

Original Paper

Social Capital and Job Quality among Female Industrial Workers: Resource Mobilization, Worker Agency, and the Role of Trade Unions

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Abstract

Industrial employment has expanded economic opportunities for women in developing economies, yet access to employment does not necessarily translate into better job quality. This study examines how social capital shapes the job quality of female workers in industrial zones, with particular attention to the mechanisms through which social relationships are converted into employment-related resources and capabilities. Drawing on secondary data, academic studies, institutional reports, and documented trade union practices, the study adopts a qualitative, document-based approach and distinguishes among bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. The findings indicate that these forms perform distinct but complementary functions. Bonding social capital primarily provides emotional, material, and everyday support that strengthens workers' resilience; bridging social capital broadens access to information, learning, training, and occupational opportunities; and linking social capital connects workers to institutional resources, representation, rights, and mechanisms of worker voice. Trade unions emerge as particularly important institutional brokers of linking social capital by facilitating access to information, services, representation, and social dialogue. However, social capital is not uniformly beneficial: closed networks, reciprocal obligations, power asymmetries, and gender norms may constrain workers' capacity to mobilize network resources. The study proposes an analytical pathway in which social capital influences job quality through access to and mobilization of resources and the strengthening of worker agency. It concludes that improving women's job quality requires not merely stronger social connections but more diverse and institutionally connected networks that enable workers to convert social resources into economic security, skills, voice, and occupational opportunities.

Keywords

social capital, job quality, female industrial workers, bonding social capital, bridging social capital, linking social capital, worker agency, trade unions

1. Introduction

Industrialization and the expansion of global production networks have created substantial employment opportunities for women in developing economies, particularly in labour-intensive industries such as garments, textiles, electronics, and footwear. Paid industrial employment can enhance women's income, economic autonomy, and household bargaining power (Buchori et al., 2024; Mamun & Hoque, 2022). However, women's concentration in relatively low-paid and labour-intensive occupations raises a more fundamental question: whether greater access to employment is accompanied by better job quality.

This issue is particularly relevant to Viet Nam, where rapid industrialization and integration into global value chains have significantly reshaped employment. In 2024, approximately 17.4 million people worked in industry and construction, representing 33.4% of total employment. Gender disparities nevertheless persisted: average monthly labour income was VND 8.7 million for men compared with VND 6.5 million for women (GSO, 2025). The textile and garment sector, which employs large numbers of women, is also undergoing technological upgrading, changing skill requirements, and restructuring associated with global value-chain integration (ILO, 2025a). These transformations may generate new opportunities while simultaneously exposing female workers to employment insecurity, skill pressures, and unequal access to occupational mobility.

Job quality therefore extends beyond employment status or earnings. It encompasses employment security, working conditions, social protection, opportunities for skills development and career advancement, workplace relationships, worker voice, and work-family balance. These dimensions are especially important for women because occupational segregation, unequal care responsibilities, and gendered workplace norms can constrain both employment opportunities and career progression (ILO, 2023, 2025b; Seguino & Braunstein, 2019). Evidence from industrial settings in Nepal and India similarly demonstrates persistent problems related to low-skilled work, working conditions, limited mobility, and women's dual responsibilities in paid and unpaid work (Poudel, 2023; Kaur et al., 2025). Social capital provides a useful perspective for explaining why workers facing similar structural conditions may experience different employment outcomes. It refers to resources embedded in social networks and relationships that individuals can access and mobilize. In the workplace, these resources may include information, emotional and material support, trust, reciprocal assistance, training opportunities, access to decision-makers, representation, and institutional support. Previous research links social capital to job satisfaction, quality of working life, employment prospects, well-being, and bargaining capacity (Requena, 2003; Lee & Hlasny, 2023; Gudeta et al., 2025).

For female industrial workers, three forms of social capital are particularly relevant. Bonding social capital, rooted in close ties with family, friends, and trusted co-workers, can provide emotional, financial,

and practical support. Bridging social capital connects workers to wider networks that may provide new information, training, and career opportunities. Linking social capital connects workers vertically to actors and institutions with greater authority and resources, including supervisors, employers, trade unions, public agencies, and legal or social-service organizations. Such connections may facilitate access to formal support, representation, grievance mechanisms, and labour rights.

