

Patriarchy

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What is patriarchy? A society is patriarchal to the degree that it is *male-dominated*, *male-identified*, and *male-centered*. It also involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women. Patriarchy is male-dominated in that positions of authority—political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military, domestic—are generally reserved for men. Heads of state, corporate CEOs and board members, religious leaders, school principals, members of legislatures at all levels of government, senior law partners, tenured full professors, generals and admirals, and even those identified as “head of household” all tend to be male under patriarchy. When a woman finds her way into such positions, people tend to be struck by the exception to the rule, and wonder how she’ll measure up against a man in the same position. It’s a test we rarely apply to men (“I wonder if he’ll be as good a president as a woman would be”) except, perhaps, on those rare occasions when men venture into the devalued domestic and other “caring” work most women do. Even then, men’s failure to measure up can be interpreted as a sign of superiority, a trained incapacity that actually protects their privileged status (“You change the diaper, I’m no good at that sort of thing”).

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In the simplest sense, male dominance creates power differences between men and women. It means, for example, that men can claim larger shares of income and wealth. It means they can shape culture in ways that reflect and serve men's collective interests by, for example, controlling the content of films and television shows, passing laws that allow husbands to rape their wives, or adjudicating rape and sexual harassment cases in ways that put the victim rather than the defendant on trial. Male dominance also promotes the idea that men are superior to women. In part this occurs because we don't distinguish between the superiority of *positions* in a hierarchy and the kinds of people who usually occupy them.¹ This means that if superior positions are occupied by men, it's a short leap to the idea that *men* must be superior. If presidents, generals, legislators, priests, popes, and corporate CEOs are all men (with a few token women as exceptions to prove the rule), then men as a group become identified with superiority even though most men aren't powerful in their individual lives. In this sense, every man's standing in relation to women is enhanced by the male monopoly over authority in patriarchal societies.

Patriarchal societies are *male-identified* in that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity. The simplest example of this is the still widespread use of male pronouns and nouns to represent people in general. When we routinely refer to human beings as "man" or to doctors as "he," we construct a symbolic world in which men are in the foreground and women in the background, marginalized as outsiders and exceptions to the rule.² (This practice can back people into some embarrassingly ridiculous corners, as in the anthropology text that described man as a "species that breast-feeds his young.") But male identification amounts to much more than this, for it also takes men and men's lives as the standard for defining what is normal. The idea of a career, for example, with its 60-hour weeks, is defined in ways that assume the career-holder has something like a wife at home to perform the vital support work of taking care of children, doing laundry, and making sure there's a safe, clean, comfortable haven for rest and recuperation from the stress of the competitive male-dominated world. Since women generally don't have wives, they find it harder to identify with and prosper within this male-identified model.

Another aspect of male identification is the cultural description of masculinity and the ideal man in terms that closely resemble the core values of society as a whole. These include qualities such as control, strength, efficiency, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion that interferes with other core values (such as invulnerability).³ These male-identified qualities are associated with the work valued most in most patriarchal societies—such as business, politics, war, athletics, law, and medicine—because this work has been organized in ways that require such qualities for success. In contrast, qualities such as inefficiency, cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and in-

tuitive and other nonlinear ways of thinking are all devalued *and* culturally associated with femininity and femaleness.

Of course, femaleness isn't devalued entirely. Women are often prized for their beauty as objects of male sexual desire, for example, but as such they are often possessed and controlled in ways that ultimately devalue them. There is also a powerful cultural romanticizing of women in general and mothers in particular, but it is a tightly focused sentimentality (as on Mother's Day or Secretaries' Day) that has little effect on how women are regarded and treated on a day-to-day basis. And, like all sentimentality, it doesn't have much weight when it comes to actually doing something to support women's lives by, for example, providing effective and affordable child day-care facilities for working mothers, or family leave policies that allow working women to attend to the caring functions for which we supposedly value them so highly.

