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Examining Gender Relations in Contemporary Social Structures: Women's Negotiation of Roles in the Public Sphere

Abstract: This study examines the dynamic interplay between gender norms, structural conditions, and women's agency in shaping women's participation in the public sphere within contemporary social structures. Despite increasing opportunities for women's engagement, deeply embedded social expectations and institutional arrangements continue to influence how women access, navigate, and negotiate public roles. The study aims to examine how women interpret and respond to gendered expectations, how structural constraints and enabling conditions shape their participation, and how agency is exercised through the reconstruction of social meanings. Employing a qualitative review approach, this research draws on peer-reviewed literature indexed in Scopus and published between 1999 and 2026, using an interpretative and thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and conceptual insights related to gender relations and public participation. The findings reveal that women actively negotiate gender norms through strategies of conformity, adaptation, and subtle resistance, while structural factors such as economic inequality, cultural expectations, and institutional frameworks simultaneously constrain and enable their participation. Furthermore, women's agency functions as a transformative force, particularly through discursive practices that redefine roles, challenge dominant narratives, and expand the boundaries of the public sphere. These findings highlight the importance of understanding gender relations as fluid and context-dependent processes shaped by the interaction of norms, structures, and agency. The study implies that promoting gender equality requires integrated approaches that address structural barriers, support women's agency, and encourage the transformation of restrictive social norms.

Keywords: gender relations; public sphere; women's agency; social norms; structural constraints

INTRODUCTION

Gender relations in contemporary social structures are increasingly characterised by complex and dynamic interactions shaped by cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and historical legacies (Gammage et al., 2016). Although modern societies have witnessed significant transformations in the positioning of women within public life, deeply embedded patriarchal systems continue to influence how gender roles are constructed and enacted (Carter et al., 2013). The public sphere, often associated with visibility, participation, and power, remains a contested space where women must continuously navigate expectations that are both enabling and constraining (Xiong & Chen, 2024). Feminist scholarship has long argued that gender is not merely a fixed category but a socially constructed and negotiated process, reproduced through

discourse, media, and everyday practices (Awoonor-Williams & Overå, 2022). As a result, women's participation in public domains, whether political, economic, or cultural, is not simply a matter of access but involves ongoing negotiation of identity, legitimacy, and authority within socially defined boundaries (Ruthchild, 2017).

Despite notable progress in gender inclusion, empirical evidence suggests that women continue to face significant disparities in terms of representation, decision-making power, and recognition (Nevett, 2011). Global discussions on gender equality often highlight improvements in formal participation; however, these advances do not always translate into substantive empowerment. Gammage et al. (2016) emphasise that women's voice and agency remain unevenly distributed, with many women experiencing limited influence despite being present in institutional spaces. Similarly, context-specific studies reveal that women's engagement in public life is frequently shaped by socio-cultural constraints that require careful negotiation. For instance, Ferdous (2025) demonstrates how women in Bangladesh manoeuvre within entrenched gender norms to participate in co-management processes, while Slama (2012) illustrates how women in Indonesia enter public realms through gradual and culturally mediated pathways. These findings underscore that women's participation is not linear but contingent upon their ability to adapt to and reinterpret existing gender expectations (Erturk, 1998).

However, while the literature has extensively documented gender inequalities and structural barriers, there remains a limited understanding of how women actively negotiate their roles at the micro-social level within everyday public interactions (Huq, 2010). Much of the existing research tends to prioritise macro-level analyses, such as policy frameworks, institutional reforms, or economic indicators, often overlooking the nuanced and lived experiences through which gender relations are continuously constructed and contested ("Empowering Women: An Essential Objective," 1994). This creates a critical gap in understanding the processes through which women exercise agency, not only as a response to structural constraints but also as a means of reshaping those same structures (Soh, 2004). In particular, there is insufficient attention to the discursive practices and meaning-making processes that underpin women's navigation of public roles, especially in diverse and rapidly changing social contexts.

Previous studies have contributed valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of gender relations across different domains. Research on migration and integration highlights how gender roles are renegotiated within transnational contexts, where women experience both new opportunities and persistent inequalities (Çela, 2015). In the realm of cultural diplomacy, women have been shown to act as informal agents of influence, shaping international relations through everyday cultural practices (Biltekin, 2020). Studies on community development and tourism further demonstrate how gender relations are transformed through participation, yet remain embedded within local cultural frameworks (Y.-S. Kim, 2009). Additionally, historical and spatial analyses reveal that gendered divisions of labour and space continue to influence contemporary social arrangements (Ferdous, 2025). Other works emphasise the role of agency and resistance, showing how women negotiate religious, political, and social expectations in various contexts (Khalid & Razem, 2022). While these studies collectively highlight the dynamic and context-dependent nature of gender relations, they often focus on specific sectors or issues, leaving a fragmented understanding of how women navigate the broader public sphere as an integrated social space (Onaran, 2011).

Building on these limitations, this study seeks to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective by focusing on the discursive and experiential dimensions of women's role negotiation within contemporary public spheres (Biltekin, 2020). Rather than viewing gender relations solely through structural or institutional lenses, this research foregrounds the ways in

which women actively construct, interpret, and negotiate their roles in everyday interactions (Hulse et al., 2010). By examining how meanings are produced and contested in the public sphere, the study aims to capture the fluid and performative nature of gender relations, highlighting women's agency not only as adaptive but also as transformative. This approach contributes to the literature by bridging the gap between macro-level structures and micro-level experiences, offering a more holistic understanding of gender dynamics (Norgren & Stankeviciene, 2024; Wright, 2005).

