PRAISE FOR ALLAN G. JOHNSON’S

The Gender Knot

“Johnson’s book is beautifully written, thoughtful, and provides compelling analyses of patriarchy and the powerful ideology that supports it and inhibits change. It is a guidebook for a life-changing adventure.”
—REBECCA BACH, Contemporary Sociology

“Allan Johnson has written one of the best, most readable, and most comprehensive accounts of patriarchy that is available in print.”
—PAULA ROTHENBERG, editor of Race, Class, and Gender in the United States

“This is a brilliant accounting of patriarchy . . . a long, hard and unflinchingly honest look at how patriarchy works.”—Off Our Backs

“As any knitter will tell you, the way to untangle a knot is not to pull hard on one end, but to gently shake the entire skein until all the threads are loosened. In this book, Allan Johnson gently and patiently shakes the patriarchal knot until each of the constituent threads becomes analytically clear.”
—MICHAEL KIMMEL, author of Manhood in America

“A good introduction for women as well as men, but most importantly, it is from a man who can clearly explain to men what’s happening and what they can do to change it.”—Feminist Bookstore News

“The Gender Knot is a unique book that fills a void in the literature on gender. Highly accessible and a pleasure to read, Johnson[’s account] never oversimplifies complex issues. His engaging style will appeal to a wide audience.”
—abby l. ferber, Gender and Society

“An excellent gift for anyone who ‘just doesn’t get it’ about feminism.”
—Arnold Kahn, Psychology of Women Quarterly
“This book can be especially recommended to male students as an exemplary model of plainspoken and conscientious writing about male supremacy that is neither naive nor navel-gazing and that takes feminist theory and analysis absolutely seriously. This honorable book promises to be around a long time. The Gender Knot belongs on the reading list of every course in sexual politics that encourages students to engage patriarchy meaningfully.”
—JOHN STOLTENBERG, Men and Masculinities

“Johnson takes patriarchy to task, critically examining its dynamics to reveal an underlying, pervasive domination-and-control mentality that is destructive to both females and males.”—Choice

“This book is well written, well argued, and nails all the key issues right on the head. It’s the best I’ve seen in this genre.”
—MICHAEL SCHWALBE, author of Unlocking the Iron Cage
The Gender Knot
ALSO BY ALLAN G. JOHNSON

NONFICTION

The Forest and the Trees

Privilege, Power, and Difference

The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology

FICTION

The First Thing and the Last

Nothing Left to Lose
The Gender Knot

Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy

THIRD EDITION
FOR NORA L. JAMIESON

Life partner, dearest friend,
comrade and soul companion in the journey
toward understanding how to live a life
that makes a difference
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The Gender Knot flows from many parts of my life. It is based on more than thirty years of work on issues of gender inequality, from reading and teaching and research to giving speeches at rallies to testifying before legislative committees to writing op-ed pieces to working in corporations and schools with men and women trying to understand what living in a patriarchal world is about.

It has been shaped by my experience growing up and living as a male in the United States. As a boy who liked literature more than football, for example, I often felt on the outside of the young-boy macho in-crowd, a vantage point that ultimately enabled me, I think, to see many things about gender more clearly and notice many other things that I would otherwise have missed. I’ve also had to come to terms with my mother and father and how their lives and our relationships were shaped by the choices they made within patriarchy as it shaped their generation. I have had to navigate the aggressive ritual of status competition among boys and men. I have had to move from avoiding men as dangerous and untrustworthy to, during five years in a weekly men’s group, rediscovering what men can be beneath the distortions of patriarchal masculinity. I’ve had to resolve the massive contradictions between my need and love for women and the horrendous damage patriarchal culture does to gender relations and sexuality. I have had to learn to accept the social fact of male privilege and the damage it does to women, without taking it personally as saying something bad about me simply because I’m a man.

This work has been touched in powerful ways by the people I have known who share in the struggle to understand what patriarchy means for the world and their lives. From knowing them has come an unshakable belief that
Oppression is not an inevitable feature of human life, that the choices each of us makes matter more than we can ever know, and that we must find ways for both men and women to become part of the solution rather than just part of the problem.

This book comes from a place in me once described by a writer friend as “an edificial turn of soul.” It bends me toward the underlying structure of things and the work of making sense and finding ways to share that with others. It draws me to build bridges that connect a diversity of life experiences, ideas, and ways of seeing, to create a common ground for people who might otherwise feel driven apart.

This book also arises from a lifelong preoccupation with the moral nature of human life and its connection to fundamental questions about the world and us in it. What is this that we are about here? What binds us together in a common lot and what drives us to inflict such suffering on one another? Such questions make it impossible to ignore issues of social inequality, injustice, and disregard for human dignity. They also go to the heart of a moral imperative to do something, however small, for change. But to act, I have needed to find a way to think about what it means to take responsibility for things that seem so huge and beyond my ability to affect anything. This has led me to what is perhaps the most important bridge of all, the one that enables me to find ways to make a difference.

Notes on the Revised and Updated Edition

This new edition benefits from several years of speaking on college and university campuses, an experience that has prompted three significant changes. The first is to describe in greater detail the characteristics of patriarchy, especially male identification. The second is to reposition Chapter 4 to become Chapter 2, moving the discussion of patriarchy to where it’s needed most. The third expands the discussion of individuals and systems, with the addition of a graphic that I’ve found useful with a wide variety of audiences.

I have also made a point of telling more about Robert Bly and Sam Keen, whose work I often use to exemplify typical “men’s movement” takes on patriarchy and gender inequality. Because many readers may be unfamiliar with them, I hope this will make the discussion more useful.

Definitions of key—and controversial—terms such as sexism, privilege, and political correctness are found in footnotes attached to their first use.

Finally, I have tried to respond to suggestions from a variety of helpful sources (see the Acknowledgments) as well as bring the book generally up to date in its references to current figures, events, and resources. A lot has happened in the world since the first edition was published, most notably the violent events of September 11, 2001, and the virtual state of war embodied in the violent U.S. response to them. Some argue that the terrorist attack on the United States forever altered the basic outlines of social life, but as I believe
the chapters to follow make clear, violence is a manifestation of patriarchal dynamics that have been around for a long, long time.

Such changes are in keeping with my most important consideration in preparing the revised edition, which has been to keep a steady focus on the book’s original purpose—to illuminate the basic character of patriarchy, the relationship of individuals to it, and the kinds of thinking that get in the way of seeing both in a clear and critical way.

Notes on the Third Edition

In addition to the usual updates and fine-tunings, the most important change in this edition is a new chapter—“What Changes and What Does Not: Manhood and Violence”—an analysis not only of the causes of men’s violence but of its persistent invisibility as a gendered phenomenon. I have also added a glossary that I hope will be of use to readers, especially those who may be unfamiliar with historical and other references made throughout the book.

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When I think about where this book comes from and the parts other people have played in it, the line between 'me' and 'them' quickly becomes a mysterious and elusive thing. It never would have occurred to me to write this book were it not for the many writers whose work on gender issues has been part of the air I have breathed for most of my adult life. I am especially grateful to Marilyn French, whose monumental book, Beyond Power, profoundly shaped my understanding of patriarchy.

The work and the result would have been enormously different without the people who cared enough to read what I wrote and tell me the truth of what they thought of it. As I prepared the first edition, Jeanne Bonaca read the entire manuscript and gave freely of her enthusiasm and support, her fine ear for clarity and the simple elegance of good prose, and her uncanny grasp of things structural. Nicholas Ayo, Michael Kimmel, Jeffrey McChristian, Michael Schwalbe, Sharon Toffey Shepela, and an anonymous reviewer for Temple University Press all shared thoughtful and useful comments. Many of my students at Hartford College for Women read portions of the book, especially the chapter on feminism. In addition to their feedback, they gave the gift of pushing for things to make sense and to go beyond describing the problem to identifying what we can do about it once we know it’s there.

In preparing this edition, I am grateful for the feedback and suggestions I received from Elisabeth Bass (Camden County College), Gerard L. Katilius, Elisabeth M. Lucal (Indiana University South Bend), Elizabeth Ralston, Michael Schwalbe (North Carolina State University), Will C. van den Hoonoord (University of New Brunswick), and Rebecca Wishnant (University of Dayton). I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for Temple University Press.
I also express my profound debt to the generations of activists, scholars, and writers whose courage and vision and hard work have given me the basis for most of what I know about these issues. And to those authors whose work I encountered so long ago that their insights have inadvertently slipped into my store of common knowledge, I can only offer both my appreciation and my apologies for being unable to give them proper attribution.

Writing about problems is always easier than doing something about them. I have been fortunate to know people like Bettina Borders, Kim Cromwell, Donna Garske, Annalee Johnson, Charles Levenstein, Anne Menard, and Jane Tuohy, who provide models of how to think about the world and act on what they think. They have profoundly affected my writing of this book, especially the last chapter.

I have also benefited from the kindness of strangers whose generous response to my call for help in finding the right agent to represent this book spoke volumes about the possibilities of a feminist future. Although I had never met any of them, when I wrote out of the blue to Barbara Ehrenreich, Susan Faludi, and Marilyn French, they surprised me by writing back with suggestions and support. Arnold Kahn’s help came via the women’s studies Internet discussion list, whose subscribers have reminded me daily for years with their ongoing conversation that this work is alive and well and goes on all over the world.

My publishing journey led to literary agents Gail Ross and Howard Yoon, who from the start believed in this book and the importance of getting it published, and published well. Their faith and good work led in turn to Temple University Press, its director David Bartlett, and its editor-in-chief Michael Ames. Their enthusiasm and commitment to The Gender Knot’s potential are gratifying reminders of the wisdom of patience.

For this edition, I thank my editor, Janet Francendese, for all her support of my work, and production editors Charles Ault and Rebecca Logan, design editor Kate Nichols, and copy editor Amy Schneider for expertly bringing the manuscript into print. And my thanks go to Lou Fuiano for designing such a beautiful cover and to Ann-Marie Anderson and Gary Kramer for all they do to ensure that The Gender Knot reaches the broadest possible audience.

Closer to home are people who believe not simply in the writing but, more important, in the writer. Writing is solitary work, but surrounding it have been people whose loving presence and support make the solitude possible. I am especially mindful of my sister Annalee Johnson and of Annie Barrett, Kristin Flyntz, Anne Batterson, and Rob Okun.

Last and most important is Nora L. Jamieson, to whom the book is dedicated. It is hard for me to grasp the significance of having lived together as life partners these past thirty-four years. As a feminist healer and wise-woman, Nora lives and works in the thick of patriarchy and its consequences. In that sense we have breathed the same air of attention, swum in a common sea of ideas, and struggled with the same issues. And yet we are in such different places as woman and man under patriarchy, a fact that both divides us and, in
our facing it together, joins us in common purpose. The paths of our work and lives run parallel and cross, diverge and draw near in a continuing flow that enriches beyond measure not only the work but the experience of being alive. It has been thirty-four years of “Can I run something by you?” and “getting it” and “not getting it,” of bedside tables piled high with books, of play and passion and silent meditation, of struggling with the patriarchal legacy as it lives in each of us and, unavoidably, between us. And it has been thirty-four years of learning how a woman and man can share life and love each other in spite of patriarchy, of learning what is possible across the great gender divide we were born into, of the many meanings that ‘we’re in this together’ can have.

And, of course, she read every word of every draft and brought to it her uncannily accurate ‘crap detector’ that invariably goes off whenever something doesn’t make sense or reads badly. And she has brought to it her belief in the work and in me—I can only wonder at the depth of difference that has made to both.
The Gender Knot
I

What Is This Thing Called Patriarchy?
Twenty-five men and women gather for a workshop on gender issues in the workplace. In a simple opening exercise, they divide into small single-gender groups and brainstorm four lists: the advantages and disadvantages their own gender has in the workplace and their perception of the advantages and disadvantages the other gender has. The women dive into the task with energy to spare that gets more intense as their lists of women's disadvantages and men's advantages spill over onto second and third flip-chart pages. Sometimes the energy comes in waves of laughter that roll out into the room and wash up on the still-quiet shore of the men's groups. At other times it is felt simply in women's furious scribbling of one item after another: paid less, held to higher or double standards, worked harder, granted little power or respect, judged on physical attractiveness more than performance or ability, confined by glass ceilings, not taken seriously, harassed, given little support or mentoring, allowed little space or privacy, excluded from informal networks, patronized, expected to do 'housekeeping' chores from taking notes to getting coffee, treated as weaker and less intelligent, often denied credit for ideas appropriated by men, and treated without recognition of the family roles that also claim their time and energy in a society that makes few such demands on men.

On it goes. The men work in tight-knit little groups on the fringes of the women's energy. Surprisingly for many, their lists are quite similar to the women's lists, if a bit shorter. Men miss many of the forms that advantage and disadvantage take, but in a basic sense, they know very well what they've got and what women do not.

When the men are done, they stand in awkward silence and watch the women, still at work. After a while each group shares what it has come up with.
There is some good-natured if somewhat nervous laughter over the inevitable throwaway items: men don’t have to wait in line to use the bathroom; men can get away with simpler wardrobes. But there soon follows a steady stream of undisputed facts about how gender shapes the lives of women and men in the workplace and beyond.

The accumulated sum hangs heavy in the air. There are flashes of anger from some of the women, but many don’t seem to know what to do with how they feel. The men stand and listen, muted, as if they would like to find a safe place to hide or some way to defend themselves, as if all of this is about them personally. In response to questions about how the lists make them feel, one man says that he wants to hang on to the advantages without being part of their negative consequences for women. “Depressed” is a frequent response from the women.

In the silence that falls over the room, two things become clear: the lists say something powerful about people’s lives, and we do not know how to talk about them. And if we cannot talk about a problem, we make it all but impossible to understand it, much less discover what to do about it.

The result is a kind of paralysis that reflects not only where this particular group—and countless others like it—finds itself as it confronts the reality of gender but where entire societies are in relation to these issues.

