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Where Are We?

Twenty-five men and women gather for a workshop on gender issues in the workplace. In a simple opening exercise, they divide into small single-gender groups and brainstorm four lists: the advantages and disadvantages their own gender has in the workplace, and their perception of the advantages and disadvantages the other gender has. The women dive into the task with energy to spare that gets more intense as their lists of women's disadvantages and men's advantages spill over onto second and third flip-chart pages. Sometimes the energy comes in waves of laughter that roll out into the room and wash up on the still quiet shore of the men's groups. At other times it's felt simply in women's furious scribbling of one item after another: paid less, held to higher or double standards, worked harder, granted little power or respect, judged on physical attractiveness more than performance or ability, confined by glass ceilings, not taken seriously, harassed, given little support or mentoring, allowed little space or privacy, excluded from informal networks, patronized, expected to do "housekeeping" chores from taking notes to getting coffee, treated as weaker and less intelligent, often denied credit for ideas appropriated by men, and treated without recognition of the family roles that also claim their time and energy in a society that makes few such demands on men.

On it goes. The men work in tight-knit little groups on the fringes of the women's energy. Surprisingly for many, their lists are quite similar to the

women's lists, if a bit shorter. Men miss many of the forms that advantage and disadvantage take, but in a basic sense, they know very well what's going on. They know what they've got and what women don't.

When the men are done, they stand in awkward silence and watch the women, still at work. After a while each group shares what it's come up with. There is some good-natured if somewhat nervous laughter over the inevitable throw-away items: men don't have to wait in line to use the bathroom; men can get away with simpler wardrobes. But there soon follows a steady stream of undisputed facts about how gender shapes the lives of women and men in the workplace and beyond.

The accumulated sum hangs heavy in the air. There are flashes of anger from some of the women, but many don't seem to know what to do with how they feel. The men just stand and listen, muted, as if they'd like to find a safe place to hide or some way to defend themselves, as if all of this is about them personally. In response to questions about how the lists make them feel, one man says he wants to hang on to the advantages without being part of the negative consequences for women. "Depressed" is a frequent response from the women.

In the silence that falls over the room, two things become clear: The lists say something powerful about people's lives. And we don't know how to talk about the lists. If we don't know how to talk about them, we certainly don't know what to do about them.

The result is a kind of paralysis that reflects not only where this particular group—and countless others like it—finds itself as it confronts the reality of gender inequality, but where entire societies are in relation to these issues. Where we are is stuck. Where we are is lost. Where we are is deep inside an oppressive gender legacy, faced with the knowledge that what gender is about is tied to a great deal of suffering and injustice. But we don't know what to do with the knowledge, and this binds us in a knot of fear, anger, and pain, of blame, defensiveness, guilt, and denial. We're unsure of just about everything except that something is wrong and we're in it up to our necks. The more we pull at the knot, the tighter it gets.

Patriarchy

We are trapped inside a legacy and its core is patriarchal. To understand it and take part in the journey out, we have to find ways to unravel the knot, and this begins with getting clear about what it means to be inside a patriarchal legacy. To get clear, we first have to get past the defensive reaction of many people—men in particular—to the word "patriarchy" itself, which they

routinely interpret as a code word for “men.” It will take an entire chapter (Chapter 2) to do justice to this issue, but, for now, the gist of the answer is this: Patriarchy is *not* simply another way of saying “men.” Patriarchy is a kind of society, and a society is more than a collection of people. As such, “patriarchy” doesn’t refer to me or any other man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men *and* women participate. By itself this poses enough problems without the added burden of equating an entire society with a group of people.

What is patriarchy? A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege* by being *male dominated*, *male identified*, and *male centered*. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its aspects the oppression of women.

Male Dominance

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 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 rarely applied 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 typically done by women. 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”).

* I use the term *privilege* according to the definition developed by Peggy McIntosh in her classic article, “What Privilege and Male Privilege,” in *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*, 2nd ed., edited by Anne Minas (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000). Privilege refers to any unearned advantage that is available to members of a social category while being systematically denied to others. In patriarchy, for example, what men say tends to have greater credibility than what women say, even when they’re saying the same thing. Access to privilege depends on the prevailing definition of categories such as “male” and “female” and the advantages and disadvantages socially attached to them. It also depends on related characteristics—a man’s access to male privilege, for example, will vary according to other status characteristics such as race, sexual orientation, disability status, and social class. McIntosh’s approach is important to any understanding of privilege because it refers not to individuals, but to the organization of social systems in which people live.