The urgency of this research lies in its relevance to ongoing global efforts to promote gender equality and social inclusion. As societies become increasingly complex and interconnected, public spaces are evolving into arenas of negotiation where diverse identities and interests intersect. Understanding how women navigate these spaces is essential for developing more inclusive policies and practices that move beyond formal equality toward substantive empowerment. Persistent inequalities in representation, voice, and recognition indicate that structural changes alone are insufficient without a deeper understanding of the social processes that sustain them. Therefore, this study is timely in addressing the need for more context-sensitive and experience-based analyses of gender relations, ultimately contributing to the creation of more equitable and participatory social structures. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: the Method section outlines the literature review approach and thematic analysis procedure; the Results and Discussion section presents findings on the negotiation of gender norms, structural constraints and enabling conditions, and women's agency and discursive reconstruction of roles; and the Conclusion synthesises these findings and their implications.

METHOD

This research employed a literature review approach to explore the dynamics of gender relations and women's negotiation of roles within contemporary social structures and the public sphere (Norgren & Stankeviciene, 2024). The study was grounded in an interpretivist perspective, focusing on how gender is socially constructed and continuously negotiated through discourse, cultural practices, and institutional arrangements. The sampling technique was conducted purposively, selecting scholarly publications indexed in the Scopus database that provide rich, in-depth qualitative insights into women's experiences, agency, and participation in public life. Articles were selected based on their relevance to themes such as gender norms, public sphere engagement, and role negotiation across diverse socio-cultural contexts, thereby ensuring both analytical depth and contextual variation in the reviewed data. The core search string combined the Boolean query ("gender relations" AND "public sphere" AND ("women" OR "agency")) within the Scopus database, restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles in the Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities subject areas, published in English, and limited to the final publication stage. This search was subsequently refined to open-access records to capture recent, freely accessible studies, yielding a supplementary set of articles spanning 1999–2026 that were screened for relevance to gender norms, public sphere engagement, and role negotiation before being incorporated into the thematic synthesis.

Data analysis was carried out using a thematic interpretative approach to capture patterns of meaning embedded within the selected literature. The analysis involved a rigorous and iterative process of reading and re-reading the selected articles to achieve deep familiarisation with the conceptual arguments, empirical findings, and theoretical frameworks presented in each study. Key statements and findings related to gender relations, women's agency, and public participation were identified as meaningful units of analysis. These units were then systematically

coded and organised into emergent analytical themes reflecting recurring patterns such as the negotiation of gender norms, structural constraints, discursive constructions of femininity, and strategies of agency within the public sphere.

The analysis emphasised interpretative depth by examining how women's roles are constructed, contested, and redefined across different contexts, including migration settings, community participation, cultural practices, and institutional environments. Particular attention was given to how women navigate tensions between traditional expectations and modern opportunities, as well as how they actively reinterpret social norms to create spaces for participation and recognition. Reflexive interpretation was applied throughout the analytical process to ensure that the synthesis remained grounded in the original contexts of the studies while allowing for critical engagement with broader theoretical perspectives on gender and social structure. Methodological rigour was strengthened through analytical transparency, consistency in coding and theme development, and careful consideration of contextual diversity, ensuring the credibility, dependability, and interpretive validity of the findings.

This literature review approach aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of gender relations as lived, negotiated, and context-dependent processes rather than fixed structural conditions. By focusing on the interpretative synthesis of Scopus-indexed studies, this research highlights how women's negotiation of roles in the public sphere reflects complex interactions between agency and constraint, discourse and practice, as well as tradition and transformation. Furthermore, this approach contributes to the advancement of gender studies by positioning the public sphere not merely as a site of participation, but as a dynamic arena of meaning-making where identities, power relations, and social norms are continuously constructed and reconfigured.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Negotiation of Gender Norms and Social Expectations

The negotiation of gender norms and social expectations represents a central dimension in understanding women's positioning within contemporary social structures and the public sphere (Wong, 1997). Gender norms are not fixed or universal; rather, they are socially constructed frameworks that define appropriate roles, behaviours, and identities for men and women within specific cultural and historical contexts. These norms operate as powerful regulatory mechanisms, shaping expectations around femininity, responsibility, and participation (Orjuela, 2025). Women entering the public sphere often encounter these normative boundaries, which simultaneously enable and constrain their actions. As such, their engagement in public life becomes an ongoing process of negotiation, where they must interpret, respond to, and at times challenge socially prescribed roles (Christianson & Eriksson, 2015).

This negotiation process is deeply embedded in everyday practices and interactions, where women continuously balance competing expectations between the private and public domains (Spiegel, 2010). Traditional gender norms frequently associate women with domestic responsibilities, caregiving roles, and emotional labour, while the public sphere is often constructed as a space aligned with masculinity, authority, and rationality. When women participate in public activities, whether in professional, political, or community settings, they are often required to reconcile these contrasting expectations (Sutherland et al., 2017). This reconciliation is rarely straightforward; instead, it involves subtle adjustments, compromises, and reinterpretations that allow women to navigate multiple and sometimes conflicting identities (Slama, 2012).

