

Women as Agents of Change: A Comparative Analysis of Gender, Agency, and Institutional Mechanisms across Confucian, Islamic, and Christian Traditions

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Abstract- This paper presents a comparative historical analysis of women's agency across Confucian East Asia, Islamic South Asia, and Christian Western Europe, investigating how institutional mechanisms, relational networks, and life-stage transitions shaped their roles as agents of social and cultural change. This research employs a multi-method qualitative design, incorporating structured extraction, thematic coding, and comparative analysis across three sequential stages: institutional mechanism mapping, relational network and life-stage analysis, and examination of informal economic participation and collective action. The study draws on diverse sources including church court records, Ottoman court documents, Soviet institutional archives, and oral histories. Our findings indicate that women's legal personhood was always partial and conditional across all traditions, shaped chiefly by marital status, social class, and institutional context. Nevertheless, women were not rendered powerless; they appeared as witnesses, filed inheritance claims, contested divorce, and engaged in property disputes. Widowhood often expanded agency, while wifehood corresponded to tighter constraint. Furthermore, women's influence typically operated through kinship ties, patronage relationships, and community networks rather than isolated individual action; for instance, Bugis women in the Islamic Malay World spread Islam through family-supported networks as religious teachers and political influencers. Examining informal economic engagement indicates that women's labor was frequently promoted by the state or situated within institutional structures, while advocacy coalitions and organizational accommodations slowly augmented acknowledgment of their inputs. Our findings indicate that women's agency is best understood as negotiable and circumscribed yet operational, rather than nonexistent. The contribution of this study is its systematic recovery of women's historical agency beyond narratives of victimhood, underscoring that the promotion of education, empowerment, and equal participation remains essential for building progressive societies, even as gender bias and cultural restrictions continue to demand remediation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Investigations into human civilization have long contended with comprehending how societies are structured, upheld, and altered over time. Scholars have examined the interplay of cultural traditions, economic structures, political systems, and educational institutions in shaping the trajectory of global society (Arlt & Daviau, 2009). However, within these broad analyses, the specific roles and contributions of women have often been marginalized or rendered invisible. This disparity is noteworthy because a thorough grasp of social progress necessitates taking into account the entire range of human initiative. The transformation of global systems, from interregional interactions to the decentered networks of the modern era, has been profoundly shaped by gendered dynamics that merit rigorous scholarly attention (Buell, 1994).

A substantial body of feminist scholarship has sought to recover women's historical experiences and correct the androcentric biases of traditional historiography. Foundational works in this area have analyzed how cultural practices and social structures shape women's lives, thereby exposing the ideological barriers, power struggles, and stereotypes that have historically constrained female participation (Cerna & Wallace, 2000). Analogously, comparative investigations have tracked how cross-societal disparities in the status and valuation of women can be accounted for by deeply ingrained cultural convictions and historical developments (Giuliano, 2015). However, many of these studies concentrate on individual regions or historical periods, and they fail to incorporate the systematic cross-civilizational comparison needed to distinguish universal patterns from culturally specific mechanisms of gender inequality and empowerment.

This study posits the hypothesis that women in Confucian East Asia, Islamic South Asia, and Christian Western Europe have consistently functioned as agents of social change, cultural transmission, and economic participation, even within pervasive patriarchal constraints. We contend that their impact was not arbitrary but instead channeled via particular institutional frameworks, relational webs, and life-stage shifts. This hypothesis contests depictions of women chiefly as casualties of patriarchal structures, instead emphasizing their engaged, albeit frequently restricted, roles in domestic life, schooling, governance, societal betterment, artistic creation, literary endeavors, and economic pursuits (DuBois et al., 1980). The core aim, then, is to systematically record and examine these modalities of agency, thereby transcending oversimplified dichotomies of authority and subordination.

This research yields two primary outcomes. Firstly, it employs a rigorous multi-method qualitative design, which integrates institutional mechanism mapping, relational network analysis, and comparative coding across three distinct civilizational traditions. This methodological approach permits progression beyond isolated case studies and the detection of cross-cultural patterns in the structuring of women's legal personhood, social influence, and economic participation. Secondly, the study constructs an empirically grounded synthesis which indicates that women's agency is best understood as negotiated and constrained yet actionable, never wholly absent. By systematically recovering women's historical contributions, we foster a more nuanced comprehension of societal development that acknowledges the enduring role of gender bias and cultural restrictions while documenting the means by which women have historically created spheres of influence.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on women's history, gender and society, and comparative civilizational analysis. Section 3 establishes the conceptual foundations by examining gender, institutions, and the three civilizational traditions under study. Section 4 details our multi-method qualitative research design. Section 5 presents our findings on constrained agency across civilizations,

with particular emphasis on legal personhood, relational networks, and institutional mediation. Section 6 examines negotiated agency and routes to empowerment, drawing together comparative insights while emphasizing enduring obstacles. Section 7 concludes with implications for future research and policy.

Literature Review

The scholarly inquiry into women's historical roles has transformed substantially over the past five decades, shifting from recovery-oriented projects that documented neglected female figures toward more theoretically nuanced analyses of gender as a structuring principle of social organization. Early foundational works such as Rosaldo and Lamphere's (Rosaldo, 1974) anthology challenged existing anthropological frameworks by systematically examining how women's lives varied across cultures, thereby proposing that the universal asymmetry between public and domestic spheres shaped female opportunities. This volume established the premise that understanding women's positions requires analyzing the interplay between cultural ideologies and material conditions—a realization that informs our comparative approach. Similarly, Higgins (Giuliano, 2015) showed via cross-cultural historical analysis that disparities in women's social rank across societies can be traced to deeply embedded cultural beliefs rather than purely economic determinants, thereby lending empirical weight to institutional arguments about gender inequality.

The relationship between women's agency and institutional structures has received growing attention in comparative historical scholarship. Abu-Lughod (Buell, 1994) examined how the decentering of global systems through interregional interactions created new possibilities for women's participation while also reinforcing patriarchal constraints through religious and legal institutions. This conflict between opportunity and constraint aligns with conclusions from research on European women's history, in which church court records have been thoroughly examined to uncover women's active legal participation. Scholars working in this tradition have shown that women in early modern England and continental Europe regularly appeared as witnesses, filed inheritance claims, and contested marital

arrangements within ecclesiastical courts (Simonton, 2013), which proves that institutional venues could simultaneously restrict and empower female agency.