6 WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED PATRIARCHY?

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, or handling 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 kind of people who usually occupy them.¹ This means that if men occupy superior positions, 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 moment is enhanced by the male monopoly over authority in patriarchal societies.

Note that male dominance does not mean that all men are powerful. Most men in patriarchies are not powerful individuals, and spend their days doing what other men tell them to do whether they want to or not. Male dominance does mean that where there is a concentration of power, men are the ones most likely to have it—they are the default.

Nor does male dominance mean that all women are powerless. Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg, for example, or National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice or Hewlett-Packard Chair and CEO Carleton "Carly" Fiorina, are all far more powerful than most men will ever be. But, they stand out as exceptions because male dominance is the rule. Like all subordinate groups, women also manage to have some power by making the most of what is left to them by men. Just as patriarchy turns women into sex object who are supposed to organize their lives around men's needs, for example, so, too, does this arrangement grant women the power to refuse to grant men sexual access.²

Male Identification

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 are in the background, marginalized as outsiders and exceptions to

the rule.³ (This practice can back people into some embarrassingly ridiculous corners, as in describing 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 sixty-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, 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). These male-identified qualities are associated with the work valued most in patriarchal societies—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 cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and intuitive 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 Mothers 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, without compromising their careers.

Because patriarchy is male identifies, 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 (e.g., 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 who she 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. In other words, 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, for example, or 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 its male identification. Although a few individual women have wielded great power in patriarchal societies, each has been surrounded by powerful men—generals, cabinet ministers, bishops, and wealthy aristocrats or businessmen—whose collective interests she must support by 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.⁴

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. Indeed, without such change, the Margaret Thatchers and Condoleezza Rices of the world tend to affirm the very systems that subordinate women by fostering the illusion of gender equality and by embracing the patriarchal values on which male power and privilege rest. This does *not* mean we shouldn't try to get women into positions of power, only that making some women powerful will not be enough to bring about fundamental change.

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).⁵

Lina Wertmuller beautifully portrays this dynamic in her film, *Swept Away*, in which a working-class man is marooned on an island with an upper-class woman. Although disadvantaged by class, he's very aware of his right to sexually dominate any woman he chooses, which he uses to accomplish a temporary overthrow of her class privilege. Under patriarchy, this scenario would have little credibility or mainstream audience appeal if we reversed the situation and had a lower-class woman subdue and dominate an upper-class man. The objection is based not on social class but on the threat to the gender order that subordinates women. She wouldn't be seen as bold or heroic; rather, *he* would be judged for his lack of masculine power and control.

When a society identifies a particular group such as men as the standard for human beings in general, it follows that men will be seen as superior, preferable, and of greater value than women. Not only will maleness be culturally defined as superior, but whatever men do will tend to be seen as having greater value. Occupations performed primarily by men, for example, will tend to be more highly regarded and better paid than occupations done primarily by women even when women's jobs require the same or even higher levels of skill, training, and responsibility. In the nineteenth century, most secretaries, telephone operators, librarians, and nurses were men and those occupations consequently commanded higher pay and status than they do now when most are performed by women.⁶

And just as what men do tends to be valued more highly than what women do, those things that are valued in a social system's culture will tend to be associated with men more than with women. God, for example, is of enormous importance in human life, and so it should come as no surprise that every monotheistic patriarchal religion worships a male-identified God gendered as masculine. As Mary Daly argues in her book, *Beyond God the*

Father, this, in turn, puts men in the highly favorable position of having God identified with *them*, which further reinforces the position of women as “other” and the legitimacy of men’s claim to privilege and dominance.⁷

Male Centeredness

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 med 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, men and masculinity are usually the terms in which you must see it. Male experience is what patriarchal culture uses to represent *human* experience, even when it is women who most often live it. Films about single men taking care of children, for example, such as *Sleepless in Seattle*, have far more audience appeal than those focusing on women, even though women are much more likely to be single parents. And stories that focus on deep bonds of friendship—which men have a much tougher time forming than women do—are far more likely to focus on men than women.⁸

In another example, the closing scenes of *Dances with Wolves* show, the white male hero and his Native American-raised wife leaving his recently adopted tribe, which is also the only family she has known since early childhood. The focus, however, is clearly on the drama of *his* moment as she looks on supportively. *She* is leaving her adoptive parents, but we see only the emotionally charged parting (with a touching exchange of gifts) between son- and father-in-law. And the last words we hear are the deeply moving cries of a newfound warrior friend testifying to the depth of feeling between these two men (of which, oddly, this is the only expression we ever see).