In many contexts, women adopt strategic forms of conformity as a means of gaining acceptance within socially regulated environments. Rather than directly confronting dominant norms, they may choose to align their behaviour with culturally valued attributes such as modesty, respectability, or relational harmony (Promburom, 2022). This strategic conformity allows women to enter and remain within public spaces without being perceived as transgressive or disruptive (Ruwanpura, 2008). However, such strategies should not be understood as passive acceptance of inequality. Instead, they reflect a calculated and context-sensitive approach to navigating power relations, where women exercise agency within the limits imposed by social expectations (Hilck, 2019).

At the same time, negotiation of gender norms also involves subtle forms of resistance and transformation. Women often reinterpret traditional roles in ways that expand their scope of participation without entirely rejecting cultural values (Ruwanpura, 2008). For instance, caregiving roles may be reframed as a basis for leadership in community initiatives, or religious identities may be mobilised to legitimise public engagement (Cox & Paul, 2022). Through these reinterpretations, women create spaces for participation that are both socially acceptable and personally meaningful. This process highlights the fluidity of gender norms, demonstrating that they are not static constraints but evolving constructs that can be reshaped through practice and discourse (Ketola, 2020).

The negotiation of gender expectations is further complicated by the intersection of multiple social identities, including class, ethnicity, religion, and age. These intersecting factors influence the degree of flexibility or rigidity in gender norms, as well as the strategies available to women in different contexts (Barik et al., 2025). For example, women from more privileged backgrounds may have greater access to education and resources, enabling them to challenge traditional expectations more directly. In contrast, women in more conservative or resource-constrained environments may rely on more subtle and incremental strategies of negotiation. This intersectional perspective underscores the importance of context in shaping how gender norms are experienced and negotiated.

Language and discourse play a crucial role in this negotiation process, as they provide the means through which gender norms are articulated, reinforced, and contested. Women's narratives about their experiences in the public sphere reveal how they make sense of their roles and justify their actions within socially acceptable frameworks. Through storytelling, self-representation, and everyday communication, women construct identities that align with or challenge dominant discourses (O. Kim et al., 2019). These discursive practices are not merely reflective but constitutive, actively shaping the meanings attached to gender roles and influencing how others perceive women's participation in public life (Domènech-Sorolla et al., 2025).

Another important aspect of negotiation lies in the temporal dimension of social change. Gender norms are not only context-dependent but also historically situated, evolving over time in response to broader social, economic, and political transformations (Gammage et al., 2016). Women's negotiation of roles must therefore be understood as part of an ongoing process of change, where past traditions intersect with contemporary realities (Carter et al., 2013). In many societies, rapid modernisation and globalisation have introduced new opportunities for women, while also intensifying tensions between traditional and modern values. Women's ability to navigate these shifting landscapes reflects both their adaptability and their capacity to contribute to social transformation (Xiong & Chen, 2024).

The role of institutions, such as family, education, religion, and the state, is also central in shaping gender norms and expectations. These institutions both reproduce and regulate gender roles, establishing boundaries around acceptable behaviour and participation (Awoonor-

Williams & Overå, 2022; Lonergan, 2018). Women's negotiation of these norms often involves engaging with institutional structures, whether by conforming to their expectations, leveraging their resources, or challenging their authority (Ruthchild, 2017). For instance, educational institutions may provide opportunities for empowerment, while religious institutions may impose certain constraints but also offer frameworks for legitimising participation. This dual role of institutions highlights the complexity of the environments within which gender negotiation occurs (Nevett, 2011).

In the workplace, the negotiation of gender norms becomes particularly visible, as women navigate expectations related to professionalism, leadership, and competence (Flather, 2013; Mirza, 1999). Women are often required to perform a delicate balancing act, demonstrating assertiveness and confidence while avoiding perceptions of being overly aggressive or unfeminine (Stromquist, 2006). This phenomenon, sometimes described as a "double bind," illustrates the contradictory expectations placed on women in public roles. Successfully navigating these expectations requires not only individual skill but also an awareness of the social norms that shape perceptions of gender and authority (Owlia, 2025).

The emotional dimension of negotiation is another critical yet often overlooked aspect. Women's experiences in negotiating gender norms are not purely rational or strategic but are also shaped by feelings of anxiety, pressure, aspiration, and resilience (Erturk, 1998). Emotional labour becomes a key component of managing relationships, maintaining social harmony, and sustaining participation in challenging environments (Huq, 2010). Women must often regulate their emotions in ways that align with social expectations, while also coping with the stress and uncertainty associated with navigating complex gender dynamics. This emotional dimension adds depth to our understanding of negotiation as a holistic and embodied process ("Empowering Women: An Essential Objective," 1994).

Family dynamics further illustrate the complexity of negotiating gender roles, as the household remains a primary site where norms are reproduced and contested. Women's participation in the public sphere often requires renegotiation of responsibilities within the family, including the redistribution of domestic labour and caregiving roles (Soh, 2004). These negotiations can involve conflict, compromise, and gradual change, reflecting broader shifts in societal expectations (Çela, 2015). The support or resistance encountered within the family can significantly influence women's ability to engage in public life, highlighting the interconnectedness of private and public spheres (Y.-S. Kim, 2009).

