



CANONSPHERE LAW REVIEW

Volume 1 Issue 3

July to September, 2025



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WOMEN'S RIGHT AND PATRIARCHY: BREAKING THE SOCIAL BARRIERS

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ABSTRACT

One of the oldest and most pervasive systems of social control, patriarchy has historically denied women equal rights and conditioned them into submissive roles. Women have been confined within male-created and reinforced power structures for centuries. Though these roles were frequently framed within patriarchal narratives that glorified their subordination to men, women in ancient times held spaces of reverence as mothers, nurturers, and occasionally as rulers or scholars. Women's marginalization increased with the introduction of organized religion and the codification of laws. Discrimination against women was institutionalized by social norms, religious precepts, and hierarchical status divisions. By dictating women's subservience to fathers, husbands, and sons, ancient texts such as the Manusmrithi legitimized male dominance and reduced women's autonomy to almost nothing. Gender inequality has been sustained across generations as a result of these artificial concepts becoming cultural norms. Education, property rights, political participation, and even basic freedoms were restricted for women. In addition to being accepted as normal, the exploitation and conditioning of women was also defended as necessary to uphold social order. The historical foundations of patriarchy, its social and religious expressions, and its long-lasting effects on women's rights are all critically examined in this article. It makes the case that breaking down such ingrained barriers calls for a mix of social awareness, legal reforms, and empowerment tactics that go against oppressive customs. Society can move closer to a more inclusive and egalitarian future by dismantling patriarchal ideologies and reclaiming women's rights.

INTRODUCTION

The fight for women's rights has a long history and is ingrained in human civilization. Patriarchal systems that prioritized male authority and reduced women to dependent roles have subjected women to systematic subordination for centuries. Rather than being a natural order, patriarchy is a man-made structure intended to maintain male dominance in the social, political, economic, and religious domains. Women have been denied agency and forced to accept inequality as their fate from ancient customs to contemporary institutions. Religious texts, cultural norms, and social structures that have continuously positioned men at the center of power have all contributed to the marginalization of women in India. Ancient women's roles were framed within male-defined parameters of obedience and service, even though they were occasionally exalted in mythology and literature. This inequity was formalized by the Manusmriti and other comparable writings, which mandated women's subordination to men at every stage of life first to the father, then to the husband, and finally to the son. In addition to being religious, these directives also became legally binding social standards that shaped customs, laws, and cultural perceptions of women. Wide ranging effects have resulted from these beliefs' persistence, including the denial of education, limitations on mobility, labor exploitation, and silence during decision making.

WOMEN AND BOUNDARIES, THE CONDITIONING BY MEN

Women were essential to the family, community, and economy in the early phases of human civilization. Women were frequently essential to domestic work, farming, and the maintenance of cultural traditions, according to archeological evidence. Despite being appreciated for their nurturing and reproductive roles, women's social recognition was constrained by largely male defined structures. Even in cultures where women were occasionally in positions of power, such as queens, priestesses, or esteemed advisors, these were exceptions rather than the rule, carefully framed by patriarchal boundaries that aimed to maintain male dominance in the greater social order. Women were initially granted certain liberties in Vedic India, including the ability to attend school and take part in rituals. Even women scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi, who studied philosophy, are mentioned in ancient

hymns.¹ However, these instances were exceptional departures from a burgeoning culture of male authority rather than reflecting the status of women as a whole. As patriarchal control grew stronger and women were more restricted to domestic work, these freedoms gradually dwindled. Women's identities were linked to their roles as mothers and wives, and marriage emerged as the primary institution through which they were socialized to meet the needs of men. Social norms and practices that praised obedience and submission served to further indoctrinate women. The "ideal woman" was frequently portrayed in oral traditions, myths, and stories as selfless, devoted, and submissive to male authority. Because of this cultural programming, women were guaranteed to internalize their subordination as normal, and any departure from the roles that were prescribed was stigmatized or punished.

