defer them indefinitely, civil servants may perceive formal grievance mechanisms as ineffective and not worth using. Such perceptions leave grievances unresolved and may push employees toward informal or politicized channels, further undermining administrative integrity. Without a leadership culture grounded in transparency, responsiveness, and accountability, procedural reforms alone are unlikely to restore trust or legitimacy in grievance-handling systems.

4.5. Normalization of Inequity: Patronage as an Entrenched Tradition

Beyond procedural shortcomings, the grievance process in the Nepali civil service is further weakened by deep inequities, particularly in the allocation of scarce opportunities for career advancement. Grievances in this

area are not merely individual disputes but challenges to entrenched systems of patronage that senior leaders often defend as tradition. The most common and contentious complaints concern access to foreign training and professional development opportunities. Civil servants widely view the selection processes for these opportunities as opaque and biased, which reinforces the belief that advancement depends more on personal connections than on merit. As one civil servant stated:

> Every individual deserves equal consideration for opportunities related to foreign training and visitation. Authorities responsible for decisions should ensure fairness and equity when granting such opportunities (Interviewee #R1).

This call for fairness reflects a demand for transparent, rule-based decision-making. When clear criteria are absent, every decision appears suspect, which erodes morale and undermines trust in the institution. These experiences suggest that formal rules play a secondary role to informal power structures in shaping outcomes. What makes this dynamic particularly corrosive is the reaction of leadership when inequity concerns are raised. Leaders often dismiss fairness-related grievances as illegitimate challenges to long-standing organizational norms, instead of addressing the substance of the concerns. As one civil servant recalled what senior officials often say:

> Why focus on this topic? Our organization has always worked this way. Why question practices that have existed for so many years? (Interviewee #R5).

Such responses do not deny the existence of inequity; rather, they legitimize it by presenting patronage as tradition. In shifting scrutiny from decision-makers to complainants, leadership reinforces entrenched privileges and silences dissent. Recasting concerns about fairness as disruptions discourages employees from speaking out. The normalization of inequity thus emerges as one of the barriers to a functional grievance system. When leaders openly defend favouritism as tradition rather than confront it as abuse of authority, they send a clear signal that formal redress mechanisms are futile. This entrenches cynicism, weakens institutional trust, and reinforces perceptions that the system serves well-connected elites. In such contexts, civil servants see little value in formal grievance channels and instead turn to informal or politicized pathways, further eroding the integrity and legitimacy of the civil service.

4.6. Conditional Optimism and the Resilience of Professional Duty

In contrast to the widespread experiences of dysfunction, many civil servants expressed a cautious yet persistent sense of optimism. This optimism

does not reflect confidence in the existing grievance system, but rather faith in the broader mission of the civil service and its potential to resolve problems under ideal conditions. It reflects a form of professional resilience that endures despite daily frustrations. As one civil servant noted:

> The organization maintains a positive outlook, and the situation will become clearer if complications do not arise. In the best case, this will be resolved successfully. At times, circumstances may go beyond control, yet the organization will still respond positively (Interviewee #R3).

This testimony illustrates the paradox of hope amid persistent dysfunctions. Resolution is anticipated only under "best-case" conditions and in the absence of complicating circumstances that the findings suggest are uncommon. Optimism, therefore, does not arise from the grievance system as it currently operates, but from an imagined version of the organization that adheres to its stated principles. The reference to a "positive approach" despite uncertain outcomes reflects faith in the ethos of public service itself, distinct from shortcomings in leadership and procedures. Although fragile, this optimism is important. Many civil servants distinguish the institution's mission from its systemic weaknesses and resist complete cynicism. This residual faith motivates continued engagement with grievance processes despite their flaws and sustains hope for future improvement. However, such goodwill is finite. Repeated experiences of inaction, inequity, or arbitrary authority gradually erode trust. If left unaddressed, today's cautious optimism may give way to resignation and withdrawal from the profession. The challenge, therefore, is not to mistake optimism as evidence that problems are minor, but to recognize it as a critical institutional resource. Without reforms that replace passive assurances with transparent and accountable systems, this goodwill is likely to dissipate, leaving the organization vulnerable to cynicism and disillusionment.

5. Discussion

A key finding of this study is that civil servants in Nepal strongly prefer verbal complaints over formal, written submissions, a pattern that contrasts with much of the Western literature on organizational grievance handling. Existing research emphasizes how formal systems and the conditions such as timeliness, transparency, and fairness encourage employees to use official channels (Nurse & Devonish, 2007; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008). The underlying assumption is that when formal procedures are

well designed, and reliably implemented, employees will naturally rely on them. The Nepali case challenges this assumption. Interviewed civil servants indicated that their preference for verbal complaints is not a cultural remnant but a rational response to formal mechanisms widely perceived as ineffective, risky, and unresponsive. Civil servants pointed to fear of reprisal, the risks associated with creating permanent written records, and greater trust in face-to-face negotiations as reasons for avoiding formal channels. In this context, informality is not an exception to the system but the primary mode through which voice is exercised. This reflects deep institutional distrust and the discretionary authority embedded in a patronage-based administrative system (Berenschot, 2014; Grindle, 2012; Jauregui, 2014). Formal grievance procedures are perceived not as safeguards for justice but as potential liabilities, which reinforces civil servants' reliance on informal practices to manage organizational power relations.