By contrast, films that focus on women, such as *Elizabeth*, *Girlfriends*, *Leaving Normal*, *Passion Fish*, *Strangers in Good Company*, *Beaches*, and *Thelma and Louise*, are such startling exceptions that they invariably sink quickly into obscurity, are dismissed as clones of male themes (“female buddy movies”), or are subjected to intense scrutiny as aberrations needing to be explained.

TABLE 1 Films Winning the Oscar for Best picture, 1965-2003

2003	Lord of the Rings
2002	Chicago
2001	A Beautiful Mind
2000	Gladiator
1999	American Beauty
1998	Shakespeare in Love
1997	Titanic
1996	The English Patient
1995	Braveheart
1994	Forrest Gump
1993	Schindler's List
1992	The Unforgiven
1991	The Silence of the Lambs
1990	Dances with Wolves
1989	Driving Miss Daisy
1988	Rain Man
1987	The Last Emperor
1986	Platoon
1985	Out of Africa
1984	Amadeus
1983	Terms of Endearment
1982	Gandhi
1981	Chariots of Fire
1980	Ordinary People
1979	Kramer vs. Kramer
1978	The Deer Hunter
1977	Annie Hall
1976	Rocky
1975	One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
1974	The Godfather, Part II
1973	The Sting
1972	The Godfather, Part I
1971	The French Connection
1970	Patton
1969	Midnight Cowboy
1968	Oliver!
1967	In the Heat of the Night
1966	A Man for All Seasons
1965	The Sound of Music

To get a full sense of what I mean, look at Table 1, which lists films awarded the Oscar for Best Picture since 1965. Of the almost forty films, only four tell a story through the life of someone who is female—*Chicago*, *Out of Africa*, *Terms of Endearment*, and *The Sound of Music*—and only the middle two focus on a serious subject, the other two being musicals.

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.⁹ 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 typically command center stage and receive most of the attention.¹⁰ Even when women gather, 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 alone?”

Many men, however, will protest that they don’t *feel* at the center, and this is one of the many ironic consequences of male privilege. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf writes that women often serve as “looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.”¹¹ Woolf’s insight suggests several things about what happens to men in patriarchal societies. As part of men’s training, they are affirmed through what they accomplish.¹² This contrasts with women, whose training mirrors them in different ways, affirming them less for what they accomplish than for their ability to empathize and mirror others as they form and maintain personal relationships. If men want to satisfy the human need to be seen and acknowledged by others, it will be through what they do and how well they live up to the standards of patriarchal manhood (which is one reason why male friendships tend to focus so heavily on competition and doing things together). This affects both individual men and patriarchy as a system, for men’s focus on themselves (“See me!”) and women’s focus on others reinforce patriarchy’s male-identified, male-centered aspects. These, in turn, support male dominance by making it easier for men to concentrate on enhancing and protecting their own status.

Another consequence of patriarchal mirroring is that heterosexual men in particular are encouraged to relate to women with the expectation of seeing only themselves. When men’s reflection is obscured by the reality and demands of women’s own lives, men are vulnerable to feeling left out and neglected. Like cold-blooded animals that generate little heat of their own, this dynamic makes it hard for men to feel warm unless the light is shining on them at the moment, something well-known to women who spend inordinate amounts of time worrying about whether they’re paying enough attention to their male partners, about whether they should be sitting quietly and reading

a book or spending time with women friends when they could be with the men in their lives. It is a worry few men wrestle with unless women complain.

All of this is compounded by the expectation that in order to feel normally alive, patriarchal men must be reflected as larger than life. This makes it difficult to develop an acceptable sense of self as an ordinary human being with a relatively stable center from which to relate to other people. As a result, feeling themselves the focus of a one-way flow of attention is the closest that patriarchal training allows many men to come to authentic personal relationships.

This shouldn't be confused with most of what passes for "male bonding." When men get together with other men, they typically are male centered in the general sense of focusing attention on men and what men do. On an interpersonal level, however, men generally don't put other men at the center of their attention because they are in competition with one another and because they are too busy looking for someone to put *them* at the center. As I've wrestled with the difficulty of forming friendships with other men, for example, it's been both puzzling and painful to realize how rarely it occurs to me to telephone a male friend simply to ask how he is, to place his life at the center of my attention at my own initiative. For many years I simply couldn't see the point. I was in the middle of one of many patriarchal paradoxes: that men live in a male-centered society and yet act as though the reality of other men's inner lives matters very little.