Where we are is stuck. After two decades of sometimes dramatic change in the 1970s and 1980s, progress toward gender equity has slowed to a crawl since 1990. The average man working full time, for example, earns almost 30 percent more than the average woman. In spite of being a majority among college graduates, most employed women are still confined to a narrow range of low-status, low-paid occupations, and those women who have made inroads into previously male-dominated professions, such as medicine, are more likely than men to be in lower-ranked, lower-paid positions. At the same time, men entering occupations such as nursing and elementary school teaching are more highly paid than comparable women and more likely to advance to supervisory positions. In universities, science professors, both male and female, widely regard female students as less competent than comparable males and are less likely to offer women jobs or to pay those they do hire salaries equal to those of men. In politics, women make up just 19 percent of the U.S. Congress and hold less than a quarter of state legislature seats and statewide elective executive offices in spite of being over 50 percent of the population. In families, women still do twice the amount of housework and child care as men, even when they are employed outside the home.¹

We are not only stuck but lost. There is, for example, an ongoing global epidemic of men’s violence, including war, terrorism, mass murders, sex trafficking, and rape and battering directed at girls and women. Official responses and public conversations show little understanding of the underlying causes or what to do, including what to make of the fact that the overwhelming majority of violence is perpetrated by men (about which I have much to say in Chapter 10). Worldwide, 30 percent of women report having been sexually or physically
assaulted by a current or former partner, and women are more at risk for rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war, and malaria combined. The U.S. military recently revealed that sexual assault is so pervasive within its ranks that the greatest threat to women’s safety comes not from the hazards of military service but from sexual assault by male service members.

Where we are is deep inside an oppressive gender legacy whose consequences in a male-dominated world extend far beyond relations between women and men, from runaway capitalist greed and class inequality to the impending devastation of climate change.

On a scale both large and small, we are faced with the knowledge that what gender is about is tied to a great deal of suffering, injustice, and trouble, but our not knowing what to do with that knowledge binds us in a knot of fear, anger, and pain, of blame, defensiveness, guilt, and denial. We are unsure of just about everything except that something is wrong, and the more we pull at the knot, the tighter it gets.

Patriarchy

We are trapped inside a legacy whose core is patriarchal. To understand what that is and take part in the journey out, we need ways to unravel the knot, and this begins with getting clear about what it means to be inside a patriarchal legacy. To get clear, we first have to get past the defensive reaction of many people—men in particular—to the word ‘patriarchy’ itself, which they routinely interpret as code for ‘men.’ It will take an entire chapter (Chapter 2) to do justice to this issue, but for now, the gist of the answer is this: Patriarchy is not a way of saying ‘men.’ Patriarchy is a kind of society, and a society is more than a collection of people. As such, ‘patriarchy’ refers not to me or any other man or collection of men but to a kind of society in which men and women participate. By itself this poses enough problems without the added burden of equating an entire society with a group of people.

What is patriarchy? A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered.

*I use the term ‘privilege’ according to the definition developed by Peggy McIntosh in her classic paper “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies” (Working Paper 189, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA, 1988). Privilege refers to any unearned advantage that is available to members of a social category while being systematically denied to others. In patriarchy, for example, what men say tends to have greater credibility than what women say, even when they’re saying the same thing. Access to privilege depends on the prevailing definition of categories such as ‘male’ and ‘female’ and the advantages and disadvantages socially attached to them. It also depends on related characteristics—a man’s access to male privilege, for example, varies according to other status characteristics such as race, sexual orientation, disability status, and social class. McIntosh’s approach is important to any understanding of privilege because it refers not to individuals but to the organization of social systems in which people live.
It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women.

**Male Dominance**

Patriarchy is male dominated in that positions of authority—political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military, domestic—are generally reserved for men. Heads of state, corporate CEOs, religious leaders, school principals, members of legislatures at all levels of government, senior law partners, tenured professors, generals and admirals, and even those identified as ‘head of household’ all tend to be male under patriarchy. When a woman finds her way into higher positions, people tend to be struck by the exception to the rule and wonder how she’ll measure up against a man. It is a test rarely applied to men (“I wonder if he’ll be as good a president as a woman would be”) except, perhaps, when men take on the devalued domestic and other caring work typically done by women, such as child care and housework or caring for an elderly parent. Even then, men’s failure to measure up can be interpreted as a sign of superiority, a trained incapacity that actually protects their privileged status (“You change the diaper. I’m no good at that.”).

In the simplest sense, male dominance creates power differences between men and women. It means, for example, that men can claim larger shares of income and wealth. It means they can shape culture in ways that reflect and serve men’s collective interests by, for example, controlling the content of films and television shows, or handling rape and sexual harassment cases in ways that put the victim rather than the defendant on trial.

Male dominance also promotes the idea that men are superior to women. In part this occurs because we don’t distinguish between the superiority of positions in a hierarchy and the kinds of people who usually occupy them.³ This means that if men occupy superior positions, it is a short leap to the idea that men themselves must be superior. If presidents, generals, legislators, priests, popes, and corporate CEOs are all men (with a few token women), then men as a group become identified with superiority. It is true that most men in patriarchies are not powerful individuals and spend their days doing what other men tell them to do whether they want to or not. At the same time, every man’s standing in relation to women is enhanced by the male monopoly over authority in patriarchal societies.

Male dominance also does not mean that all women are powerless. Secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton and Supreme Court justices Sonia Sotomayor, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, and Elena Kagan, for example, are all far more powerful than most men will ever be. But they stand out precisely because they are so unusual in a society in which male dominance is the rule.

Like all subordinate groups, women also manage to have some power by making the most of what is left to them by men. Just as patriarchy turns women into sex objects who are supposed to organize their lives around men’s needs,
for example, so, too, does this arrangement grant women the power to refuse to have sex with them.  

Male Identification

Patriarchal societies are male identified in that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are culturally associated with how we think about men, manhood, and masculinity. The simplest example of this is the still-widespread use of male pronouns and nouns to represent people in general. When we routinely refer to human beings as ‘man’ or call women ‘guys,’ we construct a symbolic world in which men are in the foreground and women are in the background, marginalized as outsiders (a practice that can back people into some embarrassingly ridiculous corners, as in a biology text that described ‘man’ as “a species that breast-feeds his young”).

But male identification amounts to much more than this, for it also takes men and men’s lives as the standard for defining what is normal. The idea of a career, for example, with its sixty-hour week, is defined in ways that assume the career holder has something like a traditional ‘wife’ at home to perform the vital support work of taking care of children, doing laundry, and making sure there is a safe, clean, comfortable haven for rest and recuperation from the stress of the competitive male-dominated world. Since most women don’t have such ‘wives,’ they find it harder to identify with and prosper within this male-identified model.

Another aspect of male identification is the cultural description of masculinity and manhood in terms that are virtually synonymous with the core values of society as a whole. These include qualities such as control, strength, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion that interferes with other core values (such as invulnerability). These male-identified qualities are associated with the work valued most in patriarchal societies—business, politics, war, athletics, law, and medicine—because this work has been organized in ways that require such qualities for success. In contrast, qualities such as cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing, empathy, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and intuitive and other nonlinear ways of thinking are all devalued and culturally associated with women and femininity.

Of course, women are not devalued entirely. Women are often prized for their beauty as objects of male sexual desire, for example, but as such they are often possessed and controlled in ways that ultimately devalue them. There is also a powerful cultural romanticizing of women in general and mothers in particular, but it is a tightly focused sentimentality (as on Mother’s Day or Secretaries Day) that has little effect on how women are regarded and treated on a day-to-day basis. And, like all sentimentality, it does not have much weight when it comes to actually doing something to support women’s lives by, for
example, providing effective and affordable child day care facilities for working mothers or family-leave policies that allow working women to attend to the caring functions for which we supposedly value them so highly, and without compromising their careers.

Because patriarchy is male identified, when most women look out on the world they see themselves reflected as women in a few narrow areas of life such as ‘caring’ occupations and personal relationships. To see herself as a leader, for example, a woman must first get around the fact that leadership itself has been gendered through its identification with manhood and masculinity as part of patriarchal culture. While a man might have to learn to see himself as a manager, a woman has to be able to see herself as a woman manager who can succeed in spite of the fact that she is not a man.

As a result, any woman who dares strive for standing in the world beyond the sphere of caring relationships must choose between two very different cultural images of who she is and who she ought to be. For her to assume real public power—as in politics, corporations, or the professions—she must resolve a contradiction between her culturally based identity as a woman, on the one hand, and the male-identified position that she occupies on the other. For this reason, the more powerful a woman is under patriarchy, the more ‘unsexed’ she becomes in the eyes of others as her female cultural identity recedes beneath the mantle of male-identified power and the masculine images associated with it. With men the effect is just the opposite: the more powerful they are, the more aware they are of their manhood. In other words, in a patriarchal culture, power looks sexy on men but not on women.

For all the pitfalls and limitations, however, some women do make it to positions of power. What about Margaret Thatcher, for example, or Queen Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great, Indira Gandhi, and Golda Meir? Doesn’t their power contradict the idea that patriarchy is male dominated?

The answer is that patriarchy can accommodate a limited number of powerful women as long as the society retains its essential patriarchal character, especially male identification. Although a few individual women have wielded great power in patriarchal societies, each has been surrounded by powerful men—generals, cabinet ministers, bishops, and wealthy aristocrats or businessmen—whose collective interests she must support by embracing core patriarchal values. Indeed, part of what makes these women stand out as so exceptional is their ability to embody values culturally defined as masculine: they have been tougher, more decisive, more aggressive, more calculating, and more emotionally controlled than most men around them.6

These women’s power, however, has nothing to do with whether women in general are subordinated under patriarchy. It also doesn’t mean that putting more women in positions of authority will by itself do much for women unless we also change the patriarchal character of the systems in which they operate. Indeed, without such change, the Hillary Rodham Clintons and Sonia Sotomayors of the world tend to affirm the very systems that subordi-
nate women, by fostering the illusion of gender equality and by embracing the patriarchal values on which male power and privilege rest. This does not mean we shouldn’t try to get women into positions of power, only that making some women powerful will not be enough to change the system itself.

Since patriarchal culture identifies power with men, most men who are not themselves powerful can still feel some connection with the idea of male dominance and with men who are powerful. It is far easier, for example, for an unemployed working-class man to identify with male leaders and their displays of patriarchal masculine toughness than it is for women of any class. When upper-class U.S. president George W. Bush ‘got tough’ with Saddam Hussein, for example, men of all classes could identify with his acting out of basic patriarchal values. The same can be said of President Barack Obama’s ordering the mission that resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden. In this way, male identification gives even the most lowly placed man a cultural basis for feeling a sense of superiority over an otherwise highly placed woman. This is why, for example, a construction worker can feel within his rights as a man when he sexually harasses a well-dressed professional woman who happens to walk by.7

Lina Wertmüller beautifully portrays this dynamic in her classic 1974 film *Swept Away*, in which a working-class man is marooned on an island with an upper-class woman. Although disadvantaged by class, he is acutely aware of his right to sexually dominate any woman he chooses, which he uses to accomplish a temporary overthrow of her class privilege. Under patriarchy, this scenario would have little credibility or mainstream audience appeal if we reversed the situation and had a lower-class woman subdue and dominate an upper-class man. The objection is based not on social class but on the threat to the gender order that subordinates women. She would not be seen as bold or heroic; rather, he would be judged for his lack of masculine power and control.

When a society identifies a particular group such as men as the standard for human beings in general, it follows that men will be seen as superior, preferable, and of greater value than women. Not only will men be culturally defined as superior, but whatever men do will tend to be seen as having greater value. Occupations performed primarily by men, for example, will tend to be more highly regarded and better paid than occupations done primarily by women even when women’s jobs require the same or even higher levels of skill, training, and responsibility. In the nineteenth century, most secretaries, telephone operators, librarians, and nurses were men, and those occupations consequently commanded relatively higher pay and status than they do now, when they are mostly performed by women. At the same time, as men have entered occupations such as nursing and elementary school teaching in search of stable employment following the economic collapse of 2008, they have received better pay than women and are more likely to be elevated to supervisory positions, a phenomenon known as the ‘glass escalator.’8

And just as what men do tends to be valued more highly than what women do, those things that are valued in a culture will tend to be associated with men
more than with women. The idea of God, for example, is of enormous importance in human life, and so it should come as no surprise that every monotheistic patriarchal religion worships a male-identified God gendered as masculine. As Mary Daly argues in her book Beyond God the Father, this, in turn, puts men in the highly favorable position of having God identified with them, which further reinforces the position of women as ‘other’ and the legitimacy of men’s claim to privilege and dominance.

Male Centeredness

In addition to being male dominated and male identified, patriarchy is male centered, which means that the focus of attention is primarily on men and boys and what they do. Pick up any newspaper or go to any movie theater and you will find stories primarily about men and what they’ve done or haven’t done or what they have to say about either. With rare exceptions, women are portrayed as being along for the ride, fussing over their support work of domestic labor and maintaining love relationships, providing something for men to fight over, or being foils that reflect or amplify men’s heroic struggle with the human condition. If there is a crisis, what we see is what men did to create it and how men then deal with it.

If you want a story about heroism, moral courage, spiritual transformation, endurance, or any of the struggles that give human life its deepest meaning, men and masculinity are usually the terms in which you must see it. Men’s experience is what patriarchal culture uses to represent human experience, even when it is women who most often live it. Films about single men taking care of children, for example, such as Sleepless in Seattle, have far more audience appeal than those focusing on women, even though women are much more likely than men to be single parents. And stories that focus on deep bonds of friendship—which men still have a harder time forming than do women—are far more likely to focus on men than women.

In another example, the closing scenes of Dances with Wolves show the white male hero and his Native American–raised white wife leaving his recently adopted tribe, which is also the only family she has known since early childhood. The focus, however, is clearly on the drama of his moment as she looks on supportively. She is leaving her adoptive parents, but we see only the emotionally charged parting (with a touching exchange of gifts) between son-in-law and father-in-law. And the last words we hear are the deeply moving cries of a newfound warrior friend testifying to the depth of feeling between these two men (which, oddly, is the only expression of it we ever see).

