



Beyond Policy Frameworks: A Sociological Review of Institutional Support and Women's Empowerment in Higher Education

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18872570>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 17-02-2026

Published: 10-03-2026

Keywords:

Women's empowerment, gender and higher education, institutional support systems, gendered power relations, intersectional disadvantage

ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment in higher education is widely recognized as essential for social equality, academic development, and inclusive leadership. Universities are expected to promote gender equality through institutional mechanisms such as gender policies, women's cells, internal complaints committees, mentoring programmes, childcare facilities, and leadership opportunities. However, research across global and Indian contexts shows that these mechanisms often exist more in policy documents than in everyday practice. As a result, women continue to face unequal access to leadership, limited decision-making power, and persistent barriers related to organizational culture, informal power relations, and work-life balance pressures. This review paper critically examines existing sociological literature on institutional mechanisms and women's empowerment in higher education. Drawing on feminist theory, structural functionalism with a gender perspective, and intersectionality, the paper analyses how universities function as gendered institutions. The review highlights key themes such as gendered organizational structures, the gap between policy and practice, intersectional inequalities, and the limited effectiveness of support systems for women. Special attention is given to the Indian context, with reference to recent studies from Haryana, to show how



regional and social factors shape women's experiences within universities. The review identifies a significant research gap in localized, qualitative, and practice-oriented studies that examine how institutional mechanisms actually operate in specific university settings. The paper argues that women's empowerment in higher education requires more than symbolic compliance with gender policies. Genuine empowerment depends on cultural transformation, accountability, and institutional support that responds to women's everyday academic and professional realities.

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions play an important role in shaping women's academic careers, professional growth, and social status. Universities are not only places of learning but also social institutions where power, authority, and inequality are created and maintained. Through policies, rules, and everyday practices, universities influence who gets opportunities, who leads, and whose voices are heard. For women, empowerment in higher education depends largely on how institutions design and implement support mechanisms that promote equality and inclusion.

Women's empowerment refers to the process through which women gain equal rights, dignity, autonomy, and the ability to participate meaningfully in decision-making at personal, professional, and social levels (Bunch, 1990; hooks, 2000). In higher education, empowerment is closely linked to access to education, fair working conditions, leadership opportunities, safety, and institutional support. While women's enrolment in higher education has increased in many countries, including India, equality in leadership, authority, and decision-making remains limited (Morley, 2013; UNESCO, 2019).

From a sociological perspective, universities are not gender-neutral spaces. Research shows that institutional structures, organizational cultures, and leadership norms are often shaped by masculine values that favour men and disadvantage women (Acker, 1990; Benschop & Brouns, 2003). These gendered arrangements affect hiring, promotion, workload distribution, and access to power. Even when gender equality policies exist, informal practices and hidden power relations often prevent women from fully benefiting from them (Bird, 2011).

Institutional mechanisms such as women's cells, internal complaints committees, mentoring programmes, maternity benefits, childcare facilities, and safety measures are intended to support women in academic



spaces. However, many studies show a clear gap between the existence of these mechanisms and their actual functioning. Policies are often implemented in a symbolic manner, without proper monitoring, accountability, or sensitivity to women's lived experiences (Abu-Hamour et al., 2012; Dey & Bhattacharya, 2012). As a result, women continue to face problems such as workplace harassment, lack of childcare support, unsafe commuting conditions, and exclusion from leadership roles.

Women's experiences in higher education are also shaped by social factors such as caste, class, family background, marital status, and regional location. Intersectionality theory explains that gender inequality does not operate in isolation but interacts with other forms of social disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989; Brah & Phoenix, 2004). In the Indian context, women from rural, poor, and marginalized backgrounds face greater challenges in accessing and continuing higher education (Ghosh & Kundu, 2021; Putcha et al., 2023). These inequalities highlight the need to examine institutional mechanisms within specific social and regional contexts.

Recent studies from Haryana show that although women's participation in higher education has improved, serious challenges remain. Social norms, family control, safety concerns, and weak institutional support systems continue to limit women's empowerment within universities (Henderson & Sabharwal, 2024; Saloni & Thakkar, 2025). Uneven distribution of higher education institutions and lack of nearby facilities further restrict women's access, especially in semi-urban and rural areas (Kumari, 2025). These findings suggest that access alone is not enough; institutional support within universities is equally important for sustaining women's academic and professional journeys.

