

## **Episode 2: Patriarchy (Transcript)**

### **Lavanya Mehra**

Patriarchy exists everywhere it is true and patriarchy works in many different, subtle and overt ways. From, what clothes we wear, what jobs we can do, where we can go, whom we can meet.

And as women, well, we should eat, who we can marry, whether there is a life outside marriage that we can think of, how many children we should have, the assets we have, whether we can inherit property, I mean, the list goes on.

Patriarchy determines and controls all of those, all of these things.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Welcome to Think Feminist by CREA, a podcast on feminist ideas to help deepen your feminist way of thinking. I'm Srilatha Batliwala, your host, and you're listening to the second episode of Think feminist.

In this episode, we're going to talk about the whole reason for being a feminist. The patriarchy. Patriarchy is a Greek word that literally means the rule of the father, but actually describes a system of social organization where power is held by men and passed down through the male line.

In South Asian languages. It is called *pitrusatta*, *pitrupradhan*, *pitrutantra*, *gothipatisasita samaj*, or *badar shahi hukumat*.

There may be a different term for it in your language, or no word for it at all. But when you finish listening to this podcast, you'll certainly recognize it. My colleague at Krea, Lavanya Mehra has extensive experience working with organizations that focus on mobilizing men and boys against patriarchal gender inequality. Lavanya says

### **Lavanya Mehra**

Patriarchy is a system where the rule of the male is prevalent. It is not specific to particular men and boys, but in general, the overall system, the structure of society, are all male dominated or masculine in their construction.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

One thing I like reminding people is that patriarchy isn't an inevitable condition of being human. We didn't naturally evolve as Homo sapiens to organize our societies in this way.

Human beings with some technological capability and basic social organization have existed on the planet for at least 200,000 years, maybe more. And patriarchy is a relatively recent phenomenon.

### **Lavanya Mehra**

I think it is now widely believed. And a lot of anthropologists and sociologists have been telling us that patriarchy has only existed for about 13 to 15 years, 15,000 years. And not more than that.

The shift towards patriarchy began more or less with the shift towards agrarian societies. When agriculture became prominent when human societies moved towards agriculture. It is then that domestication began when family as a unit started emerging

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Before the rise of patriarchy, both historical and genetic evidence shows that all societies are matrilineal metrical, where people trace their family lived through their mother, not father, matrilineal or mother rights societies existed for at least 30 to 50,000 years before patriarchal systems evolved.

Value anthropologists, evolutionary biologists, geneticists and sociologists have all offered theories about how these societies were structured, but we have no way of knowing for sure.

### **Lavanya Mehra**

I think what's believed is that when human societies were mostly hunter gatherers, partners were frequently exchanged. It didn't matter if men and women had more than one partner, and raised children of different partners.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

I'd like to introduce you to the concept of matrix cultures theorized by feminist Max Doshu. She describes these as mother rights societies, matrix societies with some common features.

They had foundational women, like the great grandmother who founded the entire clan or tribe. There was strong sister-brother ties, milk bonds between the children of sisters, there was shared motherhood and collective caregiving.

Couples resided in the woman's home, and had the right to change partners. Women held positions of public authority in clan and tribal councils. There was little or no private property, the sharing of communal resources and values that respected peace and the natural environment.

### **Lavanya Mehra**

But when private property and the concept of private ownership of that property should belong to one particular person when this idea came up, then this idea also emerged that whatever I own, whatever my assets are, whatever belongs to me should pass down to my son to my children, and not to somebody else's child.

When battles over land and resources broke out, human survival dictated that young men were sent to battle not young women, since the clan could more easily survive the loss of its men than its women.

As men fought over territory, and seized captives from the losing group, two key turning points occurred in history that had dire consequences for the future of women.

The first was the concept of private property, and its ownership, sale, and trade. The second was the concept of slavery, owning and selling other human beings as commodities.

Neither of these concepts existed earlier, nobody owned anything in the modern sense. And the idea that other human beings could be treated as property to be owned or sold, was completely alien.