The negotiation of gender norms is also characterised by its non-linear and often contradictory nature. Women may simultaneously conform to certain expectations while resisting others, reflecting the complexity of their social positions. This hybridity challenges binary understandings of compliance and resistance, suggesting that negotiation operates along a continuum of practices and strategies. Such complexity underscores the need for nuanced analytical approaches that capture the fluid and dynamic nature of gender relations. These recurring themes, together with illustrative lived experiences, are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic Representation of Women's Negotiation of Gender Norms and Social Expectations.

Theme	Meaning	Lived Experience Illustration
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Negotiation of Gender Norms	Gender norms are socially constructed expectations that define appropriate roles and behaviours for women, requiring continuous interpretation and adjustment.	A woman entering a leadership role adapts her communication style to appear assertive yet still socially acceptable as “feminine.”
Balancing Public and Private Roles	Women navigate dual expectations between domestic responsibilities and public participation.	A working mother manages professional duties while still being expected to prioritise caregiving at home.
Strategic Conformity	Women align with certain cultural norms to gain acceptance in public spaces without direct confrontation.	A woman dresses modestly or adopts culturally valued behaviour to avoid social criticism while working in public roles.

Structural Constraints and Enabling Conditions in the Public Sphere

Structural constraints and enabling conditions in the public sphere constitute a critical dimension for understanding how gender relations are produced, maintained, and transformed in contemporary societies (Khalid & Razem, 2022). The public sphere is not a neutral or universally accessible space; rather, it is shaped by historically embedded power relations that privilege certain groups while marginalising others (Onaran, 2011). Women’s participation within this sphere is therefore mediated by structural arrangements that regulate access to resources, opportunities, and legitimacy. These structures include legal systems, economic institutions, cultural norms, and political frameworks, all of which interact to define the boundaries of women’s engagement in public life (Biltekin, 2020).

One of the most persistent structural constraints is the unequal distribution of economic resources. Access to financial capital, employment opportunities, and economic independence plays a fundamental role in determining women’s capacity to participate in the public sphere (Hulse et al., 2010). In many contexts, women face wage disparities, limited career advancement, and occupational segregation, which restrict their ability to gain influence and visibility (Wright, 2005). Economic dependency can reinforce traditional gender roles, making it more difficult for women to challenge existing norms or pursue public engagement. As a result, economic inequality remains a foundational barrier that shapes broader patterns of gender relations (Wong, 1997; Win, 2004).

Education functions as both a structural constraint and an enabling condition, depending on its accessibility and quality (Christianson & Eriksson, 2015). Limited access to education restricts women’s opportunities for skill development, critical thinking, and social mobility, thereby reinforcing their marginalisation. Conversely, education can serve as a powerful enabling factor by equipping women with the knowledge, confidence, and credentials necessary to participate in public life (Spiegel, 2010). Educational institutions also play a role in shaping gender norms, either by reproducing traditional expectations or by promoting more egalitarian values. Thus, the impact of education on gender relations is deeply contingent on the broader socio-cultural context in which it operates (Sutherland et al., 2017).

Cultural norms and values represent another significant structural force that shapes women’s participation in the public sphere. These norms define what is considered appropriate

behaviour for women, often emphasising modesty, obedience, and domestic responsibility (Slama, 2012). Such expectations can limit women's mobility, visibility, and decision-making power. Cultural constraints are particularly influential because they are often internalised, shaping women's self-perceptions and aspirations (Hilck, 2019). At the same time, cultural norms are not static; they can evolve and be reinterpreted, creating opportunities for women to expand their roles within socially acceptable frameworks (Ruwanpura, 2008).

Religious institutions and beliefs further contribute to the structuring of gender relations, often reinforcing specific roles and expectations for women. In some contexts, religious frameworks impose restrictions on women's participation in public life, while in others they provide a basis for empowerment and community engagement (Cox & Paul, 2022). The relationship between religion and gender is therefore complex and multifaceted, involving both constraint and possibility (Ketola, 2020). Women's ability to navigate religious expectations often requires careful negotiation, as they seek to align their public participation with culturally and spiritually accepted values (Barik et al., 2025).

Political institutions and governance structures play a crucial role in either facilitating or constraining women's engagement in the public sphere. Policies related to gender equality, representation, and inclusion can create formal opportunities for participation, such as quotas or legal protections against discrimination. However, the existence of such policies does not automatically translate into meaningful participation. Informal practices, power dynamics, and institutional cultures often limit the effectiveness of these measures. Women may face barriers such as exclusion from decision-making processes, lack of support networks, and gender bias within political systems (O. Kim et al., 2019; Vasvári, 2013).

Legal frameworks also influence the extent to which women can exercise their rights and participate in public life. Laws related to property ownership, employment, and personal status can either empower or restrict women's autonomy. In contexts where legal protections are weak or unevenly enforced, women may struggle to assert their rights or access resources (Domènech-Sorolla et al., 2025; Rodziewicz, 2019). Conversely, robust legal systems can provide a foundation for gender equality, enabling women to challenge discrimination and seek redress. The effectiveness of legal frameworks, however, depends on their implementation and the broader social context in which they operate.