Although men generally don't provide one another with the kind of mirroring they expect from women, they do play a part in fostering the illusion of being larger than life, especially through competition. When men compete, they enter the pumped-up world of winners and losers, in which the number of times a ball goes through a hoop or is carried over a line elevates some men over other men (and, by default, over all women) in ways judged to be important in patriarchal culture. If ever there were an assertion of larger-than-life status, the triumphant shout of "We're number one! We're number one!" is it. (Not asked is, For how long? Compared to whom? So what?) Even the losers and the male spectators share in the reflected glow of the noble masculine striving after the coveted opportunity to stand before the mirror that makes us look bigger than we are, if only for a little while—until the next season begins or someone faster, stronger, younger, or smarter comes along.

All of this, of course, is impossible for men to sustain. Women have distracting lives of their own in spite of their training to keep men at the center of attention. And the fleeting moments of actually living up to the expectation of being larger than life are just that. As a result, patriarchal

expectations that place men at the center paradoxically perch men just a short drop away from feeling that they are not at the center—and, therefore, on some level, that they don't exist at all.

Obsession with Control

The fourth characteristic of patriarchy is an obsession with control as a core value around which social life is organized. As with any system of privilege that elevates one group by oppressing another, control is an essential element of patriarchy: men maintain their privilege by controlling women and anyone else who might threaten it. Given the primacy of control, it becomes the cultural standard for a truly superior human being, which is then used to justify men's privileged position. Men are assumed (and expected) to be in control at all times, to be unemotional (except for anger and rage), to present themselves as invulnerable, autonomous, independent, strong, rational, logical, dispassionate, knowledgeable, always right, and in command of every situation, especially those involving women. These qualities, it is assumed, mark them as superior and justify their privilege. Women, in contrast, are assumed (and expected) to be just the opposite, especially in relation to men.

It would be misleading to suggest that control is inherently bad or inevitably leads to oppression. Control is, after all, one of the hallmarks of our species. It is our only hope to bring some order out of chaos or to protect ourselves from what threatens our survival. We imagine, focus, and act—from baking bread to composing music to designing a national health plan—and all of this involves control. Even small children delight in a sense of human agency, in being able to make things happen. Under patriarchy, however, control is more than an expression of human essence or a way to get things done. It's valued and pursued to a degree that gives social life and oppressive form by taking a natural human capacity to obsessive extremes.

Under patriarchy, control shapes not only the broad outlines of social life but also men's inner lives. The more men see control as central to their sense of self, well-being, worth, an safety, the more driven they feel to go after it and to organize their inner and outer lives around it. This takes men away from connection to theirs and themselves and toward disconnection. This is because control involves a relationship between controller and controlled, and disconnection is an integral part of that relationship. In order to control something, we have to see it as a separate "other." Even if we're controlling ourselves, we have to mentally split ourselves into a "me" that's being controlled and an "I" that's doing the controlling. And if we're controlling other

people, we have to justify the control and protect ourselves from an awareness of how our control affects them.

As a result, controllers come to see themselves as subjects who intend and decide what will happen, and to see others as objects to act upon. The controlled are seen without the fullness and complexity that define them as human beings. They have no history, no dimensions to give them depth or command the controllers' *attention* or *understanding* expect by interfering with control. When parents control small children, for example, they often act as though children aren't full human beings, and justify punishment by saying that children can't reason and don't understand anything else. As children grow older, it becomes more difficult to see them as "other" and control becomes more difficult, especially in that memorable moment when a parent looks at a maturing child and sees a person looking back. Suddenly, control that once seemed justified may feel awkward, inappropriate, or even foolish.