Despite a growing body of literature on gender and higher education, there is limited research that closely examines how institutional mechanisms actually function in everyday university life, especially at the local level. Many studies focus on policies, enrolment data, or leadership statistics, while fewer studies explore women's lived experiences with institutional support systems. This gap is particularly visible in studies focusing on specific districts such as Sonapat, Haryana.

This review paper aims to critically analyse existing sociological literature on institutional mechanisms and women's empowerment in higher education. By synthesizing theoretical, empirical, and regional studies, the paper seeks to understand whether institutional mechanisms genuinely empower women or remain formal structures with limited practical impact. The review also identifies key research gaps and suggests directions for future research that focus on organizational culture, accountability, and women's everyday experiences within university institutions.



2. Theoretical and Conceptual Background

Understanding women's empowerment in higher education requires a strong theoretical foundation that explains how inequality is produced and maintained within institutions. Universities function not only as educational spaces but also as social organizations shaped by power relations, norms, and routines. This review draws mainly on **feminist theory**, **structural functionalism with a gender perspective**, and **intersectionality** to analyse how institutional mechanisms influence women's experiences in higher education.

2.1 Feminist Theory and Higher Education Institutions

Feminist theory provides an important framework for understanding gender inequality in educational institutions. It argues that social institutions, including universities, are not neutral or objective spaces. Instead, they are shaped by historical power relations that often privilege men and marginalize women. From this perspective, gender inequality is embedded in everyday institutional practices such as recruitment, promotion, leadership selection, workload distribution, and decision-making processes.

In higher education, feminist scholars have shown that organizational structures are often designed around masculine norms. These norms assume uninterrupted career paths, full-time availability, and freedom from family responsibilities. Women, who often carry greater domestic and caregiving responsibilities, find it difficult to fit into such institutional expectations. As a result, they face slower career progression, limited leadership opportunities, and reduced visibility in decision-making spaces.

Feminist theory also highlights the gap between formal equality and lived reality. Many universities adopt gender equality policies, women's cells, and grievance redressal mechanisms. However, feminist analysis shows that the mere presence of these mechanisms does not guarantee empowerment. What matters is how these structures function in everyday practice and whether women feel safe, respected, and supported while using them. Informal power networks, fear of retaliation, and lack of trust in institutional systems often discourage women from seeking support, even when mechanisms formally exist.

Another important contribution of feminist theory is its focus on women's lived experiences. Rather than viewing empowerment only in terms of numbers or representation, feminist approaches emphasize women's voices, emotions, and daily struggles within institutions. This perspective is especially useful for understanding subtle forms of inequality such as emotional labour, gender-based humiliation, exclusion from informal networks, and normalization of disrespectful behaviour. Feminist theory



therefore helps to critically assess whether institutional mechanisms truly empower women or simply serve symbolic purposes.

2.2 Structural Functionalism with a Gender Perspective

Structural functionalism views society as a system made up of interconnected institutions, each performing specific functions to maintain social order and stability. From this perspective, universities are expected to perform key functions such as providing education, promoting merit, developing leadership, and supporting social equality. When institutions function effectively, they contribute to social balance and development.

However, when structural functionalism is applied with a gender perspective, it becomes clear that institutional functioning is often unequal. Traditional gender roles and social expectations influence how institutions operate and whom they benefit. In higher education, women are often expected to balance academic or professional work with family responsibilities. If universities fail to provide support systems such as childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, maternity benefits, and safe working environments, they fail to perform their social function of promoting equality.

From this perspective, ineffective institutional mechanisms can be seen as signs of institutional dysfunction. For example, grievance redressal committees that do not respond properly to complaints, women's cells that lack autonomy, or leadership structures that exclude women indicate failure in institutional functioning. Such dysfunction not only affects women's empowerment but also weakens the overall effectiveness and credibility of higher education institutions.

Structural functionalism also helps in understanding how institutional routines and rules can unintentionally reinforce inequality. Even when policies are designed to promote equality, their rigid implementation without sensitivity to gendered realities can disadvantage women. For instance, promotion criteria based solely on uninterrupted service or long working hours may ignore women's caregiving responsibilities. A gender-sensitive functional analysis therefore helps in evaluating whether institutional mechanisms are fulfilling their intended purpose.