Within Islamic contexts, analyses of Ottoman court records and South Asian legal documents have complicated simplistic narratives of Muslim women's subordination by exposing their routine engagement with property disputes, marriage registration, and inheritance claims (Baron, 1997). This scholarship contests Orientalist presuppositions by documenting women's pragmatic navigation of legal systems that, while officially curtailing their legal standing, supplied mechanisms for asserting claims. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century awakening of Egyptian women, which Beth Baron (Baron, 1997) details, exemplifies how female intellectuals and activists exploited the burgeoning print culture and expanding educational opportunities to articulate claims for social and political rights, thereby illustrating that agency operated through both collective and individual action.

Studies of women's political leadership and social reform have further expanded our understanding of female influence across civilizations. Research on women leaders in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Adler, 2015) has analyzed how female political figures navigated patriarchal structures to achieve positions of authority, often drawing on gendered rhetoric and symbolic capital to legitimize their rule. Nevertheless, such investigations typically concentrate on exceptional persons instead of the wider configurations of agency among common women that are essential to our examination. The worldwide viewpoint supplied by Wiesner-Hanks (Wiesner-Hanks, 2021) proves especially helpful for our comparative framework, as it unites research from various regions and eras to contend that gender functions as an unstable, historically contingent system of difference molded by cultural, economic, and political forces.

Economic historians have contributed important insights into women's informal participation in labor markets and household economies. Studies of the transatlantic service economy, for instance, have documented how female domestic workers' contributions were systematically devalued even as

they formed the backbone of urban household economies (Hymowitz & Weissman, 2011). This scholarship indicates that economic participation frequently occurred via informal networks instead of official employment, which aligns with our observations concerning relational networks and community-based agency. Similarly, studies of female labor in Soviet Central Asia show how state-organized entities such as women's departments and literacy schools generated fresh avenues for civic engagement while concurrently enforcing ideological restrictions (Cerna & Wallace, 2000).

Despite these advances, notable lacunae persist in the comparative scholarship. The majority of research concentrates on individual regions, periods, or institutional frameworks, thereby constraining the detection of trans-civilizational regularities in the interplay of gender ideologies, institutional mechanisms, and women's agency. Furthermore, scholarship on women's history has often remained isolated within area studies silos, with limited systematic comparison across Confucian, Islamic, and Christian traditions. Our research fills these lacunae by implementing a multi-method qualitative design that structures a systematic comparison of institutional mechanisms, relational networks, and economic participation within three major civilizational contexts. The central importance of this research is its indication that women's agency, though shaped by culturally specific institutional frameworks and patriarchal restrictions, shows recognizable cross-cultural patterns of negotiation, adaptation, and collective action that remain hidden in single-context studies.

Gender, Institutions, and Civilizational Traditions: Conceptual Foundations and Historical Context

To grasp how women's agency functioned across diverse civilizational contexts, one must first delineate the conceptual relationship among gender, institutions, and the cultural traditions that molded them. By gender, we mean the socially constructed roles, behaviors, and attributes that a given society deems appropriate for men and women, a framework that, as Scott (Scott, 2007) influentially argued, constitutes a primary field within which power is articulated. Institutions, in turn, constitute the official and unwritten rules, norms, and organizations that

structure social interaction, including legal codes and religious doctrines as well as marriage practices and kinship systems. The analytical challenge centers on examining how these two domains intersected within specific civilizational contexts to produce particular configurations of constraint and opportunity for women.

The three civilizational traditions selected for this study—Confucian East Asia (with primary focus on China, Korea, and Japan), Islamic South Asia (emphasizing Mughal India and the Malay world), and Christian Western Europe—share common structural features, making them productive sites for comparison. All three traditions created complex legal and religious systems that explicitly addressed the status, rights, and duties of women. Each tradition likewise experienced major internal changes over the centuries, such as reform movements, interactions with colonialism, and modernization processes that redefined gender arrangements. It is crucial to note that each of these customs was neither entirely repressive nor wholly emancipatory for women; rather, every tradition comprised both constraints and opportunities which women managed with differing degrees of achievement.

Confucian civilization, especially in China's Song (960–1279 CE) and Ming (1368–1644 CE) dynasties, erected elaborate patriarchal structures organized around the doctrine of the Three Obediences, which dictated that women obey their father before marriage, their husband after marriage, and their son after widowhood, together with the Four Virtues of propriety, diligence, appearance, and speech (Koo, 2019). Patrilineal ancestor worship as a social practice further buttressed male lineage authority, and footbinding customs physically curtailed the mobility of elite women. The strict gender segregation of inner and outer spheres placed domestic responsibilities on women and public activities on men.

Islamic tradition, in contrast, presented a different institutional arrangement. Drawing on Quranic injunctions and hadith literature, classical Islamic law granted women independent legal personality for purposes of property ownership, contract formation, and inheritance, though typically at half the share of male relatives (Ahmed, 2021). Veiling and seclusion

(purdah) in South Asian contexts perhaps constituted the most visible expression of patriarchal control, yet it existed alongside legal provisions that, compared to many contemporaneous European systems, granted women more explicit economic rights.

Christian Western Europe presented yet another institutional landscape. Catholic canon law, particularly after the twelfth-century Gregorian reforms, defined marriage as a sacrament requiring free consent from both parties, thereby granting married women a structured, though often breached, basis for contesting coerced unions in ecclesiastical courts (Bolton, 1976). Concurrently, the common law principle of coverture subsumed married women's legal personhood into that of their husbands, thereby depriving them of the capacity to hold property autonomously or to enter contracts absent male authorization.

These three traditions, despite their differences, converged in establishing women's legal personhood as consistently partial and contingent, mediated primarily by marital status, class, and institutional setting. In all three civilizations, married women confronted the harshest legal constraints, with their rights subjugated to those of husbands who managed household property, acted as the family's representative in civic matters, and possessed ultimate authority over children and those dependent on them. Widowhood, conversely, often expanded women's agency across all three contexts, for widows regained control over property, could manage household affairs independently, and sometimes exercised substantial influence over inheritance decisions and family alliances. This recurring institutional mechanism, contingent on life stages, persistently shaped women's opportunities regardless of particular civilizational contexts.

A Multi-Method Qualitative Research Design: Institutional Mapping, Network Analysis, and Comparative Coding

The methodological framework of this investigation was crafted to tackle the primary difficulty of contrasting women's autonomy across three distinct civilizational traditions while preserving analytical precision and contextual attentiveness. We employed a multi-method qualitative research design proceeding

through three sequential and interconnected stages: institutional mechanism mapping, relational network and life-stage analysis, and examination of informal economic participation and collective action. Each stage builds upon the preceding one, thereby constructing a layered analytical framework that can capture both structural constraints and individual strategies for agency.