The spatial organisation of society further shapes gendered access to the public sphere. Urban and rural environments often present different opportunities and constraints for women's participation. Urban settings may offer greater access to education, employment, and social networks, while rural areas may be characterised by more restrictive norms and limited resources. Physical infrastructure, such as transportation and public facilities, also plays a role in determining women's mobility and safety. These spatial factors highlight the importance of considering geography in analyses of gender relations (Gammage et al., 2016; van den Heuvel, 2019). Social networks and community structures act as both constraints and enabling conditions. On one hand, tightly knit communities can reinforce traditional norms and exert social pressure on women to conform to expected roles (Carter et al., 2013). On the other hand, supportive networks can provide resources, information, and encouragement that facilitate women's participation. Informal networks, including family, friends, and community organisations, often play a crucial role in shaping women's opportunities and experiences in the public sphere (Xiong & Chen, 2024).

The labour market represents a key site where structural constraints and enabling conditions intersect. Women's participation in the workforce is influenced by factors such as employment policies, workplace cultures, and access to childcare. Discriminatory practices,

gender stereotypes, and unequal pay can limit women's career advancement and reinforce their marginalisation (Awoonor-Williams & Overå, 2022; Munizaga et al., 2024). At the same time, inclusive workplace policies and supportive organisational cultures can enable women to thrive and contribute meaningfully to public life. The labour market thus reflects broader patterns of gender inequality while also offering opportunities for change. Technological developments have introduced new dimensions to the public sphere, creating both opportunities and challenges for women (Ruthchild, 2017). Digital platforms can expand access to information, communication, and economic activities, enabling women to participate in ways that transcend traditional barriers. However, technology also presents risks, such as online harassment and digital exclusion, which can disproportionately affect women. The digital public sphere is therefore a contested space where structural inequalities are both reproduced and challenged (Nevett, 2011; Souza-Leal et al., 2018).

Globalisation has further reshaped the conditions of women's participation in the public sphere by introducing new economic opportunities, cultural influences, and transnational networks (Flather, 2013). While globalisation can facilitate greater mobility and access to resources, it can also exacerbate inequalities and create new forms of exploitation. Women's experiences of globalisation are highly uneven, reflecting differences in socio-economic status, geographic location, and access to resources. This highlights the need for context-sensitive analyses of structural conditions (Stromquist, 2006). Migration is another important factor influencing gender relations, as it exposes women to new cultural norms and institutional frameworks. Migrant women often navigate complex environments where they must reconcile their cultural identities with the expectations of host societies (Owlia, 2025). Migration can create opportunities for empowerment and independence, but it can also involve new forms of vulnerability and exclusion. The experiences of migrant women illustrate the dynamic interplay between structural constraints and enabling conditions across different contexts (Erturk, 1998; Yang & Ren, 2020).

Family structures remain a central site where structural constraints are both reproduced and contested. Traditional divisions of labour within the household often place a disproportionate burden of caregiving and domestic work on women, limiting their ability to engage in public activities (Huq, 2010). At the same time, changing family dynamics, including shifts towards more egalitarian arrangements, can create opportunities for women to expand their roles. The negotiation of responsibilities within the family is therefore closely linked to broader patterns of participation in the public sphere ("Empowering Women: An Essential Objective," 1994; Sathar & Kazi, 2000).

Media and cultural representation play a significant role in shaping perceptions of women's roles and capabilities. Dominant media narratives often reinforce stereotypes that limit women's participation, portraying them in narrowly defined roles (Soh, 2004). However, media can also serve as a platform for challenging these representations and promoting alternative narratives. The visibility of diverse and empowered representations of women can contribute to shifting societal expectations and expanding opportunities for participation (Çela, 2015).

The structural constraints and enabling conditions identified across the reviewed literature are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Structural Constraints and Enabling Conditions Shaping Women's Participation

Theme	Meaning	Lived Experience Illustration
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Structural Constraints in the Public Sphere	Women's participation is limited by systemic barriers such as economic inequality, cultural norms, institutional bias, and unequal access to resources and decision-making power.	A woman is unable to pursue a leadership role due to workplace discrimination, limited childcare support, and expectations to prioritise family responsibilities.
Enabling Conditions for Participation	Certain factors such as education, supportive policies, economic opportunities, and social networks facilitate women's access, visibility, and engagement in public life.	A woman gains confidence and career advancement through higher education and mentorship programmes that support women's leadership.
Contextual and Intersectional Dynamics	Women's experiences in the public sphere are shaped by intersecting factors such as class, culture, religion, and geography, creating varied forms of constraint and opportunity.	A migrant woman navigates new opportunities in an urban setting while still facing cultural expectations from her community and barriers related to her socio-economic status.

Women's Agency and the Discursive Reconstruction of Roles

Women's agency and the discursive reconstruction of roles represent a critical dimension in understanding how gender relations are actively transformed within contemporary social structures (Y.-S. Kim, 2009). Agency, in this context, is not merely the capacity to act, but the ability to interpret, negotiate, and reshape social meanings attached to gender roles (Ferdous, 2025). Rather than being passive recipients of social expectations, women engage in continuous processes of meaning-making that allow them to redefine their identities and positions within the public sphere. This perspective shifts the focus from structural limitations alone to the dynamic interplay between constraint and creative action (Khalid & Razem, 2022).