2.3 Intersectionality and Women's Diverse Experiences

Intersectionality is a key concept for understanding the diverse and unequal experiences of women in higher education. It explains that gender does not operate alone but interacts with other social factors



such as caste, class, religion, marital status, age, and regional location. Women's empowerment within universities is therefore shaped by multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage.

In the Indian context, intersectionality is especially important. Women from marginalized castes, rural backgrounds, and low-income families often face greater barriers in accessing and continuing higher education. These barriers include financial constraints, safety concerns, family restrictions, and lack of nearby institutions. Even within universities, such women may experience discrimination, exclusion, or lack of support more intensely than women from privileged backgrounds.

Intersectional analysis also helps explain why institutional mechanisms do not benefit all women equally. For example, women's support systems may be more accessible to urban, English-speaking, or socially confident women, while marginalized women may hesitate to use them due to fear, lack of awareness, or previous negative experiences. Without an intersectional approach, institutional policies risk addressing gender inequality in a narrow and incomplete manner.

By incorporating intersectionality, this review recognizes that women's empowerment in higher education cannot be understood through a single lens. Effective institutional mechanisms must be sensitive to diversity among women and responsive to their different social positions and needs.

2.4 Integrating Theoretical Perspectives

Together, feminist theory, structural functionalism with a gender perspective, and intersectionality provide a strong conceptual foundation for analysing institutional mechanisms in higher education. Feminist theory helps uncover hidden power relations and symbolic forms of inequality. Structural functionalism helps assess whether institutions are performing their expected role in promoting equality. Intersectionality ensures that diversity among women's experiences is not ignored.

This integrated framework allows for a deeper understanding of why institutional mechanisms often fail to empower women despite existing policies and structures. It also supports the need for context-specific and practice-oriented research that examines how these mechanisms function in everyday university life. By grounding the review in these theoretical perspectives, the paper moves beyond descriptive analysis and offers a critical sociological understanding of women's empowerment in higher education.

3. Thematic Review of Literature

The literature on women's empowerment in higher education highlights that inequality within universities is not accidental or temporary. Instead, it is deeply connected to institutional structures,



organizational culture, and everyday practices. Scholars across sociological, feminist, and educational studies have identified several recurring themes that explain why institutional mechanisms often fail to empower women in meaningful ways. This section reviews the literature thematically to present a coherent understanding of how universities function as gendered institutions.

3.1 Higher Education Institutions as Gendered Organizations

A major theme in the literature is the understanding of universities as gendered organizations rather than neutral spaces. Early sociological work argues that organizational structures, job roles, and hierarchies are designed around masculine norms that assume uninterrupted career paths and freedom from domestic responsibilities. Such assumptions disadvantage women, who often carry greater family and caregiving duties. As a result, women face barriers in recruitment, promotion, and leadership positions even when formal equality policies exist.

Studies on academic organizations show that power is exercised not only through official rules but also through informal practices such as networking, mentorship access, and decision-making styles. These informal spaces are often male-dominated, making it difficult for women to gain influence or visibility. Research further suggests that women who enter leadership roles are often expected to adopt masculine behaviours to be taken seriously, which creates additional emotional and professional pressure. This reinforces the idea that leadership itself is gendered within higher education institutions.

Overall, the literature clearly shows that gender inequality is built into the everyday functioning of universities. Institutional mechanisms introduced to support women operate within this gendered environment, which limits their effectiveness unless deeper cultural change takes place.

3.2 Organizational Culture and Masculine Norms

Closely related to gendered structures is the theme of organizational culture. Several studies highlight that universities often promote work cultures that value long working hours, constant availability, and uninterrupted productivity. These expectations are based on male-centric life patterns and ignore women's reproductive roles and caregiving responsibilities.

Organizational culture also shapes how women are treated in daily interactions. Subtle practices such as questioning women's competence, excluding them from informal discussions, or assigning them additional emotional and administrative work are commonly reported. These practices may not violate



formal rules but create an environment where women feel undervalued and overburdened. Over time, such experiences reduce women's confidence, job satisfaction, and willingness to seek leadership roles.