By contrast, films that focus on women, such as Precious, The Queen, Erin Brockovich, Elizabeth, Girlfriends, Leaving Normal, Passion Fish, Strangers in Good Company, Beaches, and Thelma and Louise, are such startling exceptions that they invariably sink quickly into obscurity, are dismissed as clones of male
themes (‘female buddy movies’), or are subjected to intense scrutiny as aberrations needing to be explained.

To get a full sense of what I mean, look at the list of films awarded the Oscar for Best Picture since 1968 (Table 1). Of almost fifty films, only four tell a story through the life of someone who is female— *Million Dollar Baby, Chicago, Out of Africa*, and *Terms of Endearment*—and only three of these focus on a serious subject, with the other being a musical.

A male center of focus is everywhere. Research makes clear, for example, what most women probably already know: that men dominate conversations by talking more, interrupting more, and controlling content. When women suggest ideas in business meetings, they often go unnoticed until a man makes the same suggestion and receives credit for it (or, as a cartoon caption put it, “Excellent idea, Ms. Jones. Perhaps one of the men would like to suggest it.”). In classrooms at all levels of schooling, boys and men typically command center stage and receive most of the attention. Even when women gather, they must often resist the ongoing assumption that no situation can be complete or even entirely real unless a man is there to take the center position. How else do we

### Table 1: Films Winning the Oscar for Best Picture, 1968–2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Film</th>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>12 Years a Slave</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Dances with Wolves</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Argo</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Driving Miss Daisy</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>The Artist</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Rain Man</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>The King’s Speech</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>The Last Emperor</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>The Hurt Locker</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Platoon</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Slumdog Millionaire</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Out of Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>No Country for Old Men</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Amadeus</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>The Departed</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Terms of Endearment</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Crash</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Gandhi</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Million Dollar Baby</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Chariots of Fire</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Lord of the Rings</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Ordinary People</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Kramer vs. Kramer</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>A Beautiful Mind</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>The Deer Hunter</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Gladiator</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Annie Hall</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>American Beauty</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Rocky</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Shakespeare in Love</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>Titanic</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>The Godfather, Part II</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>The English Patient</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>The Sting</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Forrest Gump</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>The French Connection</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Schindler’s List</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Patton</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>The Unforgiven</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Midnight Cowboy</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>The Silence of the Lambs</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Oliver!</td>
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understand the experience of groups of women who go out for drinks and conversation and are approached by men who ask, “Are you ladies alone?”

Many men, however, will protest that they do not feel at the center, and this is one of the many ironic aspects of male privilege. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf writes that women often serve as “looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” Woolf’s insight suggests several things about what happens to men in patriarchal societies. As part of men’s training, they are affirmed through what they accomplish.

This contrasts with women, whose training mirrors them in different ways, affirming them less for what they accomplish than for their ability to empathize and mirror others as they form and maintain personal relationships. If men want to satisfy the human need to be seen and acknowledged by others, it will be through what they do and how well they live up to the standards of patriarchal manhood (which is one reason why male friendships tend to focus so heavily on competition and doing things together). This affects both individual men and patriarchy as a system, for men’s focus on themselves (“See me!”) and women’s focus on others reinforce patriarchy’s male-identified, male-centered aspects. These, in turn, support male dominance by making it easier for men to concentrate on enhancing and protecting their own status.

Another consequence of patriarchal mirroring is that heterosexual men in particular are encouraged to relate to women with the expectation of seeing only themselves. When men’s reflection is obscured by the reality and demands of women’s own lives, men are vulnerable to feeling left out and neglected. Like cold-blooded animals that generate little heat of their own, this dynamic can make it hard for men to feel warm unless the light is shining on them at the moment, something well known to women who spend inordinate amounts of time worrying about whether they’re paying enough attention to their male partners, about whether they should be sitting quietly and reading a book or spending time with women friends when they could be paying attention to the men in their lives. It is a worry few men wrestle with unless women complain.

All of this is compounded by the expectation that in order to feel normally alive, patriarchal men must be reflected as larger than life. This makes it difficult to develop an acceptable sense of self as an ordinary human being with a relatively stable center from which to relate to other people. As a result, feeling themselves the focus of a one-way flow of attention is the closest that patriarchal training allows many men to come to authentic personal relationships.

This should not be confused with most of what passes for male bonding. When men get together with other men, they typically are male centered in the general sense of focusing attention on men and what men do. On an interpersonal level, however, men generally do not put other men at the center of their attention because they are in competition with one another and because they are too busy looking for someone who will put them at the center. As I have wrestled with the difficulty of forming friendships with other men, for
example, it has been both puzzling and painful to realize how rarely it occurs to me to telephone a male friend simply to ask how he is, to place his life at the center of my attention at my own initiative. For many years I simply could not see the point. I was in the middle of one of many patriarchal paradoxes: that men live in a male-centered society and yet often act as though the reality of other men's inner lives matters very little.

Although men generally do not provide one another with the kind of mirroring they expect from women, they do play a part in fostering the illusion of being larger than life, especially through competition. When men compete, they enter the pumped-up world of winners and losers, in which the number of times a ball goes through a hoop or is carried over a line elevates some men over other men (and, by default, over all women) in ways judged to be important in patriarchal culture. If ever there were an assertion of larger-than-life status, the triumphant shout of “We're number one!” is it. (Not asked is, For how long, compared to whom, and so what?) Even the losers and the male spectators share in the reflected glow of the noble masculine striving after the coveted opportunity to stand before the mirror that makes men look bigger than they are, if only for a little while—until the next season begins or someone faster, stronger, younger, or smarter comes along.

All of this, of course, is impossible for most men to sustain. Women have distracting lives of their own in spite of their training to keep men at the center of attention. And the fleeting moments of actually living up to the expectation of being larger than life are just that. As a result, patriarchal expectations that place men at the center paradoxically perch men just a short drop away from feeling that they are not at the center—and, therefore, on some level, that they don’t exist at all.

The Obsession with Control

The fourth characteristic of patriarchy is an obsession with control as a core value around which social and personal life are organized. As with any system of privilege that elevates one group by oppressing another, control is an essential element of patriarchy: men maintain their privilege by controlling both women and other men who might threaten it. Given the primacy of control, it becomes the cultural standard for a truly superior human being, which is then used to justify men’s privileged position. Men are assumed (and expected) to be in control at all times, to be unemotional (except for anger and rage), to present themselves as invulnerable, autonomous, independent, strong, rational, logical, dispassionate, knowledgeable, always right, and in command of every situation, especially those involving women. These qualities, it is assumed, mark them as superior and justify male privilege. Women, in contrast, are assumed (and expected) to be just the opposite, especially in relation to men.

It would be misleading to suggest that control is inherently bad or that it inevitably leads to oppression. Control is, after all, one of the hallmarks of
our species. It is our only hope to bring some order out of chaos or to protect ourselves from what threatens our survival. We imagine, focus, and act—from baking bread to planting a garden to designing a national health plan—and all of this involves control. Even small children delight in a sense of human agency, in being able to make things happen. Under patriarchy, however, control is more than an expression of human essence or a way to get things done. It is valued and pursued to a degree that gives social life an oppressive form by taking a natural human capacity to obsessive extremes.

Under patriarchy, control shapes not only the broad outlines of social life but also men’s inner lives. The more that men see control as central to their sense of self, well-being, worth, and safety, the more driven they feel to go after it and to organize their lives around it. This takes men away from connection to others and themselves and toward disconnection. This is because control involves a relationship between controller and controlled, and disconnection is an integral part of that relationship. To control something, we have to see it as a separate ‘other.’ Even if we are controlling ourselves, we have to mentally split ourselves into a ‘me’ who is being controlled and an ‘I’ who is in control. And if we are controlling other people, we have to justify the control and protect ourselves from an awareness of how it affects them.

As a result, controllers come to see themselves as subjects who intend and decide what will happen and to see others as objects to act upon. The controlled are seen without the fullness and complexity that define them as human beings. They have no history, no dimensions to give them depth or command the controllers’ attention or understanding except when it interferes with control. When parents control small children, for example, they often act as though children are less than full human beings and justify punishment by saying that children cannot reason and do not understand anything else. As children grow older, it becomes more difficult to see them as ‘other’ and control becomes more difficult, especially in that memorable moment when a parent looks at a maturing child and sees a self-aware person looking back. Suddenly, control that once seemed justified may feel awkward, inappropriate, or even foolish.

Patriarchy is not organized around simply an obsession with control, but a male-identified obsession with control. As a result, the more that men participate in the system, the more likely they are to see themselves as separate, autonomous, and disconnected from others. They may become versions of the western hero who rides into town from nowhere, with no past, and leaves going nowhere, with no apparent future. Women’s lives, of course, also involve control, especially in relation to children. But the idea and practice of control as a core principle of social life is part of what defines patriarchal manhood, not womanhood, and so women are discouraged from pursuing it and criticized if they do. A woman perceived as controlling a man is typically labeled a castrating bitch or a ball buster, and the man she supposedly controls is looked down on as henpecked, pussy whipped, and barely a man at all. But there are no insulting terms for a man who controls a woman—by having the last word, not
letting her work outside the home, deciding when she’ll have sex, or limiting her time with other women—or for the woman he controls. There is no need for such words because men controlling women is culturally defined as a core aspect of patriarchal manhood.

Women and Patriarchy

An inevitable consequence of patriarchy is the oppression of women, which takes several forms. Historically, for example, women have been excluded from major institutions such as church, state, universities, and the professions. Even when they have been allowed to participate, it has generally been at subordinate, second-class levels. Marilyn French goes so far as to argue that historically women’s oppression has amounted to a form of slavery:

What other term can one use to describe a state in which people do not have rights over their own bodies, their own sexuality, marriage, reproduction or divorce, in which they may not receive education or practice a trade or profession, or move about freely in the world? Many women (both past and present) work laboriously all their lives without receiving any payment for their work.  

Because patriarchy is male identified and male centered, women and the work they do tend to be devalued, if not made invisible, and women are routinely repressed in their development as human beings through neglect and discrimination in schools and in occupational hiring, development, promotion, and rewards. Anyone who doubts that patriarchy is an oppressive system need only consult the growing literature documenting not only economic, political, and other institutionalized sexism but pervasive violence, from pornography to the everyday realities of battering, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. And there are also the daily headlines—such as recent revelations of a long history of pervasive sexual harassment and assault in the U.S. military that went on for years before a public scandal prompted demands for corrective action, which, as of this writing, has yet to materialize.

This is not to deny that much has changed in women’s position over the last hundred years—from the appointment of women to the U.S. Supreme Court to assigning women to combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is less tolerance for overtly sexist behavior toward women in many settings. An elite of women has managed to enter the professions and, to a degree, upper levels of corporate management. And most laws that blatantly discriminate against women have been repealed.

To a great degree, however, such highly publicized progress supports an illusion of fundamental change. In spite of new laws, for example, violence and sexual harassment against women are still pervasive. Inequality of income and wealth has not changed much from the 1980s, and women are still heavily
concentrated in a small number of low-level service and pink-collar occupations. In spite of the huge influx of married women, many of them mothers, into the paid labor force, and in spite of a great deal of talk about the joys of fatherhood, there has been no substantial increase in men’s sense of responsibility for domestic labor or their willingness to actually participate. And, as we saw earlier, women's share of authority in major institutions—from the state to organized religion to corporations to science, higher education, and the mass media—remains low. In short, the basic features that define patriarchy as a type of society have barely budged, and the women’s movement has been stalled in much the same way that the civil rights movement was stalled after the hard-won gains of the 1960s.

Thus far, mainstream women’s movements have concentrated on the liberal agenda, whose primary goal has been to allow women to do what men do in the ways that men do it, whether in science, the professions, business, government, or the military. More serious challenges to patriarchy have been silenced, maligned, and misunderstood for reasons that are not hard to fathom. As difficult as it is to change overtly sexist* sensibilities and behavior, it is much harder to raise critical questions about how sexism is embedded in major institutions such as the economy, politics, religion, health care, and the family. It is easier to allow women to assimilate into patriarchal society than to question society itself. It is easier to allow a few women to occupy positions of authority and dominance than to question whether social life should be organized around principles of hierarchy, control, and dominance at all, to allow a few women to reach the heights of the corporate hierarchy rather than question whether people’s needs should depend on an economic system based on dominance, control, and competition. It is easier to allow women to practice law than to question adversarial conflict as a model for resolving disputes and achieving justice. It has even been easier to admit women to military combat roles than to question the acceptability of warfare and its attendant images of patriarchal masculine power and heroism as instruments of national policy. And it has been easier to elevate and applaud a few women than to confront the cultural misogyny that is never far off, available to anyone who wants to use it to bring women down and put them in their place.

*The words ‘sexism’ and ‘sexist’ are commonly used to describe a personal prejudice or the person who holds it. As sociologist David Wellman argues in Portraits of White Racism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), however, that approach is far too narrow to be of use because male privilege requires far more than this to continue. Following his lead, I use the term to indicate anything that has the effect of promoting male privilege, regardless of the intentions of the people involved. By judging actions, policies, and institutional arrangements solely in terms of their consequences, Wellman’s conceptualization allows us to focus on the full range of forces that perpetuate male privilege, and saves us from the trap of personalizing what is essentially a social and systemic phenomenon.
Easier, yes, but not easy or anything close to it. Like all movements that work for basic change, women’s movements have come up against the depth to which the status quo is embedded in virtually every aspect of social life. The power of patriarchy is especially evident in the ongoing resistance even to the liberal agenda of women’s movements—including the Supreme Court’s retreat on women’s reproductive rights, the routine trashing of feminism resulting in women’s reluctance to embrace or identify with it, misogynist attacks on women running for public office, and a vocal movement of men who portray themselves as victims not only of the sex/gender system but of women’s struggle to free themselves from their own oppression under it.

The power of patriarchy is also reflected in its ability to absorb the pressures of superficial change as a defense against deeper challenges. Every social system has a certain amount of give that allows some change to occur and in the process leaves deep structures untouched and even invisible. Indeed, the ‘give’ plays a critical part in maintaining the status quo by fostering illusions of fundamental change and acting as a systemic shock absorber. It keeps the focus on symptoms while root causes go unnoticed and unremarked, and it deflects the power we need to take the risky deeper journey that leads to the heart of patriarchy and our involvement in it.

