

ANCIENT ROME WITHOUT *TUTELA MULIERUM*: A LEGAL HISTORY THAT NEVER WAS

Elisabet Barreiros Morales¹

¹| University of Vigo, Spain

^a| Correspondence should be addressed to: maria.elisabet.barreiro.morales@uvigo.es

Abstract. This study analyzes the *tutela mulierum* in Roman law as a mechanism of legal subordination of women under the guise of protection. Using a methodology based on the analysis of legal, literary, and historical sources, and framed within a gender and counterfactual historical perspective, the work examines the impact of this institution on the legal exclusion of women. The hypothesis of a Rome without tutela is proposed, exploring how such an absence could have transformed women's roles in economics, politics, and culture, and altered the legacy of Western legal tradition. Results show that *tutela mulierum* consolidated a patriarchal order, limiting female citizenship even in its most advanced forms. This study opens new research lines on the persistence of patriarchal structures in modern legal systems and advocates for a gender-based critical reassessment of law to envision more equitable legal models.

Keywords: *Tutela mulierum*, Roman law, gender and law, patriarchy, counterfactual hypothesis, legal history

Introduction

The history of law has, to a great extent, been the history of the struggle for the recognition and protection of fundamental rights. It is a narrative shaped by evolving conceptions of justice, personhood, and power—often marked by exclusion as much as by progress. Within this broad trajectory, the position of women in the legal world has been systematically relegated. Their participation has been constrained not by a lack of capacity, but by deeply rooted patriarchal structures that shaped legal systems to reflect and reproduce male dominance. These structures not only restricted women's legal faculties but also confined them to narrowly defined social roles—primarily as daughters, wives, and mothers—thus denying them full juridical agency [1].

One of the most revealing legal institutions of this dynamic in ancient Rome is the *tutela mulierum*. Though presented as a protective mechanism, it functioned in practice as a clear instrument of subordination. It subjected adult women to the legal authority of a male guardian—whether father, husband, or designated tutor—thereby negating their capacity to act independently within the civic and economic spheres [2]. Far from being an exceptional or marginal feature of Roman law, *tutela mulierum* (women guardianship) formed part of a wider juridical and cultural system that institutionalized gender inequality.

This study aims to analyze the *tutela mulierum* not only as a technical legal category, but as a lens through which to examine the functioning of patriarchy within Roman society. It approaches this institution as an embodiment of systemic gender bias and as a tool for the consolidation of male control over female autonomy and property. It is not simply a matter of cataloguing the legal elements of *tutela* (guardianship), but of interrogating its sociopolitical function, its evolution over time, and the ways it was instrumentalized by male-dominated power structures. Crucially, this work also considers how the institution responded—however minimally—to pressures from social change and from women themselves, who found ways to challenge, resist, or negotiate its constraints [3].

Although Roman women at times managed to secure limited spheres of legal or economic action, these gains were always conditional and circumstantial—dependent on motherhood, widowhood, or the absence of a male authority figure. They were never the product of a legal framework that recognized women as fully autonomous agents. Instead, Roman law maintained the fiction of female incapacity while exploiting women's contributions to family, economy, and social stability [4].

The research is grounded in a robust interdisciplinary methodology, designed to capture the tension between legal norms and the social reality experienced by women in Rome. The approach is based on the cross-analysis and synthesis of three fundamental types of primary sources. On one hand, the study rigorously examines legal texts, from the Law of the Twelve Tables to the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* and the influential writings of jurists like Gaius and Ulpian. This pillar of the research makes it possible to precisely define the normative (*de iure*) framework that sustained female subordination, detailing the mechanisms of *tutela*, marriage laws, and property rights. To this legal framework is added the study of historical narratives by authors such as Tacitus and Livy, which provide the indispensable political and social context to understand how these laws were applied, and at times manipulated, especially among the elite.

The third methodological pillar, which provides a unique cultural depth, is the interpretation of literary sources, such as the poetry of Ovid or the satires of Juvenal. These texts are crucial because they open a window onto social attitudes, family dynamics, and the everyday perception of gender roles, revealing a (*de facto*) picture that often differs from the strict letter of the law. It is in these sources that one can best trace the complex strategies of negotiation and forms of agency with which women navigated the limitations imposed upon them—managing their dowries, influencing their families, or exploiting fissures in the system to gain autonomy.

