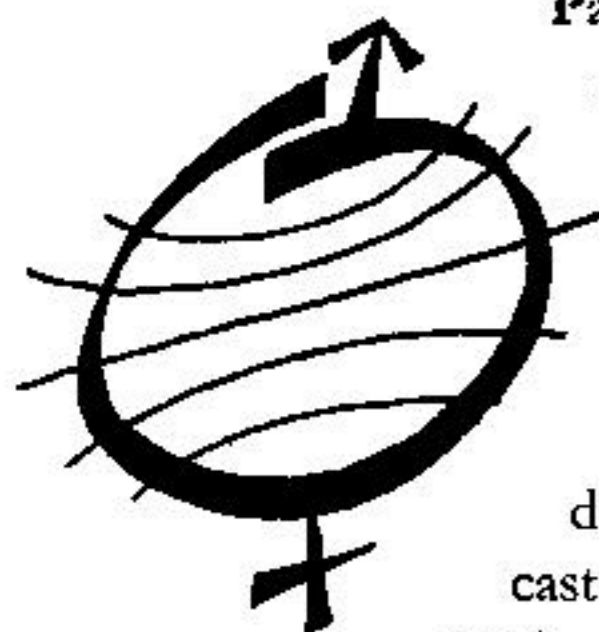


You have used the word patriarchy so often and have implied that patriarchy is the cause of gender inequalities and the subordination of women. Can you explain this term?

It is important to understand patriarchy in order to understand present-day relations between women and men. Gender relations are skewed because of the existence of patriarchy. In common parlance patriarchy means male domination; the word "patriarchy" literally means the rule of the father or the "patriarch", and was used originally to describe a specific type of "male dominated family"—the large household of the patriarch which included women, younger men, children, slaves and domestic servants, all under the rule of this dominant male. Now it is used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterise a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways. In South Asia, for example it is called *pitratta* in Hindi, *pidarshahi* in Urdu and *pitritontro* in Bangla.

The subordination that women experience daily, regardless of the class we might belong to, takes various forms—discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence — within the family, at the place of work, and in society. The details may be different but the theme is the same.



Patriarchy is not the same everywhere. Its nature can be and is different in different classes in the same society; in different societies and in different periods in history. For example the experience of patriarchy was not the same in our grandmother's time as it is today; it is different for tribal women and for upper caste Hindu women; for the women in the USA and women in India. Each social system or

historical period throws up its own variations on how patriarchy functions and how social and cultural practices differ. The broad principles, however, remain the same i.e., men control most economic resources and all social, economic and political institutions.

Patriarchy is both a social structure and an ideology or a belief system according to which men are superior. Religions have played an important role in creating and perpetuating patriarchal ideology. They have spread notions of male superiority through stories like, Eve was created from Adam's rib; or man is created in the image of God, etc. Today, media and even educational institutions spread patriarchal ideology by showing men to be stronger in decision-making positions, and women as voracious consumers, dependent and jealous. Ideology plays an important role in perpetuating social systems and controlling people's minds. For example, by reducing women to bodies and objectifying them, media encourage violence against women. Ideology provides the justification for social behaviour and socio-economic structures.

Normally the following areas of women's lives and societies can be said to be under patriarchal control.

- Women's productive or labour power
- Women's reproduction
- Women's sexuality
- Women's mobility
- Property and other economic resources
- Social, cultural and political institutions¹⁵

An analysis of the main institutions in society—the family, religion, law, political, educational and economic institutions, media, knowledge systems—demonstrates quite clearly that they are all patriarchal in nature, and are the pillars of a patriarchal structure. This well-knit and deep-rooted system makes patriarchy seem invincible; it also makes it seem natural.

Under patriarchy different kinds of violence may be used to control and subjugate women and such violence may even be considered legitimate. In fact, feminists believe that violence against women is not just pervasive, it is systemic in patriarchies.

All this does NOT imply that women are totally powerless or without rights, influence and resources under patriarchy. In fact, no unequal system can continue without the participation of the oppressed, some of whom derive some benefits from it. This is true of patriarchies as well. Women have risen to power, have occasionally been in control, have wrested benefits in greater or smaller measure. But all this does not change the fact that the system is male-dominated — women are merely accommodated in it in a variety of ways. To give a parallel example, in a capitalist economy workers play a very important role, they may even participate in

management to some extent, but this does not mean they are ever in control. For a variety of complex reasons women also support and perpetuate patriarchy. Most of us have internalised its values and are not always free of patriarchal ideology.



In order to retain their privilege women continually renegotiate their bargaining power, so to speak, sometimes at the cost of other women. But it is important that we look at the overall system and analyze the reasons for this complicity. It is true that women often treat their sons better, deprive their daughters of education, restrict their freedom, mistreat daughters-in-law and so on. All this needs to be understood in the context of the respective power and position that men and women have in the family and in society. A rural

woman explained this very well. She said "Men in our families are like the sun, they have a light of their own (they own resources, are mobile, have the freedom to take decisions, etc.) Women are like satellites, without any light of their own. They shine only if and when the sun's light touches them. This is why women have to constantly compete with each other for a bigger share of sunlight, because without this light there is no life."

The appropriate way to describe male control over women is **paternalistic dominance**. There is dominance but it is paternalistic because women are provided shelter, food and security vis-à-vis outsiders. Paternalistic dominance has oppressive aspects, but it also involves a set of mutual obligations and is frequently not perceived as oppressive. This is what makes it difficult to recognize and fight.

How liberating was national liberation?

Although national liberation movements ended the political control by colonial powers and introduced the principle of separation of legislative from judicial and punitive powers, women were not liberated from the rule of husbands, or fathers, in the household. Within the home men still retain consolidated and arbitrary powers to determine the rules, judge the performance, and punish their wives and children. Thus men have the capacity to :

- demand sexual relations at any time;
- prevent their wives from practicing contraception;
- determine how wives and daughters could and should spend their time in domestic work, in education, leisure or cultural activities, and determine the terms on which they enter the public space for employment;