

Attempts to protect women's rights in Afghanistan have been blocked by clerics in the parliament

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The new laws proposed a minimum marriage age for girls, and women not being prosecuted for rapes committed against them.

Khalil Ahmad Shaheedzada, a conservative lawmaker for the Herat province, said parliament withdrew the legislation because of opposition from religious parties that considered the law un-Islamic. "Whatever is against Islamic law, we don't even need to speak about it," Shaheedzada said.

Using executive authority, President Hamid Karzai had created the Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women in 2009. But this needed to be ratified by parliament.

The law would have criminalised domestic violence and protected victims from themselves facing criminal charges after men had raped them. It would also have banned "baad," which allows for the commercial exchange of women to settle disputes.

Religious representatives objected to more than half a dozen parts of the legislation, including a minimum marriage age of 16 for girls and supporting shelters for women whose husbands had abused them.

Shaheedzada claimed that the law might encourage promiscuity and reflected values not applicable in Afghanistan.

"Even now in Afghanistan, women are running from their husbands. Girls are running from home," Shaheedzada said. "Such laws give them these ideas."

Fawzia Kofi, a lawmaker and women's rights activist (recently honoured by *Newsweek's* online publication *The Daily Beast* as one of the "150 Women Who Shake the World"), brought the legislation up for a vote to prevent a future president from reversing it under pressure from religious groups.

Saying that the law does not represent fundamental tenants of Sharia Law and is only coming from 'the West', some of the most conservative members of the Parliament echoed strong conservative religious policies that are still upheld today by many of Afghanistan's rural tribal community leaders.

"It is wrong that a woman and man cannot marry off their child until she is 16" said Obaidullah Barekzai, a member from southeast Uruzgan province, where female literacy rates are among the lowest in the country.

An Afghan man must be at least 18 years old to marry.

Barekzai argued against all age limits for women, citing historical figure Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq, a close companion of the Prophet Muhammad, who married off his daughter at age seven.

At least eight other legislators, mostly from the Ulema Council, a government-appointed body of clerics, joined him in decrying the law as un-Islamic. Abdul Sattar Khawasi, member for Kapisa province, called women's shelters "morally corrupt". Justice Minister Habibullah Ghaleb last year dismissed them as houses of "prostitution and immorality", provoking fierce condemnation from women's groups.

"Unfortunately, there were some conservative elements who are opposing this law," said Fawzia Kofi, who is running in next year's presidential election. "What I am disappointed at is because there were also women who were opposing this law."

More than 60 women serve in Afghanistan's 352-member bicameral National Assembly, though most do so thanks to constitutional provisions reserving certain seats for women.

Before the arrival of NATO troops twelve years ago, the Taliban had banned women from working and attending school - even leaving home without a male relative - and forced them to wear head-to-toe burqas under penalty of execution for even minor offences.

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