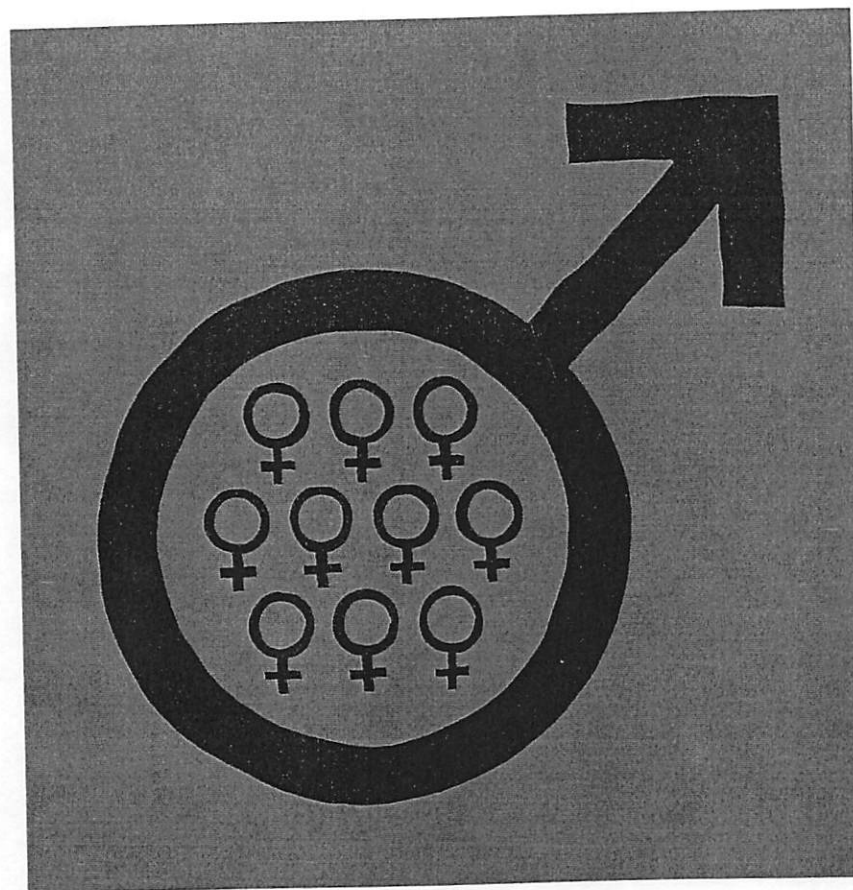


THE CONCEPT OF "PATRIARCHY" IS INDISPENSABLE FOR AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER INEQUALITY

SYLVIA WALBY (1953–)



IN CONTEXT

FOCUS

Patriarchy

KEY DATES

1792 Mary Wollstonecraft, English advocate of women's rights, publishes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

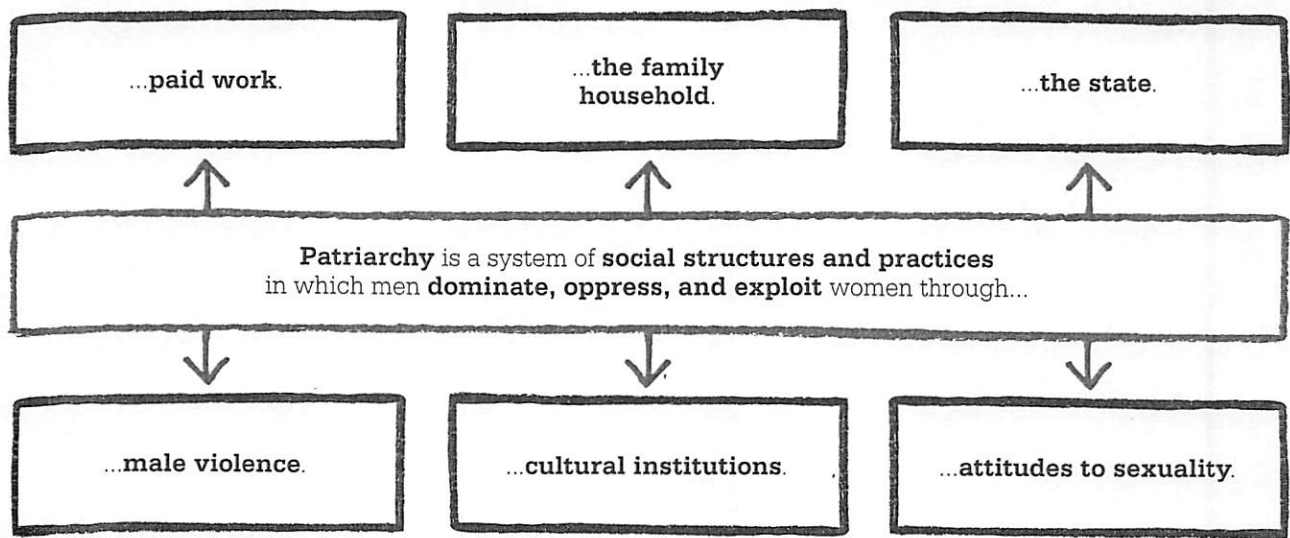
1969 In *Sexual Politics*, US feminist Kate Millett says patriarchy is a universal power relationship that is all-pervasive and enters into all other forms of social divisions.