Like all social systems, patriarchy is difficult to change because it is complex and its roots run deep. It is like a tree rooted in core principles of masculine control, male dominance, male identification, and male centeredness. Its trunk is the major institutional patterns of social life as shaped by the roots—family, economy, politics, religion, education, music, and the arts. The branches—first the larger, then the progressively smaller—are the actual communities, organizations, groups, and other systems in which we live our lives, from cities and towns to corporations, parishes, marriages, and families. And in all of this, individuals are the leaves who both make possible the life of the tree and draw their form and life from it. (See Figure 1.)

Obviously, we are in something much larger than ourselves, and it is not us. But equally obvious is our profound connection to it through the social conditions that shape our sense of who we are and what kinds of alternatives we can choose from. As a system, patriarchy encourages men to accept male privilege and perpetuate women’s oppression, if only through silence. And it encourages women to accept and adapt to their oppressed position even to the extent of undermining movements to bring about change. We cannot avoid participating in patriarchy. It was handed to us the moment we came into the world. But we can choose how to participate in it.

In this sense, we are far more than passive leaves on a tree, for human beings think and feel and, most important, make choices through which we either perpetuate or challenge the status quo. But as later chapters show, our relationship to the system of patriarchy is complex and full of paradox, challenging us to do the necessary work to understand what it is and what it has to do with us.
Deep Structures and the Way Out

Over the last century or so, a lot has happened regarding male privilege and patriarchy. There has been an enormous amount of feminist writing and social action in Western industrial societies, and for the first time the potential exists to challenge patriarchy in a serious and sustained way. Most people’s attention, however, is on the surface storms raging around particular issues such as abortion, pornography, sexual harassment and violence, and political and economic discrimination. These struggles rarely if ever raise critical questions about the nature of patriarchy itself. In spite of the important feminist work being done on the patriarchal roots of pornography and men’s violence against women, for example, public discussion rarely gets beyond issues of free speech, constitutional rights, and individual psychopathology. In part this is because we do not know how to get beyond such questions to explore the trunk and
roots of patriarchal society, but it is also a way to avoid going deeper into our own lives and the world that shapes them.

To go deeper, we need both inner and outer awareness, which flow from different yet related kinds of insight. I have come to know the first in part as a client in psychotherapy, which more than anything else introduced me to the existence of deep structures inside each of us—webs of belief, experience, and feeling that help shape the patterns in our inner and outer lives. They affect us so deeply in part because we are not aware of them in a critical way. Most people, for example, have a strong personal sense of what it means to be a woman or a man, a sense that profoundly affects how they think, feel, and act. But rarely do we think about such ideas critically. Rarely do we look closely at how they affect us or explore alternatives to them.

We are unaware because awareness is hard work (try to monitor your thoughts for just five minutes), and also because we are easily threatened by anything that questions our basic assumptions. As a result, we live as if these deep structures did not exist at all, as if life’s surface that presents itself to us most immediately is all there is. This makes us least aware of aspects of our selves that most affect us, except, perhaps, when a crisis forces us to look deeper, to overcome our resistance simply because we feel we have no other choice. We are like spouses who confront the reality of how they actually experience each other only when their marriage is falling apart.

A second kind of insight is grounded in my work as a sociologist, through which I’ve been able to see a similar phenomenon at a larger level. As a matter of course, we go about our daily lives without an ongoing awareness of the deep structures and shared understandings that define the social terms on which we live. It is as if the other leaves and small branches to which they cling are all there is to the patriarchal tree. To some degree, we are unaware of deeper social realities because we do not know how to be aware. We lack a clear working sense of what a society actually is, for example, or how to think about large systems like industrial capitalism, much less about how we’re involved in them.

In part, this is just a matter of training. Two hundred years ago, for example, psychology did not exist, and barely a century ago Freud still had not come along to suggest the existence of the subconscious and offer his ideas on personality and the meaning of dreams. And yet today a basic psychological language for making sense of inner experience has become the stuff of every day conversation. In a similar way, we need to incorporate into common usage ways of making sense of societies and our relation to them.

What is perhaps most important about the deep structures of individuals and societies is how closely they are connected to one another. It is easy to think, for example, that reality is just what we think it is, that a phenomenon like sexuality is a fixed concrete ‘thing’ that simply exists, waiting for us to discover and experience it. But as Michel Foucault has argued, our intensely personal experience of ourselves as sexual beings is profoundly shaped by the society we live in and ways of thinking about sex that are part of its culture.21
In a heterosexist and heteronormative culture, for example, when people use the word ‘sexual’ they typically mean heterosexual and exclude all other forms of sexual expression as possible meanings. In ancient Greece, however, sexuality included a much broader range of human potential and experience, which in turn shaped people’s perceptions and experience as sexual beings. And only a century or so ago in Europe and the United States, ‘homosexual’ was a term that described behavior but not people: people could behave in homosexual ways, but this did not make them homosexuals. The word ‘homosexuality’ first appeared in print in Germany in 1869 and was first used in the *New York Times* in 1926. Today, by contrast, in spite of progress toward legalizing same-sex marriage, being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is still treated as an aberration that forms the core both of individual people’s social identities and an oppressive system of heterosexual privilege that excludes and discriminates against them.

Just what we think sexuality is, then, depends on which society we’re participating in and how it shapes our sense of who we are. ‘Female’ and ‘male,’ for example, are in the simplest sense words used to categorize people according to the configuration of their bodies. We tend to experience the words as more than cultural creations, however, treating them as representing a fixed, objective reality. We act as though ‘sex’ is a word that refers to just one thing, regardless of culture, and that it includes two and only two possible categories, male and female.

In fact, however, things do not divide up so neatly. An estimated 2 to 3 percent of babies are born with physical characteristics (both visible and not) that do not fall clearly into one sex category or another. An intersex baby might be genetically female, for example, with a ‘normal’ vagina and a clitoris that has developed as a penis. In cultures that admit only two sexes, there is little tolerance for such ambiguity, and parents usually feel compelled to do something about it, from infanticide to surgically assigning one sex or the other to the newborn.

Even when babies are unambiguously identified as male or female at birth, however, this does not automatically mean they will grow up to accept this as the objective reality of who they are. Most people are cissexual, which means their internal experience of themselves as physically male or female matches the sex they have been assigned at birth. But for transsexual people, the two do not match and they feel as though they have been born into the wrong body. And for those who are genderqueer, neither ‘male’ nor ‘female’ is adequate to describe their experience of themselves as embodied beings, and sometimes it is a combination of the two.

From this perspective, words like ‘female’ and ‘male’ are cultural categories that have as much to do with creating reality as they do with objectively naming it, if not more so. Since the categories are cultural creations, they inevitably differ across cultures and shift over time. In general, for example, the idea that everyone must have a clear and fixed identity as male or female is relatively
new in human societies, and contrasts with societies that provide other alternatives. The Native American Diné (Navajo) allow those who are intersex to occupy a third category (called *nadle*) with its own legitimate social standing. In some other cultures, people have been allowed to choose their sex regardless of what it appears to be, as was the case historically in several Native American Plains tribes, where men sometimes responded to a spiritual vision by taking on not only the appearance but the social standing of women. It is important to note that how people identify themselves by sex or gender does not determine their sexual orientation. A biological male who identifies as female, for example, may be heterosexual, gay, or bisexual.

Things are often not what they seem, especially when it comes to the deep roots of the patriarchal system that shape the world we live in and our seemingly private selves. There are many reasons for this and much that gets in the way that thread together to make a tangled knot. Finding a way to unravel that knot is the major purpose of this book.

### We Would Rather Not Know

We are as stuck as we are primarily because we have not acknowledged the roots of patriarchy and our involvement in it. We show no enthusiasm for going deeper than a surface obsession with sex and gender. We resist even using terms like ‘patriarchy’ or ‘male privilege’ in polite conversation. We act as if none of it is there, because the realization that it does exist is a door that swings only one way and we cannot go back again to a state of not knowing. We are like a family colluding in silence over dark secrets of damage and abuse, or like ‘good Germans’ during the Holocaust who ‘never knew’ anything terrible was being done. We cling to the illusion that everything is all right, that bad things do not happen to good people, that good people cannot participate in the production of injustice and cruelty, and that if we only leave things alone they’ll stay pretty much as they are and, we often like to think, always have been.

Many women, of course, and a few men do dare to see and speak the truth, but they are always in danger of being attacked and discredited in order to maintain the silence. Even those who would never call themselves feminists often know there is something terribly wrong with the structures of privilege that are so central to life in modern societies and without which we think we cannot survive. The public response to feminism has been ferociously defensive precisely because feminism touches such a deep nerve of truth and the denial that keeps us from it. If feminism were truly ridiculous, it would be ignored. But it is not ridiculous, and so it provokes a backlash.

We should not be too hard on ourselves for hanging on to denial and illusions about patriarchy. Letting go is risky business, and patriarchy is full of smoke and mirrors that make it difficult to see what has to be let go of. It is relatively easy to accept the idea of patriarchy as male dominated and male identified, for example, and even as male centered. Many people, however, have a
much harder time seeing women as oppressed.\textsuperscript{27} This is a huge issue that sparks a lot of argument, and for that reason it will take several chapters to do it justice. Still, it is worthwhile to outline a basic response here.

The reluctance to see women as oppressed has several sources. The first is that many women have access to privilege based on race, class, disability status, or sexual orientation and it is difficult for many to see women as oppressed without insulting ‘truly oppressed’ groups such as the lower classes or racial minorities.\textsuperscript{28} How, for example, can we count upper-class women among the oppressed and lower-class men among their oppressors?

Although this objection has a certain logic to it, it rests on a confusion between the position of women and men as groups and their experience as individuals. Identifying ‘female’ as an oppressed status under patriarchy does not mean that every woman suffers its consequences to an equal degree or in the same ways, just as living in a racist society doesn’t mean that every person of color suffers equally or that every white person shares equally in the benefits of white privilege.

Living in a patriarchy does mean, however, that every woman must come to grips with an inferior gender position and that whatever she makes of her life will be \textit{in spite of} it. With the exception of child care and other domestic work and a few paid occupations related to it, women in almost every field of adult endeavor must still labor under the presumption of being inferior to men, interlopers from the margins of society who must justify their participation and their right to be counted as ‘one of the guys.’ Men may have such experiences because of race or other subordinate standing, but not because they are men.

It is in this sense that patriarchies are male dominated even though most individual men may not \textit{feel} dominant, especially in relation to other men. This is a crucial insight that rests on the fact that when we talk about societies, words like ‘privilege’ and ‘oppression’ describe relations between categories of people such as whites and people of color, lower and upper classes, or women and men. How privilege and oppression actually play out among individuals is another issue. Depending on social factors such as race or class, individual men will vary in their access to male privilege. We can make a similar argument about women and the price they pay for belonging to a subordinate group. Upper-class women, for example, may be insulated to some degree from the oppressive effects of being women under patriarchy, such as discrimination in the workplace. Their class privilege, however, exists \textit{in spite of} their subordinate standing as women, which they can never completely overcome, especially in relation to husbands.\textsuperscript{29}

No woman is immune, for example, to the cultural devaluing of women’s bodies as sexual objects to be exploited in public and private life, or the ongoing threat of sexual harassment and violence. To a rapist, the most powerful woman in the land is still a woman—and this more than anything culturally marks her as a potential victim.\textsuperscript{30}
Along with not seeing women as oppressed, we resist seeing men as a privileged oppressor group. This is especially true of men who are aware of their own suffering, who often argue that both men and women are oppressed because of their gender and that neither oppresses the other.

Men undoubtedly suffer because of their participation in patriarchy, but it is not because men are oppressed as men. For women, gender oppression is linked to a cultural devaluing and subordination of women as women. Men, however, do not suffer because manhood is a devalued, oppressed status in relation to one that is higher and more powerful. Instead, to the extent that men suffer as men—and not because they are also gay or of color or have a disability—it is because they belong to the dominant gender category in a system of gender privilege that both benefits them and exacts a price in return.

A key to understanding this is that a category of people cannot oppress themselves. They can inflict injury on themselves and suffer from their position in society. But if we say that a social category can oppress or persecute itself we turn the concept of social oppression into a mere synonym for socially caused suffering, which it is not.

Oppression is a social phenomenon that happens between different categories of people either within or between societies. It is a system of social inequality through which one group is positioned to dominate and benefit from the exploitation and subordination of another. This means not only that a group cannot oppress itself but also that it cannot be oppressed by society. Oppression is a relation that exists between groups, not between groups and society as a whole.

To understand oppression, then, we must distinguish it from suffering that has other social roots. Even the massive suffering inflicted on men through the horror of war is not an oppression of men as men, because there is no system in which a group of non-men subordinates men and enforces and benefits from their suffering. The systems that control the machinery of war are themselves patriarchal, which makes it impossible for them to oppress men as men.

Warfare does oppress people of color and the lower classes, who are often served up as cannon fodder by privileged classes whose interests war most often serves. Some 80 percent of all U.S. troops who served in Vietnam, for example, were from working-class and lower-class backgrounds. But this oppression is based on race and class, not gender. When Warren Farrell, a leading figure in the men's rights movement, argues that men are “disposable,” he confuses men as a privileged social category with classes and races that are indeed regarded as disposable. If war made men truly disposable as men, we would not find monuments and cemeteries in virtually every city and town in the United States dedicated to fallen soldiers (with no mention of their race or class), or endless retrospectives on the anniversary of every milestone in World War II.