So Now, men in those emerging agrarian societies wanted to raise a family that was their own, they did not want to share a family structure or develop a family structure that was more communal in nature.

So in that sense, it is believed that the emergence of private property also led to these kinds of families, where especially the sexuality and the reproduction, or the reproductive life of women had to be very closely monitored and controlled.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

One of the ways we can theorize what prehistoric cultures might have been like, is by looking at various indigenous cultures, which have survived colonization and various modern modernization projects.

There are many examples of what matrilineal cultures can look like from across the world. In the Bribri people in Costa Rica for instance, children enter their mother's clans and women inherit the land.

In the Tuareg culture of the nomadic Berbers, who travel across northern Africa, women are believed to have been created before men and remain unveiled while the men wear turbans and veils, when they are deemed mature or reach adulthood at 25.

And then some Castes and Tribes in Kerala, the tradition of marumakkathayam is a system of matrilineal inheritance.

### **Lavanya Mehra**

Patriarchy exists everywhere, which is true and patriarchy works in many different, subtle and overt ways, in all aspects of our life, from what clothes we wear, what jobs we can do, what kind of salaries we get, where we can go, whom we can meet, who we can invite to our homes, whose houses we can go to, and as women when we should eat, when we should abstain from food, who we can marry, when we can marry what should be our age when we should ideally marry.

Whether there is a life outside marriage that we can think of how many children we should have, whether or not we can have children, whether we can make decisions about the things we own, the assets we have, whether we can inherit property I mean, the list goes on. Patriarchy determines and controls all of these things.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Patriarchy is a system that originated due to particular historical circumstances, but it was not uncontested. Many women and some men have resisted patriarchy throughout its history.

While ordinary people's resistance is erased from historical records, we do have the names of women who ruled as queens, despite the patriarchal culture surrounding them. From the Egyptian Queen Hatshepsut in 14th century before Christ, who refused to surrender rule to her stepson to Sri Lanka's Queen Leelavati in 12th century AD to Rani Kittur Chennamma in 18th century, South India. Resistance to the injustice of the patriarchal system is both direct and subversive and can be found in every home in every village. And every nation.

### **Lavanya Mehra**

Resistance may not always be in the form of protest marches or signing petitions, or asking the government to enact a change. Resistance is sometimes just simple acts like asking questions,

asking for reasons, saying things like why are things different for men and women, for people of other genders, or even women of different socio economic status.

Who decides these rules? Why can't I go out after 8pm? This person who is not my caste and my religion, but I like him. Why can't I go out with him?

Why shouldn't I apply to this college or study the subjects I like? Why should I eat last or clean up after everyone has finished eating, why I can't I keep the TV remote with me.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

seemingly simple questions can lead to challenging long standing traditions and systems. The very institution of marriage, for instance, can be questioned because of its origin story, which was to ensure that

The property was inherited by their own biological children, men began to control the sexuality, reproduction and mobility of their female partners, created the institution of marriage and deprived women of equal rights.

And yet today, marriage has become a normalized, naturalized, even mandatory rite of passage for young women and men.

### **Lavanya Mehra**

So by consciously, subconsciously adhering to these expectations, by keeping the family intact by not rocking the boat, there are some ways in which we sort of maintain the system as it exists. And we don't challenge this system at places where challenging is very important.

For me, the simplest example is that of inheritance of property. While the formal legal system of the country may state that all children should have equal rights over the ancestral or fraternal/parental property. Often women and girls don't claim this shift. And they don't even want to talk about it for fear of, I guess, rocking the boat.

They don't want to disturb the family dynamics. They don't want to be painted as greedy women. They don't want to solve the family relationships, not especially with their brothers and the brothers family. So they just let go any claim to the property?

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

How did all this happen? How did patriarchy succeed and normalizing such deep inequalities? The answer is that patriarchy converted the spectrum of biological sexes into two socially constructed genders.

Erasing transgender and non binary identities that did not fit. The black and white division between the two genders required the construction of a particular set of norms and roles of femininity and masculinity,

and demanded a continual performance of ideal gendered behavior by all people in order to be accepted as part of the clan, the tribe, community and society.

