SNAPSHOT
Female Afghan Kuchi Nomad Runs for Parliament

Aspiring youth leader is determined to improve the lives of her country’s nomadic Kuchi people.

Afghanistan’s nomads, known as the Kuchis, are some of the most marginalized and vulnerable people in the country due to limited access to services, economic opportunities and security. But Farzana Elham Kochai, a 26-year-old Kuchi of the Khishki subtribe, wants to change this by running for office in the parliamentary elections scheduled on October 20, 2018.

There are approximately 2.4 million Kuchis in Afghanistan’s 34 million population. Most live off the land, herding goats from province to province and harvesting their valuable cashmere. Unlike her grandparents, who lived a traditional nomadic lifestyle in Parwan Province north of Kabul, Farzana grew up in a settlement, as with an estimated 40 percent of modern-day Kuchis.

After receiving a bachelor’s degree in Political Science, she decided to become more socially active and in 2015 she was selected to join the Emerging Civil Society Leaders (ECSL), a network of aspiring community leaders from across the country supported by USAID’s Afghan Civic Education Program. In March 2016, as the only female candidate, she was elected as the head of the ECSL alumni network, at the time a diverse group of 60 male and female youth which has since grown to 136 members.

“The ECSL program opened up many doors for me. I observed positive changes in my public speaking, networking and leadership skills. While leading the youth network, my confidence increased, and it motivated me to run in parliamentary elections,” said Farzana. “My parents were not happy with my decision to join the ECSLs as first but over time they witnessed my progress and decided not to prevent me from pursuing my dreams.”

While networking with youth and leaders across the country, Farzana’s interest in improving the lives of the Kuchi nomads started to grow. In December 2015, she joined the Independent General Directorate of Kuchis (IGDK), which reports to the Office of the President and works to assist nomads who choose to transition to settled life. During this time, she assisted with a nation-wide needs assessment of the nomads and prepared education materials. “I learned about their immediate priorities, from women’s health and lack of education to concerns about availability of grazing land for livestock,” said Farzana.

This firsthand experience helped Farzana further identify with what would become her future constituency and allow them to connect with her. Through her work as an ECSL and with IGDK, she also gained the acceptance of her relatives, most of which retain their nomadic way of live and initially did not approve of her aspirations.

Farzana Elham Kochai joined the USAID-supported ECSL program in 2015. Pictured above, she participates in a workshop on elections and government monitoring held in Kabul on August 8-9, 2018.

“The ECSL program opened up many doors for me. While leading the youth network, my confidence increased, and it motivated me to run in parliamentary elections.”

- Farzana Elham Kochai
“My plan is to unite and help Kuchi women increase their economic opportunities in areas such as handicraft production, which are known for their high quality,” said Farzana. “The already have the skills; they just need a system that allows them to source more raw material and directly market their products.”

Once they are economically empowered, Farzana says, the women will be bettered positioned to access their right to healthcare, education and other services. Farzana also intends to work to establish a quota-based enrollment system for Kuchi men in educational institutions and provide special trainings based on their backgrounds and needs.

“My determination for serving the Kuchi community does not depend on winning a seat in Parliament. However, I see it as a path.”