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# learning brief

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## What is patriarchy?



Extracted from Kamla Bhasin, *What is Patriarchy?* (1993, Kali for Women, New Delhi)

The word “patriarchy” literally means the rule of the father or the ‘patriarch’ and originally it was used to describe a specific type of male dominated family – the large household of the patriarch which included women, junior men, children, slaves and domestic servants all under the dominant rule of the male. Now it is used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways. Linked to this social system is the ideology that man is superior to women, that women are and should be controlled by men and are part of a man’s property. This thinking forms the basis of many of our religious and social practices that confine women to the home, and control their lives. The term patriarchy refers to the system that oppresses and subordinates women in both the private and public sphere.

The subordination women experience at a daily level, regardless of the class we might belong to, takes various forms – discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence – within the family, at the workplace, in society. Anyone who has experienced even subtle discrimination, bias or non-acceptance, feels and knows it, even though they may not be able to name it.

Some examples that illustrate the forms of discrimination women face (and a particular aspect of patriarchy):

- ❖ “I heard my family was unhappy when I was born as they wanted a son” (son preference).
- ❖ “My brothers could demand food. They could stretch out their hands and take what they wanted. We were told to wait for it to be given. We sisters and our mother had to make do with whatever was left over” (discrimination against girls in food distribution).
- ❖ “I have to help my mother with household work, my brothers don’t” (burden of household work on women and young girls).
- ❖ “It was a struggle to go to school. My father thought it was not necessary for us girls to study” (lack of educational opportunities for girls).
- ❖ “My brothers can come back at any time but I have to be back before dark” (lack of freedom and mobility for girls).
- ❖ “My father used to often beat my mother” (domestic violence).
- ❖ “Because I was not willing to give into the demands of my employer, I was thrown out of my job” (sexual harassment at work).
- ❖ “I have to submit my body to my husband whenever he wants it. I have no say. I fear sex” (male control over women’s bodies and sexuality).
- ❖ “I wanted my husband to use family planning methods but he refused. He also did not give me the permission to get myself operated” (no control over fertility or reproductive rights).
- ❖ “I have no share in my father’s property. My husband’s property is also not mine” (lack of inheritance or property rights for women).

## Origin of patriarchy

When people first inhabited the earth everything that a tribe had was owned in common. All resources like food, water, land and animals were equally shared. There were no class divisions and hence no ruling class and there was yet no State. Men hunted large animals while women gathered edible plants and small animals. As the women stayed longer in a place, they were able to develop their knowledge about many things: planting (which led to agriculture), domestication of animals, identify poisonous and medicinal plants.

Children became the greatest assets of the tribe (not possessions since private property had not yet evolved). Children would grow to add strength to the tribe in its battle for survival against nature as well as against other tribes. Only mothers knew who their children were since sex was not a one-to-one relationship. The children were traced through their mother's generation line and not their father's, who they did not know. This was called Mother Right and this set up of society was matrilineal. This form of society still exists in many parts of the world like tribes of African countries, Khasis and Garo tribes of Meghalaya, Nairs of Kerala etc.

Mother Right made men and women equal. Having developed the ability of planting and breeding of animals, people began to generate surplus, that is, they were able to produce more than could be consumed by the family alone. At the same time, the concept of institution of marriage evolved (one to one marital relationships were established). Hence, men came to know who their children were. A whole new set up arose. Surplus gave rise to the development of classes, that is, those who got more surplus became masters and slave owners, and those who had none became slaves. Private property evolved. Slaves and tools became the most sought after possessions since they produced surplus. More surplus was produced as higher order technology was developed in agriculture and animal husbandry.

Since men had seized the slaves and produced the tools, they maintained their hold over these assets. Since they already knew their children, the system of handing down their possessions to their off springs began. They began to hand down their possessions to their male off-springs. As this developed, the right of the father was established: the right of inheritance, right to hand down and receive, and the right to decide within the family. Through this process, our society shifted slowly from being an equitable one, where men and women lived life on equal terms, to one where men began to command more access, power and say in the decision making process. The women acquired a subordinate position and gradually through generations of oppression a woman's status in society has become unequal.

## Impact of patriarchy

The feeling and experience of subordination destroys self-respect, self-esteem and confidence and sets limits on the aspirations of women. Every courageous act that they perform to assert themselves is condemned as 'unfeminine'. They are called *beparda* (shameless) as soon as they try to step out of their defined spaces or roles. Norms and practices which define them as

inferior to men, which impose controls on them, are present everywhere – in our families, social relations, religion, laws, schools, textbooks, media and workplace.