Patriarchal ideology perpetuates itself by socializing and indoctrinating each generation into its core beliefs and practices. It then uses rewards and bribes to those who maintain the status quo, and moral policing, social exclusion and violence against those who break its rules.

### **Lavanya Mehra**

So, upholding various religious and cultural festivals is one very simple example, where the upholding of these religious cultural, traditional festival is is very gendered in its division of roles, who has to perform religious functions, whose role it is to abstain from certain kinds of food and drink, while the festivities are going on, who gets to perform the rituals and the rites, who must be in prayer, what kind of clothes have to be worn, what kind of offerings are to be made, so those rules are sort of very gendered, a lot of expectation is placed upon the married women of the house, and how, how they must behave when these religious functions are being performed.

So, in ways like this, it reinforces the role of the traditional good woman, the traditional good wife, the traditional good mother, who will uphold the family prestige, the family on her, do her duty properly, and there will be rewards for that.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

While religion has been one of the key structures that the patriarchy uses to control women, we have evidence of religious customs and traditions that originate from a more egalitarian matrilineal prehistoric time.

Mother goddesses were worshipped in almost every region of the world. From Hathor in ancient Egypt and Gaia in ancient Greece, to Asherah in ancient Sumeria, modern Iraq, Anahita in Persia, and the Morrigan In ancient Ireland.

Guanyin is worshipped in Buddhist temples across the Far East and the goddess Shakti is a powerful deity even in modern day Hinduism.

Indigenous cultures all over the world continue to worship female gods and spirits and have animus traditions from Oshun in the Yoruba derived cultures and buk in Ethiopia to Amaterasu in Shintoism, and Kunapipi in Aboriginal Australia. Read more about these.

### **Tasaffy Hossain**

One of the things we always talk about when we're talking about these intersectionality of identities is the part where, how the different power or privileges we hold based on identity changes, based on the context we're in.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

This is Tasaffy Hussain, a freelance development professional based in Dhaka, Bangladesh, who founded the initiative, Bonhishikha meaning unlearn gender.

### **Tasaffy Hossain**

So the privilege I might hold in, say workspace or in a shopping area, especially like a mall, because of my say, socio economic position because of my education because of how I look and dress somehow is kind of goes away when I'm in a very public space,

because then the identity that prevails there is the fact that I'm a woman. And regardless of all these other power positions that I might hold in a different context.

When I'm walking down the street, I am just perceived as a woman and if someone considers me to be there, to be objectified, to be stared at to be made comments that I am still available for that Regardless of whatever other privileges I might hold, this one identity sort of like trumps all the other identities.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Patriarchy we've seen, intersects and works with and through other power structures, including class, race, caste, ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual orientation, gender, identity, nationality, and location.

But just as there is no universal way that patriarchy affects all women the same, there is no one unified way to experience patriarchy as a man, as feminists in conversation with men, it is useful and important to point out that it is a system that we are working to dismantle, and not individual men whom we are trying to put down.

### **Tasaffy Hossain**

The first big step was allowing men to have that space to think about how gender does not provide them with all the freedom that we like to think it does. So trying to identify where there were barriers being created for boys and men,

but having that space to navigate and trying to identify what privilege meant when it was men who obviously felt like they weren't getting as many opportunities as say, other men.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

This brings us back to the fact that patriarchy does not operate alone. But within and through other social inequalities. As we've explained earlier, why patriarchy arose as a result of the rise of conflicts over resources, and the emergence of private property.

These changes created other systems of inequality too alongside patriarchy, inequalities between landowner and laborer created the class system, the classification of certain occupations as higher or lower or clean and or polluting, created the caste system

Inequalities between people of different skin color created racism. So patriarchy had to evolve, to work in coordination with all these other power structures. And this means that the gender norms and rules for all men and all women cannot be the same.