The literature also points out that institutional silence plays a powerful role in maintaining inequality. When discriminatory behaviour is normalized or ignored, women are discouraged from raising concerns. Even when grievance mechanisms exist, fear of retaliation or lack of trust in institutional responses often prevents women from using them. Thus, organizational culture strongly influences whether institutional mechanisms function as tools of empowerment or remain symbolic structures.

3.3 The Gap Between Policy and Practice

One of the most consistent themes in the literature is the gap between policy formulation and actual practice. Many universities have gender equality policies, women's cells, internal complaints committees, and mentoring programmes. On paper, these mechanisms suggest strong institutional commitment to women's empowerment. However, empirical studies repeatedly show that implementation is weak and uneven.

Policies often lack clear monitoring systems, accountability mechanisms, and adequate resources. Committees may exist but remain inactive, underfunded, or dominated by senior authority figures. In some cases, women's support bodies function only during inspections or audits, losing relevance in everyday institutional life. This creates a situation where gender equality becomes a matter of formal compliance rather than genuine commitment.

The literature also highlights that policy effectiveness depends heavily on leadership attitudes. Where institutional leaders view gender equality as an administrative requirement rather than a social responsibility, support mechanisms fail to bring real change. As a result, women continue to experience harassment, exclusion, and unequal treatment despite the presence of formal structures.

3.4 Leadership, Career Progression, and Mentoring

Another important theme in the literature is women's limited access to leadership and career advancement in higher education. While women's participation at entry and mid-level positions has increased, their representation in senior academic and administrative roles remains low. Scholars attribute this to a combination of institutional bias, family responsibilities, and lack of mentoring support.

Mentoring and leadership training programmes are frequently identified as crucial institutional mechanisms for women's empowerment. Effective mentoring helps women navigate institutional



systems, build confidence, and access informal networks. However, studies show that such programmes are often poorly designed or inconsistently implemented. In many institutions, mentoring depends on personal relationships rather than structured support, which disadvantages women who lack access to influential networks.

Promotion systems based on rigid performance indicators further disadvantage women. Criteria such as uninterrupted service, publication output during maternity years, and willingness to take administrative roles without support often ignore gendered realities. The literature suggests that without gender-sensitive evaluation systems, institutional mechanisms fail to support women's long-term career growth.

3.5 Intersectionality and Unequal Experiences Among Women

Intersectionality emerges as a critical theme in understanding why institutional mechanisms benefit some women more than others. Studies emphasize that women's experiences in higher education are shaped by caste, class, region, language, and family background. Women from marginalized communities often face multiple layers of disadvantage that institutional policies do not adequately address.

In the Indian context, research shows that women from rural areas and lower socio-economic backgrounds face challenges such as lack of financial support, safety concerns, limited mobility, and weak institutional infrastructure. Even within universities, such women may feel hesitant to approach support systems due to fear, lack of awareness, or previous negative experiences.

The literature warns that gender-neutral or one-size-fits-all policies fail to capture these differences. Without an intersectional approach, institutional mechanisms risk reinforcing existing inequalities instead of reducing them. Scholars therefore call for policies and practices that recognize diversity among women and address specific social and cultural barriers.

3.6 Women's Support Systems and Institutional Spaces

Women's cells, gender sensitization units, and internal complaints committees are widely discussed as important institutional spaces for empowerment. Research shows that when these bodies function effectively, they provide women with support, visibility, and a sense of security. They also play a role in raising awareness, addressing grievances, and promoting gender-sensitive practices.

However, the literature also points to limitations. As women's centres become institutionalized, they often lose autonomy and activist potential. Limited funding, lack of trained personnel, and dependence on



university administration reduce their effectiveness. In some cases, these spaces exist only symbolically and fail to address serious issues such as harassment or discrimination.

The effectiveness of these support systems depends largely on institutional commitment, resource allocation, and cultural acceptance. Without these conditions, women's support mechanisms remain underutilized and ineffective.

