



Patriarchy: Cases & Analysis From Everyday Life

Overview: Unpacking the dynamics of patriarchy is key to developing powerful, collaborative, loving and generous activists and leaders. A series of case studies provide one way of analyzing how the web of patriarchy plays out in people's lives.

Purpose: Case studies that illustrate how patriarchy affects people in everyday life encourage a thoughtful analysis about its personal and collective impact. By naming how it operates in multiple ways on the psyche, the body, and the intellect, people find that its hold over them is diminished and they can better develop strategies in response. This exercise can be used in conjunction with **The Spider Web** (Feminism, Identity, Intersectionality and Feminist Analysis Pack; Power and Transforming Power Pack), **The Dialogue Process: Codes and Questions "But Why?"** (Feminism, Identity, Intersectionality and Feminist Analysis Pack; Feminist Leadership / Leadership Development Pack) or **The Master's House and/or The House of Multiple Oppressions** (both in Feminism, Identity, Intersectionality and Feminist Analysis Pack).

Time: 1 hour

Credit: JASS Southeast Asia

Materials:

- Case studies in written or video format that show how women stay in abusive or subordinate relationships and that illustrate some of the reasons why they do (The Mena and Grace cases from the Spider Web provide examples, as does the more



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analytical piece by bell hooks “Understanding Patriarchy”) – Feel free to use the materials provided here or use your own

- Other readings you have found useful on patriarchy (e.g. Alda Facio’s “What is Patriarchy?” or “Understanding Patriarchy” by bell hooks)
- Flip chart
- Markers

Process:

In plenary:

- Explain the purpose of the activity and the process.
- Show videos or have people read case studies that illustrate the problems of patriarchy and how it plays out in people’s consciousness, family relationships, organizations and across gender, class, ethnic/racial, generational, and religious lines.

In small groups:

- Have groups discuss: *What happened to the woman? Why did this happen? Why do women stay in these kinds of situations? What keeps them from leaving? After about 10 minutes of discussion ask another set of questions: What do you think gender, class, race/ethnicity, religion etc. had to do with it?*

In plenary:

- Encourage a dialog based on the small group questions.
- *Note: Possible responses might include low education, fear of being left without economic support, sense of inferiority or worthlessness, fear of husband’s violence etc. Answers often emphasize that it is all the men’s fault, etc. You need to question this one-dimensional assertion by asking, for example, who teaches boys to believe they are superior or better than girls? What do mothers do to reinforce these roles and attitudes? Where do they learn this? Is it men who just say this? You will want to make the point that it is something else that teaches men and women what their place is in the family and world, something that affects our hearts, minds and bodies.*
- Synthesize and summarize points, underscoring that it’s important to understand that patriarchy is a like a spider web – an interlocking system and set of beliefs that privilege men over women, subordinating and marginalizing women, tying them down, yet one that is reinforced by both sexes.

Option: Going deeper

- Invite a resource person to do a mini-lecture and Q and A on patriarchy or have group read “Understanding Patriarchy” by bell hooks and discuss what insights and lessons they draw about patriarchy from her experience and analysis.



Handout 1: Why did Mena Die?

Credit: JASS Southeast Asia Staff

Mena was a 15-year-old girl living in a rural community on an Indonesian island in South East Asia. The village had limited public services, people had to travel far distances for basic health care and education. Mena wanted to become a teacher, but because her family was poor, she couldn't go to school after 3rd grade. Their local school didn't offer any higher grades and the cost of transportation to another school was prohibitive.

In the community, families lived together under one roof in very cramped spaces -- women and men, boys and girls. Mena's mother worried about her since Mena was very pretty and she knew pretty girls could get in trouble. In her ethnic community, usually parents married their girls off at a very young age. So when a young man from the community became interested in Mena, her mother asked him to marry her. Her mother was afraid of people talking badly about Mena and what the religious leaders might say. Besides, she also wanted Mena to have someone to protect her and needed more resources to support the rest of her family. Mena would go live with her husband's family which would lift the financial burden a bit. Mena loved listening to stories of romance on the radio and thought marriage could be a good idea but wasn't completely convinced that her mother's choice was the right one. Her girlfriends were excited about a possible wedding and she finally succumbed.