### **Tasaffy Hossain**

And it's not an easy conversation to have. You do see the little light bulb moments happening. And I think with men, that is one of the things to instill as part of understanding privilege.

It's not just that you understand you have privilege, it is important to think about what you're doing with that privilege. How is that privilege or power playing out in relation to others around you?

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

But let's now come to perhaps the most important question to ask, How do patriarchal power structures arise and sustain themselves? Patriarchy rests on a vast system of power.

In our first podcast on power, we explained how power structures arise, and how they maintain control. And we talked about the role played by ideology, social norms and institutions in helping power structures to stay in place.

So with patriarchy we must ask, Who is in charge? Who controls public and private resources? Who controls women's sexuality, reproduction, mobility, and our labor?



Who is in control of education and information? Who has greater voice and influence? Who controls the legal culture, state, and religious institutions?

### **Tasaffy Hossain**

I think all of these spaces where we usually have to deal with, we will always see that it's largely men who are holding the major power roles. And I think the first thing that strikes us is usually the number of men who are in these positions.

Not even just like the position at the top of the decision making pyramid, but throughout that structure, just the vast majority of individuals in that space would usually be men. And I think that is probably the first space where we encounter how much patriarchal a success a structure is, or a system is

when we just know that For the number of men who are involved with setting up that structure, who are involved with running that structure, and in many ways ensuring that that same system continues over and over again.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

The tricky part of uncovering the power structure of patriarchy is that it permeates the most intimate of our relationships. In fact, the deepest roots of patriarchy are in our minds, in our psyches, and in our most intimate relationships with people we love, like in the family,

because the family is not only a source of support and sustenance, but also an institution that upholds disempowering and oppressive norms and expectations based on our agenda.

Think about that for a moment. And even in families that seem to have every advantage of wealth and education and status, patriarchal violence in the form of sexual, reproductive, financial and physical abuse can be rampant.

### **Tasaffy Hossain**

Because it's assumed that just by having say economic power, or educational power, somehow it trumps all these other disadvantages of power dynamics that play out.

So, we've been in conversations where you're looking at trying to figure out what will be strategies to work on marginalized groups, and someone will be like, Oh, but a woman from say, a privileged family is no longer marginalized, because that family has money.

But then the question and the consideration is, just because the family has money does that mean how much of that resource is actually accessible to the woman of that family? How much of that decision making is still with the woman of that family?

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

Of course, women are not the only victims of patriarchy, from boys punished for wanting to wear makeup, to Muslim men being lynched for being friends with a Hindu girl, to a Dalit bridegroom being killed for riding a horse to his wedding. Two black men being beaten up for talking to white women.

Trans men are subjected to punitive rape, the patriarchy and that's violence on any male. It perceives as straying from the dominant accepted definition of masculinity.

### **Tasaffy Hossain**

It's easy to point it out and try to set it up as one specific kind of power and privilege. But a lot of times these shifts are based on the context of the situation and a lot of times certain privileges bypass other ones.

### **Srilatha Batliwala**

One of the continual challenges that various feminist movements have faced is to not replicate the patriarchy by setting up a female headed system of exclusion and oppression.

Dismantling the patriarchy should also mean dismantling casteism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and the patriarchy within women, which we have internalized.

Understanding how patriarchal power influences and affects everything we do, is the first step towards ending that misuse of power.

### **Tasaffy**

There's these power dynamics everywhere. So how do we actually reflect on them? How do we make it more conscious? What these power dynamics mean for us, and what we are doing to shift that power dynamic around us.

And I think that's a big conversation to have in all spaces, but especially for anyone who is holding power in any format. That's a huge responsibility to actually have that conversation with themselves and then of course, with others around you.

**Srilatha Batliwala**

Thank you for listening. We hope it is clear by now why understanding patriarchy, its history, its dynamics, and how it operates and perpetuates itself within and through other power structures is critical to feminist thinking and action.

Thanks for listening to Think Feminist. We'll be back with more episodes. For more about CREA. Check out [creaworld.org](http://creaworld.org) or follow us on Twitter and Instagram @ think.crea

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