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Afghan Women Protest New Law on Home Life

By [DEXTER FILKINS](#)

KABUL, [Afghanistan](#) — The young women stepped off the bus and moved toward the protest march just beginning on the other side of the street when they were spotted by a mob of men.

“Get out of here, you whores!” the men shouted. “Get out!”

The women scattered as the men moved in.

“We want our rights!” one of the women shouted, turning to face them. “We want equality!”

The women ran to the bus and dived inside as it rumbled away, with the men smashing the taillights and banging on the sides.

“Whores!”

But the march continued anyway. About 300 Afghan women, facing an angry throng three times larger than their own, walked the streets of the capital on Wednesday to demand that Parliament repeal a new law that introduces a range of [Taliban](#)-like restrictions on women, and permits, among other things, marital rape.

It was an extraordinary scene. Women are mostly illiterate in this impoverished country, and they do not, generally speaking, enjoy anything near the freedom accorded to men. But there they were, most of them young, many in jeans, defying a threatening crowd and calling out slogans heavy with meaning.

With the Afghan police keeping the mob at bay, the women walked two miles to Parliament, where they delivered a petition calling for the law’s repeal.

“Whenever a man wants sex, we cannot refuse,” said Fatima Husseini, 26, one of the marchers. “It means a woman is a kind of property, to be used by the man in any way that he wants.”

The law, approved by both houses of Parliament and signed by President [Hamid Karzai](#), applies to the Shiite minority only. Women here and governments and rights groups abroad have protested three parts of the law especially.

One provision makes it illegal for a woman to resist her husband’s sexual advances. A second provision requires a husband’s permission for a woman to work outside the home or go to school. And a third makes it illegal for a woman to refuse to “make herself up” or “dress up” if that is what her husband wants.

The passage of the law has amounted to something of a historical irony. Afghan Shiites, who make up close to 20 percent of the population, suffered horrendously under the Taliban, who regarded them as apostates.

Since 2001, the Shiites, particularly the Hazara minority, have been enjoying a renaissance.

President Karzai, who relies on vast support from the United States and other Western governments to stay in power, has [come under intense international criticism](#) for signing the bill into law. Many people here suspect that he did so to gain the favor of the Shiite clergy; Mr. Karzai is up for re-election this year.

Previous Afghan governments, during the Soviet era and before the arrival of the Taliban, did not impose such restrictive laws, although in practice many rural women's freedoms have long been curtailed. Rights advocates say the law for Shiites could influence a proposal for Sunnis and a draft law on violence against women.

[Responding to the outcry](#), Mr. Karzai has begun looking for a way to remove the most controversial parts of the law. In an interview on Wednesday, his spokesman, Hodayun Hamidzada, said that the legislation was not yet law because it had not been published in the government's official register. That, Mr. Hamidzada said, means that it can still be changed. Mr. Karzai has asked his justice minister to look it over.

"We have no doubt that whatever comes out of this process will be consistent with the rights provided for in the Constitution — equality and the protection of women," Mr. Hamidzada said.

The women who protested Wednesday began their demonstration with what appeared to be a deliberately provocative act. They gathered in front of the School of the Last Prophet, a madrasa run by Ayatollah Asif Mohseni, the country's most powerful Shiite cleric. He and the scholars around him played an important role in drafting the new law.

"We are here to campaign for our rights," one woman said into a megaphone. Then the women held their banners aloft and began to chant.

The reaction was immediate. Hundreds of students from the madrasa, most but not all of them men, poured into the streets to confront the demonstrators.

"Death to the enemies of Islam!" the counterdemonstrators cried, encircling the women. "We want Islamic law!"

The women stared ahead and marched.

A phalanx of police officers, some of them women, held the crowds apart.

Afterward, when the demonstrators had left, one of the madrasa's senior clerics came outside. Asked about the dispute, he said it was between professionals and nonprofessionals; that is, between the clerics, who understood the Koran and Islamic law, and the women calling for the law's repeal who did not.

"It's like if you are sick, you go to a doctor, not some amateur," said the cleric, Mohammed Hussein Jafaari. "This law was approved by the scholars. It was passed by both houses of Parliament. It was signed by the president."

The religious scholars, Mr. Jafaari conceded, were all men.

Lingering a while, Mr. Jafaari said that what was really driving the dispute was the foreigners who loomed

so large over the country.

“We Afghans don’t want a bunch of [NATO](#) commanders and foreign ministers telling us what to do.”

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