Emerging evidence from Viet Nam supports this distinction. Research among 300 garment workers in six factories in Hanoi, Bac Ninh, and Hung Yen associates bonding, bridging, and linking social capital with job satisfaction, skills development, and perceived bargaining power (Giap, 2025). Research on migrant factory workers in Binh Duong and Bac Ninh further shows that workers mobilize social networks to secure housing, financial assistance, childcare, and livelihood stability (Hoang & Turner, 2026). Social networks can therefore constitute important resources for navigating industrial employment. However, social capital is not inherently beneficial. Close networks may provide support while reproducing dependence, obligations, unequal power relations, and restrictive gender norms. Evidence from precarious workers in South Korea shows that the relationship between social capital and mental health varies by gender (Oh & Park, 2020). Bonding ties may also help workers cope with difficult employment without changing the structural conditions that generate low wages, insecurity, or limited mobility. The central issue is therefore not merely whether women possess social networks, but which resources these networks provide and under what conditions those resources can be converted into better employment outcomes.

Despite growing research on both female industrial employment and social capital, the relationship between the two remains insufficiently developed. Studies of women industrial workers largely focus on wages, working conditions, migration, empowerment, and gender inequality (Buchori et al., 2024; Mamun & Hoque, 2022; Hoang & Turner, 2026), while social-capital research tends to examine job satisfaction, employment prospects, well-being, or individual network dimensions (Requena, 2003; Oh & Park, 2020; Lee & Hlasny, 2023; Giap, 2025). Less attention has been paid to how different forms of social capital are transformed into resources that affect multiple dimensions of job quality, particularly among female industrial workers in rapidly industrializing economies.

This study addresses this gap by examining how bonding, bridging, and linking social capital influence the job quality of female workers in industrial zones. It conceptualizes this relationship as a process in which social networks facilitate or constrain access to information, support, training, institutional services, representation, and opportunities, thereby shaping workers' agency and capacity to improve their employment conditions. The study therefore asks: How and through what mechanisms does social capital influence the job quality of female workers in industrial zones?

The study contributes to the literature in three respects. First, it connects social-capital theory with the multidimensional concept of job quality by identifying the mechanisms through which network resources translate into employment outcomes. Second, it introduces a gender-sensitive perspective that recognizes social capital as a potentially enabling but also constraining resource. Third, it highlights linking social

capital and the role of trade unions and other institutional actors in connecting female workers to formal resources, representation, and rights.

Accordingly, the study proposes the following analytical pathway: *Social capital* → *access to and mobilization of resources* → *empowerment and capacity for action* → *job quality*.

This framework shifts the analytical focus from the mere existence of social ties to workers' capacity to mobilize network-based resources and convert them into improvements in the quality of work.

2. Theoretical Background and Analytical Framework

2.1 Social Capital

Social capital refers to resources embedded in social relationships that individuals can access and mobilize to pursue their goals. Unlike human capital, which resides primarily in individuals' knowledge and skills, social capital is relational: its value derives from networks, trust, reciprocity, and access to others' resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). From this perspective, social ties matter not simply because they connect people, but because they facilitate flows of information, support, influence, and opportunities.

This study distinguishes three forms of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. Bonding social capital arises from strong ties among people with relatively similar social positions, such as family members, relatives, close friends, and trusted co-workers. These relationships provide emotional support, mutual assistance, childcare, emergency finance, and other resources that may help female workers cope with employment and family pressures. However, bonding ties can become inward-looking and may reinforce dependence or existing gender norms.

Bridging social capital connects individuals across different social groups and networks. For female industrial workers, it may include relationships with workers outside their immediate circles, professional networks, former colleagues, and other occupational contacts. Such ties broaden access to non-redundant information, training, job opportunities, and alternative employment pathways. This mechanism is consistent with Granovetter's (1973) argument that weak ties can provide access to information and opportunities unavailable within close-knit networks.

Linking social capital refers to vertical relationships connecting individuals to actors and institutions with greater authority, power, or resources. In industrial employment, these may include supervisors, managers, employers, trade unions, public agencies, and organizations providing legal or social services. Linking ties are particularly important because they can connect female workers to formal resources, representation, grievance mechanisms, social protection, and decision-making processes. In this sense, linking social capital can help convert interpersonal relationships into institutional access and worker voice.