At the core of women's agency is the recognition that gender roles are discursively constructed through language, representation, and social interaction. These roles are maintained through repeated narratives that define what is considered appropriate or acceptable for women (Onaran, 2011). However, discourse is not static; it is a site of contestation where meanings can be challenged and rearticulated. Women participate in this process by producing alternative narratives that question dominant assumptions and expand the possibilities of gendered identities (Biltekin, 2020). Through everyday communication, storytelling, and self-representation, they actively contribute to the reconstruction of social norms (Hulse et al., 2010).

The public sphere serves as a crucial arena for this discursive reconstruction, providing visibility and opportunities for women to express and negotiate their identities. Participation in public life allows women to challenge traditional boundaries that confine them to private or domestic roles (Wong, 1997). However, entry into the public sphere also requires engagement with existing discourses that may be resistant to change. Women must therefore navigate complex communicative environments, where their voices are often scrutinised, marginalised, or contested. Despite these challenges, the act of speaking and being visible itself becomes a form of agency (Orjuela, 2025).

Discursive reconstruction often begins at the level of individual experience, where women reinterpret their roles in relation to their personal aspirations and social contexts. This involves redefining concepts such as leadership, professionalism, and success in ways that align with their identities and values (Christianson & Eriksson, 2015). For instance, women may reject dominant models of leadership that emphasise hierarchy and competition, instead promoting collaborative and inclusive approaches. These redefinitions not only shape individual trajectories but also influence broader understandings of gender roles within society (Sutherland et al., 2017). Language plays a central role in enabling this process, as it provides the tools through which meanings are constructed and communicated. The choice of words, narratives, and symbolic expressions reflects how women position themselves within social structures (Slama, 2012; Bezdoode, 2026). By reframing their experiences and articulating alternative perspectives, women can challenge dominant discourses and create new interpretative frameworks. This highlights the importance of discourse not only as a medium of communication but as a mechanism of social change (Promburom, 2022).

The role of media and digital platforms has further expanded the possibilities for discursive reconstruction. Social media, in particular, offers spaces where women can share their experiences, build communities, and amplify their voices beyond traditional institutional boundaries (Hilck, 2019). These platforms enable the circulation of counter-narratives that challenge stereotypes and promote diverse representations of womanhood. However, they also expose women to new forms of scrutiny and resistance, illustrating the contested nature of discursive spaces in the digital age (Ruwanpura, 2008).

Women's agency is also expressed through acts of resistance that challenge established power relations (Cox & Paul, 2022). Resistance does not always take the form of overt opposition; it can be subtle, embedded in everyday practices that disrupt normative expectations. For example, women may assert their presence in male-dominated spaces, question discriminatory practices, or refuse to conform to restrictive roles. These acts, while sometimes small and incremental, contribute to the gradual transformation of gender norms and power structures (Barik et al., 2025).

At the same time, agency involves negotiation rather than outright rejection of existing norms. Women often operate within the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour, strategically adapting their actions to achieve their goals. This negotiation reflects an understanding of the risks and consequences associated with challenging dominant discourses. By working within and around these constraints, women can create opportunities for change without necessarily provoking direct conflict. This highlights the complexity of agency as both adaptive and transformative. Collective forms of agency play a significant role in amplifying the impact of discursive reconstruction. When women come together in groups, organisations, or movements, they can articulate shared experiences and advocate for broader social change. Collective action provides a platform for challenging dominant narratives at a structural level, influencing policies, cultural norms, and institutional practices. Through solidarity and collaboration, women can extend the reach of their individual efforts and create more substantial transformations (Domènech-Sorolla et al., 2025; Hajiagha & Hamelink, 2025).

The intersection of agency and identity further enriches the process of discursive reconstruction. Women's experiences are shaped by multiple identities, including class, ethnicity, religion, and age, which influence how they interpret and negotiate their roles. Intersectionality highlights that agency is not uniform but varies across different contexts and social positions. Women from marginalised groups may face additional barriers but also develop

unique strategies of resistance and reinterpretation. This diversity of experiences contributes to a more complex and inclusive understanding of gender relations.

Education functions as a key enabling factor in supporting women's agency and discursive capacity. Through education, women gain access to knowledge, critical thinking skills, and platforms for expression that empower them to question and reshape dominant narratives. Educational spaces can also serve as sites of discursive exchange, where alternative perspectives are developed and shared. However, the impact of education depends on its accessibility and the extent to which it encourages critical engagement with gender norms.

Women's agency and the discursive reconstruction of roles discussed above are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Women's Agency and the Discursive Reconstruction of Roles

Theme	Meaning	Lived Experience Illustration
Discursive Construction and Reframing of Gender Roles	Women actively reconstruct gender roles through language, narratives, and representation, challenging dominant meanings and creating alternative identities.	A woman redefines leadership by promoting collaborative and inclusive practices, framing them as strengths rather than deviations from traditional authority.
Negotiated Agency within Social and Institutional Constraints	Women exercise agency by strategically navigating, adapting to, and subtly resisting existing norms and institutional expectations.	A female professional adjusts her communication style to be assertive yet socially acceptable, allowing her to gain influence without being negatively judged.
Collective and Transformative Agency in the Public Sphere	Women engage in collective actions and shared discourses to challenge dominant power structures and reshape societal norms.	Women participate in advocacy groups or online movements to challenge gender stereotypes and promote equal representation in public decision-making.