The young couple had to live in cramped quarters with his family, as was the custom. Mena's husband didn't have any regular job which forced Mena to find work. Since Mena had only basic education, she didn't have the skills to get anything but a menial job. She worked in the market helping shopkeepers. She loved the busy back and forth of bargaining, but not the lifting of heavy baskets that her boss made her do. Mena then got pregnant. During her pregnancy, she was not able to see the doctor or the nurse for any checkups. There simply was not the money nor the time. And to make matters worse, her husband was a flirt, fooling around with other women. He had lost interest in her and didn't help at all. Once he had even hit her. She only wished her own family could accept her back and she could leave him.

One day Mena felt some stomach discomfort. She consulted her mother about her condition, but her mother said such discomfort was common during pregnancies and she should be patient since it was just a womanhood thing. Mena tried to reach her husband to ask him to take her to the hospital, but she didn't not know where he was. Then she felt a rush of blood come from between her legs. She didn't understand what was happening. She could not stop the bleeding. Her mother then took her to the nearby hospital on a tricycle taxi, but, unfortunately Mena died before she could get there. Why did Mena die?



Handout 2: Why Did Grace Die?

Credit: Everjoice Win

Grace is a 33-year-old woman. She is married to Joe. They have three daughters aged 6 years, 4 years and 2 years. Joe works in a hotel in Johannesburg, because he could not find any jobs in Malawi. He comes home only three or four times a year, because coming more often is expensive and also he does not get a lot of time off from his job. Grace lives in the village, some 300 kilometers away from the nearest town. Here, she and Joe have built a small house, and it is right next door to Joe's parents. She works in their small field, growing maize, groundnuts and also vegetables in their smaller garden. Grace is always struggling for money as Joe does not really earn a lot of money.

A month after Joe's last visit, Grace discovered she was pregnant. Grace and Joe did not use any protection or any family planning method. They are members of the Roman Catholic Church which strongly discourages use of family planning between married couples. In addition, Joe said he did not see why Grace must use any family planning since he is away most of the time. The last time when Grace delivered the youngest child, she begged the Doctor to remove her uterus to make sure she would not ever have another baby again. The Doctor told her that at age 33 the law did not allow her to have her uterus removed. He also told her that if she wanted to have her tubes tied she had to bring her husband so he could sign the permission. The nurses who had been standing around listening to Grace talking to the Doctor later came to her bed and shouted at her. "What is wrong with you? You now want to be a prostitute since your husband is away in South Africa? Why do you not want to keep your uterus? What kind of woman are you going to be with no uterus?" One of the nurses brought her a newspaper article with a story of a woman killed by her husband for removing her uterus without his knowledge. The man had been sentenced to only 6 months of community service, and the judge in the matter said; "Any normal Malawian understands why you killed your wife. Let this be a lesson to all women to always follow our culture and not these foreign ways of doing things". The Paramount Chief from the area where the dead woman came from also said, "Women must be careful not to take their rights too far". Many people wrote letters to the Editor agreeing with the Chief and the Judge. So did many religious leaders and Members of Parliament interviewed by the newspaper.

Grace tried to talk to her husband about stopping having more children. But he was very angry. He said, "My dear, if you are tired of being married to me, you can go back to your family and return my lobola!"



When Grace spoke to both her Aunt, her mother and Joe's sister and Aunt all the women were absolutely shocked! How could she even think of stopping to produce children when she had not yet given Joe a son?