Because patriarchy isn't organized around simply an obsession with control, but around an obsession with *male* control, the more men participate in the system, the more likely they are to see themselves as separate, autonomous, and disconnected from others. They may become versions of the western hero who rides into town from nowhere, with no past, and leaves going nowhere, with no apparent future. Women's lives, of course, also involve control, especially in relation to children. But the idea and practice of control as a core principle of social life is part of what defines patriarchal *manhood*, not *womanhood*, and so women are discouraged from pursuing it and criticized if they do. A woman perceived as controlling a man is typically labeled a "castrating bitch" or a "ball buster," and the man she supposedly controls is looked down upon as "henpecked," "pussy whipped," and barely a man at all. But there are no insulting terms for a man who controls a woman—by having the last word, not letting her work outside the home, deciding when she'll have sex, or limiting her time with other women—or for the woman he controls. There is no need for such words because men controlling women is a core aspect of patriarchal manhood.

Women and Patriarchy

An inevitable consequence 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. Marilyn French goes so far as

to argue that historically women's oppression has amounted to a form of slavery:

What other term can one use to describe a state in which people do not have rights over their own bodies, their own sexuality, marriage, reproduction or divorce, in which they may not receive education or practice a trade or profession, or move about freely in the world? Many women (both past and present) work laboriously all their lives without receiving any payment for their work.¹³

Because patriarchy is male identified and male centered, women and the work they do tends to be devalued, if not made invisible, and women are routinely repressed in their development as human beings through neglect and discrimination in schools¹⁴ and in occupational hiring, development, promotion, and rewards. Anyone who doubts that patriarchy is an oppressive system need only consult 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.¹⁵ And there are also the daily headlines—such as recent revelations of a long history of sexual assault at the U.S. Air Force Academy that was allowed to continue for years before a public scandal forced corrective action.

This is not to deny that much has changed in women's position over the last hundred years—from the appointment of women to the U.S. Supreme Court to assigning women to combat zones during the Iraq War. There is less tolerance for overt sexist behavior toward women in many settings. An elite of women has managed to enter the professions and, to a degree, upper levels of corporate management. And most laws that blatantly discriminate against women have been repealed.

To a great degree, however, such highly publicized progress supports an illusion of fundamental change. In spite of new laws, for example, violence and sexual harassment against women are as pervasive as ever, if not more so. Inequality of income and wealth has not changed much from the 1950s, and women are still heavily concentrated in a small number of low-level service and pink-collar occupations. In spite of the huge influx of married women, many of them mothers, into the paid labor force, and in spite of a great deal of talk about the joys of fatherhood, there's been no substantial increase in men's sense of responsibility for domestic labor or their willingness to actually participate.¹⁶ And women's share of authority in major institutions—from the state to organized religion to corporations to science, higher education, and the mass media—remains low.¹⁷ In short, the basic features that define patriarchy as a type of society have barely budged, and

the women's movement has stalled in much the same way that the civil rights movement stalled after the hard-won gains of the 1960s.

Thus far, mainstream women's movements have concentrated on the liberal agenda, whose primary goal has been to allow women to do what men do in the ways that men do it, whether in science, the professions, business, or government. More serious challenges to patriarchy have been silenced, maligned, and misunderstood for reasons that aren't hard to fathom. As difficult as it is to change overtly sexist* sensibilities and behavior, it is much harder to raise critical questions about how sexism is embedded in major institutions such as the economy, politics, religion, and the family. It is easier to allow women to assimilate into patriarchal society than to question society itself. It is easier to allow a few women to occupy positions of authority and dominance than to question whether social life should be organized around principles of hierarchy, control, and dominance at all, to allow a few women to reach the heights of the corporate hierarchy rather than question whether people's needs should depend on an economic system based on dominance, control, and competition. It is easier to allow women to practice law than to question adversarial conflict as a model for resolving disputes and achieving justice. It has even been easier to admit women to military combat roles than to question the acceptability of warfare and its attendant images of patriarchal masculine power and heroism as instruments of national policy. And it has been easier to elevate and applaud a few women than to confront the cultural misogyny that is never far off, waiting in the wings and available for anyone who wants to use it to bring women down and put them in their place.

"Easier," yes, but not easy or anything close to it. Like all movements that work for basic change, women's movements have come up against the depth to which the status quo is embedded in virtually every aspect of social life. The power of patriarchy is especially evident in the ongoing backlash against even the liberal agenda of women's movements—including the Supreme Court's retreat on abortion rights, the widespread effort to discredit feminism resulting in women's growing reluctance to embrace or identify with it, and the emergence of a vocal movement of men who portray themselves as victims not only of the sex/gender system but of women's struggle to free themselves from their own oppression under it.