This preference for informal grievance also has broader comparative relevance. Informality in grievance handling is not unique to Nepal or to the so-called "developing" administrative systems. Research on transitional and post-socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe shows that formal administrative reforms often coexist with long-standing informal practices inherited from earlier administrative traditions (Goetz, 2001). Studies from Croatia and other EU contexts highlight how personal networks, discretionary authority, and informal arrangements continue to shape personnel management despite the presence of formal procedural frameworks (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016; Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2020). These parallels position Nepal within a wider set of administrative systems in which formal and informal institutions function simultaneously. In such settings, informal practices do not merely undermine formal rules; informal practices actively shape how formal rules are interpreted, negotiated, and applied in practice. Focusing exclusively on the design of formal grievance systems therefore risks overlooking the unwritten norms, power relations, and strategic calculations that influence how civil servants raise concerns and how leaders respond to those concerns.

Another important finding concerns how senior leaders trivialize equity-related grievances. When civil servants raised concerns about unequal access to foreign training or professional development, leaders often reframed these issues as disruptions of established organizational norms. This defensive stance reflects what Helmke and Levitsky (2004) describe as institutional persistence, in which–patronage and personal discretion are justified as long-standing practices. Such resistance is not a minor

managerial shortcoming but an active reinforcement of informal orders that undermine the meritocratic principles. Comparable dynamics are evident in European administrations, where efforts to professionalize recruitment and promotion often coexist with informal practices that prioritize loyalty and personal ties over rule-based procedures (Meyer-Sahling, 2008; 2011; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). These similarities suggest that informal resistance to meritocratic reform is not limited to a particular context but represents a broader dynamic across administrative systems transitioning from personalized governance to rule-based administration. The Nepali case thus provides a cautionary example of how deeply embedded informal norms can blunt the intended impact of formal reforms. Informal practices persist not because they are invisible, but because they serve established interests and are actively defended by those who benefit from them.

The inconsistent application of timeliness further illustrates the discretionary nature of grievance handling. Grievances that organizational leaders deemed important were addressed quickly, whereas others remained stalled for long periods. For civil servants, this arbitrariness signalled not only delays but also the perceived illegitimacy of their concerns. While procedural justice literature rightly emphasizes the importance of timely responses (Gordon & Bowlby, 1988; Nurse & Devonish, 2007), it often assumes that timeliness is applied consistently across cases. The Nepali case shows otherwise. Timeliness becomes a discretionary tool that reinforces patronage, where access to a swift response depends less on the substance of grievance and more on the complainant's position within informal networks. Comparable patterns of patronage, personal networks, and administrative discretion are evident in several Eastern European countries, including EU member states (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). This raises a question of relevance across administrative systems: the critical issue is not simply whether grievances are resolved quickly, but whose grievances are resolved quickly and why.

These findings show that grievance handling cannot be fully understood by examining formal mechanisms alone. The Nepali case highlights the dominance of informal voice, the persistence of patronage justified as tradition, and the selective use of timeliness as defining features of administrative practice. These dynamics have comparative relevance for Croatia, other EU member states, and post-socialist administrations more broadly, where formal reforms continue to coexist with informal practices that shape the effectiveness and legitimacy of public administration (Goetz, 2001; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). The Nepali experience, when

viewed within this comparative landscape, demonstrates how informal governance practices manifest across different administrative traditions and why procedural reforms focused solely on formal rules often fail to reshape behaviour or ensure fairness.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that grievance handling in the Nepali civil service is shaped more by informal practices than by the formal procedures intended to regulate it. Civil servants rely on verbal communication and informal negotiation because formal channels do not offer clarity, protection, or predictable outcomes. Selective timeliness, uneven managerial responsiveness, and the defence of inequitable practices as tradition undermine trust in official processes and constrain procedural justice. In this context, informal routes become common and rational responses. Written complaints are often seen as risky, uncertain, and unlikely to lead to satisfactory resolution, prompting civil servants to pursue interpersonal and discretionary pathways perceived as faster and safer. Informality thus persists not as an administrative anomaly, but as a behavioural logic through which civil servants navigate hierarchical authority, uneven responsiveness, and normalized inequity.

The implications of these findings are clear. Improving grievance handling requires more than procedural reform or the introduction of additional rules. It depends on rebuilding confidence in formal mechanisms through consistent rule application, credible protection for those who raise concerns, and enforceable standards of managerial accountability. Strengthening these institutional conditions can encourage greater trust in formal channels and support a gradual shift away from reliance on informal grievance handling practices.