Grace got very very, sick when the pregnancy was 5 months. She had sores on her vagina and horribly smelly yellow-coloured stuff coming out. Soon she started bleeding. She did not know who to tell. The nearest clinic was in the town, a whole day's trip away. When she asked her mother in law if she could go to the clinic, mother in law told her she must ask permission from her husband in Johannesburg. Grace sent a text message but Joe did not respond. By the time Grace was finally taken to the clinic a week after collapsing, she was too sick to even speak. The clinic took two days to find transport for Grace to be taken to the big hospital, another 350 kilometers away. Grace was pronounced dead on arrival at the big hospital. The tests showed the baby was already dead and the infection had spread all over her body.

Why did Grace die?



Handout 3: Understanding Patriarchy

Credit: *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* by bell hooks, Chapter Two

Patriarchy is the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation. Yet most men do not use the word "patriarchy" in everyday life. Most men never think about patriarchy-what it means, how it is created and sustained. Many men in our nation would not be able to spell the word or pronounce it correctly. The word "patriarchy" just is not a part of their normal everyday thought or speech. Men who have heard and know the word usually associate it with women's liberation, with feminism, and therefore dismiss it as irrelevant to their own experiences. I have been standing at podiums talking about patriarchy for more than thirty years. It is a word I use daily, and men who hear me use it often ask me what I mean by it.

Nothing discounts the old antifeminist projection of men as all-powerful more than their basic ignorance of a major facet of the political system that shapes and informs male identity and sense of self from birth until death. I often use the phrase "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation's politics. Of these systems the one that we all learn the most about growing up is the system of patriarchy, even if we never know the word, because patriarchal gender roles - are assigned to us as children and we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfill these roles.

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. When my older brother and I were born with a year separating us in age, patriarchy determined how we would each be regarded by our parents. Both our parents believed in patriarchy; they had been taught patriarchal thinking through religion. At church they had learned that God created man to rule the world and everything in it and that it was the work of women to help men perform these tasks, to obey, and to always assume a subordinate role in relation to a powerful man. They were taught that God was male. These teachings were reinforced in every institution they encountered-- schools, courthouses, clubs, sports arenas, as well as churches. Embracing patriarchal thinking, like everyone else around them, they taught it to their children because it seemed like a "natural" way to organize life.



As their daughter I was taught that it was my role to serve, to be weak, to be free from the burden of thinking, to care take and nurture others. My brother was taught that it was his role

to be served; to provide; to be strong; to think, strategize, and plan; and to refuse to caretake or nurture others. I was taught that it was not proper for a female to be violent, that it was "unnatural." My brother was taught that his value would be determined by his will to do violence (albeit in appropriate settings). He was taught that for a boy, enjoying violence was a good thing (albeit in appropriate settings). He was taught that a boy should not express feelings. I was taught that girls could and should express feelings, or at least some of them. When I responded with rage at being denied a toy, I was taught as a girl in a patriarchal household that rage was not an appropriate feminine feeling, that it should be not only not be expressed but be eradicated. When my brother responded with rage at being denied a toy, he was taught as a boy in a patriarchal household that his ability to express rage was good but that he had to learn the best setting to unleash his hostility. It was not good for him to use his rage to oppose the wishes of his parents, but later, when he grew up, he was taught that rage was permitted and that allowing rage to provoke him to violence would help him protect home and nation.

We lived in farm country, isolated from other people. Our sense of gender roles was learned from our parents, from the ways we saw them behave. My brother and I remember our confusion about gender. In reality I was stronger and more violent than my brother, which we learned quickly was bad. And he was a gentle, peaceful boy, which we learned was really bad. Although we were often confused, we knew one fact for certain: we could not be and act the way we wanted to, doing what we felt like. It was clear to us that our behavior had to follow a predetermined, gendered script. We both learned the word "patriarchy" in our adult life, when we learned that the script that had determined what we should be, the identities we should make, was based on patriarchal values and beliefs about gender. I was always more interested in challenging patriarchy than my brother was because it was the system that was always leaving me out of things that I wanted to be part of.