It is precisely in the confrontation and synthesis of these three perspectives that the methodology reveals its full analytical power. By contrasting what the law dictated with what history and literature describe, the study can more clearly identify historical turning points, such as the Augustan reforms, and evaluate not only their legal content but also their true social impact. This comprehensive approach makes it possible to move beyond the view of women as mere passive subjects of the law, reconstructing their agency. Ultimately, this methodological approach makes it possible to demonstrate that the gradual erosion of *tutela* was not a simple legislative change, but a dynamic and complex process, driven both by structural reforms and by the continuous negotiations of women themselves in their daily lives.

This study reconstructs the mechanisms that sustained female subordination and examines the complex strategies by which women navigated the legal limitations imposed upon them. The work also identifies key turning points in the gradual erosion of *tutela*, such as the legal reforms under Augustus or the rise of alternative marital arrangements, which—though partial and often paternalistic—nonetheless opened up new legal horizons for Roman women [5].

Moreover, this analysis is not confined to a historical reconstruction. From a critical, and necessarily anachronistic, perspective, the study also interrogates the long-term legacy of such legal restrictions. The patterns established by *tutela mulierum* echo, under different forms and names, in later juridical systems—including in aspects of modern civil law traditions. The persistence of gendered legal limitations into the modern period underscores the importance of examining ancient legal institutions through the lens of contemporary gender theory [6].

To push this reflection further, the study engages in a counterfactual exercise: What if *tutela mulierum* had never existed? What would a truly gender-equal Roman citizenship have looked like? By imagining an alternate legal history—one in which women were recognized as fully autonomous subjects—this work aims to expose not only the historical injustices suffered by Roman women, but also the missed opportunities for a more egalitarian legal tradition. The speculative nature of this inquiry does not detract from its analytical value; rather, it allows us to consider the broader consequences of legal exclusion and to envision alternative models of civic and legal participation [6].

In this light, *tutela mulierum* becomes more than a relic of an ancient legal system. It stands as a symbol of the broader mechanisms by which law can serve to uphold systems of inequality. As such, it invites us to rethink legal history from a gender-conscious perspective that brings to light the structural inequities of the past and their reverberations in the present. Ultimately, the critical analysis of this institution is not only an act of historical interpretation, but a call to resist the repetition of its logic in modern legal systems [7].

***Tutela Mulierum*: a mechanism limiting Roman women**

When discussing the legal status of Roman women, many adjectives were used to justify the institution of *tutela* over them. The jurist Gaius defended the idea of female weakness as the reason for perpetual guardianship. We strongly disagree with this Gaius-based perspective. Even though he uses terms such as *infirmetas sexus* (the weakness of the sex) or *levitas animi* (Lightness of spirit), we reject such terminology to describe women's legal capacity [8]. His work reflects a calculated ambiguity, intended to give his legal position a sense of modernity, even though by the second century CE Roman women had already begun a long struggle to assert their freedom and their capacity to act [9].

Despite the initiative and determination of many women who committed to fighting for their rights, there was never an adequate male institution to counterbalance the legal injustice they faced. What did occur, instead, were disguised efforts to grant women limited freedoms in exchange for increased procreation, thus securing family lineage. These efforts confined them to the domestic sphere and avoided any disruption to the prevailing patriarchal system.

The notion of female inferiority relative to men was a constant in Roman society, particularly for *sui iuris* women. Once they outgrew the guardianship of minors, these women remained under permanent male supervision, with their capacity to act limited and subject to the *voluntas* (will) of a tutor. The *tutela mulierum* was, therefore, an outdated institution that restricted women's legal agency and reflected a deeply sexist system, which has persisted in various legal systems—including our own—under different names and forms.

The formalities required under *tutela* were necessary to validate women's legal acts, exposing a legal hypocrisy: women made decisions in practice, showing their capacity was not truly lacking, yet a male tutor still had to authorize their actions. This reaffirmed male superiority and shaped the legal experience of Roman women.

Despite variations in application, *tutela* remained in effect for a long period, with evidence of its use even in the later Imperial era. Initially framed as protective, it eventually lost purpose and fell into disuse, failing to adapt to the evolving political and social context of the Roman Empire [10].

Over time, despite patriarchal pressures demanding irreproachable behavior in all legal matters, women began to gain more freedom and independence, particularly during wartime. As men left Rome, women were left to manage households and business affairs, granting them unprecedented legal protagonism, even if still subject to their tutor's *auctoritas* (authorization) [11].

Another major factor in increasing female autonomy was the rise of the *sine manu* marriage, which allowed women to retain their legal status and remain outside the control of their husbands [12]. This form enabled them to manage property independently, although still requiring a tutor's consent [13].