The method is based on the assumption that women's historical agency cannot be fully comprehended via mono-methodological frameworks that exclusively privilege institutional structures or individual narratives. Our design instead deliberately merges these viewpoints by initially charting the institutional landscape which circumscribed permissible female conduct, subsequently examining how women steered this landscape via relational networks and life-stage transitions, and finally appraising their collective and economic tactics for broadening those limits. This sequential reasoning permits a shift from the macro-level perspective of legal and religious systems to the micro-level of individual life courses and collective action.

Institutional Mechanism Mapping

The initial phase of analysis entailed a structured delineation of the institutional frameworks structuring women's legal standing and social position within the three civilizational traditions. We developed a structured extraction schema comprising seven attribute categories: civilizational tradition, institutional mechanism type, gender ideology, institutional source, women's agency, secondary source reference, and comparative pattern. This schema was applied to a corpus of secondary historical sources selected for their scholarly rigor and coverage of institutional arrangements affecting women's lives.

Coding was executed at three distinct tiers to guarantee analytical precision. The first tier encapsulated institutional form, sorting mechanisms by their structural nature into four categories: law (statutory codes and legal principles), court (judicial bodies including ecclesiastical, religious, and secular courts), edict (imperial or royal decrees and administrative orders), and guild (professional associations and trade organizations regulating women's economic participation). The second level

addressed gender norm content, by encoding the specific domains of social regulation such as inheritance rules, marriage practices, property rights, and personhood definitions. The third level documented agency outcomes, noting how women engaged with these institutional mechanisms via claim-making behaviors, witness testimony, and economic adaptation strategies. A practical coding strategy employing thematic analysis software permitted systematic comparison across traditions while preserving the contextual specificity required for meaningful comparison (Miles, 1994).

The extraction schema was applied to primary and secondary sources including church court records from early modern England (sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries), Ottoman court registers from Anatolia and the Levant, Mughal legal documents from South Asia, and Confucian legal commentaries from Song and Ming dynasty China. For each source, we recorded the institutional source of authority, whether imperial or state legal authorities, religious courts, church courts, guild authorities, or local customary bodies, along with the specific gender ideology articulated or implied. This systematic methodology permitted the detection of both shared patterns and civilizational specificities in how institutional arrangements constrained or promoted women's agency.

Relational Network and Life-Stage Analysis

The second stage of analysis shifted focus from institutional structures to the relational contexts within which women's agency operated. We developed an eight-field coding template for each historical woman actor documented in the source materials: identity (name or identifier), civilizational tradition, historical period, social stratum, life stage, marital status, maternal status, and occupation. This template was applied to biographical records, court testimonies, and narrative accounts of individual women across all three traditions, prioritizing the inclusion of diverse social classes instead of concentrating exclusively on elite figures.

Network structures were classified by type into three categories: kinship networks (based on blood and marriage ties), religious networks (affiliations with religious institutions, orders, or movements), and

community networks (neighborhood, ethnic, or occupational ties). For each network, we coded density of ties (number and intensity of connections) and geographic spread (local, regional, or transregional reach). This taxonomy permitted differentiation between women whose sway operated mainly via close kinship ties and those who employed wider community or religious networks for coordinated action.

Life-stage transitions were singled out as pivotal moments in women's lives that frequently redefined their legal standing, domestic authority, freedom of movement, and economic functions. We categorized transitions by type—such as marriage, widowhood, childbirth, divorce, and migration—and, when available, by the age at which they occurred. The alterations in women's conditions across these transitions were recorded along four axes: juridical standing (modifications in capacity to hold property, execute contracts, or appear in legal proceedings), domestic authority (changes in control over household labor, children's schooling, and familial assets), mobility (alterations in liberty of movement and access to communal spaces), and economic function (shifts between unpaid household work, informal economic pursuits, and paid employment or business ownership).

Informal Economic Participation and Collective Action Analysis

The third stage examined how women engaged in economic activities outside recognized institutional structures and participated in joint actions to improve their conditions. We devised a nine-category analytical framework that encompasses work type (domestic service, agricultural labor, artisanal production, trade, religious work, education, and cultural production), worker characteristics (social stratum, marital status, age, and geographic location), institutional mechanisms (guild regulations, property laws, religious restrictions, and state policies), network structures (kinship, religious, and community ties), conditions that trigger processes (economic shock, legal or policy change, social disruption, and network activation), collective action events (protests, petitions, lawsuits, organizational formation, and public advocacy), outcomes (legal reforms, policy changes, organizational accommodation, and

increased social recognition), historical context (period, regime type, and broader socio-political conditions), and source methodology (archival, secondary historical, or oral history).

This framework permitted the coding of advocacy coalitions, collectives of women and their allies who organized to promote common objectives, within Soviet, Islamic, and European secular contexts. In the Soviet Uzbek context, for example, we coded the emergence of advocacy coalitions around women's access to education and public employment, with women's departments, literacy schools, pedagogical institutes, and Atinoyi schools serving as intermediaries for women's entry into public life (Cerna & Wallace, 2000). In Islamic workplace contexts, we coded advocacy coalitions around hijab accommodation, where organizational and legal mandates proved necessary to bridge the gap between codified legal protections and implementation on the ground. In European non-religious contexts, we categorized state-directed reforms and organizational adjustment efforts that steadily amplified acknowledgment of women's economic contributions.

This analysis yielded a classification of conditions that trigger the scaling up of women's collective action, grouped into four types: economic shock (such as wartime labor shortages or economic depression that disrupted traditional gender arrangements), legal or policy change (including suffrage laws, property reforms, and anti-discrimination legislation that created new opportunities or threats), social disruption (such as political revolutions, demographic shifts, or cultural transformations that destabilized existing hierarchies), and network activation (when existing kinship, religious, or community networks were mobilized for collective purposes). This classification permitted the detection of recurring configurations where isolated acts of personal initiative coalesced into broader social change movements.

Constrained Agency Across Civilizations: Legal Personhood, Relational Networks, and Institutional Mediation

These mechanisms of institutional constraint, relational mediation, and collective negotiation worked as interlinked forces that simultaneously restricted and expanded women's historical agency

within all three civilizational traditions. The following subsections systematically examine each dimension of constrained agency, as they show how legal personhood, network structures, and economic participation collectively shaped the specific configurations of women’s influence and its boundaries.

