

Ladies Who Lunch Hit The Hustings

Daily Telegraph 09/10/2002

By Ahmed Rashid in Islamabad

Hundreds of Pakistani women are running for parliament.

With her long silver manicured nails, her faux-leopard heels and smart dress sense, Sumera Malik has spent much of her life in the ladies-who-lunch clubs of Lahore and Islamabad. Yet tomorrow she is one of hundreds of women running for parliament for the first time in the country's history.

A prominent female feudal landlord from an illustrious political family - her grandfather was Governor of Punjab in the 1960s and her uncle, Farooq Leghari, was a President of Pakistan - she was a housewife until she entered politics last year as head of the women's wing of Leghari's Millat Party, which supports President Pervaiz Musharraf.

"Our society has enormous capacity for change and moving forward and I have had no problems, except for criticism from the mullahs that it's a sin for a woman to be taking part in politics," she says.

About 60 women are contesting general seats, while another 281 are running for 60 seats that are especially reserved for women in the new parliament.

Pakistan's most famous female politician, Benazir Bhutto, who has twice been prime minister and twice dismissed on corruption charges, has been barred from running and is in exile in London.

Gen Musharraf, who is set to remain as president for the next five years, is popular with many women. Last year he encouraged women to take part in local elections and has made it easier for them to stand in the on-going general elections.

Mrs Malik, who is running for an Assembly seat from Khushab, said: "I am contesting from a very backward, male-dominated part of Punjab. Men are surprised to see me address rallies but everywhere I am getting a lot of support and attention from both men and women.

"I maintain the traditional values of Islam and behave appropriately and people appreciate that. Only the religious extremists are very negative but they are just a handful and they don't have electoral support."

One reason why so many women from the political and feudal elite are running is because their men have been barred under new restrictions imposed by Gen Musharraf to prevent opposition candidates from standing.

The military regime has stipulated that candidates must have a degree to run in the elections. As a result many male politicians who do not have one have stood aside to let their better-educated wives, daughters and even mothers stand instead.

Every morning Mrs Malik assembles her party workers and sends them into the Punjab countryside in four-wheel drive vehicles to woo the voters.

Strapping Punjabi men take their orders from her. Having never worked for a woman before, many are still too embarrassed to look her in the eye.

She is popular not just in her constituency but across central Punjab. Drivers have stuck her posters on their trucks and taxis and her face stares out from shop fronts.