

## The Assembly of Progress: Safeguarding Political Stability through Freedom

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16

11th Grade

2023

A young woman steps nervously toward a ballot box. The weather-beaten November leaves crunch beneath her boots and her face flushes with nervous pride as she votes for the first time. From coast to coast, this experience is replicated by thousands of women proudly taking part in democracy. With them, they each carry the understanding that this opportunity was not always presented to them and respect for the suffragettes who made it possible.

The lives of these women are the lives of Americans, but more than that, these lives are *inherently* American. They stand as citizens of an egalitarian republic, as representatives of progress, of how far we've come. We are so often inclined to believe that the progress we have obtained is simply a product of a natural linear progression that dictates equality and improvement as byproducts of time. Conversely, it is a result of what we have done with that time. Our ancestors, enabled by their constitutional rights, have served as our most prominent benefactors.

We as a people have not just inherited a meritorious country, but have *created* it. And this can all be accredited to our right to freedom of assembly.

People around the world haven't been so fortunate. If the purpose of government is to secure the rights of the people, a country lacking freedom of assembly in its constitutional foundation has already failed. This is because it has in turn legitimized its government's right to stagnation.

As Americans we currently understand foundational women's rights as a discussion of the past, but around the world women still suffer in pursuit of those freedoms we obtained over a century ago. This month marks the 1 year anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini, and a continuation of the unrest that followed. Mahsa was a young woman who was killed at the hands of police after being arrested in violation of the Iranian hijab mandate. Protests on the issue of the violation of women's rights in Iran have been an ongoing issue, but her death sparked a more fervent wave of activism.

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Iranian women have been denied basic freedoms since the Iranian revolution of 1979. This includes denial of the right to play sports, leaving the country without their husband, divorce, proper access to the job market, and a mandatory dress code. All of these issues are present in the history of American women as well, however, following protests across the country, these issues were remedied with legislative and social change. But Iranian women don't enjoy the same framework for protest that American women did. Their demonstrations have been met with extreme police violence and political suppression as conflict has thrown the country into unrest. Numbers as high as 551 reported dead from the protest including many women and children. *BBC* news has reported on a nationwide surveillance program implemented by the Iranian regime to further police the freedoms of women. *CNN* has reported on a wave of poisonings of young girls, primarily at all girls schools and seemingly targeted at the institution of women's education in Iran as a whole.

Does this result dictate that protest is grossly ineffective? If that were the case how could the suffragettes have secured not just a change in popular values, but an amendment to the countries most cherished foundational document? They formed political associations such as the NAWSA which brought awareness through dramatic demonstrations and public parades. Over 5,000 suffragettes paraded their way to the U.S capitol building, proudly chanting slogans and waving signs along the way. While they were not always vehemently accepted, the suffrage movement had the privilege to be attacked for the political agendas they were promoting, rather than the mere act of *promoting* a political agenda. As a result of their efforts, the 19th amendment, guaranteeing the enfranchisement of women, was passed by congress in June of 1919 and today America is a dramatically better place because of it.

In Iran and America we can find parallel stories. The story of women persecuted on a wide scale, seeking equal rights through protest. A hundred years apart and yet, these stories don't end so similarly. What is the disparity between the two?

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Is it that American women are inherently superior at activism? That they have given more effort? Is the implication that they care more deeply about their own rights?

Of course not, to make such an assertion negates the impact of constitutional rights in the progression of a country. Iran cannot manage to secure its people freedoms guaranteed to Americans decades ago. This is the mark of a country which considers its people too incapable to establish policy for themselves, while America has entrusted its people with those abilities and has benefited tremendously from it. Its distrust for democracy and the intelligence of its people has brought Iran to its current state, plagued by civil unrest, violently unstable and rejected both by the international community and its own people. A country which sees its descenters killed has killed itself with stagnation, but a country which relinquishes its own power to the rights of the people, has established a precedent for improvement.

While the streets of Washington may be loud, we have a constitution that protects its ever present noise as this is the sound of a generation endowed by democracy and excited to inform the future of their nation.