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NBC News

Afghan women rally, turning men red-faced with anger

By Sebastian Rich

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In any other country, the sight of a group of women holding colorful placards, marching and protesting is commonplace.

But not in Afghanistan.

In fact, a women's protest on the streets of Kabul on Thursday was the first of its kind.

On a hot, muggy day, about 30 women of all ages mustered up the courage to speak up against the age-old indignity of sexual harassment by men.

With banners that read "This street also belongs to me" and "We won't stand insults anymore," they marched with a confident stride from Kabul University to the Afghan Human Rights Institute.

Women in Afghanistan face intimidation and sexual assault on a daily basis. In the most extreme cases, schoolgirls have been terrorized by men throwing acid at them as they walked to school.

The United Nations Population Fund in Afghanistan (UNFPA) says that about 31 percent of Afghan women suffer physical violence and another 30 percent suffer from psychological trauma.

Still, today in Afghanistan, a staggering 87 percent of Afghan women are illiterate and the average life expectancy for women is just 44 years, according to the [CIA World Factbook](#).

As the women left the back streets of Kabul and entered one of the city's busiest market streets, mouths were agape with incredulity (and I suspect possibly jealousy from under swiftly passing burkas). Red-faced angry men shouted insults and spat on the ground as they passed.

As they walked across the Kabul River, the broiling heat of the day gave an extra aromatic pungency to the river's fetid still waters.

The women wrinkled their noses in disgust. A young woman protester who looked to be about 20 years old used her bright blue headscarf to wave the rotting smell away from my face.



Women march during a protest in Kabul, Afghanistan on Thursday.

She turned to me, dropped her scarf to her shoulders and said, “This smell it is like Afghan man, yes.”

Afghanistan surprisingly has a strong robust press corps, and there were almost more photographers and journalists than women marching.

The women were pleased with the press presence and hope it will bring their cause into the spotlight. But most of the women were fatalistic and acknowledged that this was just the beginning of their struggle.

When the small band of brave suffragettes wielding iPhones and flipcams arrived at the Afghan Human Rights Commission, they exchanged hugs and then disappeared back into a man's world.

But for an hour on the streets of Kabul they had protested as if they lived in any democracy, with confidence and freedom. God help them if the Taliban should ever return.

But it is unheard of for a woman to respond back to her tormenter on the streets of Kabul. Public harassment is so pervasive in Afghan society that women are used to it.

“As a woman that lives in Kabul, when I go every day, or when my mom or my sisters go out every day, we face sexual harassment at all different levels, from hearing bad things to being touched, to being pushed, to being stalked and followed,” Shaharзад Akbar, one of the protestors told NBC News. “No one has paid attention to this issue. We know this is a small step and we know not everyone will change their attitude – probably no one will – but at least discussing it as an issue rather than something that’s normal, something that’s OK if it happens, this is the idea of this walk today.”

As they marched, the women gently and politely handed out leaflets to bewildered men and women. Many of the men read them and then threw the pamphlets with disdain into Kabul’s already clogged gutters.



Women had security protection during their protest in Kabul, Afghanistan on Thursday.

I watched with a smile as one woman, whose husband was standing next to a nearby fruit stall, read the leaflet she was handed. Furtively, she folded the paper and hid it up her sleeve. She caught my eye, blushed profusely and was seemingly riddled with guilt. I smiled and pressed my forefinger to my lips in an act of mutual and friendly conspiracy.

During the Taliban’s rule, women were forbidden to work or even leave their home without a male escort. Seeking medical help from a male doctor was also forbidden.

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Some women were still worried about protecting their identity even though they were protesting on the street.

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