Further progress came with Emperor Augustus' grant of the *ius liberorum*, conditional upon childbearing. This reinforces the idea that women's recognition and autonomy were tied to their reproductive role—more *mores maiorum* (the customs of the ancestors), less innovation in the Roman family structure, especially for women [16].

Under Augustus, *tutela mulierum* began to decline through laws such as the *Lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* and the *Lex Papia Poppaea*, which established the *ius trium liberorum* [14]. Freeborn women with three or more children, and freedwomen with four, were exempt from guardianship. This privilege also allowed women to make wills and inherit substantial estates, bypassing the *Lex Voconia* [15].

Additionally, Roman matrons were granted the *ius stolae*, the right to wear the stola, marking their social prestige as transmitters of family and moral values [17].

Another factor contributing to female autonomy was the abolition of *agnatic tutela* by Emperor Claudius, allowing women more independence from their families of origin [18].

Women's progress toward prosperity implied continued male superiority, which remained a barrier to true equality. This superiority often led to the increasing invisibility of women and hindered their fight for freedom [19].

Although we approach the *tutela mulierum* with modern disdain, acknowledging the temporal gap, this study critically examines it to express our rejection of any restriction on women's legal capacity. Through the analysis of ancient sources, we uncover the archaic motivations behind the institution. Although it appeared protective, its real intent was to diminish women's legal standing under a patriarchal worldview. Still, Roman law's gradual evolution offered limited spaces for female protagonism, illustrating its dynamic ability to reflect societal change.

Roman society without *tutela mulierum*: an alternative legal and social hypothesis

The *tutela mulierum*, a fundamental legal institution in Roman law, profoundly shaped the role and status of women in antiquity. By subjecting adult women to the legal authority of male guardians, it imposed structural limitations on their civil capacity and excluded them from full juridical personhood. Framed as a paternalistic mechanism of protection, *tutela* in practice served to maintain the continuity of male dominance within the family, economy, and public life. This legal construct became both a reflection and a reinforcement of broader patriarchal ideologies that defined Roman society.

Yet one must ask: what would Roman society—and by extension, Western legal tradition—have looked like if *tutela mulierum* had never existed? This section explores that provocative hypothesis by imagining a counterfactual Rome in which women were recognized as fully autonomous legal subjects from the outset. It evaluates the potential transformations in legal, economic, political, familial, and cultural domains, and considers the long-term impact such a scenario might have had on the development of gender roles in the Western world [20].

In a legal system without *tutela mulierum*, Roman women would have enjoyed full juridical capacity—signing contracts, initiating lawsuits, drafting wills, and managing property without the oversight of a male tutor. Such recognition would have entailed a radical redefinition of women's social roles and agency, altering the very fabric of Roman civil and economic structures [21].

This foundational shift would likely have led to robust female participation in commercial activities. Women would have operated more visibly as merchants, artisans, bankers, and estate managers, reshaping the economic landscape of the Republic and Empire alike [22]. Wealth and resources, no longer transmitted exclusively through agnatic male lines, might have circulated along maternal branches as well, decentralizing power from patriarchal kinship systems and creating more plural economic elites.

Although Roman women were legally barred from holding public office and voting, removing the guardian requirement could have legitimized and expanded their informal political roles. Women like Livia Drusilla and Agrippina the Younger, already powerful behind the scenes, might have emerged as formal participants in decision-making structures. Female patronage, influence in municipal institutions, or participation in religious and legal associations (*collegia*) could have evolved into recognizable forms of public representation, particularly among elite women [23].

Over time, these roles may have institutionalized a model of political inclusion rooted not in abstract equality, but in the functional recognition of women's capacity to contribute to civic life. In this way, a society without *tutela* might have prefigured early models of gendered citizenship, centuries before such concepts were articulated in modern political theory [24].

Within the domestic sphere, the effects would have been equally profound. Roman familial organization, grounded in the authority of the *pater familias*, would have shifted toward a more balanced model of shared parental and spousal authority. The elimination of *tutela* would have allowed wives to administer dowries, make independent legal decisions, and exercise influence in inheritance matters. Maternal figures would likely have played a more central role in the education and moral formation of children, strengthening matrilineal bonds and diversifying models of Roman virtue.

Marriage itself might have become less of a transactional alliance between families and more of a personal and contractual bond between individuals. A consensual framework would have emerged earlier, reducing the political function of marriage and increasing its legal and emotional reciprocity.

Inheritance law, a core pillar of Roman private law, would have undergone major transformations. Female heirs would have had the capacity to manage estates and transmit wealth freely. This would have undermined the logic of *agnatio*—the male-centric family lineage—and encouraged new configurations of kinship, power, and memory.

