

Approaches to Understanding Patriarchy

Komal Kaushik Baral
Assistant Professor,
Department of Political Science,
Sonada Degree College,
University of North Bengal

Subordination of women to men is prevalent in large parts of the world. We come across experiences where women are not only treated as inferior to men but are also subject to discriminations, humiliations, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence. It is important to understand that women experience discrimination and unequal treatment in terms of basic right to food, health care, education, employment, control over productive resources, decision-making and livelihood not because of their biological differences or 'sex', but because of 'gender'. The difference between 'Sex' and 'gender' is important to understand women exploitation and subordination. Sex is a natural construct; the way nature has made men and women different physically or one is born with either male or female genitalia. However, gender and the gender differences are a social construct meaning that men have constructed it. The examples of which include how we assign certain attributes female as emotional and weak and men as rational and strong; how we assign gender roles, women at homes and kitchen (private space) and men are assigned important public works or assigned public space. This along with patriarchy lays the foundation of women subjugation and subordination and hence the feminists problematise it and seek to deconstruct it.

What is Patriarchy?

Patriarchy literally means rule of the father in a male-dominated family. It is a social and ideological construct which considers men (who are the patriarchs) as superior to women. Sylvia Walby in "Theorising Patriarchy" calls it "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women". Patriarchy is based on a system of power relations which are hierarchical and unequal where men control women's production, reproduction and sexuality. It imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the power relations between men and women.

Feminism as such is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and in society in general, and conscious action by women and men to

transform the present situation”. It is a struggle to achieve equality, dignity, rights, freedom for women to control their lives and bodies both within home and outside.

Approaches to Understand Patriarchy

Liberal Feminism: Liberal feminists have championed equal legal and political rights for women to enable them to compete with men in the public realm on equal terms. The philosophical basis of liberal feminism lies in the principle of individualism (that gives and they campaigned for all individuals to participate in public and political life. Several women’s movement demanded female suffrage during the 1840s and 1850s in United States and United Kingdom. The famous Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 marked the birth of women’s rights movement which among other things called for female suffrage. It is interesting to note that women were granted the right to vote in the US Constitution only in 1920. In UK though franchise was extended to women in 1918 for a decade they did not exercise equal voting rights with men. Mary Wollstonecraft’s “Vindication of the Rights of Women” (1792) was the first text of modern feminism which campaigned for women’s right to vote/ female suffrage. Wollstonecraft claimed that if women gained access to education as rational creatures in their own right the distinction of sex would become unimportant in political and social life. John Stuart Mill in collaboration with Harriet Taylor in “The Subjection of Women” (1849) proposed that women should be entitled to the citizenship and political rights and liberties enjoyed by men. Thus, liberal feminists believed that female suffrage would do away with all forms of sexual discrimination and prejudice. Thus, the efforts of liberal feminists were central in the women winning their voting rights. They thus, focused on increasing opportunities for women, prohibit discriminations and to increase public consciousness of women’s rights. However, later liberal feminists (also called second wave feminism) stated that political and legal rights were insufficient to change women’s subordination as in spite of women having their political and legal rights they are still subjugated in the society and at homes. Feminist ideas and arguments became radical and revolutionary thereafter.

Marxist Feminism: Marxist feminist believed that both subordination of women and division of classes developed historically with the development of private property. Frederick Engels in “The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State” (1884) stated that with the

emergence of private property, women's housework began to be regarded unimportant in comparison to man's productive labour. The establishment of capitalism based on private property ownership by men did away with inheritance of property. Thus, property was to be inherited from father to son and not from woman to her clan. The bourgeois families which owned private property emerged as patriarchal families where women were subjugated. Such patriarchal families became oppressive as men ensured that their property passed on only to their sons. Therefore, bourgeois family and private property as a by-product of capitalism subordinated and oppressed women.

Marxist feminists argue that class exploitation is deeper than sexual oppression and women's emancipation essentially requires social revolution which will overthrow capitalism and establish socialism. Engels believed that "in a socialist society marriage will be dissolvable and that once private property is abolished its patriarchal features and perhaps also monogamy will disappear.

Socialist Feminism: Unlike the liberal feminists, socialist feminists argue that women do not simply face political and legal disadvantages which can be solved by equal legal rights and opportunities but the relationship between sexes is rooted in the social and economic structure itself. Therefore, women can only be emancipated after social revolution brings about structural change. Socialist feminists deny the necessary and logical link between sex and gender differences. They argue that the link between child bearing and child rearing is cultural rather than biological and have challenged that biology is destiny by drawing a sharp distinction between 'sex and gender'. Therefore, while liberal feminism takes women's equality with men as their major political goal, socialist feminism aims at transforming basic structural arrangements of society so that categories of class, gender, sexuality and race no longer act as barriers to share equal resources. Gerda Lerner's (1986) explains how control over female sexuality is central to women's subordination. She argues that it is important to understand how production as well as reproduction was organized. The appropriation and commodification of women's sexual and reproductive capacity by men lies at the foundation of private property, institutionalization of slavery, women's sexual subordination and economic dependency on male.

