

Journal of Management & Public Policy

Vol. 17, No. 4, June 2026 Pp. 23-30

ISSN 0976-0148 (Online) 0976-013X (Print)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47914/jmpp.2026.v17i4.004>

Patriarchy and the Persistence of Women's Subordination: A Socio-Historical and Feminist Analysis

Uzma Saleem Malik* and Sarah Tahmeen Choudhury**

ABSTRACT

Patriarchy is one of the most enduring social systems throughout human history, profoundly shaping material conditions, cultural norms, and gendered power relations worldwide. Despite modern societies increasingly promoting the language of equality, patriarchal structures still significantly influence lived experiences of women in both public and private spheres. This paper reconceptualises patriarchy as a dynamic, historically produced system rather than an inevitable or natural state. Drawing on classical, radical, and socialist feminist theories, particularly the work of Sylvia Walby, Friedrich Engels, Gerda Lerner, and Maria Mies, it traces the evolution of patriarchal control and explores its manifestation in India from ancient to modern times. Using qualitative analysis of secondary literature, the study shows how patriarchal norms adapt to changing economic and political structures, reinforcing gender hierarchies even where legal equality exists. It argues that dismantling patriarchy requires more than legislative reform; it demands transformation of socialization processes, cultural ideologies, and household power relations. Achieving true gender equality calls for structural change at cultural, institutional, and interpersonal levels.

* Ph D in Public Administration, Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University
E-mail: uzmamlk99@gmail.com

** Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Govt. Model Degree College, Baghbar, Barpeta, India **E-mail:** sarahchoudhury0@gmail.com

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Women's Subordination, Feminist Theory, Gender Inequality, India, Social Structures, Historical Analysis

INTRODUCTION

For a very long time, patriarchy has been a key organizing factor of social life, controlling the allocation of power, labour, and resources between both genders. Deeply ingrained disparities continue to exist in the political, cultural, and economic spheres despite international pledges to gender justice. Even though women now have rights that were unthinkable for earlier generations, patriarchal standards nevertheless influence their prospects, social roles, and physiological autonomy.

Sociologist Göran Therborn observes that nearly all early human societies demonstrated recognisable patriarchal features, making gender hierarchy one of the oldest forms of social organisation. Rather from being a straightforward pattern of male power, patriarchy is now seen within feminist studies as a complex, multi-layered structure of dominance. Sylvia Walby's seminal paradigm, which identifies six interconnected systems (home production, paid employment, the state, male aggression, sexuality, and cultural institutions), shows how patriarchy endures even in cultures that profess gender equality.

This paper places patriarchy in the context of larger historical and structural processes and makes the case that patriarchal norms' flexibility over time and space accounts for its persistence. The study shows how patriarchal institutions change rather than vanish, creating new forms of gender control, by looking at the development of women's position in India.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse patriarchy as a socio-historical system shaping gender relations and women's subordination.
2. To synthesise classical, radical, and socialist feminist theories explaining patriarchal control.
3. To examine the changing status of women in India across ancient, medieval, colonial, and modern periods.
4. To identify continuities and transformations that explain the persistence of patriarchy.

RESEARCH METHOD

Based on secondary sources such as scholarly publications, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical records, and trustworthy digital archives, the study uses qualitative, interpretative analysis. The approach includes theoretical synthesis, comparative historical study, and theme analysis. The emphasis is on critically analyzing the literature to find recurrent patterns in patriarchal institutions across many eras and places rather than conducting any primary research.

CONCEPT OF PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy, which was first used to describe the power of the male head of the home, developed into a more comprehensive analytical term that describes systematic male domination in both public and private domains. According to feminist academic Kamla Bhasin, patriarchy is a system of male-dominated power structures that subjugate women by controlling their access to material, social, and intellectual resources. Thus, patriarchy functions on a number of levels, including legal, economic, cultural, psychological, and symbolic. It is a structural situation that has been normalized over generations of socialization rather than just an interpersonal interaction.

ORIGINS OF PATRIARCHY: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Biological Determinism

According to popular narratives, men's dominance is attributed to their physical prowess, their responsibilities in reproduction, or their alleged higher intelligence. For example, Aristotle's well-known view of women as "imperfect men" justified their exclusion from positions of authority. In a similar vein, Sigmund Freud's assertion that "anatomy is destiny" supported the idea that gender roles are predetermined by biology. However, biological determinism is rejected by contemporary studies as insufficient to explain patriarchal systems' worldwide uniformity.

