

Focus on: Afghanistan

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION SUPER CYCLE FROM A GENDER LENS

A series of write up from experts in the field reflecting on the role of women in last elections.

— 1996
— 2009
— 2021
— 2024



About the Author

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In support of

Silencing Women's Voices: State and de Facto State Architecture Denying Women Political Agency

Amid the 2024 election super cycle, a global backlash is gaining momentum, marked by the [rise of authoritarian governance](#) and growing hostility toward women's rights. Both state and de facto state actors continue to challenge the fulfilment of the fundamental rights of women and girls in a way that reinforces women's disempowerment and disenfranchisement, while solidifying their own power and control.

Made most visible over the last three and a half years in Afghanistan, the Taliban has exemplified a model of [patriarchal authoritarianism](#) that risks [inspiring emulation](#). The model is a state architecture of subjugation and suppression that criminalizes women's freedoms with a crippling two-fold effect: subordinating women and normalising gender inequality; and denying women the opportunities to cultivate the experiences and skills necessary to emerge as political agents. This system effectively deprives women of the tools and normative frameworks needed to build leadership and agency, and instead normalizes protectionist justifications for structural inequality.

Foundational tools for women's subjugation

Authoritarian contexts across the world are using broad laws to criminalize women's basic freedoms. These laws – often [vague](#) and [arbitrarily enforced](#) – use “morality” and [protectionist](#) justifications to shift power from women to men. In effect, they institutionalize gender inequality and normalize discriminatory ideology.

Such laws have been enacted in [direct response](#) to decades of democratic victories achieved by women's movements, and are designed to maintain power and patriarchal norms in a changing world, and dilute the power of women's advocacy and action. Instead, these measures deepen authoritarian control, widen inequalities, and remove women and marginalized groups from governance structures.

In Afghanistan, the basic dress code requiring women and girls to [wear a hijab](#) has been used as a foundational decree, creating the basis upon which further oppression is built. This restriction has both been expanded and consolidated by the “[promotion of virtue and prevention of vice law](#),” enacted in August 2024 which bolstered morality police and increased their discretionary powers. Combined with requirements for women to [travel with a male guardian](#), these decrees and their [arbitrary enforcement](#) are designed to establish a broader climate of fear and control, suppressing women and their agency.

Globally, similar examples have become increasingly common.

Protectionist narratives have been used to erode Russian women's rights to live free from violence. The guise of preserving “family values” was used to [decriminalize](#) certain forms of domestic violence in 2017, normalizing violence within homes and reinforcing patriarchal control. Aligning with broader state goals to suppress dissent, this law was applied in tandem with the vague “foreign agent” law [to target](#) women's rights

organizations fighting the decriminalization by equating feminist views on gender to “foreign ideology”.

Similarly, the enactment of laws establishing “morality police”, strict dress codes and limitations on freedom of movement in 2024 in countries like [Libya](#) and [Iran](#), under the pretext of “[guarding virtue](#),” represent an expansion of state control over women’s autonomy and a deepening crackdown on civil society. Women in [Yemen](#) equally face strict control. The inherently subjective determination of what constitutes “inappropriate hijab” and extensive punitive measures enable [arbitrary enforcement](#) and far-reaching impacts on women’s freedom of movement, employment and participation in (both physical and digital) public spaces.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are another arena where “morality” and women’s suppression collide to disempower, and ultimately work to disenfranchise, women and girls. A lack of access to contraception and abortion [reduces](#) women’s access to education and employment and increases poverty. Since 2022, the United States has experienced [alarming deterioration](#) in access to sexual and reproductive healthcare. This domestic trend has a broader chilling effect, [leading](#) to a decline worldwide in funding for sexual and reproductive health and slowing global progress toward recognition of abortion and contraception access as fundamental human rights. Similarly, in 2020, Poland severely [restricted access](#) to abortion, on the basis of safeguarding “traditional values” and protecting life.

Across these examples, protectionist laws not only discriminatorily target women but also conscript men as enforcers. Male family members, business owners and bus or taxi drivers are often held accountable – in some cases, legally as well as socially – for women’s compliance, embedding women’s subjugation into social and economic structures and normalizing their protection and subordination. By assigning men the responsibility for upholding these laws, states institutionalize patriarchal control, ensuring a future where inequality is not just sustained but a defining feature of the system.