Although this study provides valuable insights into informal grievance handling in the Nepali civil service, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and identifying directions for future research. First, the study is context specific. It draws on qualitative data from central-level organizations in the Kathmandu Valley, which allows for in-depth analysis but limits broader generalization. Future research could extend this analysis to other regions of Nepal or to other post-conflict and transitional states to assess whether similar patterns emerge across different institutional settings, legal frameworks, and administra-

tive histories. Second, reliance on interview data introduces the possibility of cautious reporting or social desirability bias, given the sensitivity of governance-related issues. Subsequent studies would benefit from mixed methods approaches that triangulate interview data with anonymous surveys, document analysis, or experimental designs. Such designs could strengthen confidence in the identified themes and explore variation both within and across organizations. Third, the findings capture a specific moment in time. Informal grievance practices may change in response to political shifts, legal reforms, or changes in leadership. Longitudinal research could examine whether and how informal channels persist, adapt, or decline over time, and how these changes influence perceptions of procedural justice, institutional trust, and organizational effectiveness. Finally, this study focuses primarily on how and why informal grievance handling occurs, rather than on its longer-term consequences. Future research could examine the effects of informal practices on service delivery, employee morale, organizational performance, and reform outcomes. Examining the relationship between practices such as reliance on verbal complaints, selective timeliness, patronage norms and measurable governance indicators would help clarify whether informal grievance handling ultimately hinders or reshapes efforts to strengthen merit-based and rule-of-law-oriented public administration.

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INFORMAL GRIEVANCE HANDLING PRACTICES IN THE NEPALI CIVIL SERVICE: EVIDENCE FROM CIVIL SERVANT EXPERIENCES

Summary

This study provides insights into grievance handling in the Nepali civil service, revealing a system governed by a deeply entrenched informal order that overrides formal procedures. The findings show that civil servants rely primarily on verbal communication not out of cultural habit but as a rational response to formal mechanisms that are seen as ineffective and risky. Grievances about career opportunities, such as transfers and training, are particularly prone to dysfunction. Timeliness is applied arbitrarily, serving as a discretionary tool, whereas leadership often acknowledges problems without delivering solutions. In many cases, inequitable practices and patronage are defended as organizational "tradition",

blocking calls for fairness. These problems are compounded by resource shortages and a climate of fear linked to oversight bodies. However, civil servants express cautious optimism regarding the institutions' potential for improvement. The Nepali case illustrates how informal practices shape grievance handling in low-trust public sectors and provides comparative lessons on the persistence of informality and its impact on accountability, fairness, and reform in other transitional contexts, including post-socialist Europe.

Keywords: *grievance handling, civil service, informal communication, fairness, leadership, Nepal*

NEFORMALNE PRAKSE RJEŠAVANJA PRITUŽBI U NEPALSKOJ DRŽAVNOJ SLUŽBI: ISKUSTVA DRŽAVNIH SLUŽBENIKA

Sažetak

U radu se istražuje rješavanje pritužbi u nepalskoj državnoj službi te se utvrđuje sustav kojim dominira duboko ukorijenjen neformalni poredak koji potiskuje formalne postupke. Rezultati pokazuju da se državni službenici ponajprije oslanjaju na usmenu komunikaciju, ne zbog kulturnih navika, nego kao racionalan odgovor na formalne mehanizme koje smatraju neučinkovitima i rizičnima. Pritužbe povezane s mogućnostima razvoja karijere, poput premještaja i stručnog usavršavanja, osobito su podložne neučinkovitom postupanju. Prilikom postupanja prema pritužbama proizvoljno se odlučuje hoće li se pravodobno postupati što služi kao diskrecijski alat, dok rukovoditelji često priznaju postojanje problema, međutim ne osiguravaju njihovo rješavanje. U mnogim se slučajevima nejednako postupanje i patronažne prakse opravdavaju organizacijskom „tradicijom", čime se otklanjaju zahtjevi za pravednijim postupanjem. Te probleme dodatno pogoršavaju nedostatak sredstava i ozračje straha povezano s djelovanjem nadzornih tijela. Ipak, državni službenici izražavaju određeni optimizam u pogledu mogućnosti institucionalnog poboljšanja. Nepalski primjer pokazuje kako neformalne prakse oblikuju rješavanje pritužbi u javnim službama obilježenima niskom razinom povjerenja te pruža komparativne spoznaje o opstojnosti neformalnosti i njezinu utjecaju na odgovornost, pravednost i reforme u drugim tranzicijskim kontekstima, uključujući postsocijalističku Europu.

Ključne riječi: *rješavanje pritužbi, državna služba, neformalna komunikacija, pravednost, rukovođenje, Nepal*