* The words *sexism* and *sexist* are commonly used to describe a personal prejudice or the person who holds it. As sociologist David Wellman argues in *Portraits of White Racism*, however, that approach is far too narrow to be of use because male privilege requires far more than this to continue. Following his lead, I use the term to indicate anything that has the effect of promoting male privilege, regardless of the intentions of the people involved. By judging actions, policies, and institutional arrangements solely in terms of their consequences, Wellman's conceptualization allows us to focus on the full range of forces that perpetuate male privilege, and saves us from the trap of personalizing what is essentially a social and systematic phenomenon.

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.

Like all social systems, patriarchy is difficult to change because it is complex and its roots run deep. It is like a tree rooted in core principles of control, male dominance, male identification and male centeredness.¹⁸ Its trunk is the major institutional patterns of social life as shaped by the roots—family, economy, politics, religion, education, music and the arts. The branches—first the larger, then the progressively smaller—are the actual communities,

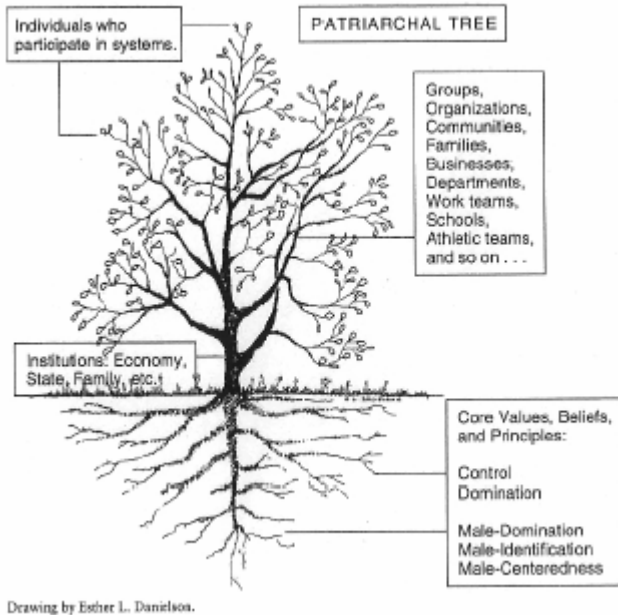


Fig. 1 Patriarchal Tree

organizations, groups, and other systems in which we live our lives, from cities and towns to corporations, parishes, marriages, and families. And in all of this, individuals are the leaves who both make possible the life of the tree and draw their form and life from it.

Obviously, we're in something that's much larger than ourselves, that isn't us. But equally obvious is our profound connection to it through the social conditions that shape our sense of who we are and what kinds of alternatives we can choose from. As a system, patriarchy encourages men to accept male privilege and perpetuate women's oppression, if only through silence. And it encourages women to accept and adapt to their oppressed position even to the extent of undermining movements to bring about change. We can't avoid participating in patriarchy. It was handed to us the moment we came into the world. But we can choose *how* to participate in it.

In this sense, we are far more than passive leaves on a tree, for human beings think and feel and, most important, make choices through which we either perpetuate or challenge the status quo. But as later chapters show, our relationship to the system of patriarchy is complex and full of paradox, challenging us to do the necessary work to understand what's going on and what it has to do with us.

Deep Structure and the Way Out

Over the last century or so, a lot has happened around the subject of male privilege and patriarchy. There's been an enormous amount of feminist writing and social action in Western industrial societies. And for the first time, the potential exists to challenge patriarchy in a serious and sustained way. Most people's attention is on the surface storms raging around particular issues such as abortion, pornography, sexual harassment and violence, and political and economic discrimination. But these struggles rarely if ever raise critical questions about the nature of patriarchy itself. In spite of the important feminist work being done on the patriarchal roots of pornography and men's violence against women, for example, public discussion rarely gets beyond issues of free speech, constitutional rights, and individual psychopathology.¹⁹ In part this is because we don't know how to get beyond such questions to explore the trunk and roots of patriarchal society, but it is also a way to avoid going deeper into our own lives and the world that shapes them.

To go deeper, we need both inner and outer awareness, which flow from different yet related kinds of insight. I've come to know the first as a client in psychotherapy, which more than anything else introduced me to the existence of deep structures inside each of us—webs of belief, experience, and feeling

that help shape the patterns in our lives. They affect us so deeply in part because we aren't aware of them in a critical way. Most people, for example, have a strong personal sense of what it means to be a woman or a man, a sense that profoundly affects how they think, feel, and act. But rarely do we think about such ideas critically. Rarely do we look closely at how they affect us or explore alternatives to them.