Rather than devalue or degrade patriarchal manhood, warfare celebrates and affirms it. As I write this on the anniversary of D-Day and the Normandy
invasion, I cannot help but feel the power of the honor and solemn mourning accorded the casualties of war, the deep respect opponents often feel for one another, and the countless monuments dedicated to men killed while trying to kill other men whose names, in turn, are inscribed on still more monuments. But these ritual remembrances do more than sanctify sacrifice and tragic loss, for they also sanctify war itself and the patriarchal institutions that promote and legitimate it. Leaders whose misguided orders, blunders, and egomanical schemes bring death to tens of thousands, for example, earn not ridicule, disgust, and scorn but a curious historical immunity framed in images of noble tragedy and heroic masculine endeavor. In stark contrast to massive graveyards of honored dead, the memorials, the annual speeches and parades, there are no monuments to the millions of women and children caught in the slaughter and bombed, burned, starved, raped, and left homeless. An estimated 90 percent of wartime casualties are civilians, not soldiers, and these include a large proportion of children and women. During the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, it was official military policy to not keep count of civilian deaths and injuries. And so, there are no great national cemeteries devoted to them. War, after all, is a manhood thing.

Perhaps one of the deepest reasons for denying the reality of women’s oppression is a reluctance to admit that a real basis for conflict exists between women and men. We do not want to admit it because, unlike other groups involved in oppressive systems of privilege, such as whites and people of color, females and males really do need each other in profound ways, if only as parents and children. This can make us reluctant to see how patriarchy puts us at odds regardless of what we want or how we feel about it. Who wants to consider the role of gender oppression in everyday married and family life? Who wants to know how dependent we are on patriarchy as a system, how deeply our thoughts, feelings, and behavior are embedded in it? Men resist seeing the oppression of their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters because we have participated in it, benefited from it, and developed a vested interest in it. We resist seeing our fathers as members of a privileged oppressor group and may prefer to see them as hapless victims of women and unseen social forces in which men and manhood magically play no part. We resist, perhaps because in our fathers we see ourselves and because we are still trying to figure out why they didn’t love us very well, or were never around, or were around but in the wrong ways. And we struggle to figure all that out in the hope that if we do, we might be able to have them after all and become something different ourselves.

Harder still is seeing our fathers linked to the oppression of our mothers or our mothers’ unavoidable participation in their own oppression, playing at being less than they are or giving themselves away in the name of perfect motherhood or tolerating neglect and abuse. All of this we resist, because we could not help taking our mothers and fathers into ourselves and making them part of our deepest longings and most enduring expectations. And in the process we
also drew into our deepest selves core elements from the patriarchal roots of
gender privilege and oppression.

But, once again, we must remember that as deeply as the patriarchal tree
shapes our lives, we are the leaves and not the roots, trunk, or branches. We are
too easily blinded by the good/bad fallacy that says only bad people can par-
ticipate in and benefit from societies that produce bad consequences. We act as
though patriarchy can be reduced to personality types, as if our participation
shows we have failed as people. But like any social system, patriarchy cannot be
reduced to personal feelings, intentions, and motivations.

It is impossible, for example, to live in this world and not participate in
industrial capitalism. We read about the sweatshops in Asia and the United
States in which workers (mostly women and children) labor for little pay un-
der appalling conditions, and we may feel anger at such cruelty and comfort
ourselves that our good intentions somehow lift us above such things. But a
quick look through our closets and the labels in our clothing will probably
show otherwise, that yesterday’s bargain was made in Thailand or Mexico and
subsidized by the exploitation of those very same workers. This doesn’t make
us bad people, as if we had set out to do harm, but it does involve us in the so-
cial production of injustice and unnecessary suffering.

In the same way, men do not have to feel cruel or malevolent toward women
in order to participate in and benefit from patriarchy as a system. This is a cru-
cial distinction that makes the difference between being stuck in a defensive
moral paralysis and seeing how to participate in change.

There are many ways to avoid facing the world in ourselves and ourselves
in the world. But it has to get done sooner or later, because any society that does
not take seriously enough the critical process of creating alternatives to itself
probably does not have much of a future. Change work is both frightening and
exciting. It loosens the boundaries of our taken-for-granted reality, and when
we feel lost we need to learn how to be ‘lost comfortably,’ like the mountain
man who never got lost in spite of long periods when he didn’t know how to get
where he was going.36

We can move toward a clearer and more critical awareness of what patri-
archy is about, of what gets in the way of working to end it, and new ways for
all of us—men in particular—to participate in its long evolutionary process of
turning into something else. Patriarchy is our collective legacy, and there is
nothing we can do about that or the condition in which we received it. But
there is much that we can do about what we pass on to those who follow.
When you say patriarchy,” a man complained from the rear of the audience, “I know what you really mean—me!” A lot of people hear “men” whenever someone says “patriarchy,” so that criticism of male privilege and the oppression of women is taken to mean that all men—each and every one of them—are oppressive people. It is enough to prompt many men to take it personally, bristling at what they often see as a way to make them feel guilty. And some women feel free to blame individual men for patriarchy simply because they are men.

Some of the time, men feel defensive because they identify with patriarchy and its values and do not want to face the consequences these produce or the prospect of giving up male privilege. But defensiveness can also reflect a common confusion about the difference between patriarchy as a kind of society and the people who participate in it. If we are ever going to work toward real change, it is a confusion we will have to clear up.

To do this, we have to begin by realizing that we are stuck in a model of social life that views everything as beginning and ending with individuals. Looking at things in this way, the tendency is to think that if bad things happen in the world and if the bad thing is something big, it is only because there are bad people who have entered into some kind of conspiracy. Racism exists, then, because white people are racist bigots who hate members of racial and ethnic minorities and want to do them harm. The oppression of women happens because men want and like to dominate women and act out hostility toward them. There is poverty and class oppression because people in the upper classes are greedy, heartless, and cruel.
The flip side of this individualistic model of guilt and blame is that race, gender, and class oppression are actually not oppression at all but merely the sum of individual failings on the part of people of color, women, and people living in poverty, who lack the right stuff to compete successfully with whites, men, and others who know how to make something of themselves.

What this kind of thinking ignores is that we are all participating in something larger than ourselves or any collection of us. On some level, most people are familiar with the idea that social life involves us in something larger than ourselves, but few seem to know what to do with that idea. Blaming everything on ‘the system’ strikes a deep chord in many people, but it also touches on a basic misunderstanding of social life, because blaming the system (presumably society) for our problems doesn’t take the next step to understanding what that might mean. What exactly is a system and how could it run our lives? Do we have anything to do with shaping it, and if so, how? How do we participate in patriarchy, and how does that link us to the consequences? How is what we think of as normal life related to male privilege, women’s oppression, and the hierarchical, control-obsessed world in which everyone’s lives are embedded?

Without asking such questions, not only can we not understand gender fully, but we also avoid taking responsibility either for ourselves or for patriarchy. Instead, ‘the system’ serves as a vague, unarticulated catch-all, a dumping ground for social problems, a scapegoat that can never be held to account and that, for all the power we think it has, cannot talk back or actually do anything.

A powerful example of this is found in the work of Sam Keen and Robert Bly, whose influential books on gender were part of the mythopoetic men’s movement, which attracted a wide following, especially during the 1990s. Although the movement is less visible than it was, Bly’s and Keen’s books continue to enjoy brisk sales, and the views of gender inequality they expressed are still widely used to reject feminism and defend male privilege.

Both Keen and Bly blame much of men’s misery on industrialization and urbanization. The solutions they offer, however, amount to little more than personal transformation and adaptation without changing society itself. The system is invoked in contradictory ways. On the one hand, it is portrayed as a formidable source of all our woes, a great monster that “runs us all.” On the other hand, it is ignored as something we think we do not have to include in a solution.

But we cannot have it both ways. If society is a powerful force in social life, as it surely is, then we have to understand it and how we are connected to it. To do this, we have to change how we think about it, because how we think affects the kinds of questions we ask, and the questions we ask in turn shape the kinds of answers and solutions we come up with.

If we see patriarchy as nothing more than men’s and women’s individual personalities, motivations, and behavior, then it won’t occur to us to ask about larger contexts—such as institutions like the family, religion, and the
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economy—and how people’s lives are shaped in relation to them. From an individualistic perspective, for example, we might ask why a particular man raped, harassed, or beat a particular woman. We would not ask, however, what kind of society would promote persistent patterns of such behavior in everyday life, from wife-beating jokes to the routine inclusion of sexual coercion and violence in mainstream movies. We would be quick to explain rape and battery as the acts of sick or angry men, but without taking seriously the question of what kind of society would produce so much male anger and pathology or direct it toward sexual violence rather than something else. We would be unlikely to ask how gender violence might serve other more normalized ends such as masculine control and domination and the proving of manhood. We might ask why a man would like pornography that objectifies, exploits, and promotes violence against women, or debate whether the Constitution protects an individual’s right to produce and distribute it. But it would be hard to stir up interest in asking what kind of society would give violent and degrading visions of women’s bodies and human sexuality such a prominent and pervasive place in its culture to begin with.

In short, the tendency in this patriarchal society is to ignore and take for granted what we can least afford to overlook in trying to understand and change the world. Rather than ask how social systems produce social problems such as men’s violence against women, we obsess over legal debates and titillating but irrelevant case histories soon to become made-for-television movies. If the goal is to change the world, this will not help. We need to see and deal with the social roots that generate and nurture the social problems that are reflected in and manifested through the behavior of individuals. We cannot do this without realizing that we all participate in something larger than ourselves, something we did not create but that we now have the power to affect through the choices we make about how to participate.

Some readers have objected to describing women as ‘participating’ in patriarchy. The objection is based on the idea that participation, by definition, is something voluntary, freely chosen, entered into as equals, and that it therefore makes no sense that women might participate in their own oppression. But that is not my meaning here, and it is not a necessary interpretation of the word. To participate is to have a part in what goes on, to do something (or not) and to have that choice affect the consequences, regardless of whether it is conscious or unconscious, coerced or not. Of course, the terms of women’s participation differ dramatically from those that shape men’s, but it is participation, nonetheless.

This is similar to the participation of workers in the system of capitalism. They do not participate as equals to the capitalists who employ them or on terms they would choose if they could. Nevertheless, without workers, capitalism cannot function as a system that oppresses them.

The importance of participation can be seen in the many ways that women and working-class people respond to oppression—all the forms that fighting
back or giving in can take. To argue that women or workers do not participate is to render them powerless and irrelevant to patriarchy’s and capitalism’s past, present, and future, for it is only as participants that people can affect anything. Otherwise, women and workers would be like pieces of wood floating down a river, which, as history makes clear, has never been the case.

The something larger that we all participate in is patriarchy, which is more than a collection of individuals. It is a social system, which means it cannot be reduced to the people who participate in it. If you go to work in a corporation, for example, you know the minute you walk in the door that you have entered ‘something’ that shapes your experience and behavior, something that is not just you and the other people you work with. You can feel yourself stepping into a set of relationships and shared understandings about who is who and what is supposed to happen and why, and all of this limits you in many ways. And when you leave at the end of the day, you can feel yourself released from the constraints imposed by your participation in that system. You can feel the expectations drop away and your focus shift to other systems such as family or a neighborhood bar that shape your experience in different ways.

To understand a system like a corporation, we have to look at more than people, because they are not the corporation, even though they make it run. If the corporation were just a collection of people, then whatever happened to the corporation would by definition also happen to them, and vice versa. But clearly this isn’t so. A corporation can go bankrupt or cease to exist altogether without any of the people who work there going bankrupt or disappearing. Or everyone who works for a corporation could quit, but that would not by itself mean the end of the corporation, because corporations are chartered by state governments as legal entities apart from the people who work or invest in them. It would mean only the arrival of a new set of participants. We cannot understand a system, then, just by looking at the people who participate in it, for it is something larger and has to be understood as such.

Even more so, we cannot understand the world and our lives in it without looking at the dynamic relationship between individual people and social systems. Nor can we understand the countless details—from sexual violence to patterns of conversation to unequal distributions of power—that make up the reality of male privilege and the oppression of women.

As Figure 2 shows, this relationship has two parts. The arrow on the right side represents the idea that as we participate in social systems, we are shaped as individuals. Through the process of socialization, we learn how to participate in social life—from families, schools, religion, and the mass media, through the examples set by parents, peers, coaches, teachers, and public figures—a continuing stream of ideas and images of people and the world and who we are in relation to them.

Through all of this, we develop a sense of personal identity—including gender—and how this positions us in relation to other people, especially in terms of inequalities of power. As I grew up watching movies and television,
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For example, the message was clear that men are the most important people because they are the ones who do the most important things, as defined by patriarchal culture. They are the strong ones who build; the heroes and superheroes who fight the good fight; the geniuses, writers, and artists; the bold leaders; and even the evil—but always interesting—villains. Even God is gendered masculine.

Among the many consequences of such messages is to encourage in men a sense of entitlement in relation to women—to be tended to and taken care of, deferred to and supported no matter how badly they might behave. In the typical episode of the television sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*, for example, Ray Barone routinely behaves toward his wife, Debra, in ways that are insensitive, sexist, adolescent, and downright stupid, but by the end of each half hour we always find out why she puts up with it year after year—for some reason that is never made clear, she just loves the guy. This sends the message that it is reasonable for a heterosexual man to expect to ‘have’ an intelligent and beautiful woman who will love and stay with him in spite of his behaving badly toward her much of the time.

Invariably, some of what we learn through socialization turns out not to be true and then we may have to deal with that. I say “may” because powerful forces encourage us to keep ourselves in a state of denial, to rationalize what we have been taught. It is a way to keep it safe from scrutiny, if only to protect our sense of who we are and ensure our being accepted by other people, including family and friends. In the end, the default is to adopt the dominant version of reality and act as though it’s the only one there is.

In addition to socialization, participation in social systems shapes our behavior through paths of least resistance, a concept that refers to a feature of social systems that guides the conscious and unconscious choices we make from one moment to the next. When a young male college student at a party, for example, observes another man taking sexual advantage of a young woman who is clearly so drunk that she has little idea of what is happening, there are many things he could do. The options vary, however, in how much social resistance they are likely to provoke. They range from asking to join in or standing by to watch as if it were some kind of entertainment to walking away and...
pretending he doesn’t know what is happening or stepping in to intervene before it goes any further. And, of course, as a human being he could do plenty of other things—sing, dance, go to sleep, scratch his nose, and so on. Most of these possibilities won’t even occur to him, which is one of the ways that social systems limit our options. But of those that do occur to him, usually one will risk provoking less social resistance than all the rest. The path of least resistance in such a situation is to go along and not make any trouble, to not get in the way of another man making use of a woman, to not risk being accused of siding with a woman against a man and thereby appearing to be less of a man himself, and unless he is willing to deal with the greater resistance that would follow, that is the choice he is most likely to make.