These three forms are complementary rather than interchangeable. Bonding capital primarily provides solidarity and everyday support; bridging capital expands information and opportunities; and linking capital facilitates access to institutional resources, representation, and power. Their contribution to job

quality therefore depends not only on the existence of social ties but also on workers' capacity to mobilize the resources embedded within them (Requena, 2003; Giap, 2025).

2.2 Job Quality

Job quality is a multidimensional concept capturing the extent to which employment contributes to workers' economic security, well-being, development, and capacity to exercise voice. It extends beyond employment status and wages to include working conditions, employment security, social protection, skills and career development, workplace relationships, worker representation, and work-family compatibility.

For female industrial workers, job quality is particularly shaped by the interaction between employment conditions and gendered social structures. Low wages, occupational segregation, limited promotion opportunities, care responsibilities, and unequal access to organizational resources can restrict women's ability to benefit fully from paid employment (Seguino & Braunstein, 2019; Poudel, 2023; Kaur et al., 2025). Job quality should therefore be understood not only through objective employment conditions but also through workers' capacity to access resources, exercise voice, develop skills, and improve their position within the workplace.

In this study, job quality is examined through five interrelated dimensions: (1) income and employment security; (2) working conditions and well-being; (3) social protection and access to employment-related services; (4) skills development and career opportunities; and (5) worker voice, representation, and capacity to influence employment conditions. This multidimensional approach allows social capital to be linked to specific employment outcomes rather than treated simply as a predictor of general job satisfaction.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The central argument of this study is that social capital affects job quality through resource mobilization rather than through social ties alone. Networks provide potential resources, but their effects depend on whether workers can access, mobilize, and convert these resources into meaningful improvements in their employment conditions.

The proposed mechanism consists of four stages: *Social capital* → *access to and mobilization of resources* → *empowerment and capacity for action* → *job quality*.

At the first stage, bonding, bridging, and linking ties constitute different network structures through which resources become available. At the second stage, workers mobilize these relationships to obtain information, emotional and material support, training, employment opportunities, institutional services, representation, and protection of rights. At the third stage, access to these resources can strengthen workers' agency by improving their ability to make employment decisions, negotiate workplace conditions, seek assistance, exercise voice, and pursue occupational mobility. These capabilities, in turn, influence different dimensions of job quality.

The three forms of social capital are expected to operate through different pathways. Bonding capital primarily strengthens resilience and everyday coping; bridging capital expands information, learning,

and occupational opportunities; and linking capital enhances access to institutional resources, representation, and bargaining capacity. Linking capital may therefore be particularly important for transforming individual or interpersonal resources into more durable improvements in employment conditions.

The relationship is nevertheless conditional rather than uniformly positive. Closed networks may restrict access to new information, strong reciprocal obligations may impose additional burdens, and workplace hierarchies may limit the resources accessible through vertical relationships. Social capital can also reproduce gender norms and existing inequalities (Oh & Park, 2020). Its effects on job quality consequently depend on network structure, the resources embedded in relationships, workers' capacity to mobilize them, and the institutional context in which these relationships operate.

The framework therefore conceptualizes social capital as a relational resource whose value lies in its conversion into capabilities and employment outcomes. This perspective moves beyond asking whether female workers have social connections to examining how different network configurations enable or constrain their capacity to achieve better-quality work.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based research design combining secondary data analysis, literature synthesis, and case analysis. This approach is appropriate for examining the mechanisms through which social capital may influence the job quality of female workers in industrial zones and for integrating evidence from academic research, institutional reports, labour statistics, and trade union practices.

First, secondary data analysis was conducted using published studies, official statistics, policy documents, and institutional reports concerning female employment, industrial zones, working conditions, social protection, skills development, gender inequality, and trade union activities. Particular attention was given to evidence on women working in labour-intensive industries and industrial areas in Viet Nam, supplemented by relevant international studies for comparative interpretation.

Second, the study synthesized empirical research on social capital, female industrial employment, workplace well-being, job quality, and worker empowerment. The review focused on studies that examined social networks, trust, workplace relationships, access to information and support, employment opportunities, bargaining capacity, and institutional connections. The evidence was organized according to the three forms of social capital developed in the analytical framework: bonding, bridging, and linking social capital.

