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**PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY AND THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN AFGHAN CULTURE****Mamatova Gulshodaxon Sharabiddinovna**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the structure and persistence of patriarchal control over women in Afghan society, with particular attention to the institutionalization of gender-based restrictions since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. It surveys the historical roots of patriarchal norms, the cascade of legal decrees restricting women's education, employment, mobility, and legal standing, and the international debate over classifying these measures as "gender apartheid." The article also considers organized resistance among Afghan women, including underground education networks and documentation efforts aimed at future accountability. By situating recent developments within feminist and postcolonial scholarship, this study argues that Afghanistan represents a case in which formal state power has been used to entrench patriarchal control at an institutional scale, while also showing that such control remains contested from within Afghan society itself.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Gender Apartheid, Women's Rights, Afghan Society, Taliban, Feminist Theory

**Introduction.** Patriarchy, understood as a social system in which men hold predominant power over political, economic, and familial life, has long structured gender relations in Afghanistan. While rooted in tribal custom and particular interpretations of religious law, patriarchal control in Afghanistan has been most visibly reinforced through formal state power since the Taliban's return in August 2021. This article examines how patriarchal norms have been codified into law, the scale of their effect on women's daily lives, and the forms of resistance that have emerged in response.

Patriarchy as a concept describes more than individual prejudice; it denotes a structural arrangement in which institutions, laws, and cultural norms jointly subordinate women. Feminist theorists have long argued that formal legal equality is insufficient where patriarchal structures remain embedded in family, religion, and governance. In Afghanistan, this distinction has proven consequential: the period between 2001 and 2021 produced meaningful legal reforms, including a legal marriage age, family courts, and institutional bodies addressing violence against women, yet these gains were largely top-down, dependent on international funding, and vulnerable to political collapse. The swift reversal of these reforms



after 2021 illustrates how formal equality can be undone once the political conditions sustaining it disappear.

Since 2021, the Taliban has issued a large body of decrees restricting nearly every dimension of women's public life. Afghanistan is now the only country in the world where girls are barred from secondary and higher education, and a 2024 decree extended this exclusion to medical and midwifery training. Economic participation has fallen accordingly: roughly one in four Afghan women is working or seeking work, compared with nearly ninety percent of men, and the denial of secondary education to girls is estimated to cost the country approximately 2.5 percent of GDP annually. Legal reforms have compounded these restrictions; a 2026 criminal regulation narrows the definition of prosecutable domestic violence to cases involving broken bones or visible injury, while a separate decree on spousal separation imposes evidentiary burdens on women that do not apply to men. Freedom of movement has been curtailed to the point that women, including United Nations staff, have been barred from UN premises since September 2025.

These measures are enforced coercively. Women who have organized public demonstrations against the restrictions have faced violent suppression, including beatings, tear gas, and, according to multiple reports, torture and sexual violence in detention. Despite this risk, organized resistance has persisted. Drawing on strategies first developed during the first Taliban regime of the 1990s, Afghan women sustain underground schools, community mentorship circles, and documentation networks aimed at supporting future legal accountability before international courts. This resistance suggests that patriarchal control, however institutionalized, is neither uncontested nor universally internalized by the population it governs.

Several scholars have explored the representation and structural entrenchment of patriarchy in Afghanistan. Bennouné's early legal scholarship on the international obligation to counter gender apartheid provided a framework later adopted by UN bodies to describe the systematic and institutionalized character of the Taliban's policies. True and colleagues have argued that the failure of the international Women, Peace, and Security agenda to transform patriarchal structures in Afghanistan reflects a broader pattern in which women's rights are treated as negotiable within elite political settlements rather than as non-derogable protections. Ahmed-Ghosh situates the current period within a longer historical arc, showing that Afghan women's status has repeatedly expanded and contracted in step with shifts in political power rather than following a linear trajectory of progress. Kitch's ethnographic work with Afghan professional women documents firsthand critique of patriarchal Afghan culture alongside skepticism



toward the assumptions embedded in some international advocacy campaigns. Together, this literature situates the Afghan case within broader feminist and postcolonial debates about the relationship between formal law, cultural custom, and structural gender inequality.

**Conclusion.** The Afghan case demonstrates how patriarchal social structures can be entrenched and accelerated through formal state power once institutional checks are removed. The scale and speed of the post-2021 rollback across education, employment, healthcare, and legal standing has led international bodies to treat the Afghan situation as a distinct category of gender-based human rights violation. At the same time, the historical record shows that patriarchal control of this kind consistently meets organized, adaptive resistance, indicating that the current system, however entrenched, remains contested from within.

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