Furthermore, the full legal capacity of women would have likely generated demand for education beyond the domestic arts. Girls could have received training in rhetoric, philosophy, and jurisprudence alongside their male counterparts. As a result, Rome might have seen the earlier emergence of women

in intellectual spheres: female orators, legal scholars, poets, historians, and scientists. The contributions of these women would have enriched Roman cultural production with diverse voices and experiences, producing a more inclusive literary and philosophical canon [25].

This cultural rebalancing would have had ripple effects through time. Rome, as the primary legal and ideological reference for medieval and modern Europe, served as the foundation for Christianity, canon law, feudal institutions, and early codifications of civil law. Had female autonomy been normalized in antiquity, it is conceivable that this paradigm would have influenced subsequent religious and political doctrines. Doctrines of natural law, divine order, and social hierarchy might have developed with different assumptions about gender.

Christianity, for instance, might have incorporated more egalitarian principles from its inception. Female apostles, deacons, and bishops might have emerged within early Christian communities, shaping ecclesiastical institutions with a different logic of moral and spiritual authority. In turn, the trajectory of the Church—and the gendered norms it helped disseminate across Europe—could have followed a more inclusive course [26].

The long-term consequences of a Rome without *tutela mulierum* would have extended into the modern age. The legal, economic, and symbolic capital accumulated by women across centuries could have accelerated the recognition of their civil and political rights in the 18th and 19th centuries. Feminist movements would have drawn upon a deeper historical legacy of female autonomy, possibly achieving legislative and institutional change earlier and with greater systemic impact [27].

This counterfactual scenario, while speculative, serves a crucial purpose: it reveals the weight of legal fictions in shaping social realities. It reminds us that the exclusion of women from public and legal life was not inevitable, but constructed—and that other trajectories were possible, and are still possible. By imagining what might have been, we sharpen our understanding of what has been lost and what remains to be reclaimed.

In essence, a Rome without *tutela mulierum* challenges us to reimagine legal history not as a linear progression, but as a field of possibilities shaped by power, ideology, and contestation. It suggests that the foundations of modern legal systems could have been more equitable had different choices been made in antiquity. Rome, had it embraced legal parity between the sexes, might have left a legacy of justice as durable as the Empire itself [28].

Conclusions

Throughout this study, we have established that *tutela mulierum* was neither an isolated nor accidental legal figure, but rather a deliberate and systemic instrument of the Roman patriarchal order. It was not a marginal anomaly within an otherwise neutral legal structure, but a foundational mechanism by which the state reinforced the authority of men over women in virtually all spheres of life—private and public, material and symbolic. Disguised under the rhetoric of protection, moral guidance, and assistance, this institution functioned as a form of permanent legal surveillance and control, profoundly shaping the conditions of female citizenship and denying women the status of fully autonomous legal subjects.

In this context, tutela must be understood not simply as a juridical device, but as a broader social strategy for the invisibilization and subordination of women. It operated at the intersection of law, culture, and ideology, drawing legitimacy from assumptions about female inferiority while serving concrete purposes in the distribution of property, authority, and lineage.

The apparent paradox between legal doctrine and social reality in Rome further reveals the internal contradictions of the system. While law denied women the capacity to act independently, practice often required them to do precisely that—especially in contexts of war, widowhood, or absence of male kin. Women managed estates, arranged marriages, negotiated contracts, and maintained the economic foundations of Roman households. The fact that such activities were tolerated, yet not formally recognized, underscores a structural hypocrisy: the legal fiction of female incapacity persisted not because of evidence or necessity, but because of ideology and power.

This contradiction reinforces the argument that the legal exclusion of women was not rooted in reason or nature, but in a political and cultural design aimed at preserving male hegemony. Roman jurists and lawmakers codified this imbalance into enduring structures that, even as they evolved, never fully relinquished control. The supposed reforms—such as the *ius liberorum*—were not aimed at dismantling patriarchal norms, but at reinforcing them by offering women conditional privileges in exchange for fulfilling roles assigned by male-centered state interests, primarily reproductive.

Seen in this light, *tutela mulierum* exemplifies how legal systems can serve as tools of both symbolic domination and practical constraint. The body of the law, far from being a neutral arbiter, reveals itself as a cultural artifact—one that constructs and sustains hierarchies as much as it regulates behavior. This insight is particularly urgent for contemporary legal critique: laws that claim to protect often conceal deeper forms of exclusion.