Most socialist feminists agree that the confinement of women to the domestic sphere of housework and motherhood serves the economic interests of capitalism. Women relieve men of the burden of housework and child rearing, and allow them to concentrate on productive employment. Thus, unpaid domestic labour contributes to the health and efficiency of

capitalist economy and also accounts for the low social status and economic dependence of women on men. But, unlike the Marxist feminists, socialist feminists look at both relations of production as well as relations of reproduction to understand patriarchy. Unlike orthodox Marxists who have given prime importance to class politics over sexual politics, modern socialist feminists give importance to the later. They believe that socialism in itself will not end patriarchy as it has cultural and ideological roots.

Radical Feminism: Unlike the liberal and socialist traditions, radical feminists developed a systematic theory of sexual oppression as the root of patriarchy which preceded private property. They challenge the very notion of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive and biologically determined categories. The ideology of motherhood subjugates women and perpetuates patriarchy, which not only forces women to be mothers but also determines the conditions of their motherhood. It creates feminine and masculine characteristics, strengthens the divide between public and private, restricts women's mobility and reinforces male dominance. "While sex differences are linked to biological differences between male and female, gender differences are imposed socially or even politically by constructed contrasting stereotypes of masculinity and femininity". Simone de Beauvoir in "The Second Sex" (1970) pointed out that women are made and not born. She believed that greater availability of abortion rights, effective birth control and end of monogamy would increase the control over their bodies.

Radical feminists aim at the need to redefine individual identity, free language and culture from the clutches of masculinity, re-establish political power, re-evaluate human nature/behaviour and challenge the traditional values. Thus, radical feminists contend that along with legal reforms and revolution against the capitalist society, it is important to transform the traditional sexual identity through sexual revolution. Radical feminists therefore believe that unless sexuality is reconceived and reconstructed in the image and likeness of women, they will remain subordinate to men.

Radical feminists claim that 'personal is political', meaning that patriarchy has created a difference between personal space (home) and public space. Women's sphere is considered to be home, while the public space belongs to men. This is problematic, but what is more problematic is that the personal space is regarded unimportant as compared with the public space. This is the reason why domestic violence that women face inside homes is not as security issue and is regarded as personal matter to be solved by family members and not by

say the government. Further, women's work inside homes is unpaid labour. This too makes women dependent on men and makes them subordinate.

Eco-feminists accept women's attitudes and values as different from men. They believe that in certain respects women are superior to men and possess the qualities of creativity, sensitivity and caring which men can never develop. Vandana Shiva in her conception of ecofeminism critiques development and establishes the connection between ecological destruction and capitalist growth as a patriarchal project.

Postmodern feminists claim that there is no fixed female identity. The socially constructed identities can be reconstructed or deconstructed. Thus, the distinctions between sex and gender are criticized from two perspectives: (i) 'difference feminists' who believe that "there are essential difference between men and women and the social and cultural characteristics are seen to refer the biological differences" and (ii) 'postmodern feminists' who "questioned whether sex is a clear-cut biological distinction as is usually assumed". In other words, the features of biological motherhood do not apply to women who cannot bear children. Thus "there is a biology-culture continuum rather than a fixed biological/cultural divide and the categories male and female become more or less arbitrary and the concepts of sex and gender become hopelessly entangled"

Black feminists have prioritized differences based on race and challenge the tendency within feminism to ignore it. They portray sexism and racism as interlinked systems of oppression and highlight the particular range of gender, racial and economic disadvantages that confront "women of colour". In other words, the feminist's movements ignore the discrimination and subordination based on their colour (they being black). Black feminists argue that women are not subject to common forms of oppression due to their sex but 'women of colour' in particular are more vulnerable to oppression and subjugation. They criticize the liberal, Marxist, socialist and radical feminists for ignoring race as a category of oppression and analysis. By assuming that gender is primary form of subordination, oppression of class, sexuality and race become extensions of patriarchal domination. Radical feminists' insistence that the elimination of sexism is key to the elimination racism is inadequate to "women of colour" as they experience racism from white women as well as from men. Thus, an analysis of the intersection of class, caste, race, sexuality and gender is important.

lesbian feminists primarily struggle against homophobia which is as important as the struggle against patriarchy. Lesbian feminism and cultural feminism are two types of feminist

separations advocating the creation of women identified world through the attachments women have to each other. They believe that since patriarchy is organized through men's relations with other men, unity among women is the only effective means for liberating women. They position lesbianism as more than a personal decision and an outward sign of an internal rejection of patriarchal sexuality. Lesbianism becomes a paradigm for female-controlled female sexuality which meets women's needs and desires. 'Another popular strategy for resisting patriarchy has been to redefine social relations by creating women-centered cultures that emphasise positive capacities of women by focusing on creative dimensions of their experiences'

Conclusion

Thus, it is clear that while earlier feminists struggled for a legally equal position for women and demanded democratic rights, which included right to education and employment, right to own property, right to vote, right to birth control, right to divorce, today feminists have gone beyond demanding mere legal reforms to end discrimination between men and women. They have raised issues of violence against women, rape, unequal wages, discriminatory personal laws, the sexual division of labour, distribution of power within the family, use of religion to oppress women and negative portrayal of women in media. More so, they have challenged the very construction of the knowledge and offer gender lenses to view the world. Emancipation of women necessarily calls for challenging patriarchy as a system which perpetuates women's subordination. Several structures of society such as kinship and family, class, caste, religion, ethnicity, educational institutions and state reinforce patriarchy. Some of the experiences of multiple patriarchies can be illustrated by analysing the dynamics and interface of social forces which institutionalize and legitimize patriarchy in society.