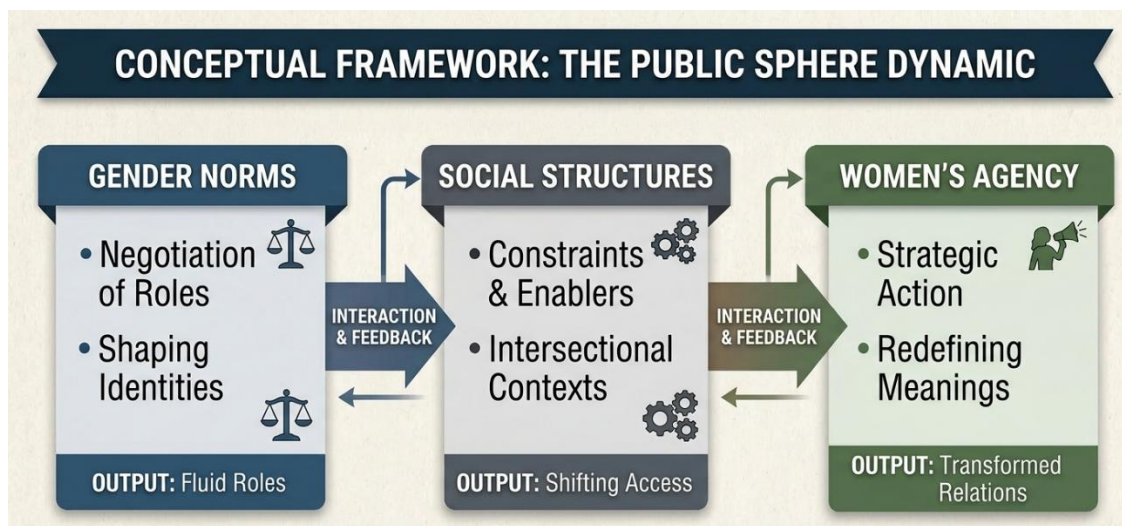
The interaction between gender norms, structural conditions, and women's agency described above is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Gender Relations and Social Construction.

Integrating Norms, Structures, and Agency

Women's position in the public sphere cannot be understood as a static condition; rather, it results from a dynamic and continuous interaction between gender norms, structural conditions, and individual as well as collective agency. These three dimensions are deeply interconnected, forming a complex system that both constrains and enables women's participation in social, political, and economic life (Sutherland et al., 2017). Understanding this interplay is essential for capturing the fluid and evolving nature of gender relations in contemporary society. At the foundation of these dynamic lies gender norms, which function as socially constructed expectations that define appropriate roles, behaviours, and identities for women (Christianson & Eriksson, 2015). These norms are embedded in cultural, religious, and historical contexts, making them highly variable across societies. Despite this variability, they consistently operate as regulatory frameworks that influence how women are perceived and how they are expected to act in both private and public domains (Spiegel, 2010).

Women's engagement in the public sphere often requires navigating these normative expectations, which are frequently contradictory. On one hand, women are expected to embody traits such as care, modesty, and emotional sensitivity; on the other hand, public participation demands assertiveness, rationality, and leadership. This tension creates a space of negotiation where women must continuously interpret and reconcile competing expectations (Christianson



& Eriksson, 2015). This process of negotiation is not merely a reactive adjustment but an active and strategic practice. Women employ various strategies to navigate gender norms, including selective conformity, adaptation, and reinterpretation. These strategies allow them to gain access to public spaces while maintaining social legitimacy within their cultural contexts (Spiegel, 2010).

Strategic conformity serves as a key mechanism through which women manage social expectations. By aligning themselves with culturally valued behaviours, women can participate in public life without being perceived as transgressive (Christianson & Eriksson, 2015). However, this conformity is often tactical rather than passive, reflecting a nuanced understanding of social boundaries and power relations. At the same time, women engage in subtle forms of resistance

that gradually reshape gender norms. Rather than directly opposing dominant expectations, they reinterpret traditional roles in ways that expand their scope of action. For example, caregiving roles may be reframed as a foundation for leadership, thereby bridging the gap between private and public identities (Orjuela, 2025).

The intersectional nature of gender norms further complicates this negotiation process. Women's experiences are shaped by multiple social identities, including class, ethnicity, religion, and age. These intersecting factors influence both the rigidity of gender norms and the strategies available for navigating them, resulting in diverse and context-specific experiences (Hulse et al., 2010). While norms shape expectations, structural conditions define the material and institutional context within which women operate. The public sphere itself is structured by systems of power that regulate access to resources, opportunities, and recognition. These structures include economic systems, legal frameworks, political institutions, and cultural practices (Biltekin, 2020).

Economic inequality represents one of the most significant structural barriers to women's participation. Limited access to financial resources, employment opportunities, and economic independence restricts women's ability to engage fully in public life. Economic dependency often reinforces traditional gender roles, making it more difficult to challenge existing norms (Onaran, 2011). Education, however, can serve as a powerful enabling condition that mitigates these constraints. Access to education provides women with knowledge, skills, and confidence, enabling them to participate more actively in the public sphere. It also builds critical awareness, allowing women to question and reinterpret gender norms (Khalid & Razem, 2022).

Cultural and religious institutions play a dual role in shaping structural conditions. While they may impose constraints by reinforcing traditional gender roles, they can also provide frameworks for legitimising women's participation. Women often navigate these institutions strategically, leveraging their values to support their engagement in public life. Political and legal frameworks further influence the extent of women's participation (Ferdous, 2025). Policies promoting gender equality can create formal opportunities for inclusion, but their effectiveness depends on implementation and the broader institutional culture. Informal practices and entrenched biases often limit the impact of formal regulations (Y.-S. Kim, 2009).