Women face a system of patriarchal domination and superiority, of male control in which they are subordinate. Even the words used for husband – *swami*, *shauhar*, *pati*, *maalik* – all mean ‘lord’ or ‘owner’. It is important to understand that men and women are not assigned different roles because of their biological differences but because of a social system that defines what men and women should be doing.

The nature of patriarchy can be and differs in different classes even in the same society, from society to society, and from time to time. What is common is that patriarchal forces are in control but the nature of this control may differ. For example, the nature of patriarchy during our grandmothers’ time was not the same as it is today; it is different for tribal women and for upper caste Hindu women; for women in India and elsewhere.

In a patriarchal system normally the following areas of a woman’s life can be said to be under the control of a patriarchal structure:

a. **Productivity or labour power:** women’s productivity both within the household and outside (even when paid) is controlled. At home, women provide all kinds of free service to their children, husbands and other members of the family throughout their lives. This back-breaking, endless and repetitive labour is not considered work at all and housewives are seen to be dependent on their husbands.

Women’s labour outside the home is also controlled in several ways. Women are compelled to work, to support the family. Their earnings may be taken away from them. Women are excluded from better paid jobs; they are forced to work at very low wages or work within the home on what is called ‘home based production’. This control over and exploitation of women’s labour means that men benefit materially from patriarchy and they derive concrete economic gains from the subordination of women.

b. **Reproduction:** Women’s reproductive power is controlled in several ways. In many societies women do not have the freedom to decide how many children they want, when to have them, whether they can use family planning methods or terminate a pregnancy. Apart from individual male control, male dominated institutions like the church or State also lay down rules regarding women’s reproductive capacity. For example, in the Catholic Church, the male religious hierarchy decides whether men and women can use birth control methods. Based on the population growth rate and what the State decides as the required rate, it actively encourages or discourages women to have children. In India, there has been always a policy to control the population growth rate while in some other countries like Sweden where birth rates are very low, incentives are given to women to have children.

c. **Sexuality:** Women are obliged to provide sexual services to men according to their needs and desires. Women’s sexuality outside marriage in every society is taboo, while society turns a

blind eye to male promiscuity. In some situations, men may force their wives, daughters and other women in their control into prostitution. Rape and threat of rape is another way in which women's sexuality is dominated through an invocation of 'shame' and 'honour'.

d. **Mobility:** In order to control women's sexuality, production and reproduction, her mobility needs to be controlled. Women are subjected to constraints in their mobility in ways that men are not subjected to, e.g., using *pardah*, limits on interaction between the sexes, restrictions on when they can leave home and for what, what time they should be home (before dark), etc.

e. **Property and other economic resources:** Most property and other productive resources are controlled by men and they are passed from one man to another, usually from father to son. Even where women have the legal right to inherit such assets, a whole range of customs, emotional and social pressures prevent them from acquiring control over them.

In a family, the man is considered the head of the family. This is where a child learns the first lessons in hierarchy, subordination and discrimination. Boys learn to assert and dominate, girls to submit and to expect unequal treatment.

#### Effects of patriarchy

- ❖ Women, on average, earn just 74.9 per cent of men's wages.
- ❖ While women do more than 60 per cent of the hours of work done in the world, they get 10 per cent of the world's income and only 1 per cent of the world's property.
- ❖ Women occupy only 14 per cent of managerial and administrative posts.
- ❖ Women work mostly in jobs where wages are low, job security is low, there are no benefits of leave or pension, and conditions of work are difficult and poor.

A minority of women have learnt to assert themselves in a patriarchal system, assume new roles, cross the boundaries set for them by society and achieve positions of power. But the majority of women learn to abide by the system and accept it without question. Often, those who accept the system also perpetuate it. Many times we come across incidents of a mother discriminating between her son and daughter, or in cases of female infanticide it is mostly a female member of the family who probably undertakes this act of sacrificing the girl child. In several instances it is the mother-in-law who is engaged in harassing the daughter-in-law, under the cover of patriarchy, probably to gain a better position in the family.

Men, almost everywhere, enjoy certain privileges as men. But they too face some disadvantages of patriarchy. Like women, they are also expected to perform certain roles and behave in a certain way. Men who are gentle and non-aggressive are harassed; those who

share the responsibilities of household chores with their wives are laughed at. Men, too, do not have the option of stepping out of the choices that society has made for them – they can very rarely give up the roles of earning and protecting the family. However, this experience cannot be compared with the subordination of women as a group. They are rarely ever discriminated against and do not face the consequences that women face.