Our lives consist of an endless stream of choices as we navigate among various possibilities in relation to the path of least resistance in each social situation. Most of the time we make choices unconsciously without realizing what we’re doing. It is what seems most comfortable to us, most familiar and safe. But there are also many times, such as with the young man just described, when the path of least resistance may be anything but easy, just as it isn’t easy for women to do most of the housework and child care or live up to patriarchal norms of feminine beauty. The resistance to the path is ‘least’ only in comparison with the alternatives. An awareness of those alternatives is what enables us to make conscious, informed choices, and that is where our potential to make a difference lies.

This brings us to the arrow on the left side of the figure, which represents the fact that human beings are the ones who make social systems happen. A classroom, for example, does not happen as a social system unless and until students and teachers come together and, through their choices from moment to moment, *make* it happen in one way or another. Because people make systems happen, then people can also make systems happen differently. And when systems happen differently, the consequences are different as well. In other words, when people step off paths of least resistance, they have the potential not simply to change other people but to alter the way the system itself happens.

Given that systems shape people’s behavior, this kind of change can be powerful. When a man objects to a sexist joke, for example, it can shake other men’s perception of what is socially acceptable and what is not so that the next time they are in this kind of situation, their perception of the social environment itself—not just of other people as individuals, whom they may or may not know personally—may shift in a new direction that makes old paths (such as telling sexist jokes) more difficult to choose because of the increased risk of social resistance.

The dynamic relationship between people and social systems represents a basic sociological view of the world at every level of human experience, from the global capitalist economy to casual friendships to the patriarchal system in which women and men participate. Thus, patriarchy is more than a collection of women and men and cannot be understood by understanding *them.*
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We are not patriarchy, no more than people who believe in Allah are Islam or Canadians are Canada. Patriarchy is a kind of society organized around certain kinds of social relationships and ideas that shape paths of least resistance. As individuals, we participate in it as we live our lives. Paradoxically, our participation both shapes our lives and gives us the opportunity to be part of changing or perpetuating it. But we are not it, which means patriarchy can exist without men having oppressive personalities or actively conspiring with one another to defend male privilege.

To demonstrate that gender privilege and oppression exist, we do not have to show that men are villains, that women are good-hearted victims, that women do not participate in their own oppression, or that men never oppose it. If a society is oppressive, then people who grow up and live in it will tend to accept, identify with, and participate in it as normal and unremarkable. That is the path of least resistance in any system, and it is hard not to follow it, given how we depend on society and its rewards and punishments that hinge on going along with the status quo. When privilege and oppression are woven into the fabric of everyday life, we do not need to go out of our way to be overtly oppressive for a system of privilege to produce oppressive consequences, for, as Edmund Burke tells us, the only thing that evil requires is that good people do nothing.

The System

In general, a system is any collection of interrelated parts or elements that we can think of as a whole. A car engine, for example, is a collection of parts that fit together in certain ways to produce a whole that is culturally identified as serving a particular purpose. A language is a collection of parts—letters of the alphabet, words, punctuation marks, and rules of grammar and syntax—that fit together in certain ways to form something we identify as a whole. In the same way, a family or a society qualify as systems that differ in what they include and how those elements are organized.

The crucial thing to understand about patriarchy or any other system is that it is something people participate in, an arrangement of shared understandings and relationships that connect people to one another and something larger than themselves. In some ways, we are like players who participate in a game. Monopoly, for example, consists of a set of ideas about things such as the meaning of property and rent, the value of competition and accumulating wealth, and rules about rolling dice, moving around a board, buying, selling, and developing property, collecting rents, winning, and losing. It has positions—player, banker, and so on—that people occupy. It has material elements such as the board, houses and hotels, dice, property deeds, money, and pieces that represent each player’s movements on the board. Thus, the game is something we can think of as a system whose elements cohere with a unity and wholeness that distinguish it from other games and from nongames. Most
important, we can describe it as a system without ever talking about the personal characteristics or motivations of the individual people who actually play it at any given moment.

If we watch people play Monopoly, we notice certain patterns of feeling and behavior that reflect paths of least resistance inherent in the game itself. If someone lands on a property I own, for example, I collect the rent (if I happen to notice), and if they cannot pay, I take their assets and force them from the game. The game encourages me to feel good about this, not necessarily because I’m a greedy and merciless person but because the game is all about winning, and this is what winning consists of in Monopoly. Since everyone else is also trying to win by driving me out of the game, each step I take toward winning protects me and alleviates some anxiety about landing on a property whose rent I cannot pay.

Because these patterns are shaped by the game far more than by individual players, we can find ourselves behaving in ways that might seem disturbing in other situations. When I’m not playing Monopoly, I behave quite differently, even though I’m still the same person. This is why I don’t play Monopoly anymore—I don’t like the way it encourages me to feel and behave in the name of having fun, especially toward people I care about.

The reason we behave differently outside the game does not lie in our personalities but in the game’s paths of least resistance that define certain behavior and values as appropriate and expected. When we see ourselves as Monopoly players, we feel limited by the rules and goals the game defines, and experience them as external to us and beyond our control.

It is important to note how rarely it occurs to people to change the rules. The relationships, terms, and goals that organize the game are not presented to us as ours to judge or alter. The more attached we feel to the game and the more closely we identify ourselves as players, the more likely we are to feel helpless in relation to it. If you’re about to drive someone into bankruptcy, you can excuse yourself by saying you’ve got to take their money because those are the rules, but only if you ignore the fact that you could choose not to play at all or you could suggest a change in the rules. Then again, if you cannot imagine life without the game, you won’t see many alternatives to doing what’s expected.

If we try to explain patterns of social behavior only in terms of people’s personalities and motives—people do greedy things, for example, because they are greedy—then we ignore how behavior is shaped by paths of least resistance found in the systems people participate in. The ‘profit motive’ associated with capitalism, for example, is typically seen as a psychological motive that explains capitalism as a system: capitalism exists because there are people who want to make a profit. But this puts the cart before the horse by avoiding the question of where wanting to make a profit comes from in the first place. We need to ask what kind of world makes such wants possible and encourages people to organize their lives around them, for although we may pursue profit as we play Monopoly or participate in real-world capitalism, the psychological
profit motive does not originate with us. We are not born with it. It does not exist in many cultures and was unknown for most of human history. The profit motive is a historically developed aspect of market systems in general and capitalism in particular that shapes the values, behavior, and personal motives of those who participate in it.

To argue that managers lay off workers, for example, simply because managers are heartless or cruel ignores the fact that success under capitalism often depends on this kind of competitive, profit-maximizing, ‘heartless’ behavior. Most managers probably know that discarding people in the name of profit and expedience is hurtful and unfair. This is why they feel so bad about having to be the ones to carry it out, and they protect their feelings by inventing euphemisms such as ‘downsizing’ and ‘outplacement.’ And yet they participate in a system that produces these cruel results anyway, not because of cruel personalities or malice toward workers but because a capitalist system makes this a path of least resistance and attaches real rewards and costs that depend on whether we follow it.

To use the game analogy, it is a mistake to assume that we can understand players’ behavior without paying attention to the kind of game they’re playing. We create even more trouble by thinking we can understand the game without ever looking at it as something more than the thoughts and feelings of the people who play it. One way to see this is to realize that systems often work in ways that do not reflect people’s experience and motivations.

If we try to explain warfare, for example, by observing what soldiers actually do and the consequences that result, we might attribute war to a human tendency to be aggressive and slaughter one another, to a ‘natural’ brutality. But if we look for such tendencies in the participants themselves, the soldiers, we will not find much, for account after account shows that the typical soldier is motivated by anything but aggressive, bloodthirsty impulses to kill, maim, and destroy.

Most soldiers are simply following paths of least resistance found in social systems. They want nothing more than to do what they think is expected of them—especially to live up to cultural images of what it means to be patriotic and a man—and to get themselves and their friends safely home. Many are there because they couldn’t find another way to make a living or wanted job training or a subsidized college education and never imagined they would wind up in combat. Or they got caught in a wave of nationalism that sent them off to fight for things they only dimly perceive and barely understand. Once in battle, their aggressive behavior is more often than not a defensive reaction to fear created by confronting other men who feel compelled to kill them so that they can do what’s expected of them and get home safely.4

If we look to the personal motivations of national leaders to explain war, we won’t do much better. Leaders often seem to feel caught in webs of obligations, contingencies, and alternatives they did not create and cannot control, and feel compelled to commit armies to war in spite of personal misgivings over
the probable result. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, for example, U.S. president John F. Kennedy and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. The evidence suggests that both felt trapped between what they saw as the imperatives of national interest and the terror that things might get beyond their control and result in nuclear holocaust. Surely their personal motivations pale beside the incalculable horror of what their actions might have caused.\(^5\)

In spite of all the good reasons not to use individual models to explain social life, doing so constitutes a path of least resistance because personal experience and motivation are what we know best. As a result, we tend to see something like patriarchy as the result of poor socialization through which men learn to act dominant and masculine and women learn to act subordinate and feminine. While there is certainly some truth to this, it fails to explain patterns of privilege and oppression. It is no better than trying to explain war as simply the result of training men to be warlike, without looking at economic systems that equip armies at huge profits and political systems that organize and hurl armies at each other. It is like trying to understand what happens during Monopoly games without ever talking about the game itself and the kind of society in which it would exist. Of course, soldiers and Monopoly players do what they do because they have learned the rules, but this doesn’t tell us about the rules themselves and why they exist to be learned in the first place. Socialization is merely a process, a mechanism for training people to participate in social systems. Although it tells us how people learn to participate, it does not illuminate the systems themselves. Accordingly, it can tell us something about the how of a system like patriarchy but very little of the what and the why.

Without some sense of how systems work and how people participate in them, we cannot do much about either. Robert Bly and others in the mytho-poetic men’s movement, for example, want to change cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity. They want men to become “spiritual warriors” in touch with the “deep masculine,” who feel good about themselves as men and who do not need to rely on coercion and violence. And they want the “old men”—the fathers—to initiate the young men into this new way of being. However, because the concept of a patriarchal system has no place in Bly’s analysis, changing cultural definitions will have no effect on that system. In other words, masculinity will be transformed without confronting the control-driven system of patriarchal power relations and male competition and all the ways they are embedded in social institutions.

Where, then, will we find these old men who are prepared to give up their male privilege and adopt, promote, and welcome young men into ways of seeing men (and women) that contradict the prevailing patriarchal order that gives those same old men the most to lose? And where will we find young men willing to follow their lead? Quite simply, we will not, except among a relative few who adopt ‘new masculinities’ as personal styles. These new masculinities,
however, are generally reserved for ritual observances among the like-minded and otherwise kept from public view, or, as seems to be the case in the ‘new men’s movement,’ they turn out to be not so new after all.

Either way, the individualistic model offers little hope of changing patriarchy because patriarchy is more than how people think, feel, and behave. Patriarchy is not simply about the psychic wounding of sons by their fathers, or the dangers and failures of heterosexual intimacy, or boys’ feelings about their mothers, or how men treat women and one another. It includes all of these by producing them as symptoms that help perpetuate the system, but these are not what patriarchy is.

Patriarchy is a way of organizing social life through which such wounding, failure, and mistreatment are bound to occur. If fathers neglect their sons, it is because fathers move in a world that makes pursuit of goals other than deeply committed fatherhood a path of least resistance. If heterosexual intimacy is prone to fail, it is because patriarchy is organized in ways that set women and men fundamentally at odds with one another in spite of all the good reasons they otherwise have to get along together and thrive. And men’s use of coercion and violence against women is a pervasive pattern only because force and violence are supported in patriarchal society, because women are designated as desirable and legitimate objects of male control, and because in a society organized around control, force and violence work.

We cannot find a way out of patriarchy or imagine something different without a clear sense of what patriarchy is and what it’s got to do with us. Thus far, the alternative has been to reduce our understanding of gender to an intellectual gumbo of personal problems, tendencies, and motivations. Presumably, these will be solved through education, better communication skills, consciousness raising, heroic journeys and other forms of individual transformation, and the mere passage of time. Since this is not how social systems actually change, the result is widespread frustration and cycles of blame and denial, which is precisely where most people in this society seem to have been for many years.

We need to see more clearly what patriarchy is about as a system. This includes cultural ideas about men and women, the web of relationships that structure social life, and the unequal distribution of power, rewards, and resources that underlies privilege and oppression. We need to see new ways to participate by forging alternative paths of least resistance, for the system does not simply run us like hapless puppets. It may be larger than us, it may not be us, but it does not happen except through us. And that is where we have the power to do something about it and about ourselves in relation to it.

**Patriarchy**

The key to understanding any system is to identify its various aspects and how they are arranged to form a whole. To understand a language, for example,
we have to learn its alphabet, vocabulary, and rules for combining words into meaningful phrases and sentences. A system like patriarchy is more complicated because there are many different aspects, and it can be difficult to see how they are connected.

Patriarchy’s defining elements are its male-dominated, male-identified, male-centered, and control-obsessed character, but this is just the beginning. At its core, patriarchy is based on a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture embodied by everything from the content of everyday conversation to the practice of war. Patriarchal culture includes ideas about the nature of things, including women, men, and humanity, with manhood and masculinity most closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of other. It is about how social life is and what it is supposed to be, about what is expected of people and about how they feel. It is about standards of feminine beauty and masculine toughness, images of feminine vulnerability and masculine protectiveness, of older men coupled with younger women, of elderly women alone. It is about defining women and men as opposites, about the ‘naturalness’ of male aggression, competition, and dominance on the one hand and of female caring, cooperation, and subordination on the other. It is about the valuing of masculinity and manhood and the devaluing of femininity and womanhood. It is about the primary importance of a husband’s career and the secondary status of a wife’s, about child care as a priority in women’s lives and its secondary importance in men’s. It is about the social acceptability of anger, rage, and toughness in men but not in women, and of caring, tenderness, and vulnerability in women but not in men.

