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Challenging Gender Bias through Biking

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Afghan women fight bravely against the traditional customs which pose challenge ahead of their social life. Neither the threatening looks of the Islamists nor the conservative culture can prevent them from their active role in the society. Riding bike is one of the steps Afghan women have taken to challenge gender biases.

Around the world the bike is used a direct tool for social justice for women and girls – fighting gender violence, increasing access to education and healthcare and providing overall freedom of mobility.

The young women of the Afghan National Cycling Team, and the young women around Afghanistan that are learning to ride bikes for the first time in the country's history, do not grow up under burqa. They matured in the post Taliban decade. They have taken advantage of opportunities in education, art, sport and politics. Many were refugees in Iran and Pakistan and returned here in 2002 and 2003 with their families. However, some stayed in the country and endured the Taliban's regime.

There certainly exist prohibitive cultural biases against Afghan women and they are not free to ride bike. In other words, women riding bikes is still considered taboo in the country. When Afghan women are riding bike in public, it is not without risk. The girls face enormous challenges to ride a bike, illustrated best by the fact that they can't ride bike alone, or with their teammates. The only way to ride safely is with a male family member or their coach. Whether they realize it or not, these women are challenging gender barriers very publicly.

Afghan women know what they are doing is controversial, but they believe it is their right, that they deserve the same access and opportunities as men and riding a bike should not be forbidden because of their gender.

"I believe sport is a natural gateway to social change. As these women race and bring national pride to themselves, their families and to Afghanistan, they are opening the door to allowing girls to ride bikes socially, as transportation. Increasing access to school or work, protecting their safety and improving their health. Creating social justice and gender equality on two wheels." Says Shannon Galpin, the founder of Mountain2Mountain.

Trundling down dun-colored mountain slopes of Paghman, women cyclists ignore hard stares and vulgarities from passing men, reveling in an activity that seemed unthinkable for previous generations of Afghan women — riding a bicycle.

The sight of a woman on a bicycle may not be unusual in most parts of the world, but it is a striking anomaly in Afghanistan where strict Islamic mores deem the sport unbecoming for women.

The country's 10-member national women's cycling team is challenging those gender stereotypes, often at great personal risk, training their eyes not just on the 2020 Olympics but a goal even more ambitious — to get more Afghan women on bikes.

One crisp morning, dressed in tracksuit bottoms, jerseys and helmets, Marjan and half a dozen team members, all aged between 17 and 21, set out for a training ride from Kabul to the hills of neighboring Paghman.

Mindful of turning heads and ogling eyes, they rode in the amber light of dawn through a landscape of grassy knolls, fruit orchards and tree-lined boulevards.

A little boy dressed in a grubby shalwar kameez stopped by the wayside and stared at the girls with wonder and amazement.

Up ahead, dour-looking bearded men in a Toyota minivan pulled up parallel to the cyclists — their stares were more menacing.

But the wheels continued to spin as the women powered ahead undaunted.

They have become accustomed to the hostility, often accompanied by insults. But the team says they are emboldened despite such attitudes — partly due to the encouraging support from unexpected quarters.

Thirteen years since the Taliban were toppled from power in a US-led invasion; Afghan women have taken giant strides of progress with access to education and healthcare.

Female lawmakers are no longer an anomaly in Afghan politics and the ongoing election saw the participation of the country's first woman vice presidential candidate.

That marks a sea change in women's rights from the Taliban-era, when women weren't allowed to leave their homes without a male chaperone and were brutally repressed and consigned to the shadows.

But gender parity still remains a distant dream as conservative attitudes prevail.

That sentiment is portrayed in a mural by graffiti artist Shamsia Hassani on the walls of a Kabul cafe: burqa-clad women trapped in a watery universe — an allegory of women in the post-Taliban era who have a voice but still cannot be heard.

It's hard to reason with self-proclaimed arbiters of “morality” who regard a woman mounted on a bicycle as inconceivably risqué, say members of the cycling team.

According to a report, on a recent training session outside Kabul, three young Afghan men riding a motorbike swooped out of nowhere and sideswiped one of the cyclists, 18-year-old Sadaf Nazari, who tripped and tumbled on top of Marjan.

Marjan badly injured her back in the incident, which drove Mohammed Sadiq, head of the Afghan Cycling Federation who was trailing the women in his SUV, into a paroxysm of fury.

He chased down the men — the two pillion riders escaped, but he caught the driver by his collar and hauled him over to the police headquarters.

Sadiq, who established the team in 2003 after his own daughter expressed an interest in cycling, said the women's safety was a constant concern — and plans for international troops to pull out of Afghanistan by 2016 has perpetuated those anxieties.

“If the Taliban return, the first casualty will be women's rights,” he said in an interview in Kabul's old city.

“My parents never allowed me to ride a bicycle. I can't let the same happen,” said mother of 20-year-old university student Firoza, adding that she and her husband kept relatives and neighbors in the dark about their daughter’s sport because “they just won't understand”.