Because patriarchy is male-identified, when most women look out on the world they see themselves reflected as women in a few narrow areas of life such as "caring" occupations (teaching, nursing, child care) and personal relationships. To see herself as a leader, for example, a woman must first get around the fact that leadership itself has been gendered through its identification with maleness and masculinity as part of patriarchal culture. While a man might have to learn to see himself as a manager, a woman has to be able to see herself as a *woman manager* who can succeed in spite of the fact that she isn't a man. As a result, any woman who dares strive for standing in the world beyond the sphere of caring relationships must choose between two very different cultural images of who she is and ought to be. For her to assume real public power—as in politics, corporations, or her church—she must resolve a contradiction between her culturally based identity as a woman, on the one hand, and the male-identified *position* that she occupies on the other. For this reason, the more powerful a woman is under patriarchy, the more "unsexed" she becomes in the eyes of others as her female cultural identity recedes beneath the mantle of male-identified power and the masculine images associated with it. With men the effect is just the opposite: the more powerful they are, the more aware we are of their maleness. Power looks sexy on men but not on women.

But for all the pitfalls and limitations, some women do make it to positions of power. What about Margaret Thatcher, Queen Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great, Indira Gandhi, and Golda Meir? Doesn't their power contradict the idea that patriarchy is male-dominated? The answer is that patriarchy can accommodate a limited number of powerful women so long as the society retains its essential patriarchal character, especially in being male-identified.⁴ Although some individual women have wielded great power, it has always been in societies organized on a patriarchal model. Each woman was surrounded by powerful men—generals, cabinet ministers, bishops, and wealthy aristocrats or businessmen—whose collective interests she supported and without whom she could not have ruled as she did. And not one of these women could have achieved and held her position without embracing core patriarchal values. Indeed, part of what makes these women stand out as so exceptional is their ability to embody values culturally defined as

masculine: they've been tougher, more decisive, more aggressive, more calculating, and more emotionally controlled than most men around them.⁵ These women's power, however, has nothing to do with whether women in general are subordinated under patriarchy. It also doesn't mean that putting more women in positions of authority will by itself do much for women unless we also change the patriarchal character of the systems in which they operate. . . .

Since patriarchy identifies power with men, the vast majority of men who aren't powerful but are instead dominated by other men can still feel some connection with the *idea* of male dominance and with men who *are* powerful. It is far easier, for example, for an unemployed working-class man to identify with male leaders and their displays of patriarchal masculine toughness than it is for women of any class. When upper-class U.S. President George Bush "got tough" with Saddam Hussein, for example, men of all classes could identify with his acting out of basic patriarchal values. In this way, male identification gives even the most lowly placed man a cultural basis for feeling some sense of superiority over the otherwise most highly placed woman (which is why a construction worker can feel within his rights as a man when he sexually harasses a well-dressed professional woman who happens to walk by).⁶ . . .

In addition to being male-dominated and male-identified, patriarchy is *male-centered*, which means that the focus of attention is primarily on men and what they do. Pick up any newspaper or go to any movie theater and you'll find stories primarily about men and what they've done or haven't done or what they have to say about either. With rare exceptions, women are portrayed as along for the ride, fussing over their support work of domestic labor and maintaining love relationships, providing something for men to fight over, or being foils that reflect or amplify men's heroic struggle with the human condition. If there's a crisis, what we see is what men did to create it and how men dealt with it.

If you want a story about heroism, moral courage, spiritual transformation, endurance, or any of the struggles that give human life its deepest meaning and significance, men and masculinity are usually the terms in which you must see it. (To see what I mean, make a list of the twenty most important movies you've ever seen and count how many focus on men as the central characters whose experience forms the point of the story.) Male experience is what patriarchal culture offers to represent *human* experience and the enduring themes of life, even when these are most often about women in the actual living of them. . . .

A male center of focus is everywhere. Research makes clear, for example, what most women probably already know: that men dominate conversations by talking more, interrupting more, and controlling content.⁷ When women suggest ideas in business meetings, they often go unnoticed until a man makes the same suggestion and receives credit for it (or, as a cartoon caption put it, "Excellent idea Ms. Jones. Perhaps one of the men would like to suggest it"). In classrooms at all levels of schooling, boys and men command center stage and receive the lion's share of attention.⁸ Even when women gather together, they must often resist the ongoing assumption that no situation can be complete or even entirely real unless a man is

there to take the center position. How else do we understand the experience of groups of women who go out for drinks and conversation and are approached by men who ask, "Are you ladies alone?" . . .