Third, a case-based analysis was used to examine trade union initiatives supporting female workers. Trade unions were treated as an important institutional channel of linking social capital because they connect workers with information, welfare services, legal support, representation, training opportunities, and mechanisms for expressing workplace concerns. Cases were selected from publicly available reports

and documented trade union activities relating to the protection, support, and empowerment of female workers.

The analysis followed a thematic procedure. Evidence was coded into four analytical categories: (1) forms of social capital; (2) resources accessible through social networks; (3) empowerment and capacity for action; and (4) dimensions of job quality. Particular attention was paid to the mechanisms connecting these categories and to conditions under which social capital produced either supportive or constraining effects.

The study therefore does not seek to establish causal effects statistically. Rather, it develops an evidence-based explanation of how social relationships and institutional connections may be converted into resources and capabilities that shape job quality. Triangulation across academic studies, official statistics, institutional reports, and documented trade union practices was used to strengthen the credibility of the analysis and reduce dependence on any single source of evidence.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Job Quality of Female Industrial Workers

The reviewed evidence indicates that industrial employment has expanded women's access to paid work and income while leaving important dimensions of job quality uneven. Women remain concentrated in labour-intensive and relatively low-skilled positions, where employment opportunities may coexist with wage disadvantages, demanding working conditions, limited career mobility, and the double burden of paid work and unpaid care (Seguino & Braunstein, 2019; Poudel, 2023; Kaur et al., 2025). Similar tensions are evident in garment-producing economies, where paid employment can strengthen women's economic autonomy and household bargaining position without necessarily removing structural inequalities in the workplace (Buchori et al., 2024; Mamun & Hoque, 2022).

The Vietnamese context reflects this broader pattern. Industrialization and participation in global production networks have generated substantial employment opportunities for women, particularly in labour-intensive manufacturing. Yet employment alone does not ensure job quality. Female workers' experiences are shaped by income and employment security, working conditions, access to social protection, opportunities for training and advancement, worker voice, and the compatibility of paid work with family responsibilities.

Digital transformation adds a further dimension to these challenges. Technological upgrading can create opportunities for productivity improvement, skills development, and occupational mobility, but it can also increase the risk of skills mismatch and labour-market exclusion for workers with limited access to training. Female workers in routine and lower-skilled occupations may be particularly vulnerable when technological change occurs faster than opportunities for reskilling. Job quality in this context increasingly depends not only on current employment conditions but also on workers' capacity to obtain information, acquire new skills, access institutional support, and adapt to changing occupational requirements.

These findings suggest that differences in job quality cannot be explained solely by individual human capital. Workers' ability to use their skills and respond to employment risks also depends on the social and institutional resources available to them. This provides the point of connection between job quality and social capital.

4.2 Forms of Social Capital among Female Workers

The evidence reveals three complementary forms of social capital through which female workers access different types of resources.

Bonding social capital is primarily embedded in relationships with family members, relatives, friends, and trusted co-workers. These ties provide emotional support, childcare, accommodation, emergency financial assistance, and everyday mutual aid. Among workers facing employment and family pressures, bonding ties can therefore strengthen resilience and help sustain labour-market participation. Research in Ethiopia similarly demonstrates the importance of co-workers, friends, and family in providing material and subjective support to women in low-skilled employment (Gudeta et al., 2025).

However, bonding capital functions primarily as a protective and coping resource rather than as a mechanism for structural improvement. Evidence from Vietnamese garment workers indicates that bonding relationships are positively associated with job satisfaction but are less capable of generating changes in skills, bargaining power, or institutional access without complementary bridging and linking relationships (Giap, 2025).

Bridging social capital performs a different function by connecting women to information and resources beyond their immediate circles. Relationships with wider occupational networks, workers from other groups, former colleagues, and organizational contacts can provide information about vacancies, training, skills, and alternative employment opportunities. This finding is consistent with Granovetter's argument that weaker and more diverse ties can provide non-redundant information unavailable within close networks. For female workers, bridging capital may therefore be particularly important for learning and occupational mobility.