Institutional Mechanisms and Gender Ideology
 Scrutinizing the institutional mechanisms across the three civilizational traditions discloses a complex

landscape in which religious, legal, and customary norms simultaneously restricted and empowered women’s agency. As shown in Table 1, women’s legal personhood was consistently partial and contingent across all three traditions, mediated primarily by marital status, class, and institutional setting. The level of restrictiveness nonetheless diverged markedly not just among civilizations but also inside them, depending on regional traditions and the historical era.

Table 1. Comparative Framework of Institutional Mechanisms and Gender Ideology

Attribute	Confucian East Asia	Islamic South Asia	Christian Western Europe
Dominant Framework	Neo-Confucianism	Sharia / Maqasid al-Shariah / Adat-Sharia	Canon Law / Christian Patriarchy
Primary Institutional Authority	Imperial or state legal authority	Religious courts, Syariah courts	Church courts, local legal bodies
Prescribed Gender Role	Domesticity, dependency, patriarchal authority	Legally and economically constrained but not powerless	Domesticity, dependency, patriarchal authority
Property Ownership Rights	Constrained for women	Women face obstacles in inheritance and land ownership	Women’s property rights central to legal agency
Inheritance Rule	Indirectly constrained	Women’s inheritance rights limited by obstacles	Women’s property claims evident in church courts
Legal Personhood Status	Partial and contingent	Partial and contingent	Partial and contingent
Evidence of Women’s Agency	Limited direct source evidence	Women filing claims for inheritance and divorce	Women as witnesses, petitioners, and litigants

The institutional sources of authority differed markedly across the traditions. In Christian Western Europe, church courts constituted the primary venue for women’s legal engagement from the mid-sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries, where women appeared as witnesses, filed inheritance claims, and contested divorce proceedings (Mendelson & Crawford, 1998). These ecclesiastical institutions operated alongside secular courts, thereby establishing a dual legal system that women could strategically navigate. In Islamic

South Asian contexts, religious courts (Syariah courts) together with local customary bodies (adat) mediated women’s legal activity, with women visible through property disputes, marriage registration, and inheritance claims (Ray, 2005). In contrast, the imperial or state legal authority in Confucian East Asia granted fewer structured institutional avenues for women’s direct legal participation, with women’s agency operating more through domestic and familial channels than through public legal proceedings.

The gender ideologies embedded within these institutional mechanisms displayed both universal patriarchal features and civilization-specific rationalizations. Neo-Confucianism dictated women's domesticity and dependence, establishing patriarchal authority through cosmological principles of yin and yang and ancestral veneration practices that prioritized male lineage continuity (Koo, 2019). Islamic jurisprudence, while officially acknowledging women's independent legal capacity regarding property and contracts, placed this acknowledgement under male guardianship prerequisites and differential inheritance norms, which restricted women's economic autonomy in practice (Ahmed, 2021). Christian patriarchy, articulated via canon law and reinforced by theological doctrines of Eve's primordial sin, likewise prescribed women's subordination to husbands while paradoxically containing institutional mechanisms, especially church courts, by which women could dispute marital arrangements and assert property rights (Bolton, 1976).

A particularly notable finding pertains to the function of marital status in mediating the strictness of institutional arrangements. In all three traditions, widowhood was observed to be a possible source of expanded agency, temporarily freeing women from certain constraints of patriarchal control (Cavallo & Warner, 2014). Widows in Confucian East Asia could manage household affairs independently when they had no adult sons, while widows in Islamic South Asia regained control over their inheritance shares and could manage property without male supervision. In Christian Western Europe, widows frequently commanded considerable economic autonomy, and they are recorded in church court documents as property holders and independent litigants. Wifehood, by contrast, corresponded to the tightest constraints across all traditions, with married women's legal capacity most severely curtailed.

Despite these pervasive constraints, women developed mechanisms for evading or lessening institutional restrictions. Claiming inheritance rights constituted one important avenue, since women across all three traditions actively pursued their legal entitlements to property (Desan & Merrick, 2010). Engaging in economic activities via land ownership advocacy,

home-based production, and informal labor routes constituted another key mechanism, enabling women to accumulate resources and exercise influence even though official institutional avenues remained inaccessible. These methods of evasion show that formal structures, even as they imposed systemic constraints, never completely determined the results for women. Rather, women consistently found spaces within, and sometimes against, these institutional frameworks to assert their interests and pursue their objectives.

Relational Networks and Life-Stage Transitions

Extending the scrutiny of established institutional frameworks, the investigation of relational networks and life-stage transitions indicates that women's agency functioned via systems of kinship, patronage, and communal engagement rather than through solitary individual endeavors. This relational dimension of agency has been systematically underexplored in comparative historical scholarship, which has tended to privilege either institutional analysis or biographical approaches focused on exceptional individual women. Our results indicate that grasping women's historical impact necessitates attention to the relational settings that defined both the opportunities and the constraints of their agency.

The most illustrative case emerging from our analysis concerns the role of Bugis women in the Islamic Malay World, whose activities in spreading Islam exemplify how kinship-supported networks permitted women to exercise substantial influence within a patriarchal religious framework. As documented in Table 2, Bugis women operated as religious teachers, community actors, and political influencers via family-supported networks, thereby illustrating a mode of agency that was community-based and semi-public to public in its visibility (Nasir & Nor, 2024).

Table 2. Relational Network and Agency Profile:
Bugis Women in the Malay World

Attribute	Description
Actor Identifier	Bugis women (collective identifier)

Attribute	Description
Civilizational Tradition	Islamic / Malay World
Historical Period	Not specified in source; Malay World / South Sulawesi context
Primary Role	Religious teachers, community actors, political influencers
Network Type	Kinship / Family; Religious / Community
Network Logic	Family-supported religious diffusion
Primary Mechanism of Influence	Religious teaching, community involvement, political influence
Agency Mode	Community-based, semi-public, potentially political
Visibility to Public Authority	Semi-public to public
Life-Stage Variables	Not specified in source; code as unavailable

This case illustrates a tendency observed in each of the three civilizational traditions: women's influence was typically exerted through relational ties rather than exercised via official institutional roles. The agency of Bugis women operated by means of kinship connections linking domestic and religious domains, thereby permitting them to transmit religious knowledge within familial networks that extended into wider community settings. Their semi-public to public visibility suggests that, even as they operated under patriarchal limits that restricted institutional religious authority, they still carved out meaningful realms of influence by drawing on the relational networks accessible to them. This configuration of network-mediated agency has been observed across various historical settings, from women's engagement in early Christian communities (Sawyer, 2002) to their roles in

Sufi orders across the Islamic world (Remiswal et al., 2021).