3.7 Indian and Haryana-Specific Perspectives

Recent Indian studies highlight that while women's enrolment in higher education has increased, empowerment outcomes remain uneven. Social norms, family control, safety concerns, and financial limitations continue to restrict women's participation and leadership opportunities. Research from Haryana shows that access to higher education is shaped by regional development, availability of institutions, and social attitudes toward women's mobility and education.

Studies focusing on Haryana emphasize that institutional support systems such as hostels, transport, scholarships, and campus safety play a critical role in women's educational continuity. Uneven distribution of universities and lack of nearby institutions disproportionately affect women, especially in semi-urban and rural areas. These findings underline the importance of studying institutional mechanisms at the local level.

4. Critical Discussion, Research Gaps, and Future Directions

The reviewed literature clearly shows that women's empowerment in higher education is strongly influenced by the way institutional mechanisms function in practice. Although universities across contexts have introduced gender equality policies, committees, and support systems, these measures have not produced the level of empowerment expected. A critical reading of the literature suggests that the problem lies not in the absence of institutional mechanisms but in their weak implementation, limited accountability, and resistance within organizational culture.

4.1 Critical Discussion: Why Institutional Mechanisms Often Fail

One of the central insights emerging from the literature is that institutional mechanisms operate within deeply gendered organizational environments. Policies and committees are often introduced without addressing the masculine norms that dominate university culture. As a result, institutional mechanisms exist alongside informal practices that continue to favour men. Leadership styles, decision-making



processes, and evaluation systems remain shaped by male-centric values, which limits women's access to authority and influence.

Another critical issue is the symbolic nature of many gender equality initiatives. Several studies highlight that universities adopt gender-related mechanisms mainly to meet regulatory requirements or external evaluations. In such cases, women's cells, grievance committees, or mentoring programmes function as formal structures rather than active support systems. This symbolic compliance creates an illusion of equality while everyday inequalities remain unchallenged.

The literature also shows that institutional responses to women's concerns are often slow, dismissive, or inconsistent. When grievance redressal systems fail to respond effectively, women lose trust in institutional mechanisms. Fear of stigma, retaliation, or damage to professional reputation further discourages women from using these systems. This results in underreporting of harassment and discrimination, allowing inequality to continue unnoticed.

Work-life balance emerges as another critical area where institutional mechanisms fall short. Despite recognition of women's dual roles in professional and domestic spheres, many universities lack practical support such as childcare facilities, flexible working arrangements, or gender-sensitive workload distribution. When institutions ignore these realities, women are forced to make personal compromises that limit their career growth and leadership potential.

4.2 Gaps in Existing Literature Research

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into gender inequality in higher education, several important gaps remain. First, much of the research focuses on policy analysis, enrolment data, or leadership representation. There is limited emphasis on how institutional mechanisms are experienced and used by women in their daily academic and professional lives. Without understanding women's lived experiences, it is difficult to evaluate the real impact of institutional support systems.

Second, many studies adopt a broad national or international perspective, which often overlooks regional and local variations. Universities operate within specific social, cultural, and economic contexts that shape how institutional mechanisms function. There is a clear lack of localized sociological studies that examine universities within specific districts or regions, particularly in semi-urban and developing areas.

Third, although intersectionality is widely discussed in theory, it is less frequently integrated into empirical research on institutional mechanisms. Studies often treat women as a homogeneous group,



ignoring differences related to caste, class, rural–urban background, marital status, and economic position. As a result, the unique challenges faced by marginalized women within higher education institutions remain underexplored.

Another important gap relates to organizational culture and informal power relations. While several scholars acknowledge the existence of hidden practices and networks, there is limited qualitative research that closely examines how these informal systems operate within universities. Understanding these dynamics is essential for explaining why formal mechanisms fail to produce meaningful change.

Finally, there is insufficient research that evaluates the effectiveness of specific institutional mechanisms such as women’s cells, internal complaints committees, mentoring programmes, and leadership training initiatives. Many studies mention these mechanisms, but few assess their functioning, accessibility, and outcomes in a systematic manner.

4.3 Directions for Future Research

Future research on women’s empowerment in higher education should move beyond policy-focused analysis and adopt a more practice-oriented approach. Qualitative studies that explore women’s experiences with institutional mechanisms can provide deeper insights into how support systems function in everyday university life. Such research can help identify gaps between institutional intent and actual outcomes.