Women and Patriarchy

At the heart of patriarchy is the oppression of women, which takes several forms. Historically, for example, women have been excluded from major institutions such as church, state, universities, and the professions. Even when they've been allowed to participate, it's generally been at subordinate, second-class levels. . . .

Because patriarchy is male-identified and male-centered, women and the work they do tends to be devalued, if not made invisible. In their industrial capitalist form, for example, patriarchal cultures do not define the unpaid domestic work that women do as real work, and if women do something, it tends to be valued less than when men do it. As women's numbers in male-dominated occupations increase, the prestige and income that go with them tend to decline, a pattern found in a variety of occupations, from telephone operator and secretary to psychotherapist.⁹ Like many minorities, women are routinely repressed in their development as human beings through neglect and discrimination in schools¹⁰ and in occupational hiring, development, promotion, and rewards. Anyone who doubts that patriarchy is an oppressive system need only spend some time with the growing literature documenting not only economic, political, and other institutionalized sexism, but pervasive violence, from pornography to the everyday realities of wife battering, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.¹¹ . . .

The power of patriarchy is also reflected in its ability to absorb the pressures of superficial change as a defense against deeper challenges. Every social system has a certain amount of "give" in it that allows some change to occur, and in the process leaves deep structures untouched and even invisible. Indeed, the "give" plays a critical part in maintaining the status quo by fostering illusions of fundamental change and acting as a systemic shock absorber. It keeps us focused on symptoms while root causes go unnoticed and unremarked; and it deflects the power we need to take the risky deeper journey that leads to the heart of patriarchy and our involvement in it. . . .

We'd Rather Not Know

We're as stuck as we are primarily because we can't or won't acknowledge the roots of patriarchy and our involvement in it. We show no enthusiasm for going deeper than a surface obsession with sex and gender. We resist even saying the word "patriarchy" in polite conversation. We act as if patriarchy weren't there, because the realization that it does exist is a door that swings only one way and we can't go back again to not knowing. We're like a family colluding in silence over dark

secrets of damage and abuse, or like “good and decent Germans” during the Holocaust who “never knew” anything terrible was being done. We cling to the illusion that everything is basically all right, that bad things don’t happen to good people, that good people can’t participate in the production of evil, and that if we only leave things alone they’ll stay pretty much as they are and, we often like to think, always have been.

Many women, of course, do dare to see and speak the truth, but they are always in danger of being attacked and discredited in order to maintain the silence. Even those who would never call themselves feminists often know there is something terribly wrong with the structures of dominance and control that are so central to life in modern societies and without which we think we cannot survive. The public response to feminism has been ferociously defensive precisely because feminism touches such a deep nerve of truth and the denial that keeps us from it. If feminism were truly ridiculous, it would be ignored. But it isn’t ridiculous, and so it provokes a vigorous backlash.

We shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves for hanging on to denial and illusions about patriarchy. Letting go is risky business, and patriarchy is full of smoke and mirrors that make it difficult to see what has to be let go of. It’s relatively easy to accept the idea of patriarchy as male-dominated and male-identified, for example, and even as male-centered. Many people, however, have a much harder time seeing women as oppressed.¹² This is a huge issue that sparks a lot of arguments, and for that reason it will take several chapters to do it justice. Still, it’s worthwhile outlining a basic response here.

The reluctance to see women as oppressed has several sources. The first is that many women enjoy race or class privilege and it’s difficult for many to see them as oppressed without, as Sam Keen put it, insulting “truly oppressed” groups such as the lower classes or racial minorities.¹³ How, for example, can we count upper-class women among the oppressed and lower-class men among their oppressors?