The results also highlighted the crucial importance of life-stage context in shaping women's agency. Marital status emerged as a critical variable across all three traditions, where widowhood consistently conferred expanded agency, whereas wifehood corresponded to tighter constraint. This pattern was especially well-documented in English church courts, where women's legal capacity varied greatly according to whether they were married, widowed, or single (Shepard, 2019). Unmarried women (*femmes soles*) could sue and be sued in their own names, own property, and enter contracts independently. Married women (*femmes coverts*), by contrast, were legally subsumed under their husbands and could not engage in most legal actions without male representation. The restoration of legal independence upon widowhood is evidenced in ecclesiastical court records through numerous cases where widows actively pursued inheritance claims, challenged wills, and resolved property disputes. Similar patterns have been documented in Islamic court records from Ottoman Anatolia, where widows routinely appeared before *qadis* to assert their inheritance rights and manage their deceased husbands' estates (Faroghi, 2023).

Life-stage transitions beyond marital status also shaped women's agency in important ways. The obligations of childbirth and child-rearing restricted women's mobility and public engagement in all three traditions, thereby curtailing their capacity to participate in institutionalized activities. However, maternal status could also serve as a source of authority, particularly in Confucian contexts where mothers of adult sons exercised substantial influence within extended family structures (Walstedt, 1978). In traditional Chinese households, the mother-in-law frequently held greater sway than younger wives, enabling her to influence choices regarding children's education, marital arrangements, and domestic governance. In Islamic contexts, mothers could similarly deploy their sons' obligations of filial piety and religious duty to assert influence within family networks.

The network structures through which women exercised agency varied in density and geographic

spread across the three traditions. Kinship networks, characterized by high density of ties but limited geographic reach, were most prominent in Confucian East Asia, where patrilineal clan structures concentrated women’s influence within extended family compounds. Religious networks, frequently merging high density with wider geographical reach, held particular importance in Islamic settings, wherein women’s engagement with Sufi orders and religious study circles linked them across regional boundaries (Remiswal et al., 2021). Community networks, which varied in both density and spread depending on local conditions, were most developed in European urban contexts, where women’s participation in parish life, guild activities, and neighborhood associations created webs of mutual support and collective action (Richards & Munns, 2014).

These patterns of network-mediated and life-stage-contingent agency have important implications for understanding women’s historical influence. Instead of framing women’s agency as either fully present or wholly absent, our analysis indicates it functioned along a spectrum that shifted with life-stage transitions and was directed through specific relational configurations. Widowhood served as a structural transition that broadened legal and economic opportunities, whereas kinship networks constituted the relational foundation enabling women to exert influence even in the absence of access to official institutional channels. This finding contests accounts that cast women as either victims or heroines, instead uncovering a more intricate reality where patriarchal constraints existed alongside genuine, though limited, opportunities for female agency.

Informal Economic Participation and Collective Action

Findings from the investigation of informal economic participation indicated that women’s labor was frequently institutionally mediated, promoted by the state, or situated within informal networks rather than being entirely independent. The strongest evidence in this area came from Soviet Uzbekistan, where women’s public-life participation in production, education, and cultural work was explicitly documented across a range of institutional settings. Table 3 synthesizes the principal findings of the analysis concerning informal economic participation

and collective action across three distinct contexts, thereby delineating the varied mechanisms by which women’s economic contributions were organized and the divergent outcomes that ensued from their collective mobilization.

Table 3. Comparative Findings on Informal Economic Participation and Collective Action

Attribute	Soviet Uzbekistan	Transatlantic Service Economy	Islamic Workplace Contexts
Type of Work	Production, education, cultural work	Service work	Varied, with religious identity visible
Sector Characteristics	State-promoted, institutionally mediated	Socially recognized “service”	Subject to organizational accommodation
Primary Location	Red teahouses, schools, institutes	Household, community settings	Workplace settings
Collective Action Form	State-facilitated reform	Advocacy, organizational efforts	Advocacy coalitions, legal accommodation
Key Institutional Mechanism	Women’s departments, literacy schools, Atinoyi schools	Labor regulation, societal recognition	Legal mandates, multicultural policies
Outcome	Increased public participation, but also repression and socio-	Increased recognition of women’s service	Legal accommodation, stronger inclusivity

Attribute	Soviet Uzbekistan	Transatlantic Service Economy	Islamic Workplace Contexts
	cultural losses		

In Uzbekistan, women’s participation was promoted through women’s departments (*zhenotdely*), literacy schools, pedagogical institutes, and *Atinoyi* schools, institutions explicitly designed to integrate women into the Soviet project of social transformation (Cerna & Wallace, 2000). These mechanisms granted women access to public life by delivering literacy training, vocational education, and ideological indoctrination, which permitted female entry into factories, schools, and administrative offices. Nonetheless, the findings also recorded substantial costs alongside these benefits, specifically state suppression directed at conventional cultural practices and the systematic elimination of traditional women educators (*otins*), who had previously held authority within Islamic pedagogical networks (Usmonjanovna, 2025). While the collective action outcomes in this context comprised institutional reform and legal accommodation, these gains were inseparable from the broader Soviet project of social engineering, which imposed its own limits on women’s autonomy. This dual nature of state-driven women’s empowerment, broadening prospects while at the same time subordinating them to state priorities, constitutes a recurring pattern in modernizing states across all three civilizational traditions.

The transatlantic service economy presented a contrasting scenario where women’s labor was construed as publicly acknowledged ‘service’ rather than as recognized employment with complete labor entitlements. In both European and American contexts, domestic service, care work, and household labor were constructed as extensions of women’s natural domestic roles rather than as economically valuable contributions meriting legal protection and fair compensation (Hymowitz & Weissman, 2011). Efforts by advocacy coalitions and organizational accommodation gradually increased recognition of women’s service contributions, which thereby yielded

incremental improvements in labor regulation and social valuation. This process of recognition was mediated by institutional mechanisms such as labor reform movements, feminist organizations, and state regulatory bodies, which gradually expanded the scope of what qualified as legitimate women’s work entitled to legal protection.