Handout 4: What is Patriarchy?

Credit: Alda Facio, 2013

The concept of Patriarchy itself is not a contribution of feminist theories. Many social scientists in the nineteenth century wrote about it as a more civilized or complex form of organization compared to the primitive matriarchies [1]. Engels referred to it as the earliest system of domination establishing that Patriarchy is “the world historical defeat of the female sex.” [2] In this sense, it is said that Patriarchy was a form of political organization that distributed power unequally between men and women to the detriment of women. The Royal Academy of the Spanish Language Dictionary defines Patriarchy as “A *primitive social organization in which authority is exercised by a male head of the family, extending this power even to distant relatives of the same lineage.*”

Feminist theories updated and expanded the understanding of Patriarchy in the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, the social sciences had left it behind precisely because it was considered only to apply to and characterize ancient civilizations. But for many feminists, Patriarchy is much more than civilizations that existed in the ancient past and goes beyond “*the unequal distribution of power between men and women in certain aspects of our societies*”, as many dictionaries still define it. On the contrary, most forms of feminism characterize Patriarchy as a present day unjust social system that subordinates, discriminates or is oppressive to women. As Carole Pateman writes, “The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection.”[3] For me, the concept of Patriarchy includes all the socio-political mechanisms, which I call Patriarchal Institutions, which reproduce and exert male dominance over women. Feminist theory typically characterizes Patriarchy as a social construction, which can be overcome by revealing and critically analyzing its manifestations [4] and institutions.

Fixating on real and perceived biological differences between the two recognized sexes [5], men justify their domination on the basis of an alleged biological inferiority of women. Both feminist and non-feminist thinkers recognize that Patriarchy has its historical origins in the family, the leadership (legal and practical) of which is exercised by the father and is projected to the entire social order – an order that is maintained and reinforced by different mechanisms/institutions, among them the Institution of Male Solidarity. Through this institution, men as a social category, individually and collectively oppress all women as a social category, but also oppress women individually in different ways, appropriating women’s reproductive and productive force and controlling their bodies, minds, sexuality and spirituality mainly through “peaceful” means such as the law and religion. However,



often these peaceful means are reinforced through the use of physical, sexual, and/or psychological violence.

Combining all of these elements of Patriarchy, I define it as:

"Patriarchy is a form of mental, social, spiritual, economic and political organization/structuring of society produced by the gradual institutionalization of sex-based political relations created, maintained and reinforced by different institutions linked closely together to achieve consensus on the lesser value of women and their roles. These institutions interconnect not only with each other to strengthen the structures of domination of men over women, but also with other systems of exclusion, oppression and/or domination based on real or perceived differences between humans, creating States that respond only to the needs and interests of a few powerful men."

By "gradual institutionalization" I refer to a historical process that proves Patriarchy is not natural, has not always existed, and is not identical in all cultures and in all generations. This, in turn, means that although men have power over women in all institutions considered important in each society, it does not mean that women do not have any power or rights, influence or resources, nor does it mean that all women have or exert the same power. Moreover, as Patriarchy becomes more sophisticated, more women of specific groups are allowed access to certain institutions, although they are almost never the most powerful people within those institutions.

By "sex-based political relations", I mean, as explained so well by Kate Millet, that sexual and other relations between the two sexes recognized as such by Patriarchy, are political relations, through which men dominate women.

By "consensus on the lesser value of women", I refer to a tacit and subconscious agreement between each member of a community that women and everything relating to women is worth less than men and everything relating to men. We see this reflected in the Institution of Sexist Language, which establishes the feminine as "the other" and the male as the norm and that which represents or contains the feminine. By "consensus", I also make reference to an ideology and its expression in language that explicitly devalues women, assigning them, their roles, their work, their products and their social environment less worth and/or power than that assigned to men.