Throughout history, religion has served as a potent tool of social control, frequently serving as a place of limitation rather than emancipation for women. The belief that women were fundamentally inferior to men and needed continual control was reaffirmed by doctrines and rituals in many different religions. Hinduism used religious duties rather than gender-based discrimination to defend the ritual exclusion of women during menstruation, the prohibition of women from entering sacred areas, and the insistence on women's purity. In a similar vein, women were routinely assigned to roles that prioritized chastity and obedience over independence, other religious traditions, women were routinely assigned to roles that prioritized chastity and obedience over independence, barred from positions of authority, and prohibited from conducting rituals. These limitations went far beyond religion and permeated society and status hierarchies. Property rights, political representation, and education were all routinely denied to women. Due to the perception that having a girl child was a burden in many communities, female infanticide and subsequent dowry exploitation became commonplace.² Despite their significant contributions to household survival and agricultural labor, women's labor was not valued or acknowledged in the social hierarchy. Women had little personal agency because of the social construction of "honor," which further linked their worth to male guardianship from positions of authority, and prohibited from conducting rituals in other religious traditions. Customs that identified women as dependents served to further restrict their status. A woman's identity was never defined as an independent person, but rather as a relational one as a mother, wife, or daughter. A clear reminder of how women's social value was totally dependent on men, widows in particular

¹ Flavia Agnes, FLAVIA AGNES, LAW AND GENDER INEQUALITY: THE POLITICS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN INDIA 157 (Oxford Univ. Press 1999).

² Gerda Lerner, GERDA LERNER, THE CREATION OF PATRIARCHY 45 (Oxford Univ. Press 1986).

faced severe social exclusion, were made to live in austerity, and had their dignity taken away. Thus, societal norms and religious precepts combined to create a strict system of control that denied women the right to equality and self-determination. The *Manusmriti*, an ancient Hindu legal code traditionally ascribed to the sage Manu, is one of the most persistent sources of patriarchal authority in Indian society. The text, which was written between 200 BCE and 200 CE, had a significant impact on India's legal, social, and religious systems. Despite its claims to create a moral order, its treatment of women was blatantly patriarchal at the time. *Manusmriti* believed that women should always be under the guardianship of men: the father during childhood, the husband during youth, and the son during old age. By enshrining dependency in their very identity, this articulation ruled out the possibility of women existing as independent entities. The idea that women are inferior was also reaffirmed in the text.³

MAN MADE SOCIETAL NORMS AGAINST WOMEN AND EXPLOITATION

In addition to religious texts, man-made societal notions that consistently positioned women in subordinate roles served as the strongest basis for patriarchy. These concepts were social constructs that were deliberately created to uphold male dominance rather than being divine truths. Because they were ingrained in customs, ceremonies, and everyday activities, women's subordination was accepted as the norm. Through cultural narratives, folklore, and moral instruction, the idea that women were essentially weak, emotionally unstable, and reliant on men was passed down through the generations. Even in the absence of a clear law or scripture, these concepts served as imperceptible chains that bound women. One example of how society institutionalized women's dependence is marriage customs.⁴ Child marriage limited women's access to education and autonomy, while customs such as dowries perpetuated the idea that women were financial liabilities. Widows were pushed into social exclusion, stigmatized, and denied property rights. Though not always followed, the exaltation of customs like Sati revealed a societal perspective that valued a woman's loyalty to her husband, even to the point of self-destruction. These traditions were created in patriarchal societies to preserve men's dominance over resources, property, and social power rather than being mandated by divine authority. The connection between women's bodies and

³ Uma Chakravarti

UMA CHAKRAVARTI, EVERYDAY LIVES, EVERYDAY HISTORIES: BEYOND THE KINGS AND BRAHMANS OF ANCIENT INDIA 112 (Tulika Books 2006).

⁴ Patrick Olivelle (Translator)

PATRICK OLIVELLE, MANU'S CODE OF LAW: A CRITICAL EDITION AND TRANSLATION OF THE MĀNAVA-DHARMAŚĀSTRA 105 (Oxford Univ. Press 2005).