Evidence from Vietnamese garment workers supports this mechanism, showing a strong relationship between bridging social capital, job satisfaction, and skills development (Giap, 2025). The significance of bridging capital lies in its capacity to extend workers' opportunity structures rather than merely help them cope with existing circumstances.

Linking social capital connects female workers vertically to actors and institutions possessing greater authority and resources. These include supervisors, managers, employers, trade unions, public institutions, and organizations providing legal or social services. Its principal resources are therefore institutional: information about rights, representation, access to services, grievance mechanisms, and channels through which workers can express concerns.

Among the three forms, linking capital has the greatest potential to connect individual needs with institutional resources and collective representation. Evidence from Vietnamese garment workers associates linking social capital with stronger perceived bargaining power (Giap, 2025). The distinction

is important: bonding capital can help a worker manage a problem, whereas linking capital may improve her capacity to have that problem recognized and addressed institutionally.

The findings therefore indicate a functional differentiation among the three forms:

Bonding → support and resilience

Bridging → information, learning, and opportunities

Linking → rights, representation, and institutional access

Rather than operating independently, these forms can reinforce one another. Job quality is more likely to improve when workers can move beyond supportive close ties to wider networks and, critically, to institutions capable of providing resources and influencing employment conditions.

4.3 Trade Unions as a Source of Linking Social Capital

The analysis identifies trade unions as an important institutional mechanism through which linking social capital can be created and mobilized. Their significance extends beyond the provision of individual benefits. By connecting workers with employers, workplace management, public institutions, legal information, welfare services, and collective representation, trade unions can bridge the gap between interpersonal networks and formal institutional resources.

For female workers, this role is particularly relevant because many employment-related problems cannot be resolved through family or co-worker support alone. Wage disputes, social insurance, occupational safety, maternity rights, workplace discrimination, training opportunities, and representation require access to actors with organizational or institutional authority. Trade unions can facilitate such access through information provision, consultation, welfare support, dialogue with employers, representation, and referral to appropriate services.

The mechanism identified from the evidence can be expressed as: *Trade union connections* → *information, support, and representation* → *access to institutional resources* → *enhanced worker agency* → *improved job quality*.

This mechanism illustrates why linking capital differs qualitatively from bonding capital. Informal relationships can help workers absorb employment risks, whereas institutional relationships can potentially influence the conditions producing those risks. Trade unions may therefore serve as resource brokers, converting organizational connections into information, services, representation, and opportunities that individual workers would otherwise find difficult to access.

Their contribution is nevertheless conditional. Linking capital generates meaningful benefits only when workers can access union institutions, trust them, communicate their needs, and receive effective representation. The existence of a formal organization alone does not constitute effective social capital; what matters is whether institutional relationships generate resources that workers can actually mobilize. This interpretation extends conventional accounts of workplace social capital. Trade unions are not simply external support organizations but can be understood as institutional infrastructures of linking social capital through which workers connect horizontal social relationships with organizational power and formal systems of rights and representation.

4.4 Limits and Ambivalence of Social Capital

The findings also challenge the assumption that greater social capital necessarily produces better job quality. Social capital is a relational resource, and its consequences depend on network composition, power relations, gender norms, and institutional conditions.

First, strong bonding networks may become closed networks. When workers rely predominantly on family members or close colleagues, they may repeatedly receive similar information and have limited exposure to new employment opportunities, training, or institutional resources. Strong ties can therefore provide security while simultaneously restricting mobility.

Second, social relationships involve reciprocal obligations. Family and kinship networks may provide childcare, finance, and emotional support, but they can also generate expectations concerning caregiving, household responsibilities, or financial transfers. For women, such obligations may reduce the resources and time available for training, occupational mobility, or career development.

Third, networks can reproduce rather than overcome gender norms. Social relationships embedded in traditional expectations about women's family and care responsibilities may normalize occupational choices, discourage mobility, or increase women's unpaid workload. Evidence from precarious workers in South Korea demonstrates that the relationship between social capital and psychological well-being differs by gender, indicating that social connectedness does not automatically produce equivalent benefits for women and men (Oh & Park, 2020).

Finally, linking relationships are shaped by power asymmetries. Connections with supervisors, employers, or institutions may increase access to resources, but workers in subordinate positions may have limited capacity to mobilize those relationships. The value of linking capital therefore depends on institutional responsiveness, trust, effective representation, and workers' ability to exercise voice.

