

# ***A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Interactive Mechanisms Between Social Structures and Gender Inequality***

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**Abstract:** Gender equality has become a significant global issue. However, gender inequality persists, manifesting differently across various cultural and social structures. This paper explores the complex and interconnected factors contributing to gender inequality, emphasizing the roles of social structures, cultural concepts, and institutional arrangements. Through a multi-dimensional approach, it examines case studies from Northern Europe, South Asia, and Africa to highlight the diverse ways in which gender hierarchies are sustained. The research reveals how Nordic countries' inclusive policies have made strides toward gender equality, while South Asian societies struggle with patriarchal norms, and African matrilineal societies offer alternative gender structures that are increasingly threatened. Literary works also serve as a tool to both reinforce and critique gender inequalities. This study underscores the need for culturally and institutionally informed interventions to address gender disparities and emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural understanding in shaping gender equality policies. But the research is limited by its focus on a select number of regions, and future studies could expand the geographic scope to include a broader range of cultural contexts for a more comprehensive understanding of global gender inequality.

**Keywords:** Gender inequality, social structures, cross-regional comparison, cultural narratives

## **1. Introduction**

In the past few decades, gender equality has become a topic of widespread concern in the global society, and international documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) have continuously urged governments to respond at the legal and policy levels [1]. However, despite certain achievements, gender inequality is still prevalent around the world and presents diverse and complex manifestations in different cultures and social structures. Gender gaps between countries and regions in terms of political participation, economic opportunities, education and health are still significant. In other words, gender inequality is not the result of a single factor, but the product of the interweaving of social structure, cultural concepts and institutional arrangements.

Social structures not only define the functions and divisions of gender roles, but also perpetuate and reinforce gender inequality through institutional mechanisms such as education systems, legal frameworks, and family organization. In many societies, women are systematically excluded from high-level political and economic decision-making processes. While such exclusion is often rationalized through appeals to “traditional culture” or “social customs,” its deeper cause lies in

entrenched structural exclusion and asymmetrical power relations. This paper adopts a multi-dimensional analytical approach that combines theoretical frameworks, cross-regional case comparisons, and literary interpretation to uncover the mechanisms through which gender inequality is produced and sustained. By examining representative social structures and cultural contexts in regions such as Northern Europe, South Asia, and Africa, the study seeks to reveal the interactive logic between institutional arrangements and gender hierarchies. Ultimately, this research aims to enhance cross-cultural understanding of gender issues in academic discourse and to underscore the importance of acknowledging structural and cultural differences when formulating gender equality policies.

## **2. Theoretical frameworks on gender inequality**

Understanding the structural roots of gender inequality requires a multidimensional theoretical lens. Structural functionalism emphasizes the functional differentiation of gender roles, viewing such division as essential for maintaining social stability and efficiency. Talcott Parsons' theory of instrumental and expressive roles assigns men to public, goal-oriented functions and women to emotional, domestic responsibilities, thus legitimizing institutionalized gender roles [2]. However, this perspective often overlooks the inherent power asymmetries and institutional injustices embedded within such divisions. In many Asian and Middle Eastern societies, women are systematically confined to the private sphere, a phenomenon reinforced not only by cultural norms but also by legal, educational, and religious institutions. In contrast, critical theory focuses on the historical and ideological reproduction of power relations, exposing the ways in which dominant gender ideologies are naturalized through institutions such as law, education, and media. R. W. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" illustrates how traits associated with heterosexual, dominant, and rational masculinity are institutionalized as normative, while alternative gender expressions are marginalized [3]. Feminist institutional analysis further shows how even seemingly neutral legal and policy structures often sustain male-centered logics. Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, expands the analysis by addressing how gender inequality intersects with race, class, religion, and other axes of identity [4]. Crenshaw's work highlights the specific vulnerabilities of women of color, whose experiences are often rendered invisible within single-axis gender frameworks. In countries such as India or the United States, for instance, women's opportunities and rights are simultaneously shaped by factors like caste, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the institutionalization of gender inequality and suggest the necessity of culturally sensitive and structurally aware policy interventions in pursuit of substantive gender justice.

