Patriarchy is a form of Structural Violence
“Peace in patriarchy is war against women.”

— Maria Mies, Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour

**Introduction**

In a state of equality, none is above the other. When one side of the balance begins to impinge on and outweigh the other, this state of equality is disturbed. Inequality prevails when one part of the population is marginalised, dominated over and suppressed by the other. The domination of one over another leads to a state of disarray that culminates in conflict, and is thereby a threat to peace. Among many different kinds of threats to peace, there exists one kind that cuts across borders: patriarchy.

Think patriarchy, and the first thought in any mind would pivot around its impact on women, whether in peacetime or in conflict. Society is divided according to gender, among other factors.¹ Gender is not the same as the differences and distinctions between the sexes – which is purely biological, but is rather a “cultural categorisation and ranking grounded in a sexual division of labour that may be the single cultural form of greatest significance.”² It is therefore inferable that gender as a classification, quite like other forms of classification, does provide room for inequality. It appears that the “general crisis of modernity has its roots in the imposition of gender”.³ With the purportedly continued increment in the bifurcation of both genders, the segmentation gained a definitive form, culminating in the birth of patriarchy – where male domination took on a clear space.

Our first lessons in patriarchy commence with our families. Specific roles and conduct are ascribed and are expected of children of both sexes – and with that, a subliminal understanding of the bifurcated statuses is inculcated. This is then systemically built upon with time, as children grow

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² Ibid

to become adults that encourage and perpetrate the same beliefs, and a continuous cycle is then created. In peacetime, patriarchy remains a part of the social fabric, propping up gender equality. In conflict, patriarchy manifests itself through war-strategy in the form of gender-based violence that culminates in war crimes and genocide. Irrespective of whether it is peace or conflict, therefore, there is always a simmering undercurrent of prevailing patriarchy. In this paper, I will be looking at patriarchy as a threat to peace – as a form of structural violence. The first part paper will look at the meaning and scope of patriarchy as a term. The second part will go on to evaluate how patriarchy is a form of structural violence, and consequently, a threat to peace.

**Understanding 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.\(^4\) Patriarchy is based on a system of power relations which are hierarchical and unequal where men control women’s production, reproduction and sexuality.\(^5\) It imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the iniquitous power relations between men and women.\(^6\) Patriarchy is not a constant and gender relations which are dynamic and complex have changed over the periods of history.\(^7\) The nature of control and subjugation of women varies from one society to the other as it differs due to the differences in class, caste, religion, region, ethnicity and the socio-cultural practices.\(^8\) The “processes that confer privileges to

\(^4\) Suranjita Ray, *Understanding Patriarchy, Delhi University*, p. 1
\(^5\) Ibid
\(^6\) Ibid
\(^7\) Ibid
\(^8\) Ibid
one group and not another group are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred.”

9 The patriarchy rhetoric has significant political dimensions”.

Gender is an attribute, on the lines of what social class, caste, race or religion, are. With that in mind, it is important to understand that gender can also function as a significant element in creating social cleavage and it is important to analyse it to understand social inequalities, oppressions and unequal relationship between men and women. 11 It has been explained by feminist scholars who believe that the theory of ‘sexual politics’ and ‘sexism’ are conscious parallels with theory of ‘class politics’ and ‘racism’ to understand oppression of women. 12

The concept of “public patriarchy” refers to the institutional arrangements of a society, the predominance of males in all power positions within the economy and polity, both locally and nationally, as well as the “gendering” of those institutions themselves (by which the criteria for promotion, for example, appear to be gender-neutral, but actually reproduce the gender order). 13 Another manifestation of patriarchy is within the confines of the household – called and identified as “domestic patriarchy”. Domestic patriarchy includes within its fold the elements and dimensions of male-female relationships, the dynamics of familial life and the mode of upbringing for the children of such families. Public patriarchy is the wider social set up that includes all actors beyond the family – which means the remainder of society, including the military and the police.

**Patriarchy as a threat to Peace**

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10 Ibid
11 Suranjita Ray, p. 1
12 Suranjita Ray, p. 1
13 Michael Kimmel, p.2
In essence, patriarchy is a form of structural violence.\textsuperscript{14} Structural violence refers to the kind of undercurrent of violence that is built into the structure of a society, or a culture, or an economic or political institution. In that it is an undercurrent, structural violence is indirect in its impact, and arguably more insidious in comparison with actual physical violence. Examples of structural violence include slavery in Ancient Egypt and Imperial Rome, the antagonism against the Jews, Gypsies and Roma populations in the run up to and during the Second World War and the occurrence of Female Genital Mutilation and Honour Killings in different communities. The nature of structural violence is such that it is indirect in its impact because it is built into the social set up – and consequently, it can take the shape of deprivation and denial of rights – such as “economic well-being, social, political and sexual equality, a sense of personal and sexual equality, a sense of personal fulfilment and self-worth, and so on.”\textsuperscript{15}