Taken together, the findings reveal a central distinction between coping and transformation. Bonding capital is particularly effective in helping female workers cope with everyday employment and family pressures. Bridging capital can expand their informational and occupational opportunities. Linking capital has greater potential to transform access to rights, representation, and institutional resources. Yet none of these forms automatically improves job quality.

The evidence consequently supports a more conditional mechanism: *Social capital* → *access to resources* → *capacity to mobilize resources* → *worker agency* → *job quality*, with this process shaped by gender norms, network openness, organizational power relations, and institutional accessibility.

This interpretation helps explain why workers with apparently similar social networks may experience different employment outcomes. The decisive factor is not the number of social relationships they possess, but whether those relationships provide valuable resources and whether workers have the capacity and institutional opportunity to convert those resources into better-quality work.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined how social capital shapes the job quality of female workers in industrial zones through the mechanisms of resource access, mobilization, and worker agency. The analysis shows that social capital matters not simply because workers are socially connected, but because different relationships provide access to different resources that can be converted into employment-related outcomes.

The three forms of social capital perform distinct but complementary functions. Bonding social capital provides emotional, material, and everyday support that strengthens workers' resilience and capacity to cope with employment and family pressures. Bridging social capital extends access to information, learning, training, and occupational opportunities beyond close social circles. Linking social capital connects workers to actors and institutions with greater authority and resources, thereby facilitating access to rights, services, representation, and mechanisms of worker voice. This differentiation reinforces the central analytical pathway proposed in the study: *Social capital* → *access to and mobilization of resources* → *empowerment and capacity for action* → *job quality*.

The findings have several implications. First, interventions aimed at improving women's job quality should strengthen the three forms of social capital simultaneously rather than relying predominantly on close interpersonal networks. Bonding ties remain important for everyday resilience, but they need to be complemented by wider professional networks and stronger institutional connections. Expanding bridging capital through occupational networks, peer learning, digital platforms, and training can improve women's access to information, skills, and employment opportunities, particularly as technological change transforms skill requirements in industrial production.

Second, particular attention should be given to linking social capital. Female workers need effective connections to trade unions, employers, public institutions, training providers, and legal and social services. Strengthening these relationships can improve access to social protection, skills development, grievance mechanisms, representation, and career opportunities. Linking social capital is therefore particularly important for moving beyond individual coping toward more sustainable improvements in employment conditions.

Third, trade unions can play a strategic role as institutional brokers of linking social capital. Their function should extend beyond welfare assistance to strengthening workers' access to information, skills, services, representation, and social dialogue. More accessible communication channels, gender-responsive support, legal assistance, training, and stronger connections between workers and relevant institutions can increase women's capacity to exercise voice and mobilize resources. In this sense, effective trade union engagement can help convert social connections into institutional resources and employment capabilities.

At the same time, policies should recognize the potential limitations of social capital. Closed networks, excessive reliance on kinship ties, unequal reciprocal obligations, and gendered expectations may restrict access to new information and reproduce existing inequalities. Strengthening social capital should

therefore involve not simply increasing social connectedness, but diversifying networks and improving women's capacity to access and mobilize resources across interpersonal, organizational, and institutional boundaries.

The study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing social capital as a mechanism linking social relationships to job quality through resource mobilization and worker agency. It further demonstrates the analytical importance of distinguishing between bonding as a source of support and resilience, bridging as a source of information and opportunity, and linking as a pathway to institutional resources, representation, and rights.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Because the study relies primarily on secondary evidence and documented cases, it does not establish causal relationships between specific forms of social capital and individual dimensions of job quality. Future research should test the proposed framework using primary data from female industrial workers and examine how bonding, bridging, and linking social capital interact with gender, migration status, skills, occupational position, and digital transformation. Comparative research across industries and industrial zones would also help identify the institutional conditions under which social capital is most effectively converted into better-quality work.

Overall, improving the job quality of female industrial workers requires more than expanding employment opportunities. It requires strengthening their capacity to access, mobilize, and convert social and institutional resources into economic security, skills, voice, and occupational opportunities. Social capital is therefore most valuable not as a substitute for decent employment institutions, but as a resource that enables women to navigate, access, and influence those institutions.

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