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Afghan women on the campaign trail

Their roles as canvassers, voters, even candidates in the Aug. 20 election highlight some of the gains – and remaining challenges – facing women as the country moves toward democracy.

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KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

When Farzana Barekzai and her small band of female campaigners knock at the home of Ahmadin Pahlawan, he greets them and points to a poster of President Hamid Karzai above the door to assure them: His vote isn't changing.

Mr. Pahlawan didn't need convincing from the Karzai canvassers on a previous visit either, recalls Ms. Barekzai. Instead, the man with orange-dyed hair called the women of the house together and said, "You are going to vote for Karzai and these women will tell you why."

It's not uncommon for the male head of household to dictate a woman's vote – but neither is it universal.

"Not all families were like this. There were some families where women influenced husbands," says Barekzai. Besides, once in the voting booth, "it's only herself and her God."

Women's roles in the upcoming national elections highlight some of the gains – and many of the remaining challenges – facing Afghan women as the country has moved toward democracy.

"We have seen advancements in women's rights ... but what was agreed to and committed to has not been done," says Massouda Jalal, a former Minister of Women's Affairs. "A fundamental change has not happened in the national lives of women."

PROGRESS FOR WOMEN

Considering that eight years ago Afghan women were not allowed to venture out alone, just participating at all in the elections process marks progress.

Now, two women candidates are among the 41 running for president in Thursday's vote. Neither has gained any traction, but the issue of women's participation came up as one of the questions during a TV debate Sunday night.

"Women should not be considered the second sex," said candidate Ramzan Bashardost. One local Kabul man, Bismallah Ahmadi, said after watching the debate at a restaurant that it was his favorite line of the evening.

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

On the campaign trail, both Karzai and candidate Ashraf Ghani have reached out to women voters with special women's rallies. Thousands attended Karzai's rally in Kabul Thursday in which he claimed credit for opening girls' schools. Karzai also appointed the country's first female governor as well as female ministers.

Several women after the rally said they appreciated the focus on education, but complained that the salaries for teachers – many of whom are women – aren't enough to put food on the table.

"If Karzai were not here, we would not have the freedom to say all these things, but if Karzai is reelected, we want to have him work on these things," says Shakila Mohammad.

CONTROVERSIAL MARRIAGE BILL

Representative politics here hasn't always represented female freedoms.

In March, Karzai signed a marriage law bill for Afghanistan's Shiite minority that critics said essentially legalized marital rape. The pushback, both from the international community and Afghan women, forced Karzai to suspend enforcement.

But a revised version released last month appears little better, giving a husband the right to withhold food to a wife who refuses to have sex with him. Karzai then used a legislative loophole to pass the revision by decree.

MORE WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT?

For Ms. Jalal, the whole affair explains how the government is not "gender sensitive."

She had fought for years trying to pass a bill to protect women against domestic violence. Meanwhile, the Shiite marriage law sailed through parliament.

Most of the gains for women came early in the transition from Taliban rule, she says, and promises made internationally have since remained unfulfilled.

"This lack of political willingness can be solved if we have more women in the next government of Afghanistan," says Jalal, who argues that 50 percent of the positions should go to women.

A WOMAN'S STYLE OF CAMPAIGNING

The women who go door-to-door for Karzai seem to talk less about what Karzai will do and instead tell

personal anecdotes about how their lives are better than they were seven years ago under the Taliban.

One canvasser, Leeda Sadaat, convinced the manager of a Kabul hotel to switch allegiance from Mr. Ghani. Her list was practical – the drive from Kabul to the city of Shiberghan used to take 48 hours; now it's only nine. And when she was a refugee in Pakistan she had to pay for education, but when she came back to Afghanistan, it was free.

"I have influenced my husband and he will vote for Karzai, too," says Mrs. Sadaat, a computer operator.

TARGETING WOMEN VOTERS

Mostly, the women volunteers are not dispatched to talk to male voters. The precinct campaign directs male volunteers to reach out to influential people in the public square – in other words, men – while the women go out to the houses to influence those with private sway – the women.

Ten women volunteers work in Karzai's Precinct 8 office in Kabul. Each is assigned 50 homes to look after, paying multiple visits to each family. They especially pay a visit if they learn another candidate's workers have been courting one of the families on their list.

Gender separation seen in the campaign roles also plays out on the campaign trail. At a rally in Daikundi for Abdullah Abdullah, the men filled the bazaar, while women listened from a private square, hidden from view by sheets. A Karzai rally in a hotel ballroom kept the women sitting on the left and the men on the right.

But Karzai's Precinct 8 office happens to be headed up by a woman. Lailuma Naimzai, an obstetrician/gynecologist on leave to work for Karzai, manages a campaign team with male doctors, engineers, and businessmen working under her.

In the end, Dr. Naimzai wants what most Afghans – men and women – want.

"I want to bring some peace to the country," says Naimzai, explaining why she got into politics. "Karzai is a good person in that he brings peace, and brings a lot of clinics in the villages and hospitals to the city."

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