Although Keen’s objection has a certain logic to it, it rests on a confusion between the position of women and men as groups and as individuals. To identify “female” as an oppressed status under patriarchy doesn’t mean that every woman suffers its consequences to an equal degree, just as living in a racist society doesn’t mean that every person of color suffers equally or that every white person shares equally in the benefits of race privilege. Living in patriarchy does mean, however, that every woman must come to grips with an inferior gender *position* and that whatever she achieves will be *in spite of* that position. With the exception of child care and other domestic work and a few paid occupations related to it, women in almost every field of adult endeavor must labor under the presumption that they are inferior to men, that they are interlopers from the margins of society who must justify their participation. Men may have such experiences because of their race, ethnicity, or other minority standing, but rarely if ever because they’re men.

It is in this sense that patriarchies are male-dominated even though most individual men may not *feel* dominant, especially in relation to other men. This is a crucial insight that rests on the fact that when we talk about societies, words like “domi-

nance” and “oppression” describe relations between categories of people such as whites and Hispanics, lower and upper classes, or women and men. How dominance and oppression actually play out among individuals is another issue. Sexism, for example, is an ideology, a set of ideas that promote male privilege in part by portraying women as inferior to men. But depending on other social factors such as race, class, or age, individual men will vary in their ability to take advantage of sexism and the benefits it produces. We can make a similar argument about women and the price they pay for belonging to a subordinate group. Upper-class women, for example, are insulated to some degree from the oppressive effects of being women under patriarchy, such as discrimination in the workplace. Their class privilege, however, exists *in spite of* their subordinate standing as women, which they can never completely overcome, especially in relation to husbands.¹⁴ No woman is immune, for example, to the cultural devaluing of women’s bodies as sexual objects to be exploited in public and private life, or the ongoing threat of sexual and domestic violence. To a rapist, the most powerful woman in the land is first and foremost a woman, and this more than anything else culturally marks her as a potential victim.

Along with not seeing women as oppressed, we resist seeing men as a privileged oppressor group. This is especially true of men who are aware of their own suffering, who often argue that men and women are both oppressed because of their gender and that neither oppresses the other. Undoubtedly men do suffer because of their participation in patriarchy, but it isn’t because men are oppressed *as men*. For women, gender oppression is linked to a cultural devaluing of femaleness itself. Women are subordinated and treated as inferior because they are culturally defined as inferior *as women*, just as many racial and ethnic minorities are devalued simply because they aren’t considered to be white. Men, however, do not suffer because maleness is devalued as an oppressed status in relation to some higher, more powerful one. Instead, to the extent that men suffer *as men*—and not because they’re also poor or a racial or ethnic minority—it’s because they belong to the dominant gender group in a system of gender oppression, which both privileges them and exacts a price in return.

A key to understanding this is that a group cannot oppress itself. A group can inflict injury on itself, and its members can suffer from their position in society. But if we say that a group can oppress or persecute *itself* we turn the concept of social oppression into a mere synonym for socially caused suffering, which it isn’t.¹⁵ Oppression is a social phenomenon that happens between different groups in a society; it is a system of social inequality through which one group is positioned to dominate and benefit from the exploitation and subordination of another. This means not only that a group cannot oppress itself, but also that it cannot be oppressed *by society*. Oppression is a relation that exists *between groups*, not between groups and society as a whole.

To understand oppression, then, we must distinguish it from suffering that has other social roots. Even the massive suffering inflicted on men through the horrors of war is not an oppression of men *as men*, because there is no system in which a group of non-men enforces and benefits from men’s suffering. The systems that

control the machinery of war are themselves patriarchal, which makes it impossible for them to oppress men as men. Warfare *does* oppress racial and ethnic minorities and the poor, who are often served up as cannon fodder by privileged classes whose interests war most often serves. Some 80 percent of all U.S. troops who served in Vietnam, for example, were from working- and lower-class backgrounds.¹⁶ But this oppression is based on race and class, not gender. . . . If war made men truly disposable *as men*, we wouldn't find monuments and cemeteries in virtually every city and town in the United States dedicated to fallen soldiers (with no mention of their race or class), or endless retrospectives on the fiftieth anniversary of every milestone in World War II.