When a society forcibly imposes restraints on the development of its people, or undermines the well-being and happiness of its people on any account – whether age, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexual preference or any other attribute, it amounts to a manifestation of structural violence.\textsuperscript{16}

Another factor that manifests because patriarchy is a form of structural violence is that patriarchy and hierarchy have a strong link.\textsuperscript{17} Patriarchy elevates men, thereby devaluing women – and encourages a climate of domination that may be backed by force. The domination and subjugation hinges on gender – in that the men dominate over and subjugate the women in society. This hierarchy remains a value that is passed onto succeeding generations – and because of the dominant nature, they become “male values”, which enculturation carries forth while devaluing the female values of subjugation.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} David P. Barash and Charles P Webel, \textit{Peace and Conflict Studies}, Chapter 1, p. 7
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid
\textsuperscript{18} Taylor and Miller, p. 1
Given that structural violence is invariably often built into a social set up, it is often perceived as an “acceptable practice” or something that is “traditional” or “the norm”. Therefore, the fact that it is violence is never really noticed or considered. In sharp contrast, direct violence is overt, visible and actually tangible. But, in most instances, structural violence is the enabler for overt and direct violence. For example, the harassment of newlywed brides and their families for dowry in India is a clear case of structural violence, because it is a practice built into Indian society to demand a price for the groom from the bride’s family. But the manifestation of that violence can be direct – such as abusive behaviour, bride-burning and domestic violence.¹⁹

No matter what form it manifests in, patriarchy is essentially held in place with the use of or a threat of use of violence – either implicitly or explicitly.²⁰ The targeting of women, girls, men and boys based on their gender roles within particular societies and cultures is systematic and thorough.²¹ The use of sexual violence, domestic violence and even verbal abuse are means that are often seen to sustain patriarchy – particularly in the domestic context.²² While these are the most common manifestations, they are not the only forms – the kind of violence used or threatened varies significantly, and is constantly in a state of flux.²³ Although the use of violence sustains patriarchy, there is no mathematic correlation or coincident to the extent that the decrease or increase in one factor results in a change in the other, inversely or proportionately. This is often the reason behind the fact that the foray of women into the workforce or their increased participation in legislative and policy-making initiatives may undermine public patriarchy, but may just go right ahead and produce its own set of backlash efforts which might wind up reinforcing domestic patriarchy.²⁴ Michael Kimmel explains that efforts in the legislature to undermine public patriarchy may result in a reinforcement of domestic patriarchy – such as “covenant marriages, tightening of divorce laws to restrain women’s exit from the home, increased domestic assault or even

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¹⁹ Ibid
²⁰ Michael Kimmel, p.3
²² Michael Kimmel, p.3
²³ Michael Kimmel, p.3
²⁴ Michael Kimmel, p.3
a virulent resurgence of domestic patriarchy (the Taliban).” On the other end of the spectrum the increment in public presence will also undermine domestic patriarchy – such as through “shared parenting and housework”.”

Given that patriarchy is a form of structural violence, and that it is a manifestation of antagonism and violence that begins from within the social set up, it is, in effect, a blatant threat to peace. Gender imbalance and the continued perpetration of violence by one gender against the other is a huge threat to peace. Women are not subject to violence because of any inherent vulnerability, but rather that the undercurrent of the structural violence of patriarchy offers a sense of privilege and entitlement for men – who wield their power on women. The sustenance of such power remains alive because of the use of overt and explicit manifestations of violent conduct. In peacetime, the incidents of violence against women remain independent incidents confined to specific and isolated incidents – and not as mass campaigns. In wartime, the manifestation of patriarchy takes on scale and magnitude – where orchestrated and planned campaigns of violence are launched against women. The gross militarisation of the world becomes a greater enabler for more violence against women – since the absence of peace becomes a hotbed for impunity to thrive. Women are also conspicuously absent from peace processes in the aftermath of war.

The constant denudation of a social set up by undermining equality before it is given a chance is the most disparaging consequence of patriarchy. If the world remains skewed against women, gives peace a subordinate position vis-a-vis war, and refuses to acknowledge the role of women – the ones who hold up half the sky along with men – in influencing peace, policy and legislation, we continue to live in a prolonged state of conflict, for peace is elusive in a community that is built on the foundations of structural violence. Until there is a lasting solution that shifts mindsets away from patriarchy, change will remain elusive.

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25 Michael Kimmel, p.3
27 Ibid