## **3. Cross-cultural case study: the impact of social structures on gender inequality**

### **3.1. Gender equality in nordic countries**

Nordic countries, especially Sweden, Norway and Finland, are widely regarded as models of global gender equality. These countries have built a highly inclusive gender structure through systematic social policies, reflecting the close connection between social structure and gender equality [5]. Taking Sweden as an example, it has been promoting the "socialization of housework" reform since the 1970s [6]. By implementing maternity leave, parental leave and universal childcare services, it has greatly reduced the constraints of traditional gender role division on women. Nordic countries generally implement the "daddy quota system", which stipulates that part of the parental leave must be borne by the father, otherwise it will be invalid. This policy not only encourages men to participate in family care, but also challenges the traditional monopoly of men as the "economic pillar". According to OECD data, the proportion of Swedish men using parental leave has exceeded 30%,

significantly higher than the global average [7]. At the political level, Nordic countries use quotas to promote women's participation in politics. This high level of gender representation has led to the introduction of more policies to protect women's rights, forming a positive feedback loop. The key to the success of the Nordic model is to embed gender equality into the social structure through institutional design, rather than relying solely on cultural propaganda. This case shows that structural institutional intervention can effectively break the rigidity of gender roles and achieve the reconstruction of gender power relations.

### **3.2. The Intersection of patriarchy and religious culture in South Asian societies**

South Asian countries, especially India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, generally have a deep patriarchal culture and religious authority structure [8]. These social factors have jointly shaped the marginal status of women in institutions and daily life. In India, the caste system is closely intertwined with Hindu culture, strengthening the hierarchical control over women. For example, women of different castes are treated extremely unequally in marriage choices, educational opportunities, and labor participation. Even in urban areas, the employment rate of women is still significantly lower than that of men, and they are often concentrated in informal and low-income jobs. Religious practice also plays an amplifying role in the system. Some Islamic or Hindu communities use "chastity" and "obedience" as core norms to discipline women's behavior through family structure, marriage system, and even clothing regulations. This social norm is not only maintained through intergenerational inheritance in the family, but also gains legitimacy through education, media, religious forums and other channels, constituting a structural manifestation of "cultural patriarchy".

There is often hidden discrimination in the education system. The law guarantees women's right to education, but in remote areas, the dropout rate of girls is still high. The causes of gender inequality are multifaceted, including child marriage, economic pressures within families, and the prevailing belief that "women should prioritize the family." Gender inequality cannot be understood as a singular form of oppression. The experiences of women from different castes, classes, and regional backgrounds are more complex, particularly in areas such as marriage, education, and labor. For instance, low-caste rural women often endure compounded marginalization due to the intersection of religious, caste-based discrimination, and economic hardships. These institutionalized disparities are not only manifested in cultural norms but are also reflected in policy gaps and the underrepresentation of women in political spheres. This highlights the deeply structural and intersectional nature of gender inequality in South Asia.

### **3.3. Gender rights in matriarchal societies in Africa**

In the global gender structure dominated by patriarchy, matriarchal societies in some parts of Africa provide another perspective to understand the relationship between gender and power. The Akan people in Ghana, West Africa, practice a matrilineal inheritance system, where land, property and identity are passed down through the maternal line, and women have actual decision-making power in family and community governance [8]. This social structure challenges the common assumption that "gender equity power subordination" and demonstrates the possibility of gender role diversity. In these matriarchal societies, women not only occupy a core position in the family, but in some cases can also serve as public roles such as religious ceremony hosts and local political leaders. This social structure challenges the widely held assumption of "gender equals power" and illustrates the potential for diverse gender roles. In these matriarchal societies, women occupy central roles within the family and, in some instances, also serve in public capacities such as religious ceremony leaders and local political figures. Studies have shown that these societies perform relatively well in terms of gender-based violence rates, female literacy rates and community participation. This shows that when social

structures place women at the center of resource control and discourse power, their status in the public and private domains can be significantly improved.

These traditional structures face challenges under the modern state system. With the intervention of the national legal system, market economy and religious revival, many matriarchal systems are gradually being weakened. In modern national laws, male inheritance rights are often given priority, resulting in the marginalization of the legal basis of matrilineal traditions. In addition, the modernization process of urbanization and education systems often ignores or excludes matrilineal knowledge and practices, forming new inequalities. African matrilineal society provides counterexamples and hope for gender research, but also reveals the tension between traditional and modern systems.

#### **4. The role of institutions, culture, and literature in gender inequality**

##### **4.1. The impact of institutional and power structures on gender inequality**

The configuration of institutions and power in social structures largely determines the distribution of gender roles and the depth and form of gender inequality. Institutions are not merely a collection of laws and policies; they also encompass operational norms across various social domains such as education, labor, family, and politics. When these institutions are not designed or implemented with gender sensitivity, they often serve to deepen the marginalization of women. Taking the political field as an example, although many countries recognize gender equality in their constitutions, the representation of women in parliament and government remains disproportionately low. Globally, women's representation in parliament is 27%, and it is expected to take another 39 years to achieve equality [9]. Institutional "gender neutrality" often masks structural gender barriers, such as gender bias in party nomination mechanisms and unequal access to political funds.

