

# International Rankings, Domestic Institutions, and Gender Policy: Comparative Evidence from Denmark and Uzbekistan

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## Abstract

International rankings have become influential instruments of global governance, shaping state behavior through reputational pressure, benchmarking, and norm diffusion. Gender equality indices such as the Global Gender Gap Index and the Gender Inequality Index increasingly affect domestic policy agendas and international legitimacy strategies. This article examines how international gender rankings influence national gender policy in two structurally different states: Denmark and Uzbekistan.

Using a qualitative comparative case study design grounded in governance by indicators and constructivist international relations theory, the article argues that rankings influence domestic gender policy through distinct mechanisms shaped by institutional context. In Denmark, rankings function primarily as instruments of policy reinforcement within an established gender equality regime. In Uzbekistan, they operate mainly as tools of international legitimation and external signaling within a transitional reform environment. The study demonstrates that the impact of rankings depends not only on external pressure but also on domestic institutional capacity and the presence of actors capable of translating indicators into sustained policy change. The findings contribute to debates on global governance and indicator-based governance.

**Keywords:** Gender Policy, International Rankings, Governance By Indicators, Norm Diffusion, Denmark, Uzbekistan

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, international rankings have become central instruments of global governance. States are increasingly evaluated through quantitative indicators covering economic performance, governance quality, human development, and gender equality. Among the most influential are the Global Gender Gap Index published by the World Economic Forum and the Gender Inequality Index produced by the United Nations Development Programme.

These indices do not merely measure social conditions; they shape political priorities by producing reputational incentives and global comparisons. As scholars<sup>1</sup> of governance by indicators argue, ranking systems function as indirect tools of governance that influence state behavior without formal coercion.

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, K. E., Kingsbury, B., & Merry, S. E. (2012). *Governance by indicators: Global power through quantification and rankings*. Oxford University Press.

However, the effects of rankings are uneven across political contexts. While some states integrate rankings into domestic political competition, others respond primarily in symbolic or strategic ways. This article addresses this variation by comparing Denmark and Uzbekistan, two countries with fundamentally different political systems and positions within global gender governance structures. The study addresses the questions: How do international gender rankings influence domestic gender policy? Why do rankings produce different outcomes in Denmark and Uzbekistan?

The central argument is that rankings operate through different causal mechanisms depending on domestic institutional environments. In consolidated democracies, they reinforce existing policy frameworks, while in transitional systems they primarily generate legitimacy-oriented reforms.

### Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

A central strand of scholarship conceptualizes international rankings and indicators as instruments of governance rather than neutral measurement systems. This literature argues that indicators shape political behavior through benchmarking, comparison, and reputational pressure, thereby functioning as technologies of global governance rather than passive statistical tools.

Sally Engle Merry demonstrates that indicators translate complex social realities into simplified numerical categories, enabling governance at a distance while simultaneously obscuring structural inequalities and lived experiences<sup>2</sup>. Building on this foundation, Davis, Kingsbury, and Merry conceptualize this phenomenon as “governance by indicators,” arguing that global institutions exercise power through ranking systems rather than coercive mechanisms<sup>3</sup>. Their analysis shows that indicators operate as tools of standard-setting and decision-making, shaping how states are evaluated, compared, and governed within international systems.

Expanding this argument, Broome and Quirk show that benchmarking functions as a form of indirect governance that structures policy priorities without formal authority<sup>4</sup>. In this framework, global indicators act as soft regulatory mechanisms that influence state behavior through comparison and reputational competition. Complementing these perspectives, Kelley and Simmons argue that international indicators generate compliance through reputational incentives rather than legal enforcement<sup>5</sup>. Their findings demonstrate that states are sensitive to ranking positions because these rankings influence perceptions of legitimacy, credibility, and international status.

Together, this body of literature establishes that international rankings are not neutral measurement mechanisms but active governance technologies embedded in global political structures. They shape domestic policy agendas through reputational pressure, institutional reactivity, and normative comparison, thereby playing a significant role in contemporary global governance.

### Comparative Institutional Responses to International Gender Rankings: Denmark and Uzbekistan

Denmark represents one of the most consolidated gender-equal welfare states globally, consistently ranking among the top performers in the Global Gender Gap Index, with a score of 0.789 in 2024 and ranking 15th out of 146 countries<sup>6</sup>. This high performance reflects long-standing institutional commitments, including universal childcare, parental leave policies, and sustained female labor market participation, which reaches approximately 60.8% of women aged 15+<sup>7</sup>.