We're unaware because awareness is hard work (try to monitor your thoughts for just five minutes), and also because we're easily threatened by anything that questions our basic assumptions. As a result, we live as if these deep structures did not exist at all, as if life's surface that present itself most immediately to us is all there is. This makes us least aware of aspects of our selves that most affect us, except, perhaps, when a crisis forces us to look deeper, to overcome our resistance simply because we feel we have no other choice. We're like spouses who confront the reality of how they actually experience each other only when their marriage is falling apart.

A second kind of insight is grounded in my work as a sociologist, through which I've been able to see a similar phenomenon at a larger level. As a matter of course, we go about our daily lives without any ongoing awareness of the deep underlying structures and shared understandings that define the social terms on which we live. It's as if the other leaves and small branches to which they cling are all there is to the patriarchal tree. To some degree, we're unaware of deeper social realities because we don't know *how* to be aware. We lack a clear working sense of what a society actually is, for example, or how to think about large systems like industrial capitalism, much less about how we're involved in them. In part, this is just a matter of training. Two hundred years ago, for example, psychology didn't exist, and barely a century ago Freud still hadn't come along to suggest the existence of the subconscious and offer his ideas on personality and the meaning of dreams. And yet today a basic psychological language for making sense of inner experience has become the stuff of everyday conversation. In a similar way, we need to incorporate into common usage ways of making sense of societies and our relation to them.

What is perhaps most important about the deep structures of individuals and societies is how closely they're connected to one another. It's easy to think, for example, that reality is just what we think it is, that a phenomenon like sexuality is a fixed concrete "think" that simply exists, waiting for us to discover and experience it. But as Michel Foucault has argued, our intensely personal experience of ourselves as sexual beings is profoundly shaped by the society we live in and ways of thinking about sex that are part of its culture.²⁰

In a heterosexist culture, for example, when people say “sexual” they typically mean “heterosexual” and exclude all other forms of sexual expression as possible meanings. In ancient Greece, however, “sexual” included a much broad range of human potential and experience which, in turn, shaped people’s perceptions and experience as sexual beings. And only a century or so ago in Europe and the United States, “homosexual” was a term that described behavior but not people: People could behave in homosexual ways, but this didn’t make them “homosexuals.” The word “homosexuality” first appeared in print in Germany in 1869 and was first used in the *New York Times* in 1926.²¹ Today, by contrast, being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered is treated as an aberration at the core of people’s social identities and an oppressive system of heterosexual privilege that excludes and persecutes them.²²

Just what we think sexuality *is*, then, depends on which society we’re participating in and shapes our sense of who we are. “Female” and “male,” for example, are in the simplest sense words used to categorize people. We tend to experience them as more than words, however, treating them as representing some fixed, objective reality. We act as though “sex” is a word that refers to just one thing, regardless of culture, and that it includes two and only two possible categories, male and female. But in fact, things don’t divide up so neatly. An estimated 2 to 3 percent of babies are born with physical characteristics that don’t fall clearly into one sex category or another. A baby might be born genetically female, for example, with a “normal” vagina and a clitoris that has developed as a penis. In cultures that admit only two sexes, there’s little tolerance for such ambiguity, and parents usually feel compelled to do something about it, from infanticide to surgically assigning one sex or the other to the newborn.²³

From this perspective, words like “female” and “male” are cultural categories that have as much (if not more) to do with creating reality as they do with objectively naming it. Since the categories are cultural creations, they inevitably differ across cultures and shift over time. In general, for example, the idea that everyone must have a clear and fixed identity as male or female is relatively new in human societies, and contrasts with societies that provide other alternatives.²⁴ The Native American Navahos allow those born with sexual “ambiguities” to occupy a third sex category (called *nadle* with its own legitimate social standing. In some other cultures, people have been allowed to choose their gender regardless of what it appears to be “objectively,” as was the case historically in several Native American Plains tribes, where men sometimes responded to a spiritual vision by taking on the dress and social standing of women.²⁵

In our everyday lives we pay scant attention to the deep patriarchal roots that shape both the world we live in and our seemingly private selves. There are many reasons for this and much that gets in the way that thread together to make a tangled know. Finding a way to unravel that knot is the major purpose of this book.

