

## AFGHAN WOMEN SECURE PRESIDENTIAL PLEDGE TO AMEND 'MARITAL RAPE' LAW



\*\*\*\*\*

AdvocacyNet  
News Bulletin 199  
May 5, 2009  
\*\*\*\*\*

Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghan President Hamid Karzai has bowed to pressure from the women's rights movement in Afghanistan and abroad, and promised to amend a controversial new law legalizing marital rape.

The president made the commitment to change the so-called "Shia Personal Status Law" at an April 26 meeting with members of the [Afghan Women's Network \(AWN\)](#) and other civil society groups in Kabul. Several members of the Afghan parliament also attended the meeting. AWN is a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP).

The new law runs 270 pages, and gathered dust in the country's parliament for 18 months before being pushed through in March, when Mr Karzai began to face stiff competition in his race for re-election. The law applies to the Shia minority in Afghanistan, who make up 20 percent of the population. Protests in Kabul

The law caused a storm of protest inside Afghanistan and internationally. According to advocates, it would prevent women from leaving the house without permission, forbid wives from refusing sex with their husbands, and permit the practice of child marriage.

After Mr Karzai signed the law, AWN sent a letter to the minister of justice and met with the minister on April 8. A week later, AWN members took part in a protest march in Kabul (above) that attracted an estimated 500 women, including several female parliament members.

The following day, AWN took part in a press conference and released a statement demanding that the new law should "include provisions for the protection and respect of women and children's human rights, in line with the Afghanistan Constitution and international commitments and treaties ratified by Afghanistan."

The protesters pointed out that the Afghan Constitution bans discrimination and states that men and women have "equal rights and duties before the law." They also argued that the law would contravene the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Afghanistan has ratified.

At the April 26 meeting, President Karzai promised to remove the discriminatory parts of the law and send it back to parliament. While this is seen as encouraging, [Human Rights Watch has expressed concern](#) that the law may be reviewed by officials from the Ministry of Justice with a conservative Shia background, and could still emerge seriously flawed.

The government's handling of the controversy has also prompted a wider concern among women that gains made since the fall of the Taliban will not be sustained.

Meanwhile, another AP partner in Afghanistan, the [Oruj Learning Center](#), continues to earn accolades for its pioneering work in promoting girls' education. Sadiqa Basiri Saleem, the founder of Oruj, is featured prominently in a May 1 [article on Newsweek.com](#). Ms Basiri Saleem [recently won the Samuel Huntington Public Service Award](#), which brings a \$10,000 prize. She served as the AWN's Deputy Director until 2003.

Ms Basiri Saleem launched Oruj in 2002 by offering informal classes to 36 girls in an abandoned mosque in her home village of Godah, Wardak province. Last year, Oruj supported the education of 2,870 girls in six schools. Ms Basiri Saleem won a Vital Voices Global Leadership Award earlier this year.

- Learn more about the [Oruj Learning Center](#)
- Read the [Newsweek article](#)