1971 Italian feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa argues that women's unwaged labor is an essential part of the functioning of capitalism.

1981 In "The Unhappy Marriage of Feminism and Marxism," US feminist economist Heidi Hartmann suggests that the "dual systems" of capitalism and patriarchy oppress women.

In 1990, the British sociologist Sylvia Walby published *Theorizing Patriarchy*, a groundbreaking book that claims "patriarchy" is a highly complex phenomenon made up of many intersecting forces. Whereas earlier feminists had focused on identifying a single cause of patriarchy, linked to a particular historical era or culture, Walby defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women." She claims there are six interacting structures: the family household, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions. To examine

See also: Karl Marx 28–31 ■ Judith Butler 56–61 ■ bell hooks 90–95 ■ Teri Caraway 248–49 ■ Christine Delphy 312–17 ■ Ann Oakley 318–19



these six structures, Walby looks back through the struggles and work of previous feminists.

First-wave feminism

Walby notes that the “first wave” of feminism of the 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe and the US focused on the private, rather than public, nature of patriarchy. At this time, she says, married women were excluded from paid employment, so patriarchal domination occurred mainly within the family, where it was “the man in his position as husband or father who [was] the direct oppressor and beneficiary... of the subordination of women.” The idea of “domesticity” intensified during this era. Middle-class women were confined to the private sphere; they were denied the right to vote, own property,

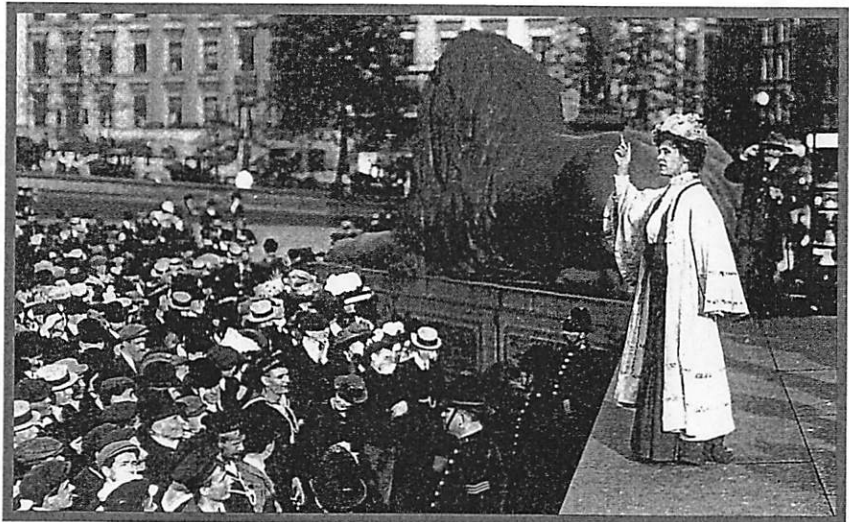
or to gain higher-level education, and violence by husbands was legally sanctioned.

The first-wave feminists addressed these issues on a legal level, but Walby maintains that the significant rights they won for women failed to eliminate all forms of inequality. This was because the family and the household continued to function effectively as

a “patriarchal mode of production.” Patriarchy within the household is the first of Walby’s six patriarchal structures; it undervalues the work of housewives (as unpaid labor), while apparently valuing them only within this role (this was women’s “rightful place”).

Walby points out that in Marxist terms, housewives are the producing class, while husbands »

Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928) was a militant, first-wave feminist who fought hard to advance women’s basic rights and to secure married women the vote in the UK.



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Women are not passive victims of oppressive structures. They have struggled to change both their immediate circumstances and the wider social structures.

Sylvia Walby

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are the class that benefits “individually and directly” from women’s unpaid labor.

Women within capitalism

By the 20th century, capitalism had become the dominant global economic model. As capitalism grew, women lost forms of work that had once been open to them (in textiles, for instance) through the growth of industrialization. They moved into a position that was disadvantaged in two ways: vertical segregation (being offered employment only in the lower grades of work) and horizontal segregation (being seen as suitable only for particular areas of work). For this reason, Walby proposes that “patriarchal relations in paid work,” which give men the highest opportunities in jobs available and level of employment, constitute the second of the six structures that maintain patriarchy.

However, Walby notes that in the 20th century an interesting conflict began to arise between patriarchy and capitalism, because they had rival interests in the exploitation of women’s labor.

As she says: “if women are working for capitalists they have less time to work for their husband.”