Above all, patriarchal culture is about the core value of control and domination in almost every area of human existence. From the expression of emotion to economics to the natural environment, gaining and exercising control is a continuing goal. Because of this, the concept of power takes on a narrow definition in terms of ‘power over’—the ability to control others, events, resources, or oneself in spite of resistance—rather than alternatives such as the ability to cooperate, to give freely of oneself, or to feel and act in harmony with nature. To have power over and to be prepared to use it are culturally defined as good and desirable (and characteristically masculine), and to lack such power or to be reluctant to use it is seen as weak if not contemptible (and characteristically feminine).

This is a major reason that patriarchies with the means to do so are often so quick to go to war. Studies of the men who formulate U.S. military strategy, for example, show that it’s almost impossible to lose standing by advocating an excessive use of force in international relations (such as the U.S. response to terrorism and the 2003 invasion of Iraq). But those who advocate restraint in the use of force risk being perceived as less than manly and, therefore, lacking credibility.

The main use of any culture is to provide symbols and ideas out of which to construct a sense of what is real. Thus, language mirrors social reality in
sometimes startling ways. In contemporary usage, for example, the words ‘crone,’ ‘bitch,’ and ‘virgin’ describe women as threatening or heterosexually inexperienced and thus incomplete. In their original meanings, however, these words evoked far different images.\textsuperscript{10} The crone was the old woman whose life experience gave her insight, wisdom, respect, and the power to enrich people's lives. The bitch was Artemis-Diana, goddess of the hunt, most often associated with the dogs who accompanied her. And the virgin was merely a woman who was unattached, unclaimed, and unowned by any man and therefore independent and autonomous. Notice how each word has been transformed from a positive cultural image of female power, independence, and dignity to an insult or a shadow of its former self, leaving few words to identify women in ways both positive and powerful.

Going deeper into patriarchal culture, we find a complex web of ideas that define reality and what is considered good and desirable. To see the world through patriarchal eyes is to believe that women and men are profoundly different in their basic natures, that hierarchy is the only alternative to chaos, and that men were made in the image of a masculine God with whom they enjoy a special relationship. It is to take as obvious the ideas that there are two and only two distinct sexes and genders; that patriarchal heterosexuality is natural and same-sex attraction is not; that because men neither bear nor breastfeed children, they cannot feel a compelling bodily connection to them; that on some level every woman, whether heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual, wants a ‘real man’ who knows how to take charge of things, including her; and that females cannot be trusted, especially when they're menstruating or accusing men of abuse.

In spite of all the media hype to the contrary, to embrace patriarchy still is to believe that mothers should stay home and that fathers should work outside the home, regardless of men’s and women’s actual abilities or needs.\textsuperscript{11} It is to buy into the notion that women are weak and men are strong and that women and children need men to support and protect them, despite the fact that in many ways men are not the physically stronger sex, that women perform a huge share of hard physical labor in many societies (often larger than men’s), that women’s physical endurance tends to be greater than men’s over the long haul, and that women tend to be more capable of enduring pain and emotional stress.\textsuperscript{12}

And yet, as Elizabeth Janeway notes, such evidence means little in the face of a patriarchal culture that dictates how things \textit{ought} to be and, like all cultural mythology, "will not be argued down by facts. It may seem to be making straightforward statements, but actually these conceal another mood, the imperative. Myth exists in a state of tension. It is not really describing a situation, but trying by means of this description to \textit{bring about} what it declares to exist."\textsuperscript{13}

To live in a patriarchal culture is to learn what is expected of men and women—to learn the rules that regulate punishment and reward based on how
individuals behave and appear. These rules range from laws that require men to fight in wars not of their own choosing to the expectation that mothers will provide child care. Or that when a woman shows sexual interest in a man or merely smiles or acts friendly, she gives up her right to say no and to control her own body from that point on. And to live under patriarchy is to take into ourselves ways of feeling—the hostile contempt for women that forms the core of misogyny and presumptions of male superiority, the ridicule that men direct at other men who show signs of vulnerability or weakness, or the fear and insecurity that every woman must deal with when she exercises the right to move freely in the world, especially at night and by herself in public places.

Such ideas make up the symbolic sea we swim in and the air we breathe. They are the primary well from which springs how we think about ourselves, other people, and the world. As such, they provide a taken-for-granted everyday reality, the setting for our interactions with other people that continually fashion and refashion a sense of what the world is about and who we are in relation to it. This does not mean that the ideas underlying patriarchy determine what we think, feel, and do. But it does mean they define what we have to deal with as we participate in it.

The prominent place of misogyny in patriarchal culture, for example, doesn’t mean that every man and woman consciously hates all things that are culturally associated with being female. But it does mean that to the extent that we do not feel such hatred, it is in spite of prevailing paths of least resistance. Complete freedom from such feelings and judgments is all but impossible. It is certainly possible for heterosexual men to love women without mentally fragmenting them into breasts, buttocks, genitals, and other variously desirable parts. It is possible for women to feel good about their bodies, to not judge themselves as being too big, to not abuse themselves to one degree or another in pursuit of impossible male-identified standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness.

All of this is possible, but to live in patriarchy is to breathe in misogynist images of women as objectified sexual property valued primarily for their usefulness to men. This finds its way into everyone who grows up breathing and swimming in it, and once inside us it remains, however unaware of it we may be. When we hear or express sexist jokes and other forms of misogyny, we may not recognize it, and even if we do, we may say nothing rather than risk other people thinking we’re too sensitive or, especially in the case of men, not one of the guys. In either case, we are involved, if only by our silence.

The symbols and ideas that make up patriarchal culture are important to understand because they have such powerful effects on the structure of social life. By ‘structure,’ I mean the ways privilege and oppression are organized through social relationships and unequal distributions of power, rewards, opportunities, and resources. This appears in countless patterns of everyday life in family and work, religion and politics, community and education. It is found in family divisions of labor that exempt fathers from most domestic work even
when both parents work outside the home, and in the concentration of women in lower-level pink-collar jobs and male predominance almost everywhere else. It is in the unequal distribution of income and all that goes with it, from access to health care to the availability of leisure time. It is in patterns of male violence and harassment that can turn a simple walk in the park or a typical day at work or a lovers’ quarrel into a life-threatening nightmare. More than anything, the structure of patriarchy is found in the unequal distribution of power that makes male privilege possible, in patterns of male dominance in every facet of human life, from everyday conversation to global politics. By its nature, patriarchy puts issues of power, dominance, and control at the center of human existence, not only in relationships between men and women but among men as they compete and struggle to gain status, maintain control, and protect themselves from what other men might do to them.

To understand patriarchy, we have to identify its cultural elements and how they are related to the structure of social life. We must see, for example, how cultural ideas that identify women primarily as mothers and men primarily as breadwinners support patterns in which women do most domestic work at home and are discriminated against in hiring, pay, and promotions at work. But to do anything with such an understanding, we must also see what patriarchy has to do with us as individuals—how it shapes us and we shape it.

The System in Us in the System

One way to see how people connect with systems is to think of us as occupying social positions that locate us in relation to people in other positions. We connect, for example, to families through positions such as mother, daughter, and cousin; to economic systems through positions such as vice president, secretary, or unemployed; to political systems through positions such as citizen, registered voter, and mayor; and to religious systems through positions such as believer and clergy.

How we perceive the people who occupy such positions and what we expect of them depend on cultural ideas—such as the belief that mothers are naturally better than fathers at child care. Such ideas are powerful because we use them to construct a sense of who we and other people are. When a woman marries a man, for example, how people (including her) perceive and think about her will change as cultural ideas about what it means to be a wife come into play—ideas about how wives feel about their husbands, what is most important to wives, what is expected of them, and what they may expect of others.

From this perspective, who we and other people think we are has a lot to do with where we are in relation to social systems and all the positions we occupy in them. We would not exist as social beings without our participation in one social system or another. It is hard to imagine just who we would be and what our existence would consist of if we took away all of our connections to the symbols, ideas, and relationships that make up social systems. Take
away language and all that it allows us to imagine and think, starting with our names. Take away all the positions that we occupy and the roles that go with them—from daughter and son to occupation and nationality—and with these all the complex ways our lives are connected to other people. Not much would be left over that we would recognize as ourselves.14

We can think of a society as a network of interconnected systems within systems, each made up of social positions and their relations to one another. To say, then, that I am white, male, college educated, nondisabled, and a nonfiction author, novelist, sociologist, U.S. citizen, heterosexual, husband, father, grandfather, brother, and son identifies me in relation to positions which are themselves related to positions in various systems, from the entire world to the family of my birth.

In another sense, the day-to-day reality of a society exists only through what people actually do as they participate in it. Patriarchal culture, for example, places a high value on control and manhood. By themselves, these are just abstractions. But when men and women actually talk and men interrupt women more than women interrupt men, or men ignore topics introduced by women in favor of their own or in other ways control conversation,15 or when men use their authority to harass women in the workplace, then the reality of patriarchy as a kind of society and people’s sense of themselves as gendered beings within it actually happen in a concrete way.

In this sense, like all social systems, patriarchy exists only through people’s lives. Through this dynamic relationship, patriarchy’s various aspects are there for us to see over and over again. This has two important implications for how we understand the system. First, to some extent people will experience patriarchy as external to them. This does not mean the system is a distinct and separate thing, like a house in which we live. Instead, by participating in patriarchy we are of patriarchy and it is of us. Both exist through the other, and neither exists without the other.

Second, patriarchy is not static. It is an ongoing process that is continually shaped and reshaped. Since the thing we are participating in is patriarchal, we tend to behave in ways that create a patriarchal world from one moment to the next. But we have some freedom to break the rules and construct everyday life in different ways, which means the paths we choose to follow can do as much to change patriarchy as they can to perpetuate it.

We are involved in patriarchy and its consequences because we occupy social positions in it, which is all it takes. Because patriarchy is, by definition, a system of inequality organized around culturally created gender categories, we cannot avoid being involved in it. All men and all women are therefore involved in this oppressive system, and none of us can control whether we participate, only how. As Harry Brod argues, this is especially important in relation to men and male privilege:

We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one’s privilege to be “outside” the system. One is always in the system. The only
question is whether one is part of the system in a way which challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I take and which I therefore have the option of not taking. It is something that society gives me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to have it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.16

Because privilege is conferred by social systems, people do not have to feel privileged to be privileged. When I do presentations, for example, I usually come away feeling good about how it went and, therefore, about myself and my work. If anyone were to ask me to explain why things went so well, I would probably mention my ability, my years of experience in public speaking, the quality of my ideas, and the interest and contributions of the audience. The last thing that would occur to me, however, would be that my success was aided by my gender, that if I had performed in exactly the same way but was perceived to be a woman, research shows quite clearly that I would have been taken less seriously, evaluated less positively along many dimensions, and have less of my success attributed to my own efforts and ability.

The difference between the two outcomes is a measure of male privilege, and there is little I can do to get rid of it, because its authority rests not in me but in society itself, especially in cultural images of gender. The audience does not know it is conferring male privilege on me, and I may not be aware that I’m receiving it. But the privilege is there nonetheless. That all of this may feel natural and nonprivileged only deepens the system’s hold on all who participate in it.

A Case in Point: Rethinking Gender Violence

It is a sociological truism that problems produced by social systems cannot be solved without changing systems, but one would never know it to judge from most discussions of how to cure what ails us. No matter how liberals and conservatives approach a problem like poverty, for example, the focus always comes around to changing individuals but not systems, which is a recipe for perpetuating the status quo. Conservatives blame people living in poverty, leaving it to them to pull themselves together, adopt the right values, and work harder. Liberals turn to government for the answer, but this should not be mistaken for systemic change. Liberals use government programs to change individuals living in poverty by giving them money, job training, food stamps, or health care rather than trying to change how the characteristics of society as a system generate poverty in the first place.

The industrial capitalist economy allows a small portion of the population to appropriate most of the income and wealth created each year through people’s labor—as anyone can see from readily available sources. In the United States, the richest 10 percent controls roughly 80 percent of all the wealth, while
the wealthiest fifth of the population controls almost 90 percent. The top fifth receives almost 60 percent of all income, leaving the bottom 80 percent of the population to compete over the rest. When most of the population is left to fight over less than half the income and an even smaller portion of the wealth, it is inevitable that large numbers of people will wind up with too little or just barely enough to live a decent life no matter how hard they work, including huge numbers of working poor who have full-time jobs. In the end, both liberal and conservative solutions call on individuals to work harder and compete more effectively, but the predictable result is that tomorrow’s losers will simply be better educated and harder working than today’s. What neither side dares to even hint is that a system organized to produce such gross inequality is both wrong and unsustainable.

As with poverty, so too with patriarchy. Instead of focusing on patriarchy as a system and understanding people’s relation to it, most discussions psychologize and individualize gender issues and concentrate on education, self-help workshops, psychotherapy, and other programs for individual change. This may make some people happier, better adjusted, or more successful, but without a critical awareness of patriarchy as a system, there is little reason to push beyond personal change.

Men, for example, are often motivated to avoid accusations of sexism, and once they have achieved a socially acceptable level of interpersonal sensitivity, they may enjoy a sense of relief and relative safety from criticism, if not a certain smugness in relation to men who still don’t get it (even here, the patriarchal game continues). And, having found a safe haven, they are unlikely to risk making anyone, including themselves, uncomfortable by digging deeper into questions about what patriarchy is, how it works, and why and how it needs to be changed.

The same can be said of women who manage to rise to the top of their occupations. Having achieved acceptance by the patriarchal system, they risk losing power, rewards, and recognition if they challenge that same system. As a result, they often serve patriarchal interests by accusing feminists who focus on patriarchy of playing victim instead of working to succeed as individuals.