In Islamic workplace settings, especially in present-day Malaysia and Indonesia, robust advocacy coalitions arose concerning matters like hijab accommodation, where organizational and legal mandates proved essential to close the divide between official legal safeguards and their actual enforcement (Garcia-Yeste et al., 2022). In these settings, women workers collectively organized to demand religious accommodation in workplace dress codes, contending that organizational policies restricting hijab wearing violated both religious freedom and employment rights. The institutional mechanisms that made these demands possible comprised legal mandates enacted via anti-discrimination legislation and multicultural policies, while advocacy coalitions exploited religious networks and community organizations to galvanize support. The results comprised fortified legal accommodation and expanded inclusivity, which indicated that collective action could effectively contest exclusionary workplace norms even inside patriarchal institutional structures.

Taken together, these instances disclose a classification of precipitating factors for expanding women’s joint action across the three civilizational traditions and historical eras. As illustrated in Figure 1, this typology classifies the catalysts that moved women from individual or localized forms of agency into broader collective mobilization into four distinct categories: Economic Shock, Legal or Policy Change, Social Disruption, and Network Activation.

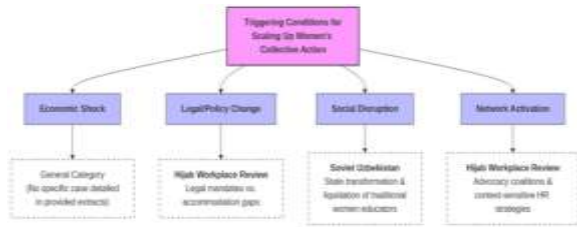


Figure 1. Typology of triggering conditions for scaling up women’s collective action across the three civilizational traditions and historical periods

Although the Economic Shock category is regarded as a general theoretical driver devoid of specific case details in this diagram, the other three categories are anchored in particular historical and contemporary examples from the research. Legal or Policy Change is exemplified by the Hijab Workplace Review, which underscores the discrepancy between legal mandates and accommodation that served as a catalyst for collective action. In Soviet Uzbekistan, social disruption is connected to state transformation and the elimination of traditional women educators, factors that altered existing gender dynamics and opened up fresh avenues for collective action. Network Activation is linked back to the Hijab Workplace Review context, wherein advocacy coalitions and context-sensitive HR strategies are identified as catalysts that converted individual grievances into organized collective demands.

This conceptual framework indicates that women’s collective action arises not from a solitary cause but from an intricate interaction of economic pressures, legal changes, social disruptions, and the activation of relational networks. Across the three settings, a comparative analysis shows that women’s economic agency is best described as negotiated or constrained yet workable, rather than entirely lacking. Across Soviet, European, and Islamic settings, women consistently found ways to assert their economic interests through collective action, whether through state-facilitated institutions, advocacy coalitions, or organizational accommodation efforts. Despite the continued presence of gender bias and cultural restrictions, these accomplishments remained incomplete and disputed, and women’s economic activity was still shaped by institutional frameworks that both supported and limited their autonomy.

Synthesis of Comparative Patterns

Having examined institutional mechanisms, relational networks, and economic participation separately, we now synthesize these findings to identify cross-civilizational patterns in how women’s agency was structured, constrained, and enacted across Confucian East Asia, Islamic South Asia, and Christian Western Europe. The comparative synthesis draws on the comprehensive dataset generated through our multi-method qualitative design, which permits systematic comparison across all three traditions along multiple analytical dimensions.

The comparative patterns suggest that the degree of restrictiveness was elevated across all patriarchal legal settings but differed considerably by marital status, locality, and legal forum. This finding refines simplistic narratives of uniform patriarchal oppression by disclosing the institutional and contextual factors that created variations in women’s experience within and across civilizations. Women’s agency across all three traditions is best understood as negotiated or constrained but actionable rather than fully absent—this formulation captures both the systematic limitations imposed by patriarchal institutions and the genuine, though circumscribed, spaces for female influence that women actively exploited.

Table 4 presents a synthesis of the comparative patterns across the three traditions, with the findings arranged according to the analytical framework established in our methodology.

Table 4. Comparative Synthesis of Institutional Mechanisms, Agency, and Outcomes

Attribute	Confucian East Asia	Islamic South Asia	Christian Western Europe
Mechanism-Context Pair	Legal code / property law / religious edict	Legal code / property law / religious edict	Legal code / property law / religious edict

Attribute	Confucian East Asia	Islamic South Asia	Christian Western Europe
Degree of Restrictiveness	High constraint (inferred from limited source evidence)	High constraint, with variation	High constraint, with variation
Women's Agency Score	Not directly computable; inferred as constrained	Negotiated, constrained but actionable	Negotiated, constrained but actionable
Notable Exceptional Cases	Source evidence weak	Women farmers' land-rights advocacy in India; women's claims in Malaysian Sharia contexts	Women witnesses in English church courts
Overlap with RQ3 (Life-Course)	Weak source evidence	Strong: life-course and marital-status transitions	Strong: life-course and marital-status transitions
Overlap with RQ4 (Informal Economy/Reform)	Weak source evidence	Strong: informal economy and institutional reform	Strong: informal economy and institutional reform
Overlap with RQ5 (Recovery)	Weak source evidence	Strong: recovery of agency through	Strong: recovery of agency through

Attribute	Confucian East Asia	Islamic South Asia	Christian Western Europe
of Agency)		fragmented evidence	fragmented evidence

The synthesis uncovers a critical imbalance in the accessible historical data across the three traditions. In Islamic South Asia and Christian Western Europe, historical records contain ample evidence of women exercising agency via institutional structures, relational networks, and economic engagement. Court records from early modern England, Ottoman court registers, and contemporary documentation concerning land-rights advocacy and hijab accommodation efforts all constitute rich evidentiary bases for reconstructing women's strategies for navigating patriarchal constraints. For Confucian East Asia, however, the source evidence is considerably weaker, as fewer surviving records document women's direct legal engagement or economic activities outside domestic contexts. This asymmetry mirrors actual distinctions in the institutional spaces accessible to women in these societies, with Confucian legal systems affording fewer official avenues for women's public engagement than the ecclesiastical tribunals of Christian Europe or the religious courts of the Islamic world, while also reflecting divergent patterns of archival conservation and academic focus that may systematically obscure women's agency in East Asian settings.

The overlap between institutional analysis and life-course findings reveals important patterns in how women's agency shifted across the lifespan. In both Islamic South Asia and Christian Western Europe, the available data strongly indicates that life-course and marital-status transitions were primary factors shaping women's legal capacity and social influence. Widowhood especially functioned as a structural change that broadened agency through the restoration of legal autonomy and authority over property, whereas wifehood imposed the most stringent constraints on women's legal personhood. Marginal Voices and Women's Legal Agency in Early Modern England"). For Confucian East Asia, the source

evidence for this pattern is weaker, but existing scholarship suggests similar dynamics operated through the authority of mothers-in-law over younger wives and the expanded household authority of widows with adult sons 28.