By "patriarchal institutions", I refer to the set of mechanisms, practices, beliefs, myths and relationships organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to the distribution of resources, the reproduction of individuals, and the type of societal structures within a given Patriarchy. These institutions are closely linked with one another, creating, maintaining and transmitting inequality from generation to generation. Most sociologists recognize as institutions such social structures as governments, the family, human



languages, universities, hospitals, business corporations, and legal systems. I prefer to rename these recognized institutions with more appropriate names such as the Institution of Androcentric Law, the Institution of Misogynist Religion or of Sexist Language, of Malestream Media or Malecentered Science, etc. But I also like to make visible other institutions which patriarchal sociology does not recognize as such, like the Institution of Male Solidarity, of History with Capital H, of Erotic Violence, of Woman-Blaming Myths, of Maleheteronormativity, of Dichotomous Sexual Beings, etc. Many feminists, while not speaking of institutions per se, argue that Patriarchy exists not only in the family but in all structures that allow for control over women, their work and reproductive force. I call these structures patriarchal institutions, because aside from being mechanisms for the perpetuation of Patriarchy, they are also a set of beliefs, practices, myths, relationships, etc. which make sure that Patriarchy is invisible even to those women which suffer the most exclusion or at the most, make sure it is perceived as natural or simply as the way things are and always will be for women.

I borrow the idea of the "Institution of Male Solidarity" from Celia Amorós, although she does not call it this and speaks instead of a brotherhood among men that takes place in the constitution of modern Patriarchy. The Costa Rican composer/singer Guadalupe Urbina refers to this institution as "the Knighthood of Mutual Praise". Marcela Lagarde, Angela Miles, Carole Pateman and many other feminists also believe that men create interdependence and solidarity among themselves, which enables them to dominate women. This does not mean that there is no hierarchy among men.

The "appropriation of women's reproductive force" and the control of their bodies and their sexuality comes from radical feminism. For example, Shulamith Firestone discusses how human reproduction, which happens in women's bodies, is legally appropriated and controlled by men and is used to benefit men or to keep women at the mercy of men. Lidia Falcón considers women as a social and economic class, insisting that it is the father and/or husband who enforce the appropriation. Many feminists, such as Maria Meis and others, have spoken of the productive relationship between husband and wife in the modern nuclear family, which is similar to the relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate in the workplace. This subordination occurs in the private space of family because whatever the husband's produces enters the market (the privileged area of capitalist Patriarchy), while the wife's production is not. In this way, all of the wife's work in the non-privileged private space of the nuclear family is invisibilized.

Some aspects, elements or characteristics of modern Patriarchy are the following:

1. Patriarchy had a beginning and therefore can have an end. Even if we still do not know how exactly it came into being we do know it came about after millenniums of



different more egalitarian human organizing. The earliest forms of Patriarchy only began at the most 6 millenniums ago.

2. We also know that there are different models of Patriarchy at different times and in different cultures and places but the lower value given to women and their roles as compared to men and their roles remains constant in all models. In other words, Patriarchy co-exists with very different forms of government and socio religious political organizing such as empires, kingdoms, theocracies, republics, democracies, etc. and can co-exist very well with capitalism, socialism, etc. However, due to the globalization of neoliberal capitalism, almost all existing Patriarchies today can be categorized as capitalist Patriarchies.
3. In all known Patriarchy negative meanings are attributed to women and their activities through symbols and myths (not always explicitly expressed). These symbols and myths are different in different cultures but within each culture they attribute negative meanings to women or the feminine.
4. Patriarchy is made up of structures or institutions that exclude women from participation in, or contact with, spaces of higher power, or what are believed to be the spaces of greatest power economically, politically, culturally and religiously.
5. Despite the above, women are not treated identically in Patriarchy, nor are all women excluded in the same way from spaces of power. In fact, this different treatment is a mechanism by which the lack of solidarity and competitiveness among women is promoted. This lack of solidarity and competitiveness among women sometimes escalate to outright contempt for each other, thus ensuring their loyalty to men and male values.
6. Patriarchy is produced by and at the same time promotes, a mindset based on dichotomous, hierarchical and sexualized thinking. This mindset divides reality into two dichotomous categories placing all of perceived reality either into things and acts associated with nature or things and acts produced by culture. Furthermore, everything placed within the category "culture" is overvalued while everything associated with nature is undervalued. By situating men and the masculine under the higher category of culture, and woman and the feminine under the less valued category of nature, "man" and masculinity become the parameter, model or paradigm of humanity, while the subordination of women is justified based on their alleged inferior "natural roles".