These structural foundations predate the emergence of international gender rankings, meaning that rankings do not primarily function as external pressure mechanisms. Instead, they operate as instruments of policy reinforcement and normative validation within domestic political discourse.

In this context, rankings contribute to gender governance by reinforcing political accountability, strengthening civil society advocacy, and highlighting sector-specific inequalities. However, research also indicates that such indicators may reproduce an overly stable national self-image while failing to fully capture

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<sup>2</sup> Merry, S. E. (2016). *The Seductions of Quantification* (University of Chicago Press)

<sup>3</sup> Davis, K. E., Kingsbury, B., & Merry, S. E. (2012). *Governance by Indicators*. Oxford University Press. pp. 71–104

<sup>4</sup> Broome, A., & Quirk, J. (2015). *Review of International Studies*, 41(5), pp. 819–841

<sup>5</sup> Kelley, J. G., & Simmons, B. A. (2015). *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(1), pp. 55–70

<sup>6</sup> World Economic Forum (2024). *Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, p 12

<sup>7</sup> World Bank (2024). *Gender Data Portal – Denmark & Uzbekistan country profiles* (labor force participation indicators, para. 3).

intersectional inequalities, particularly those affecting migrant and minority women<sup>8</sup>. Despite relatively low aggregate inequality, Denmark continues to exhibit a gender pay gap estimated at 12–14% in the private sector, particularly concentrated in high-skilled and leadership positions<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, rankings function less as reform triggers and more as instruments of continuous policy calibration within an already institutionalized equality regime.

In contrast, Uzbekistan demonstrates a structurally different pattern of engagement with international gender rankings, particularly following political reforms initiated after 2016 under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Uzbekistan ranks significantly lower in global gender equality indices, with a Global Gender Gap Index score of approximately 0.681 and ranking around 108th out of 146 countries in 2024<sup>10</sup>. Female labor force participation remains substantially lower than male participation, at approximately 39.4% compared to 72.3% for men<sup>11</sup> reflecting persistent structural constraints in the labor market.

Since 2017, Uzbekistan has introduced a series of gender-related reforms, including the 2019 domestic violence law, the establishment of gender equality institutions, and parliamentary gender quotas increasing women's representation to around 32%<sup>12</sup>. These reforms align closely with international benchmarking frameworks and development indicators, suggesting that rankings function primarily as external signaling mechanisms aimed at international organizations, investors, and development partners rather than as drivers of internal political competition.

As a result, policy change in Uzbekistan tends to be more visible in formal legislative alignment with international standards than in substantive enforcement or behavioral transformation.

These differences suggest that rankings are not independent drivers of policy change but interact with domestic institutions that shape their translation into policy outcomes.

### Conclusion

This study examined the influence of international gender rankings on domestic gender policy through a comparative analysis of Denmark and Uzbekistan. The findings demonstrate that international rankings function as important instruments of global governance, shaping state behavior through benchmarking, reputational pressure, and norm diffusion rather than direct coercion. However, their impact varies significantly depending on domestic institutional structures, political conditions, and the capacity of local actors to transform international evaluation into substantive policy outcomes.

The Danish case illustrates that in consolidated democratic welfare states, rankings primarily serve as mechanisms of policy reinforcement and normative validation. Denmark's high performance reflects long-established institutional commitments to gender equality, while rankings contribute to maintaining political accountability and identifying remaining inequalities. In contrast, the Uzbek case demonstrates that rankings operate mainly as instruments of international legitimation within a transitional reform environment. Although gender-related reforms have expanded since 2016, their implementation remains constrained by limited institutional capacity, centralized governance, and persistent social norms.

The comparative analysis suggests that international rankings are not independent drivers of policy transformation. Rather, their effectiveness depends on domestic institutional capacity, political incentives, and the presence of actors capable of converting reputational pressure into meaningful reform. Overall, the study contributes to the literature on governance by indicators by demonstrating that international rankings are context-dependent governance technologies that continue to shape global political discourse and domestic policy priorities.

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<sup>8</sup> Merry, S. E. (2016). *The Seductions of Quantification* (University of Chicago Press), p 44

<sup>9</sup> Eurostat (2023). *Gender pay gap statistics in the EU*, p. 18

<sup>10</sup> World Economic Forum (2024). *Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, p 16

<sup>11</sup> World Bank (2024). *Gender Data Portal – Denmark & Uzbekistan country profiles* (labor force participation indicators, para. 6.

<sup>12</sup> UNDP. (2023). Human Development Report / Gender equality datasets.

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