Rather than devalue or degrade patriarchal manhood, warfare celebrates and affirms it. As I write this on the fiftieth anniversary of the Normandy invasion, I can't help but feel the power of the honor and solemn mourning accorded the casualties of war, the deep respect opponents often feel for one another, and the countless monuments dedicated to men killed while trying to kill other men whose names, in turn, are inscribed on still more monuments.¹⁷ But these ritual remembrances do more than sanctify sacrifice and tragic loss, they also sanctify war itself and the patriarchal institutions that promote it. Military leaders whose misguided orders, blunders, and egomaniacal schemes brought death to tens of thousands, for example, earn not ridicule, disgust, and scorn but a curious historical immunity framed in images of noble tragedy and heroic masculine endeavor. In stark contrast to massive graveyards of honored dead, the memorials, the annual speeches and parades, there are no monuments to the millions of women and children caught in the slaughter and bombed, burned, starved, raped, and left homeless. An estimated nine out of ten wartime casualties are civilians, not soldiers, and these include a huge proportion of children and women,¹⁸ but there are no great national cemeteries devoted to *them*. War, after all, is a man's thing.

Perhaps one of the deepest reasons for denying the reality of women's oppression is that we don't want to admit that a real basis for conflict exists between men and women. We don't want to admit it because, unlike other groups involved in social oppression, such as whites and blacks, females and males really need each other, if only as parents and children. This can make us reluctant to see how patriarchy puts us at odds regardless of what we want or how we feel about it. Who wants to consider the role of gender oppression in everyday married and family life? Who wants to know how dependent we are on patriarchy as a system, how deeply our thoughts, feelings, and behavior are embedded in it? Men resist seeing the oppression of their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters because we've participated in it, benefited from it, and developed a vested interest in it. . . .

We can move toward a clearer and more critical awareness of what patriarchy is about, of what gets in the way of working to end it, and new ways for all of us—men in particular—to participate in its long evolutionary process of turning into something else. Patriarchy is our collective legacy, and there's nothing we can do about that or the condition in which we received it. But we can do a lot about what we pass on to those who follow us.

NOTES

1. See Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: On Men, Women, and Morals* (New York: Summit Books, 1985), 303.
2. There is a lot of research that shows how such uses of language affect people's perceptions. See, for example, Mykol C. Hamilton, "Using Masculine Generics: Does Generic 'He' Increase Male Bias in the User's Imagery?" *Sex Roles* 19, nos. 11/12 (1988): 785-799; Wendy Martyna, "Beyond the 'He/Man' Approach: The Case for Nonsexist Language," *Signs* 5 (1980): 482-493; Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women*, updated ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); and Joseph W. Schneider and Sally L. Hacker, "Sex Role Imagery in the Use of the Generic 'Man' in Introductory Texts: A Case in the Sociology of Sociology," *American Sociologist* 8 (1973): 12-18.
3. Note that I'm not describing actual men and women here, but cultural *ideas* about men and women under patriarchy. As concepts, masculinity and femininity play a complex role in patriarchal societies.
4. Just as a white-racist society can accommodate a certain number of powerful people of color so long as they do not challenge white privilege and the institutions that support it.
5. See, for example, Carole Levin's *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).
6. See Carol Brooks Gardner, *Passing By: Gender and Public Harassment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
7. For more on gender and interaction, see Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) and *Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives* (New York: Basic Books, 1990). See also Deborah Tannen, *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1984); idem, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: William Morrow, 1990).
8. See American Association of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Women, 1992); and Myra Sadker and David M. Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994).
9. See Paula England and D. Dunn, "Evaluating Work and Comparable Worth," *Annual Review of Sociology* 14 (1988): 227-248.
10. See American Association of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*; and Sadker and Sadker, *Failing at Fairness*.
11. See Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975); Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974); Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991); Marilyn French, *The War Against Women* (New York: Summit Books, 1992); Gardner, *Passing By*; Diana E. H. Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (New York: Macmillan, 1982); idem, *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, and Workplace Harassment* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1984); Medical News and Perspectives, *Journal of the American Medical Association* 264, no. 8 (1990): 939; Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980); Diana E. H. Russell, ed., *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993); and Catharine MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
12. For more on this, see Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1983).