Conflicts between patriarchy in the home and in the workplace have often been resolved through the intervention of Walby’s third patriarchal structure: the state. For example, during World War II, British women were needed to work in munitions factories. The trade unions were unhappy about this and persuaded the UK government to introduce legislation (the Restoration of the Pre-War Practices Act 1942) to ensure that women would be removed from employment in factories at the end of the war. In this way, women were moved to service the public or private arenas according to the needs of men, regardless of their own preferences.

In the West, the state has also intervened to enhance women’s rights, such as the 1970 Equal Pay Act in the UK. However, many of the apparent gains have led to little change in practice, with women still earning less than men. Walby says that this is because the state is “a site of patriarchal relations,” which is necessary to patriarchy as a whole. She notes that there have been important changes in state policy over the last 150 years but these also include some very significant limitations. “The state is still patriarchal as well as capitalist and racist,” she says.

Male violence and sexuality

The fourth of Walby’s six structures is male violence against women. Domestic violence includes controlling or threatening behavior, and violence or abuse between intimate partners or family members. These intimate relationships are power-structured (as is the case with all of

patriarchy’s six structures) and work through a set of arrangements whereby one person is controlled by another. Men’s violence (or threatened violence) against women plays an important part in their continuing control and domination of women.

The fifth of the structures is sexuality. Walby says that societies prize heterosexual relationships above all others, in many cases seeing them as the only permissible option. Sexuality is a major area in which men exercise domination of women: they impose their ideas of femininity onto women and have constructed sexual practices that revolve around male notions of desire.

Walby points out that the second-wave feminists of the 1960s to 1980s looked at a wider range of “unofficial” inequities than the first-wave feminists. They queried sexuality, the family, the workplace, and reproductive rights—although some present-day, third-wave feminists have criticized them for “unfinished business.” However, when oppressive laws on sexuality were abolished, some of the hard-won changes became traps for women. Sexual liberty led to the mainstreaming of pornography and

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Male violence against women is sufficiently common and repetitive... to constitute a social structure.

Sylvia Walby

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The automobile industry has a long history of using women as sex objects to sell cars (despite the deeply tenuous link to the product), positioning them as a focus of male fantasy and desire.

increased exploitation of women in prostitution, the sex industry, and human trafficking.

The last of Walby's six structures is culture; specifically, a society's cultural institutions. She claims that patriarchy permeates key social institutions and agents of socialization in society, including education, religion, and the media, all of which "create the representation of women within a patriarchal gaze." The world's religions, for example, continue to exclude women from the top positions and seem determined to restrict them to the "caring" rather than executive level—this, they say, is more "natural" for them. Women are thereby defined from a patriarchal viewpoint and kept firmly "in their place."

A shift to public patriarchy

The notions of private and public patriarchy are important for Walby in distinguishing other ways in which power structures intersect to affect women. She points out, for example, that British women of Afro-Caribbean origin are more likely to experience public patriarchy (finding it hard to gain

higher paid employment, for instance), while British Muslim women are more likely to experience higher levels of private patriarchy (affecting their abilities to leave the house or choose their preferred form of dress).

Since writing *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Walby has noted that while conventional "wisdom" sees the family as still central to women's lives, it has become less important. However, this has resulted, she suggests, in women working more, shifting them from the realms of private patriarchy into greater levels of public patriarchy. Women in the West are now exploited less by "individual patriarchs," such as their fathers and husbands, and more by men collectively, via work, the state, and cultural institutions.

Central to Walby's examination of patriarchy is her insistence that we see patriarchy neither as purely structural (which would lock women into subordinate positions within cultural institutions) nor as pure agency (the actions of individual men and women). She says that if we see patriarchy as fundamentally about structure, we are in danger of seeing women as passive victims. On the other hand, if we see women as locked into patriarchy through their own, voluntary actions, we may see them "as colluding with their patriarchal oppressors."

In *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Walby gives an account of patriarchy that explains both changes in structure (such as changes in the capitalist economy) and of agency (the campaigns of the three waves of feminism). She says major shifts must be made both within women themselves and by the society and cultures that surround them if we are to make meaningful progress. ■

Sylvia Walby

Professor Sylvia Walby is a British sociologist whose work in the fields of domestic violence, patriarchy, gender relations, and globalization has found wide acceptance and acclaim. She graduated in sociology from the University of Essex, UK, in 1984, and went on to gain further degrees from the universities of Essex and Reading.

In 1992, Walby became the founding President of the European Sociological Association, and in 2008 she took up the first UNESCO Chair in Gender Research, to guide its research into gender equality and women's human rights. In the same year she was awarded an OBE for services to equal opportunities and diversity. Walby has taught at many leading institutions, including the London School of Economics (LSE) and Harvard University.

Key works

1986 *Patriarchy at Work*
1990 *Theorizing Patriarchy*
2011 *The Future of Feminism*

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When patriarchy loosens its grip in one area it only tightens it in other arenas.

Sylvia Walby

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