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 things like "patriarchy" or "male privilege" in polite conversations. We act as if patriarchy isn'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 injustice and cruelty, 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, and a few men 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 privilege that are so central to life in modern societies and without which we think we cannot survive. The public response to such 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 provides 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.²⁶ This is a huge issue that sparks a lot of argument, 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 have access to privilege based on race, class, disability

status or sexual orientation and it's difficult for many to see women as oppressed without insulting "truly oppressed" groups such as the lower classes or racial minorities.²⁷ How, for example, can we count upper-class women among the oppressed and lower-class men among their oppressors?

Although this objection has a certain logic to it, it rests on a confusion between the position of women and men as groups and their experience as individuals. Identifying "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 white 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 experience because of their race or other subordinate 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 *privilege* and *oppression* describe relations between categories of people such as whites and people of color, lower and upper classes, or women and men. How privilege and oppression actually play out among individuals is another issue. Depending on other social factors such as race or class, individual men will vary in their access to male privilege. We can make a similar argument about women and the price they pay for belonging to a subordinate group. Upper-class women, for example, may be 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.²⁸ 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 both men and women are 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*. Men, however, do not suffer because maleness is a devalued, 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 gay or of color—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.²⁹ 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 subordinates men and enforces and benefits from their 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 people of color and the lower classes, 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.³⁰ But this oppression is based on race and class, not gender. When Warren Farrell, a leading figure in the men's rights movement, argues that men are "disposable," he confuses male gender, which is privileged, with classes and races that are indeed regarded as disposable.³¹ 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 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 anniversary of D-Day and 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.³² But these ritual remembrances do more than sanctify sacrifice and tragic loss, for they also sanctify war itself and the patriarchy institutions that promote it. Leader whose misguided orders, blunders, and egomaniacal schemes bring 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 passive 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 portion of children and women.³³ During the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, it has been official military policy to *not* keep count of civilian deaths and injuries. And so, 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 women and men. We don't want to admit it because, unlike other groups involved in oppressive systems of privilege, such as whites and people of color, 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 want 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 resist seeing our fathers as members of a privileged oppressor group and may prefer to see them as hapless victims of women and unseen social forces in which male interests magically play no part. We resist, perhaps because in our fathers we see ourselves and because we're still trying to figure out why they didn't love us very well, or were never around, or were around but in the wrong ways. And we struggle to figure all that out in the hope that if we do, we might be able to have them after all and become something different ourselves.

Harder still is seeing our fathers linked to the oppression of our mothers, or our mothers' unavoidable participation in their own oppression, playing at being less than they are or giving themselves away in the name of perfect

motherhood or tolerating neglect and abuse. All of this we resist, because we couldn't help taking our mothers and fathers into ourselves and making them part of our deepest longings and most enduring expectations. And in the process we also drew into our deepest selves core elements from the patriarchal roots of gender privilege and oppression.

But, once again, we must remember that as deeply as the patriarchal tree shapes our lives, we are the leaves and not the roots, trunk, or branches. We're too easily blinded by the good/bad fallacy that says that only bad people can participate in and benefit from societies that produce bad consequences. We act as though patriarchy can be reduced to personality types, as if our participation shows we've failed as people. But like any social system, patriarchy can't be reduced to personal feelings, intentions, and motivations.

It's impossible, for example, to live in this world and not participate in industrial capitalism. We read about the sweatshops in Southeast Asia and the United States in which workers (mostly women and children) labor for little pay under appalling conditions, and we may feel anger at such cruelty and comfort ourselves that our good intentions somehow lift us above such things. But a quick look through our closets and the labels on our clothing will probably show otherwise, that yesterday's bargain was made in Thailand or Mexico and subsidized by the exploitation of those very same workers. This doesn't make up bad people, as if we had set out to do harm; but it does *involve* us in the social production of injustice and unnecessary suffering. In the same way, men don't have to feel cruel or malevolent toward women in order to participate in and benefit from patriarchy as a system. This is a crucial distinction that makes the difference between being stuck in a defensive moral paralysis and seeing how to participate in change.

There are many ways to avoid facing the world in ourselves and ourselves in the world. But it has to get done sooner or later, because any society that doesn't take seriously enough the critical process of creating alternatives to itself probably doesn't have much of a future. Change work is both frightening and exciting. It loosens the boundaries of our taken-for-granted reality, and we feel lost we need to learn how to be "lost comfortable," like the mountain man who never got lost in spite of long periods when he didn't know how to get where he was going.³⁴

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 more about what we pass on to those who follow us.