Materialist Perspectives

Materialist feminists contend that changes in economic organization led to the emergence of patriarchy. According to Friedrich Engels, the "world-historical defeat of the female sex" resulted from the emergence of private property, which required control over women's labor and sexuality. This change strengthened male power inside the home and institutionalized monogamy for women.

Radical Feminist Approaches

Gender oppression comes before class inequality, according to radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone. They contend that the most basic type of dominance is men's control over women's bodies and reproductive potential. According to this viewpoint, patriarchy is a universal system that is socially imposed yet has its roots in physical differences.

Socialist Feminist Thought

Heidi Hartmann and Maria Mies are two examples of socialist feminists who believe that capitalism and patriarchy reinforce one another. Both male authority and capitalist accumulation gain from women's unpaid household labor and limited access to paid employment. According to Mies, economic shifts have historically impacted the concepts of femininity and masculinity.

Historical Reconstruction

Gerda Lerner, a historian, emphasizes how patriarchy developed over millennia. She contends that cultural institutions, religious beliefs, and legal frameworks that presented women's subjugation as normal and moral caused it to become deeply embedded. Challenging the ideological underpinnings of gender inequity requires an understanding of this history.

WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION: STRUCTURES AND MECHANISMS

Interconnected systems that function in the institutional, cultural, psychological, and economic spheres perpetuate women's subjugation. Because of these mutually reinforcing dynamics, patriarchy is adaptable and durable.

- 1. Economic Dependence:** Women remain dependent on males due to limited access to property and income, which strengthens male authority over important household choices.
- 2. Labour Exploitation:** The majority of women work in low-paying, unofficial jobs, and their domestic labor is still underappreciated and unappreciated.
- 3. Control of Body and Sexuality:** Women's movement, attire, sexuality, and reproductive choices are regulated by patriarchal standards that associate women's bodies with family honor.
- 4. Educational Restrictions:** In the past, women's intellectual independence and chances to engage in public life were restricted by their limited access to education.

5. **Domestic and Social Violence:** Gender conformity is enforced by the use of violence, such as honor murders, marital rape, and domestic abuse.
5. **Cultural and Religious Norms:** By portraying gender disparities as holy, customary, or divinely approved, customs and rituals normalize male power.
6. **Legal and Institutional Bias:** Patriarchal presumptions are frequently reflected in state institutions, which leads to gender-insensitive governance and lax enforcement of protective legislation.
7. **Ideological Socialisation:** From an early age, guys are encouraged to take the lead and be dominant, while girls are taught to be submissive and kind.
8. **Psychological Conditioning:** Women are socialized to place a higher value on selflessness and family prestige, which results in internalized forms of subjugation.
9. **Control of Mobility and Space:** Women's mobility restrictions restrict their access to political, economic, and educational opportunities, which increases reliance.
10. **Marriage and Kinship Systems:** Women's vulnerability is increased when they are cut off from natal support by customs like dowries, virilocal living, and early marriage.
11. **Denial of Property Rights:** Women's vulnerability is increased when they are cut off from natal support by customs like dowries, virilocal living, and early marriage.
12. **The Reproductive Labor Burden:** Women are disproportionately responsible for childbearing, childcare, and home upkeep, which limits their ability to participate in public life.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Early and Matrifocal Societies: Early non-Aryan societies had matrifocal characteristics, with women playing important roles in ceremonial rituals, agriculture, clan leadership, and medical expertise. They were respected symbolically because of their connection to fertility, but their actual authority varied.

The Vedic Era: Women's access to knowledge and spirituality was restricted in the early Vedic age. Gargi and Maitreyi, two female philosophers, participated in scholarly discussions. But as time went on, patriarchal standards grew stronger, limiting women's property rights and confining them to household duties.

The After-Vedic Era: Texts like as the Manusmriti prohibited widow remarriage, imposed child marriage, and institutionalized women's reliance on male guardians. Women's bodies and sexuality were increasingly regulated by caste purity standards.

India in the Middle Ages: Patriarchal standards became more stringent during the Middle Ages. Muslim customs like purdah coexisted alongside Hindu customs like sati, polygamy, and forced widowhood. Women's identities were linked to caste and family honor, which severely limited their freedom of movement, education, and public involvement.