The family system is also a manifestation of the power structure. Many countries still regard men as the default owners of household heads and property rights, which constitutes an institutional exclusion of women in areas such as marriage, child support, and inheritance. Gender inequality is not simply a problem of ideas, but a structural problem deeply rooted in institutional design. Achieving gender equality requires starting from the institutional level, through institutional reforms such as gender quotas, family policy adjustments, gender budgets, etc., to reshape power relations and change the foundation of unequal social structures.

##### **4.2. The mediating role of culture in gender inequality**

Culture is not only a reflection of values and beliefs, but also plays the role of a "mediating mechanism" in the social structure, shaping people's cognition and expectations of gender roles. As social constructivism points out, gender is not a natural attribute, but a social identity that is constantly constructed and strengthened through cultural practices and social discourse. Culture is not neutral in this process, and often serves the existing power structure and becomes a tool to maintain gender inequality. "Traditional culture" is often used to justify social exclusion of women. In South Asia and the Middle East, women's chastity, dress codes and subordinate status are often regarded as the "essence of culture" and widely spread through religion, marriage, education and other systems. The influence of this cultural concept makes it difficult for women to escape structural oppression in real life even if they enjoy equal rights under the law.

Culture also imposes constraints on male roles, shaping men into the roles of "strong" and "dominant", which not only suppresses men's emotional expression space, but also solidifies the gender division of labor invisibly. It can be seen that culture is both a disseminator and a defender of gender inequality. Culture itself is also dynamically changing. In recent years, with the advancement of gender equality education, media influence, and cross-cultural exchanges, traditional cultural

concepts have increasingly been questioned and reshaped. In parts of Africa, for instance, the practice of female circumcision has gradually been abolished, driven by international pressure and local feminist movements. To fully comprehend the social structural causes of gender inequality, it is essential to view culture as a key mediating factor, recognizing both its repressive role and its transformative potential. Efforts must focus on supporting institutional change and fostering shifts in social consciousness.

#### 4.3. Literary narratives and the construction of gender structures

As a mirror of culture, literature not only reflects the gender structure of society, but also participates in its construction and criticism with unique narrative strategies. Under different social backgrounds, literary works reveal the deep logic of structural inequality by portraying gender roles, presenting social norms and family relationships, and also provide space for the expression of female subjectivity. Zhang Ailing's *Love in a Fallen City* offers a poignant portrayal of the struggles faced by women in modern Chinese society [10]. Amidst the turbulence of war and societal shifts, the protagonist Bai Liusu is compelled to use marriage as a means of survival, navigating both family oppression and the rigid constraints of the marriage system. The narrative exposes the lack of autonomy and agency women experience within the traditional family structure, while also shedding light on the subtle yet powerful strategies women employ to maintain their dignity and secure their survival within these restrictive environments.

In the Western context, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on the totalitarian religious system and constructs an anti-utopian society where women are institutionally oppressed as "reproductive tools" [11]. In the novel, law, religion, and culture together constitute a control mechanism for women's bodies, thereby directly criticizing the threat of religious extremism to women's rights in reality. These literary works not only reveal how gender inequality is legitimized in social structures, but also reverse gender discourse through narrative strategies, giving voice to marginalized people and endowing them with subjectivity. From a cross-cultural comparison, whether it is Eastern family ethics or Western institutional control, literature provides a cultural text for understanding gender structure. Literary narrative is not only a carrier of gender structure, but also a critical response to institutional oppression and cultural discipline, providing us with important ideological resources and narrative power to understand the multi-layered mechanism of gender inequality.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the intricate mechanisms through which gender inequality is produced, sustained, and challenged. The research finds that gender inequality is deeply embedded in both institutional structures and cultural practices. In Nordic countries, inclusive social policies have successfully facilitated gender equality by reshaping the institutional landscape, thus demonstrating the pivotal role that legal frameworks and public policy play in addressing gender disparities. In contrast, South Asian societies face significant challenges due to patriarchal and religious norms that shape not only institutional exclusions but also cultural narratives that justify the subordination of women. These findings underscore the need for both cultural and institutional interventions in addressing gender inequality. The research also reveals that the African matrilineal societies offer a rare but valuable example of gender structures that empower women, though these are increasingly under threat from modernization and state legal systems. Furthermore, literary works such as *Love in a Fallen City* and *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrate how gender roles and inequalities are both reinforced and critiqued through narrative, shedding light on the ongoing struggle for gender justice.



Despite these valuable insights, this study has certain limitations. The research is constrained by its focus on a select number of regions and countries, meaning that it does not encompass the full diversity of gender experiences globally. Future research could build upon this study by expanding the geographic scope, incorporating more diverse regional and cultural contexts to gain a broader understanding of global gender inequality.

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