The counterfactual exercise proposed in this work—imagining a Rome without *tutela mulierum*—has proven an illuminating method for interrogating not only the past, but also the present. By considering how legal equality might have emerged differently and earlier, we open space to reflect on the historical losses that resulted from its absence. Perhaps the struggles for women's suffrage, property rights, and bodily autonomy—still ongoing in many parts of the world—could have drawn on a longer lineage of female legal agency. Perhaps the very concepts of citizenship, justice, and human rights would today bear the imprint of a more inclusive foundation.

Furthermore, the legacy of *tutela mulierum* extends far beyond the confines of ancient Rome. Its echoes reverberate through the centuries in various legal doctrines and social customs. From the canon law of the Middle Ages, which subordinated women to ecclesiastical and familial authority, to the modern civil codes that long denied women equal contractual and political rights, the basic logic of female legal dependence has proven remarkably resilient. Whether expressed through marital power, coverture, or limitations on voting and property ownership, the principle that women required male oversight remained a constant theme in many legal systems until well into the twentieth century.

This reinforces a crucial point: patriarchal law is not a historical aberration confined to antiquity, but a transhistorical structure of power that adapts to new forms while maintaining its core exclusions. As such, it demands not only academic critique, but active legal and political resistance. Legal reform, if it is to be truly emancipatory, must confront not just the letter of the law, but the deep social imaginaries it reproduces.

Ultimately, the study of *tutela mulierum* is not merely an archaeological inquiry into a distant past. It is a reminder—and a warning—about the ease with which normative systems can legitimize inequality, marginalize voices, and erase experiences under the guise of order, tradition, or benevolence. It compels us to reflect on how law constructs subjectivities and distributes recognition, agency, and dignity. It challenges us to reexamine the foundations of our own legal institutions, and to do so with a commitment to historical memory and gender justice.

Most importantly, this reflection underscores that the formal recognition of legal equality is not sufficient to dismantle centuries of structural discrimination. Equality on paper does not guarantee equity in practice. The history of *tutela mulierum* teaches us that legal texts—however progressive in tone—can conceal enduring hierarchies unless interpreted and applied through a critical and inclusive lens.

The struggle for women's freedom, then, is not only a struggle for legislative reform, but for historical redress. It is a struggle to rewrite legal history in a way that acknowledges, recovers, and values the contributions and capacities of women—those who were silenced, forgotten, or deliberately erased. Only through this sustained act of reparation can we hope to build a legal future that is not merely equal, but just, plural, and fully human.

Round Table Insight

The oral presentation of the work "Ancient Rome Without *Tutela Mulierum*: A Legal History That Never Was" at the conference and the subsequent dialogue with colleagues and the public were a decisive factor that shaped the final version of the manuscript. The academic interaction compelled the authors to carry out a crucial theoretical and methodological recalibration. Initially, questions focused on the historical feasibility of the counterfactual exercise, with specialists in Roman Law questioning whether an institution as structural as the *tutela mulierum* could have been eliminated without a collapse of the Roman patriarchal system. This feedback was key to refining the central hypothesis: it was clarified that the goal was not to propose a historical "correction," but to use the absence of *tutela* as a critical analytical tool to expose the social and legal cost of female exclusion and the lost opportunities for the Western legal tradition. The final text, therefore, placed more emphasis on the distinction between the analysis of *what was* (the history of Roman Law) and the analysis of *what could have been* (the counterfactual scenario), strengthening the justification for this method.

Furthermore, the debate extended to the systemic implications of this absence. Suggestions from the attendees led the authors to delve deeper into the *tutela*'s interaction with other legal figures, especially the authority of the *pater familias* and the *sine manu* marriage. As a result, the section exploring the scenario without *tutela* was significantly expanded. A more nuanced argument was developed, explaining that the elimination of the guardianship would have forced a redefinition of women's civic and economic roles, allowing them to manage property, participate in commerce, and exercise legal agency without male supervision. This change would have pressured the model of family authority, moving it toward a more balanced and contractual system within the domestic sphere.

Finally, the dialogue reinforced the need to explicitly connect the past with the present. Questions about the resonance of patriarchal logic in modern Law (such as marriage or property laws until the 20th century) led to a stronger Conclusions section. It became more evident how *tutela* serves as a symbol of the mechanisms of invisibilization that persist in legal systems. The round table transformed the work from specialized historical criticism into a call for contemporary legal critique, by establishing that the legacy of *tutela mulierum* endures and demands a continuous re-evaluation of legal structures that, under the guise of order or protection, perpetuate inequality. Essentially, the interaction with the audience acted as a process of validation and deepening, forcing the authors to strengthen the argumentation and maximize the theoretical and political scope of the study.

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