7. In Patriarchy, gender roles and stereotypes may be different in each social class, age and culture but through the mechanisms, structures and institutions mentioned previously, it makes these roles and stereotypes seem natural and universal.
8. In any given Patriarchy all men will not enjoy the same privileges or have the same power. Indeed, the experience of domination of men over women historically served for some men to extend that domination over other groups of men, installing a hierarchy among men that is more or less the same in every culture or region today. The male at the top of the patriarchal hierarchy has great economic power; is an adult and almost always able-bodied; possesses a well-defined, masculine gender identity and a well-defined heterosexual identity, adding a few more features by region. For example, in Latin America, for a man to be at the top of the patriarchal hierarchy, that man has to be white and Christian, in addition to the other characteristics shared with Patriarchy's counterparts across regions.
9. Across Patriarchy's different models, women are exposed to different degrees and types of violence, some common to all and others specific to each cultural, religious or economic model adopted by the Patriarchy.
10. Patriarchy was the first structure of domination, subordination and exclusion which is recognized as such by History with a capital H (recognized patriarchal history) and still remains a basic system of domination. Ironically, while being the most powerful and enduring system of inequality, it is hardly ever perceived as such even by women themselves. In fact, precisely because the invisibilization of Patriarchy is one of its institutions, even some feminists deny its existence.

[1] There is now evidence that the matriarchies these scientists were talking about were not "matriarchies" in the strict sense of the word but matrilineal or matrifocal forms of social organization. While recognizing that there is considerable variation in the role that gender plays in human societies, there are no known human examples of strictly matriarchal cultures. There are a number of societies that have been shown to be matrilineal, matrifocal, matrilineal or gynocentric, especially among indigenous tribal groups. Some hunter-gatherer groups have been characterized as largely egalitarian.

[2] See Engels, Frederic, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

[3] Pateman, Carole (1988). *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 207.

[4] See for example, Tickner, Ann J. (2001). *Patriarchy*. *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy: Entries P-Z*. Taylor & Francis. pp. 1197–1198.

[5] Most models of Patriarchy only recognize the existence of two distinct and dichotomous biological sexes.



Handout 5: Patriarchy Definitions

Women from anywhere in the world recognize the concept of patriarchy even if they don't use the word: systemic and institutionalized male domination and the privileging of masculinities over femininities. Patriarchy operates through power and control over resources, including over women's bodies and sexuality. Internalized through norms, values, and beliefs, patriarchy is reproduced through social institutions such as schools, the media, religion, and the family.

Patriarchy is...:

- "...a way of seeing and understanding the world through male eyes." – Lori Heise
- "...inextricable from racism and imperialism." – Azola Goqwana
- "...in your bedroom, telling you how to have sex and with whom, what you must wear and look like, what you must and must not eat." – Maggie Mapondera
- "...not about women and men but about masculinities and femininities." – JoJo Guan
- "...the force that, in the name of culture, has an elderly woman ask a young man for permission." – Thoko Phiri
- "...so insidious that we uphold it ourselves as women, as patriarchy's footsoldiers and gatekeepers." – Hope Chigudu
- "...always shifting, playing out in new ways." – Shereen Essof
- "...a system privileging the male in terms of resources, decision making power, and opportunities." – Srilatha Batliwala