Modern India: Modern India presents a complex interplay of reform, resistance, and resilience in the struggle for women's rights.

Colonial Reform Initiatives: Gender discussions gained political traction as a result of colonial involvement. Sati was outlawed in 1829 as a result of the opposition of reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The first girls' school was established in 1848 by educational pioneers Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule. Early feminist consciousness was shaped by feminist philosophers like Pandita Ramabai who criticized male privilege, caste, and religion.

The Nationalist Movement: Women were mobilized as leaders, activists, and symbolic mothers of the country during the independence movement. Nationalism provided new avenues for engagement, but it also upheld conventional notions of feminine purity and sacrifice.

Reforms Following Independence: The Constitution of independent India forbade discrimination based on gender and guaranteed equality. Although patriarchal resistance weakened several of his suggestions, B. R. Ambedkar spearheaded attempts to change Hindu personal laws, extending women's inheritance and marriage rights. Women's rights have been strengthened throughout the years by legislative changes such the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, the Domestic Violence Act of 2005, and revisions pertaining to sexual assault after 2012.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Despite having more rights and visibility in contemporary India, women are nevertheless subject to subtle kinds of control due to institutional prejudices, caste norms, family expectations, beauty standards, and digital surveillance. Patriarchy has changed rather than vanished. Some of the challenges faced by women in current times are mentioned below:

- Despite advancements in the law, gender discrimination still exists:
 - There is still a lot of gender-based violence.
 - Economic empowerment is hampered by low female labor force participation.
 - Dalit and Adivasi women are the targets of caste-gender violence.
 - A strong predilection for sons is reflected in sex-selective abortion.
 - At higher levels of government, political underrepresentation persists.
- Women's autonomy, sexuality, and movement are restricted by cultural policing.

CONCLUSION

Across historical eras and societal structures, patriarchy continues to be a deeply ingrained and flexible system that affects women's lives. Legal changes have increased women's rights in India, but they haven't eliminated the structural and cultural underpinnings of gender inequity. In order to achieve true gender justice, socialization processes must be changed, family labor must be redistributed, caste-based gender norms must be challenged, legal enforcement must be strengthened, and cultural narratives must be reshaped. Equality is not just something that constitutions offer; it also needs to be implemented in households and communities. A truly equal society can only be achieved via such multifaceted development.

Moreover, attaining gender equality necessitates a shift from symbolic empowerment to real change in day-to-day existence. Equal access to opportunity, economic independence, and education are crucial, but they cannot eradicate patriarchy on their own unless attitudes and social behavior also shift. Instead of being viewed as unusual, women's involvement in decision-making processes within homes, businesses, and political institutions has to be normalized. Empowerment is more than just giving people rights; it's about establishing circumstances that allow them to be used freely and without societal opposition.

Men and society at large must also be seen as active players in this transformation. Gender justice is a shared social duty, not merely a problem for women. Long-standing patriarchal systems can be gradually undermined by raising awareness, promoting inclusive ideals, and encouraging shared responsibility. Only when equality is practiced as a lived reality experienced by every person, regardless of gender, rather than as an ideal to strive for, can sustainable social development be achieved.

REFERENCES

- Beechey, V. 1977. *Some notes on female wage labour in capitalist production. Capital and Class*. 3, autumn 45-66.
- Bhasin, K. 2006. *What Is Patriarchy. Women Unlimited: New Delhi*.
- Fox, B. J. (1988). Conceptualizing 'patriarchy'. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, 25(2), 163-182.
- Miller, P. (2017). *Patriarchy*. Routledge.
- Mitchell, J. 1971. *Women's Estate. Harmondsworth: Penguin*.
- Ortner, S. B. (2022). Patriarchy. *Feminist Anthropology*, 3(2), 307-314.
- Quek, K. (2019). Patriarchy. In *Handbook on Gender and Violence* (pp. 115-130). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Skinner, M. B. (1987, January). Classical studies, patriarchy and feminism: The view from 1986. In *Women's Studies International Forum* (Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 181-186). Pergamon.
- Sultana, A. (2010). Patriarchy and women's subordination: a theoretical analysis. *Arts faculty journal*, 1-18.
- Walby, S. 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd.: Oxford, UK and Cambridge USA.