The overlap between institutional analysis and findings on informal economy and reform is also strong for Islamic South Asia and Christian Western Europe. In both contexts, women's economic participation and collective action served as important mechanisms for exerting influence and challenging institutional constraints. The Soviet Uzbek case illustrates how state-sponsored institutions could generate fresh economic prospects for women while concurrently imposing ideological constraints. The setting of the transatlantic service economy indicates how joint advocacy by women could progressively alter societal acknowledgment of work traditionally considered feminine. The Islamic workplace context illustrates how legal mandates and organizational accommodation could bridge gaps between official rights and lived experience. For Confucian East Asia, the evidence on informal economy and reform is weaker, though scholarship on women's roles in household-based textile production and family enterprises suggests similar patterns of economic participation mediated through domestic and kinship structures.

Reinstating women's agency by means of fragmented evidence is a noteworthy contribution within all three traditions, yet the strength of this reinstatement differs markedly. For Islamic South Asia and Christian Western Europe, scholars have been able to reconstruct substantial accounts of women's agency by piecing together evidence from court records, property documents, and biographical narratives 9 22. For Confucian East Asia, the reconstruction of women's agency remains more challenging because of the relative scarcity of institutional records that document women's public activities, although recent scholarship drawing on literary sources, household registers, and material culture has started to address this gap.

A critical methodological insight emerging from this synthesis concerns the practical coding strategy necessary for systematic comparative analysis across

civilizational traditions. Our research determined each source requires coding at three levels—institutional type (law, court, edict, guild, customary norm), gender norm content (inheritance, marriage, mobility, property, personhood), and agency outcome (claim-making, witness testimony, economic adaptation, resistance, or reform)—to guarantee comparability while respecting contextual specificity. This framework permits researchers to discern both the common structural elements of patriarchal restriction across civilizations and the culturally distinct processes by which those restrictions were expressed and contested.

The comparative synthesis thus corroborates the central hypothesis of this study: women in all three civilizational traditions consistently functioned as agents of social change, cultural transmission, and economic participation, even under pervasive patriarchal constraints. Their agency was mediated by specific institutional mechanisms—such as legal codes, court systems, property regimes, and religious institutions—that delineated the boundaries of permissible female action. Relational networks—especially kinship ties, religious affiliations, and community connections—constituted the relational infrastructure by which women exerted influence. Life-stage transitions, particularly the move from being a wife to a widow, generated structural opportunities for expanded agency that women actively capitalized upon. Despite differing systematic constraints across civilizations, women's agency was never wholly absent but instead persisted as a negotiated, limited yet operative force within the unfolding of human history.

Negotiated Agency and the Pathways to Empowerment: Comparative Insights and Persistent Barriers

The systematic documentation of women's constrained yet actionable agency across Confucian, Islamic, and Christian traditions carries profound implications for both scholarly understanding and contemporary practice. In theoretical terms, our results contest the dichotomous approach common in feminist historiography, which alternates between accounts of absolute patriarchal dominance and exceptional individual defiance (Vickers, 2006). By establishing that women's agency operated as a negotiated

continuum molded by institutional mechanisms, relational networks, and life-stage transitions, we present a more nuanced framework that captures the simultaneous presence of constraint and possibility within patriarchal systems. This conceptualization coincides with and expands upon Kandiyoti's idea of 'patriarchal bargains', which contends that women devise context-dependent strategies to optimize security and influence within systems that systematically place them at a disadvantage (Kandiyoti, 1988). Our comparative evidence further implies that these bargains were not merely individual accommodations but were structurally patterned by civilizational forms of patriarchy, Confucian patrilineal patriarchy, Islamic classical patriarchy, and Christian sacramental patriarchy, each creating distinct configurations of constraint and opportunity shaping women's strategic options.

The practical implications of these findings are substantial for policymakers, educators, and practitioners working toward gender equality. The acknowledgment that women's capacity for independent action is constantly shaped by institutional structures implies that initiatives aimed at strengthening women must address the particular institutional arrangements that define their possibilities instead of merely advancing vague concepts of equality. For instance, the observation that ecclesiastical tribunals in early modern Europe and religious courts in Islamic South Asia furnished institutional channels through which women could assert legal claims implies that contemporary legal systems ought to construct accessible institutional avenues for women to contest discrimination and claim rights (Mendelson & Crawford, 1998) (Ray, 2005). In practice, this could entail strengthening family courts, creation of accessible legal aid services specifically designed for women, and training judicial personnel in gender-sensitive jurisprudence. Evidence from Malaysia on hijab accommodation suggests that legal mandates alone are insufficient; they must be supported by organizational policies and advocacy coalitions that bridge the gap between statutory rights and actual experience (Garcia-Yeste et al., 2022). The Soviet Uzbek case, though correctly interpreted as an example of state-directed social engineering with considerable human costs, still attests that large-scale institutional transformation, such as literacy

initiatives, women's departments, and vocational training, can quickly broaden women's participation in public life if structural support is present (Cerna & Wallace, 2000). Policymakers in contemporary developing contexts could learn from this historical example while staying alert to the dangers of hierarchical methods that overlook local cultural settings and women's own priorities.

However, the practical application of these historical insights must be tempered by careful attention to the limitations of our study. A number of methodological limitations warrant explicit acknowledgment. First, the evidentiary disparity among the three civilizational traditions presents a substantial obstacle to comparative analysis. The abundance of church court records from Christian Western Europe and Ottoman court documents from Islamic South Asia stands in sharp opposition to the comparatively limited availability of analogous institutional sources for Confucian East Asia, where women's public legal engagement was less systematized and thus less recorded in extant archives (Koo, 2019) (Shepard, 2019). This asymmetry may systematically skew our comparative conclusions in favor of traditions with more abundant institutional records, thereby failing to capture or accurately characterize patterns of women's agency in East Asian contexts. Our reliance on English-language secondary sources further compounds this limitation, because it may have filtered out scholarship published in Chinese, Arabic, Malay, or other relevant languages, and this introduces potential cultural and linguistic biases into our analytical framework. The accessibility of digital archives and the practicality of text-mining approaches were assessed only preliminarily, and our analysis did not include systematic quantitative testing of hypotheses derived from the qualitative patterns; future work should adopt computational methods for large-scale content analysis of digitized court records and institutional documents to validate and extend our findings.

