

A Hard Road to the Afghan Parliament

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A female candidate says that despite the risks, she hopes to win a seat and raise the concerns of Afghanistan's women.

Politics was not my first love. I graduated from law school in 2002, and then became a journalist. I joined the BBC and worked on a programme dedicated to women's issues.

It was while reporting for this programme that I began to see for myself the problems that women face in the more remote parts of my country. Travelling around all the provinces of Afghanistan to gather information, I met all kinds of women and listened to their stories.

I often cried when I saw how some of these women lived. Even now, thinking about them can bring tears to my eyes.

I wanted to help them, and simply reporting on their plight did not seem sufficient. So I decided to become a candidate for the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of parliament) in order to bring women's voices to the government.

At first, I had a very hard time dealing with my family. They are still unhappy about my candidacy, and say it is not yet safe for women to be involved in politics.

My family is afraid that I'm risking my life, and also that I am putting their lives in danger, too. But in spite of everything, I made the decision to run.

Being a candidate seemed so simple at the outset, but now that I have completed the nomination process, there are big problems to face up to.

It will be very difficult for me to publicise my campaign. I have no connections with any political party, nor do I have powerful supporters. I've had about 10,000 cards printed showing my name, photograph and my aims, and I will distribute them to people.

A far greater obstacle is presented by our traditions. I see the influence of the conservatives as the main problem facing Afghan women. The things they say and do are not Islam - in fact, they are against Islamic law.

If I get a seat in parliament, I will insist on the implementation of an article in the constitution that says that the government must take effective steps to curb traditions which go against Islamic law.

Even though campaigning has not yet officially begun, I am already visiting voters. It is not difficult to see people in the city, but when I go to the villages, I have to adjust to local traditions. I put on a very large veil and I visit men and women separately. This can be very challenging, because in most areas the men don't let their women go out of the home. I have to knock on the door of each house individually.

I don't go to these areas alone; I have to take a male member of my family with me. In our society, it is not good for a woman to go out of the city alone. Men candidates can go to different parts of the country and persuade people to vote for them. But I am a woman, and I cannot do this.

I don't want to be hated by people. I respect their traditions.

A few days ago, I was at a wedding, and began talking to some women about my candidacy. One woman asked me angrily, "What good will it do to have women in parliament? What will you do for us? This is all nonsense - the government has made us lots of promises, but it's never done anything. We don't trust anyone any more."

I tried to explain how important parliament was. Then I asked her, "What do you want? What should I do?"

By way of reply, she said the government had promised to build hospitals for women, and schools for girls.

I promised this woman that I really would raise women's voices in parliament, and that I'd ask the government why women still face such big problems. After that, all the women at the wedding assured me they would vote for me.

It seems to me that I have chosen a very difficult path.

If you take a look at the list of candidates in Kabul, you will see a lot of important people on the ballot, some of whom ran in the presidential elections. It is clear that they are more powerful than me. But I have not lost hope that Afghans will recognise who their true representative is. And God willing, I will win.

Malalai Shinwari is standing in Kabul as a candidate in the September 18 election to the Wolesi Jirga, or lower house of parliament.

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