family honor is another glaring illustration of inequality caused by men. Men were rarely held to the same moral standards as women, who were taught to be chaste and pure. Generational conditioning served to further solidify these societal beliefs. Being patriarchal themselves, mothers frequently turned into enforcers of patriarchal norms, teaching daughters to fit in while training sons to rule. In this sense, patriarchy continued to exist as an independent system that was ingrained in society's psychology and culture as well as in law and religion. The way women are treated unfairly in all spheres of life social, economic, political, and cultural is the clearest indication of patriarchy's continued existence. Women have endured systematic exploitation from antiquity to the present, when men have dominated their labor, bodies, and decisions. Women have traditionally carried out unpaid labor in the home that keeps households afloat, but their contributions are rarely acknowledged as "Work." Although women worked side by side with men in agricultural economies, men were nearly always the owners of the land and produce. Women continued to be reliant and subservient as a result of this unequal resource distribution. The control of women's sexuality and reproduction was another form of exploitation. The pressure to have male children further marginalized women in many situations, which resulted in sex-selective abortions and other discriminatory practices like female infanticide.⁵ About 15 In actuality, these practices strengthened the patriarchal fear of women's equality and independence while being excused as social necessities. The main factor maintaining this unequal system was conditioning. From birth, women were taught to value silence, obedience, and modesty. While assertive or independent women were stigmatized as immoral or deviant, the "ideal woman" was portrayed as selfless and committed to her family's welfare. In turn, men were taught to believe that they were born leaders and decision-makers, deserving of power in both public and private spheres.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

A multifaceted strategy that opposes discriminatory customs and gives women the confidence to assert their equal rights is necessary to end the patriarchal cycle. Legal reforms by themselves are insufficient; social and cultural change must also occur. The suggestions listed below provide a framework for tearing down patriarchal systems and advancing gender equality: 1. Despite affirming equality through constitutional guarantees like Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Indian Constitution, their enforcement is still lacking. To guarantee that current

⁵ Barbara Ward

BARBARA WARD, PROGRESS FOR A SMALL PLANET 89 (Harvard Bus. Rev. Sept.-Oct. 1979).

laws against dowries, sexual harassment in the workplace, and domestic abuse are implemented, stronger procedures are needed. Equal inheritance rights, the recognition of marital property, and gender-neutral family laws that undermine patriarchal personal codes should also be given top priority in legal reforms. Encouraging Knowledge and Understanding The most effective strategy for removing gender barriers is still education. Giving girls at all levels access to high-quality education not only improves their economic prospects but also cultivates a critical consciousness against patriarchal conditioning. Gender studies should be incorporated into curriculum changes to challenge discriminatory stereotypes and highlight the contributions made by women in politics, science, and history.. Women's Economic Empowerment Breaking subordination requires economic independence. Policies must guarantee equal pay, promote women's involvement in formal labor markets, and give them access to credit and business opportunities. For women to prosper economically, support systems like maternity benefits, reasonably priced childcare, and workplace safety laws are crucial. Questioning Religious and Cultural Norms Religious and traditional societal beliefs need to be critically examined. Resolving Gender-Based Violence Both community-driven initiatives and more robust legal enforcement are necessary to end violence against women. Accountability can be enhanced by victim support programs, gender-sensitive policing, and expedited courts. Campaigns to combat toxic masculinity and encourage civil relationships are also required to alter societal perceptions that support violence. Changing Family Structures and Socialization The family system is how patriarchy is perpetuated. The gendered conditioning that teaches girls obedience and boys dominance must be actively rejected by parents, educators, and community leaders. In order to create a new generation less burdened by patriarchal legacies, children should instead be raised with values of equality, respect, and mutual responsibility.

CONCLUSION

In many respects, the history of women's rights is a history of opposition to patriarchal dominance. Religion, social conventions, and man-made notions that exalted women's subordination have all imposed systematic limitations on them since ancient times. The idea that women's value was solely based on their service to men was reinforced by cultural customs like child marriage, dowries, and restrictions on widows, while texts like the Manusmriti codified inequality. As a result, a cycle was established in which men were conditioned to enforce subordination and women were conditioned to accept it, guaranteeing the persistence of patriarchy across generations. However, history also shows instances of

adversity and resiliency. These discriminatory systems have been repeatedly questioned by female philosophers, reformers, and activists, sowing the seeds of resistance that are still growing today. In addition to legislative changes, a significant cultural and psychological shift is necessary to dismantle patriarchal systems. In order to truly acknowledge women as equal citizens who are capable of exercising autonomy in all areas of life, society must go beyond token displays of respect. Liberating women is only one aspect of breaking down social barriers; another is establishing an inclusive and just society in which equality is unassailable. Because gender equality is directly linked to sustainable development and democratic advancement, empowering women economically, socially, and politically will benefit entire communities. In order to do this, ingrained patriarchal values must be challenged and swapped out for equality, freedom, and dignity. Then and only then will women's rights become a reality rather than just an ideal.⁶

⁶ Amartya Sen

Amartya Sen, *More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing*, 304 BRIT. MED. J. 587 (1992).