Spatial and geographic factors also contribute to structural conditions. Differences between urban and rural environments, as well as access to infrastructure and public services, shape women's opportunities and constraints. These spatial dynamics highlight the importance of context in understanding gender relations (Çela, 2015). Within this complex structural landscape, women's agency stands out as a critical force for change. Agency refers not only to the capacity to act but also to the ability to interpret, negotiate, and transform social meanings. It is through agency that women actively engage with and reshape the conditions that influence their lives (Soh, 2004).

A central aspect of agency lies in the discursive reconstruction of gender roles. Gender is produced and reproduced through language, narratives, and social interaction. By challenging dominant discourses and creating alternative narratives, women can redefine what it means to participate in the public sphere (Erturk, 1998). This discursive process is evident in how women reinterpret concepts such as leadership and professionalism. Rather than adopting traditionally masculine models, they often promote more inclusive and collaborative approaches. These alternative frameworks contribute to a broader transformation of social expectations (Owlia, 2025).

Digital platforms have expanded the possibilities for discursive agency, providing spaces for women to share experiences, build networks, and amplify their voices. Social media enables

the circulation of counternarratives that challenge stereotypes and promote diverse representations of womanhood (Stromquist, 2006). However, agency is not exercised in isolation; it is deeply embedded in social relationships and collective practices. Collective action, such as participation in advocacy groups and social movements, allows women to challenge structural inequalities and promote systemic change. Through solidarity, individual efforts are amplified and transformed into broader social movements (Flather, 2013).

The relationship between agency and structure is inherently dynamic and reciprocal. While structures constrain action, they also provide the context within which agency is exercised. Similarly, acts of agency can reinforce, modify, or transform structural conditions over time (Nevett, 2011). This dynamic interplay is further reflected in the relationship between norms and agency. As women negotiate and reinterpret gender norms, they contribute to their gradual transformation. Norms, therefore, are not fixed constraints but evolving constructs shaped by ongoing social practices (Carter et al., 2013).

Emotional and psychological dimensions also play a significant role in this process. Women's experiences of negotiation and agency are shaped by feelings of aspiration, anxiety, resilience, and empowerment. Emotional labour becomes an integral part of navigating complex social environments (Xiong & Chen, 2024). Family remains a key site where norms, structures, and agency intersect. The redistribution of domestic responsibilities and the negotiation of roles within the household directly influence women's ability to participate in the public sphere. Changes in family dynamics often reflect broader societal transformations (Carter et al., 2013).

Media and representation further mediate these dynamics by shaping societal perceptions of women's roles. While dominant narratives may reinforce stereotypes, alternative representations can challenge these norms and expand possibilities for participation (Gammage et al., 2016). Women's engagement with media thus becomes a site of both constraint and transformation. The temporal dimension adds another layer of complexity to this analysis. Gender relations are not static but evolve in response to social, economic, and political changes. Women's agency contributes to this evolution, creating pathways for gradual transformation.

CONCLUSION

Across the reviewed studies, spanning settings as varied as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, and diverse migration and institutional contexts, women's participation in the public sphere is shaped by a dynamic and interrelated process involving the negotiation of gender norms, the influence of structural constraints and enabling conditions, and the exercise of agency through discursive reconstruction of roles. These dynamics take different forms depending on local cultural, religious, and institutional conditions, and some of the reviewed cases show women's discursive agency producing only limited or contested gains where legal and economic structures remained unchanged. The patterns below should therefore be read as context-bound tendencies rather than a single universal trajectory of women's public participation. Rather than being passive actors, women actively navigate and reinterpret socially constructed expectations while responding to institutional and cultural limitations, leading to gradual yet meaningful transformations in gender relations. These findings underscore the importance of addressing gender inequality through a holistic approach that integrates structural reform with the empowerment of women's agency and the reconfiguration of dominant social narratives. Future research is encouraged to explore this dynamic across diverse cultural and geographical contexts using empirical qualitative approaches to capture lived experiences more deeply. Practically, the study implies that policymakers and institutions should develop inclusive frameworks that not

only reduce structural barriers but also support women's capacity to redefine their roles and participate more equitably in the public sphere.

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Ethical Approval

This study is a literature review entirely based on secondary data from previously published scientific publications. As it does not directly involve human participants, no primary data collection was conducted, and there was no access to personally identifiable data; therefore, this study does not require ethical approval from an ethics committee or institutional review board (IRB). All sources used are public, indexed, and have undergone peer review according to academic standards.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest, whether financial, personal, or professional, with any party or organization that could affect the objectivity, conduct, or results of this study.

Transparency of Data

The author guarantees the transparency and validity of the data presented in this article and that other supporting research materials are available honestly and can be accounted for to enable further scientific verification.

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Authors' Contributions

The contributions of the authors in the preparation of this article are as follows:

- Lisbet Situmorang: Responsible for research conceptualization, online data collection, and literature review
- Muhammad Said: Responsible for drafting the initial manuscript and finalization of the article prior to submission to the journal.
- Pornsan Piyanantisak: Responsible for methodological supervision and responsible for critical editing.

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