Structural denial of women political legitimacy and authority

In the contexts noted above, the foundational protectionist laws provide an overarching anti-gender ideology that can then be used to justify further reversals of women’s rights. Women are denied access to basic opportunities needed to reach their full potential, which then feeds a cycle of disenfranchisement and reinforces the [logic of misogyny](#). This logic says that women are unfit for authority due to a lack of the skills and experiences deemed necessary for such roles – skills and experiences that are systematically denied to them.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban have implemented large scale bans on Afghan women working (for international and national [NGOs and the United Nations](#)) and [girls’ education](#) beyond grade six, with the justification that these are in response to alleged breaches of morality rules, in particular those relating to wearing the hijab and gender segregation. [Education](#) levels and [employment](#) have been a key factor in legitimizing

Afghan women's presence in decision making roles, leaving women in a vulnerable position where their institutionalised denial of education and employment can then be further used to justify why they should not play roles as political agents.

These challenges related to women's perceived legitimacy in politics have long been associated with what feminists have called the '[double bind](#)' – a predicament where women are expected to adhere to prescribed gender roles while simultaneously proving their competence as political representatives and agents. Globally, women are being denied access to opportunities to develop these critical skills and experiences.

As noted above, these opportunities are severely curtailed in Afghanistan. Education for Afghan girls beyond grade six is [wholly banned](#). Women's employment, in some sectors, is banned (national and international NGOs and the United Nations, and as [civil servants](#)) and in all other sectors is severely curtailed due to restrictions to freedom of movement and gender segregation.

Afghanistan, however, is not alone in limiting women's employment. Worldwide, women face restrictions to employment [in 104 countries](#) including to jobs that are deemed morally inappropriate or too arduous or hazardous, further perpetuating protectionist narratives.

In addition to challenges to their legitimacy as political agents and representatives, a troubling global trend is the growing suppression of women's rights to openly discuss political issues in both public and private spheres. Between 2015 and 2022, women's freedom to engage in political discussions saw a [marked decline](#), with the Asia-Pacific region leading the regression.

Practices of de facto authorities in Afghanistan and [in Yemen](#) and are restricting women's use of smartphones and access to the internet, limiting their voices in digital spaces. The Taliban have additionally enacted an (as-yet loosely enforced) [prohibition](#) that women should not speak in spaces where men are present, which would wholly exclude them for contributing to any formal or informal decision making processes.

This systematic denial of education, employment and access to public spaces strips women of the tools needed for political agency, further disenfranchising them. Their disempowerment, in turn, creates a cycle of sexist narratives which feeds anti-gender ideology. A well-established tactic for disempowering oppressed groups, this often compounds existing vulnerability and first affects already marginalized groups.

Political exclusion has consequences...

The impact and danger of women's direct and indirect structural disenfranchisement goes beyond state borders. First, models matter. De facto authorities like the Taliban are creating a blueprint of restrictive measures that other authoritarian-leaning states can adopt and replicate. A spread of anti-gender ideology and protectionism risks normalizing the reversal of global progress toward gender equality and liberalization.

Second, compelling evidence shows how gender inequality undermines peace, security, democracy, and development. Gender inequality correlates with higher levels of [intrastate violence](#) and [authoritarian governance](#). When women are relegated to a subordinate status, this inequality [often spills over](#) to other marginalized groups, perpetuating systemic oppression and entrenching the conditions for further disenfranchisement across societies.

Women's movement as the path forward

To break through these reinforcing cycles of inequality and authoritarian patriarchy, collective action is an essential tactic to dismantle oppressive systems and create pathways for women to build leadership and agency. Across the contexts mentioned above, women are at the forefront. In [Poland](#) and the [United States](#), in [Iran](#) and Libya. Afghan women have protested against each decree enacted to restrict their rights in the past three years, either [taking to the streets](#) or [posting online videos](#), both at great risk to their personal safety.

These efforts are critical to push back against patriarchal authoritarianism. Evidence shows how women's participation in mass mobilization is [linked to](#) democratization and their political representation [leads to](#) greater legislative equality and improved development outcomes. By asserting their roles as political agents and representatives, women can – and are – dismantling protectionist legislation and disrupting authoritarian trends. Critically, the global and interlinked nature of these trends mean that collective action and support for women's movements in one context can bolster efforts to resist regression on women's rights and disenfranchisement in another.

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