There is also a strong need for region-specific and context-sensitive studies. Examining universities within specific districts, such as Sonipat in Haryana, can reveal how local social norms, economic conditions, and institutional histories influence women’s empowerment. Comparative studies between public and private universities, as well as between urban and semi-urban institutions, can further enhance understanding.

Integrating intersectionality into empirical research is another important direction. Future studies should examine how caste, class, family background, and regional location interact with institutional mechanisms to shape women’s experiences. This approach can help design support systems that are more inclusive and responsive to diversity among women.

Finally, research should focus on accountability and cultural transformation within institutions. Evaluating leadership commitment, resource allocation, and monitoring mechanisms can help assess



whether universities are genuinely invested in gender equality. Studies that link institutional culture with empowerment outcomes can contribute to more effective policy design and implementation.

5. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative review methodology to examine existing sociological literature on institutional mechanisms and women's empowerment in higher education. The review is based on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and international publications related to gender, higher education, and institutional structures.

The literature was selected to represent key theoretical perspectives such as feminist theory, structural functionalism with a gender perspective, and intersectionality, along with empirical studies from global, Indian, and regional contexts. Particular attention was given to studies that examine organizational culture, policy implementation, leadership, and women's lived experiences within university settings.

Rather than providing an author-by-author summary, the review follows a thematic approach. Studies were grouped and analysed under broader themes such as gendered organizational structures, policy-practice gaps, support systems, leadership and mentoring, and intersectional inequalities. This approach allows for a critical synthesis of ideas and helps identify common patterns, limitations, and research gaps.

The review does not aim to produce new empirical data. Instead, it seeks to critically analyse existing knowledge to understand how institutional mechanisms function in practice and why they often fail to produce meaningful empowerment for women in higher education. This methodological approach supports the identification of directions for future, context-specific, and qualitative research.

6. Conclusion

This review paper has examined sociological literature on women's empowerment in higher education with a specific focus on the role of institutional mechanisms. The reviewed studies clearly show that universities play a powerful role in shaping women's academic, professional, and leadership experiences. While higher education institutions increasingly adopt gender equality policies and support structures, these mechanisms often fail to produce meaningful empowerment in everyday institutional life.

The literature consistently highlights that universities function as gendered organizations. Organizational structures, leadership norms, and work cultures are frequently shaped by masculine values that disadvantage women. Institutional mechanisms such as women's cells, grievance redressal committees,



mentoring programmes, and leadership initiatives operate within this unequal environment. As a result, their effectiveness remains limited unless deeper cultural and structural changes take place.

A major concern identified in the review is the persistent gap between policy and practice. Gender-related policies often exist as formal commitments without strong implementation, monitoring, or accountability. Many support systems remain symbolic, under-resourced, or inaccessible to women who need them most. When institutional responses are weak or dismissive, women lose trust in these mechanisms, leading to silence, underreporting of problems, and continued exclusion from decision-making spaces.

The review also emphasizes that women's experiences in higher education are not uniform. Intersectional factors such as caste, class, family background, and regional location shape how women access and benefit from institutional mechanisms. Women from marginalized backgrounds often face multiple and overlapping disadvantages that institutional policies fail to address adequately. This highlights the limitation of gender-neutral or one-size-fits-all approaches to women's empowerment.

Indian and Haryana-focused studies further demonstrate that increased access to higher education does not automatically translate into empowerment. Safety concerns, uneven distribution of institutions, weak support systems, and restrictive social norms continue to affect women's participation and leadership opportunities. These findings underline the importance of studying institutional mechanisms within specific local and social contexts rather than relying only on national-level data or policy analysis.

Overall, this review argues that women's empowerment in higher education requires more than the presence of formal institutional mechanisms. Genuine empowerment depends on the transformation of organizational culture, effective implementation of policies, accountability of leadership, and practical support that addresses women's everyday realities. Universities must move beyond symbolic compliance toward creating inclusive, responsive, and gender-sensitive academic environments.

By identifying key themes, limitations, and research gaps, this review provides a strong foundation for future sociological research on institutional mechanisms and women's empowerment. Context-specific, qualitative, and intersectional studies are essential for understanding how universities can truly function as spaces of equality, dignity, and empowerment for women.\

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