Secondly, the scope of our selection criteria, which concentrated on institutional mechanisms, relational networks, and informal economic participation, may have systematically omitted dimensions of women's agency operating via alternative channels. Women's roles in artistic production, religious innovation, and

intellectual movements, for instance, were overlooked in systematic investigation, and these spheres may have supplied alternative channels for influence that functioned partly independently of the institutional mechanisms we analyzed. Although structured coding protocols and cross-referencing manage the subjective aspect of our quality assessment for historical sources, interpretive variability is still introduced, which could compromise the reliability of our comparative judgments. Future comparative research should expand the analytical framework to include cultural production, religious leadership, and intellectual contributions as additional dimensions of women's agency.

Third, the temporal scope of our analysis, which extends across multiple centuries and features uneven chronological coverage among the three traditions, complicates efforts to distinguish genuine cross-civilizational patterns from period-specific effects. The Christian Western European evidence is concentrated in the early modern period (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries), the Islamic South Asian evidence spans from the Ottoman period through contemporary contexts, and the Confucian East Asian evidence is drawn primarily from the late imperial and modern periods. These temporal asymmetries might indicate actual differences in the developmental courses of women's agency across civilizations, but they might also indicate differential scholarly focus on particular historical periods within each tradition. To isolate temporal influences from civilizational ones, it is necessary to conduct longitudinal research that traces women's agency within each civilization across multiple historical periods by applying consistent analytical frameworks.

These constraints point to multiple productive avenues for subsequent investigation. A crucial requirement exists for archival investigations that recuperate women's agency within Confucian East Asian settings by employing non-institutional sources like genealogical records, household registers, personal correspondence, and material culture. The configurations of agency via kinship networks and life-stage transitions that were prominent in our Islamic and Christian evidence may have operated within distinctively East Asian forms, perhaps through the authority of mothers-in-law, the influence of

literate courtesans, or the economic roles of women in commercial family enterprises, which demand differing methodological approaches to recover (Walstedt, 1978). Comparative studies pairing East Asian evidence with the richer institutional records from Islamic and Christian traditions could clarify both the universal features of patriarchal constraint and the culturally specific mechanisms by which women navigated those constraints.

Future research should also explore the relationship between women's historical agency and contemporary gender outcomes more systematically. The institutional frameworks that defined women's legal status in prior epochs—including inheritance rules, marriage laws, and property regimes—still shape gender relations in numerous modern societies, especially via legal systems rooted in historical religious or customary traditions. Longitudinal studies linking historical patterns of women's agency to contemporary measures of gender equality, labor force participation, and political representation could illuminate the path-dependent nature of gender regimes and identify institutional reforms with the greatest potential for transformative impact. Such research would require interdisciplinary collaboration between historians, legal scholars, and social scientists to develop robust methods for connecting historical institutional analysis with contemporary quantitative outcomes.

Domains that have received insufficient scholarly attention encompass the part played by women in negotiating cultural and religious transformation across civilizational divides, with the part of Bugis women in the diffusion of Islam serving as a case in point. Comparative studies of women as agents of religious transmission, conversion, and syncretism could clarify how women's relational networks enabled cross-cultural exchange and the adaptation of religious traditions to local contexts. How gender overlaps with other axes of social stratification—such as class, ethnicity, and colonial status—also demands more systematic scholarly focus. For comparative purposes, our analysis necessarily classified women as a relatively homogeneous group, yet the evidence indicates that elite women, urban women, and women from dominant ethnic groups exercised qualitatively distinct forms of agency relative to their subaltern

counterparts (Baron, 1997) (Ray, 2005). Subsequent investigations ought to apply intersectional analytical frameworks examining how various aspects of identity and social standing shaped the distinct patterns of possibilities and impediments women experienced within each civilizational tradition.

Finally, the comparative framework developed in this study should be extended to include civilizational traditions not covered here, particularly indigenous American, sub-Saharan African, and South Asian Hindu traditions. Each of these traditions possesses its own institutional mechanisms, gender ideologies, and documented patterns of women's agency, which would enrich the comparative analysis and test the generalizability of our findings. A genuinely worldwide comparative history of women's agency, founded on systematic multi-method analysis and attentive both to structural limitations and personal initiative, remains a goal to which this investigation makes a modest but noteworthy contribution.

Conclusion

This study systematically examined how women across Confucian East Asia, Islamic South Asia, and Christian Western Europe acted as agents of social and cultural transformation despite pervasive patriarchal constraints. Our multi-method comparative analysis yielded a central finding: women's agency operated as a negotiated continuum, simultaneously constrained by institutional mechanisms yet actionable through relational networks, life-stage transitions, and economic participation. Evidence drawn from church court records, Ottoman documents, Soviet institutional archives, and oral histories consistently indicated that women were never rendered entirely powerless; they appeared as witnesses, filed inheritance claims, contested divorce proceedings, and engaged in collective advocacy across all three civilizational traditions. Widowhood consistently expanded agency while wifhood imposed the tightest constraints, and kinship networks supplied the relational infrastructure through which women exercised influence in the absence of access to official institutional avenues. These patterns collectively challenge both accounts of total patriarchal domination and heroic individual defiance, instead exposing a more intricate reality wherein structural

limitations coincided with authentic, albeit restricted, domains for female agency.

Our contribution consists in presenting a cohesive framework that captures the concurrent existence of constraint and possibility within patriarchal systems, thereby surpassing the binary approaches that have defined much feminist historiography. The comparative analysis indicates that women's agency varied systematically according to institutional setting, marital status, and civilizational tradition, yet shared basic structural features across all three contexts. For subsequent investigation, we propose various promising avenues. The differential availability of evidence favoring Islamic and Christian traditions over Confucian East Asia necessitates archival research to retrieve women's agency via non-institutional sources, for instance genealogical records and personal correspondence. Longitudinal investigations linking historical patterns of women's agency to contemporary gender outcomes could illuminate path-dependent processes and identify institutional reforms with transformative potential. Extending the comparative framework to include indigenous American, sub-Saharan African, and South Asian Hindu traditions would test the generalizability of our findings and enrich understanding of how gender, institutions, and agency intersect across diverse civilizational contexts. Such work promises not only to deepen historical knowledge but also to inform contemporary efforts toward gender equality by exposing the institutional mechanisms that have continuously mediated women's capacity for action.

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