The necessity of focusing on patriarchy as a system does not mean we ignore individuals, only that we include them as participants in a larger system rather than treat them as the beginning and end of everything. Consider, for example, the problem of male violence and harassment against women. Between one quarter and one half of American women can expect to suffer some form of sexual violence during their lives, and women are equally likely to be physically abused in other ways, especially by men close to them. Battering by intimates has become the most frequent cause of injury to women, occurring in some states more often than mugging, car accidents, and sexual assault combined. Sexual harassment is pervasive in the workplace, including the U.S. military, with the proportion of women who say they’ve been harassed ranging from just under half to more than three quarters, depending on the
occupation. According to the United Nations, “Violence against women persists in every country in the world as a pervasive violation of human rights and a major impediment to achieving gender equality.”

With the exception of some feminist analyses (which rarely receive media coverage), most discussions of gender violence and harassment focus on questions about individuals rather than patriarchy, men, and manhood. What kind of man rapes and harasses? What kind of personality problems does he have? What was his childhood like? And what bad experiences did he have with women, especially his mother? This last reason is especially popular, but it makes sense only if we ignore questions about how individuals and their experience are connected to social systems.

Why, for example, should bad experiences with members of a particular group lead to a lifetime of prejudice, hatred, and violence against them? Having a bad experience with someone who wears glasses is unlikely to cause antipathy toward people who wear glasses, but people often say that their prejudice against groups such as blacks, women, or Jews is based on a few bad experiences during their younger years. The difference between people who wear glasses, on the one hand, and Jews, blacks, and women, on the other, is that the latter are all regarded and treated as devalued subordinate groups in a racist, anti-Semitic, sexist society, while the former are not.

What turns an isolated bad experience into a pattern of prejudicial, discriminatory, and violent behavior is a social environment that encourages and supports just that sort of generalization. It does this by presenting such groups in a way that makes it easy to attribute bad experiences with individuals to their stereotypical group characteristics. So if an individual Jew treats a non-Jew badly, the latter is culturally supported in attributing the bad treatment to Jewishness itself rather than, say, to that individual’s personality or mood. The same dynamic occurs with all subordinate groups, including people of color and women. Without such cultural linkages, people would interpret unpleasant incidents with individuals as no more than that, and the particular social characteristics of the other person would take on no special social significance. But when such linkages are provided as paths of least resistance, it is all too easy to seize on devalued characteristics and generalize to them.

Individual psychology and experience are of course important keys to understanding social life. By themselves, however, they cannot explain social patterns such as prejudice, discrimination, and violence inflicted by members of one group against another. It’s like trying to explain the pervasive lynching of blacks during the Jim Crow era by analyzing the personalities of individuals who took part while ignoring how the long history of white privilege and racial oppression shaped white people’s perceptions, expectations, and judgments of what they thought they could do to people of color. It’s as if we don’t need to consider the racist social environment in which lynchers acted, that gave whites something to gain by oppressing blacks and keeping them in a state of intimidation and fear, that defined blacks as suitable targets for hostility
and violence and made it clear that whites who tortured and murdered blacks would go unpunished. It would seem almost silly to suggest that this pattern of lynching occurred simply because one community after another just happened to have some number of people whose troubled personalities led to racial hatred and violence. And it would seem equally silly to suggest that we could stop lynching by identifying troubled individuals and trying to change them — through reeducation and psychotherapy, perhaps — rather than focusing on a social system that promoted and protected their behavior.

And yet that is precisely what we’ve done in relation to men’s violence against women. There is a great deal of public resistance to the idea that such patterns could involve anything more than individual misbehavior and psychopathology.

I once testified, for example, before a state commission charged with finding ways to stop violence against women. I asked the commission to consider that (1) most violence against women is perpetrated by men; (2) this takes place in a society that is clearly male dominated, male identified, and male centered; and (3) we need to understand how these two are connected, how the patriarchal character of the society contributes to patterns of violence by members of the gender-dominant group against members of the gender-subordinate group. These ideas generated considerable interest, and I was invited to meet with a subcommittee responsible for public education and awareness.

My argument was fine, they said, but what could be done with it? I suggested a first step that was both simple and radical: become perhaps the first governmental body in the United States to acknowledge openly that men’s violence against women is widespread, that we live in a patriarchal society, and that we need to devote serious resources to studying how those two are connected. This was greeted with a nervous murmur that circled the room, for apparently even to acknowledge that patriarchy both exists and is problematic is a risky thing to do. Needless to say, patriarchy remained safely invisible in the commission’s final report.

In other such groups, the response has been similar — clear recognition of the scope of the problem but an unwillingness to come out and speak the plain truth. “It will make a lot of men angry,” goes a typical response, which, of course, is probably true. But the alternative is to go along as we have, shielding the system by pretending that problems like violence are not about systems that involve everyone but about only individuals who have somehow gone astray.

Like lynching, men’s violence against women is something that individual men do and for which they can and should be held accountable. But it is more than that, which means we have to pursue its causes in a broader and deeper way. In addition to being something that individual men do, violence against women is also a pattern of behavior that reflects the oppressive patriarchal relationships that exist between men and women as dominant and subordinate groups in society as a whole. Individuals do not behave in a vacuum — everything about us takes shape in relation to social contexts larger than
ourselves. Thus, our perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behavior are neither self-contained nor simply 'out there' in society. Rather, they emerge through and reflect our participation in patriarchal society. If we ignore this, then we perpetuate the status quo by focusing on the individual manifestations of social forces while ignoring the social forces themselves. And that is one reason why an individualistic approach serves patriarchal and other status quo interests so well.

To understand violence against women as both a social and a psychological problem, we have to ask what kind of society would provide fertile ground for it to take root and flourish as a recurring pattern of behavior. Decades of research have established a clear link between pervasive sexual violence against women and a patriarchal environment in which control and dominance are highly valued in men. Under patriarchy, for example, what is regarded as normal heterosexuality is male identified and male centered, emphasizing men's access to women and equating 'real' sex with intercourse, a practice that is far more conducive to men's pleasure than women's.

Such a system encourages men to value women primarily in terms of their ability to meet men's needs and desires and to support men's self-images as potent and in control. The huge pornography industry, for example, exists primarily to provide men with female images available for them to appropriate and incorporate into masturbatory fantasies. As a result, men's use of coercion and violence to control women sexually and their use of women as objects on which to act out feelings of rage, shame, frustration, or fear are commonplace, not only in behavior but as popular themes in literature, films, and other media. In other words, given the values promoted by patriarchal culture, men resort to violence against women because, measured against core patriarchal values, it works.

None of this can be divorced from a society organized around male privilege and oppressive relations between men and women as groups. To the degree that violence, control, domination, objectification, and sexuality are bound up with one another under patriarchy, we need to look at how patriarchal culture defines normal sexuality. What we take for granted as a purely natural sexuality is not. It is and always has been socially constructed, and the context in which this occurs as well as what goes into it are profoundly bound up with the culture and structure of patriarchal systems. This means that although sexual violence certainly involves how some men feel and behave, it goes beyond this to include patterns rooted in patriarchy as a whole.

Specific acts of violence directed at women because they are women are related to the social oppression of women as a group, just as specific acts of violence directed against blacks because they are black are related to the existence of racial oppression in society as a whole. This means that men's violence against women involves everyone who participates in the life of a patriarchal society, even though only a minority of individuals may actually do it or be directly victimized by it. Violence is an instrument of control, and control is both
highly valued in patriarchal culture and gendered as masculine. This means that patriarchy not only makes men's violence inevitable but roots it in an obsession with control that extends far beyond the individual men who engage in acts of violence.

The challenge for individuals—men in particular—is to figure out what it means to be involved in patriarchy and its culture and, therefore, to also be involved in consequences such as sexual violence. When Susan Brownmiller writes in *Against Our Will* that rape “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear,”26 many men feel offended by what they think is an accusation that all men are rapists. Regardless of what Brownmiller actually had in mind, men would not react so defensively if they realized that ‘involvement’ in a system like patriarchy does not necessarily reflect their personal motives and behavior. Regardless of whether I, as an individual man, rape anyone, I am connected to the pattern of control and violence through which other men do. I am connected if only because I participate in a society that encourages the sexual domination, objectification, and exploitation of women, all of which normalize and support sexual violence as a pattern of behavior.

Whether I personally encourage or support this behavior is beside the point. That women may fear and therefore defer to me simply because they identify me as a man, or may seek me out for protection against other men, or curtail their freedom of movement in ways that are unnecessary for me—all of this affects me regardless of how I think, feel, or behave. In such a world, being able to walk about freely at night or look people in the eye and smile when you pass them on the street or dress as you please becomes a privilege precisely because it is denied to some and allowed to others, and the privilege exists regardless of whether men experience it as such.27 That I do not rape women doesn’t mean I’m not involved in a patriarchal society that promotes both male privilege and men’s violence as a means to control women.

If we think about problems like violence in a way that appreciates both the power of systems and the importance of our role in them, the choice we face becomes clearer. The choice is not about whether to be involved in privilege and oppression. It is not about accepting blame for a system we did not create. Nor is it about whether to make ourselves better people so that we can consider ourselves above and beyond male privilege as a social problem.

The choice is how to participate in this system differently so that we can help to change not only ourselves but the world that shapes our lives and is, in turn, shaped by them. Ultimately, the choice is whether to empower ourselves to take our share of responsibility for the patriarchal legacy that we have all inherited.

If you are already starting to wonder what people can do to take responsibility, or if you start feeling that way as you read on, feel free to turn to Chapter 11, which is devoted to that question.
Why Patriarchy?

Patriarchy is full of paradox, not least of which is the mere fact that it exists at all. Consider this: In union, female and male bring new life into the world. They live and work together to make families and communities. They trace their deepest time-space sense of who they are and where they came from through ties of blood and marriage that join them as children, parents, siblings, or life partners who bring with them some of the profoundest needs for intimacy, belonging, and caring that humans beings can have. And yet here we are, stuck in patriarchy, surrounded by privilege and oppression, fundamentally at odds. Obviously, something powerful is going on and has been for a long time. What kind of social engine could create and sustain such an oppressive system in the face of all the good reasons against it? In short, why patriarchy?

The answer that first occurs to many people is that patriarchy is rooted in the natural order of things, reflecting essential differences between women and men based on biology or genetics (which is why such arguments are called ‘essentialist’).¹ Men tend to be physically stronger than women, for example, which might explain their dominance. Or men must protect pregnant or lactating women from wild beasts and other men, and female dependency requires men to be in charge. Or men are naturally predisposed to dominance, and patriarchy simply is men and what they do to one another and to women. In other words, patriarchy comes down to guys just being guys.

If we take such arguments seriously, it is hard not to conclude that male privilege and oppression are simply part of what we are as a species. This will appeal to anyone who wants to perpetuate patriarchy or who wants to blame men for it. For people like me, who sometimes feel overwhelmed by men’s
violence, it can be hard to resist the idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with maleness itself. Unfortunately, though, essentialism offers little hope short of changing human nature, getting rid of men, or finding a way for women and men to live completely apart (which won’t do anything about the awful things men can do to one another). Given this, it makes little sense to embrace essentialism unless there is solid evidence to support it.

But there isn’t. Essentialism requires us to ignore much of what we know about psychology, biology, genetics, history, and how social life actually works. We have to be willing to reduce incredibly complex patterns of social life not just to biology and genetics but to the even thinner slice of human life that defines sex, a position that gets little support even from biologists, including sociobiologists like E. O. Wilson. And if we believe in evolution, essentialism backs us into the corner of arguing that privilege and oppression are actually a positive adaptation, that societies organized in this way will thrive more than those that are not.

Essentialism also implies that patriarchy is the only system that has ever been, since what makes something essential is its universal and inescapable nature. Some things, of course, are essentially human, such as small children’s dependence on adults to feed, protect, and care for them. When it comes to patriarchy, however, all kinds of evidence from anthropology, archaeology, and history point to anything but a universal natural order.

There is, for example, considerable archaeological evidence from prepatriarchal times dating back to about seven thousand years ago, when goddess imagery held a central place throughout modern-day Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. We also know that the status of women varies a great deal among preindustrial tribal societies. In many cases, for example, kinship is traced through women, women are neither subordinated nor oppressed, misogyny and sexual violence are unheard of, and women control property and have political authority. Since essentialism assumes that all humans share the same human essence, it falls apart in the face of such striking and widespread variations.

The best reason to pass up essentialism may be that it does not fit with what we know about sex and gender. Essentialism, for example, cannot account for the enormous variability we find among women and among men, or for the similarities between men and women in similar situations. On various measures of mental ability, men differ as much from other men as they do from women, and men and women placed in the same situation, such as having sole responsibility for child care, tend to respond in ways that are far more similar than different. Essentialism also cannot explain why so much coercion is needed to keep patriarchy going. If male privilege is rooted in some male essence, then why do so many men experience such pain, confusion, ambivalence, and resistance during their training for patriarchal manhood and their lives as adult men? And if women’s essence is to be subordinate, how do we explain their long history of resisting oppression and learning to undermine and counteract male dominance?
In spite of its appeal, essentialism does not hold up as a way to understand patriarchy. The alternative takes us into the deep root structures of social forces powerful enough to drive patriarchy in spite of all the good reasons against it. And it takes us deep into ourselves, where the terms of life under patriarchy often seem to permeate to the core of who we are.

**Missing Links: Control, Fear, and Men**

Perhaps more than anything else, what drives patriarchy as a system—what fuels competition, aggression, oppression, and violence—is a dynamic relationship between control and fear. Patriarchy encourages men to seek security, status, and other rewards through control, to fear other men’s ability to control and harm them, and to identify being in control as both their best defense against loss and humiliation and the surest route to what they need and desire. In this sense, although we usually think of patriarchy in terms of women and men, it is more about what goes on among men. The oppression of women is certainly an important part of patriarchy, but, paradoxically, it may not be the point of patriarchy.

Why does control have such cosmic importance under patriarchy? One possibility is that control may be inherently so terrific that men just can’t resist organizing their lives around it. In other words, men control because they can. But this puts us back in the arms of dead-end essentialism and up against the fact that the more people try to control other people and themselves, the more miserable they seem to be. And the idea that what men might get through control, such as wealth or prestige, is inherently so appealing that they would participate routinely in the oppression of their mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives isn’t much better. For that to be true, we would first have to explain how control and its rewards could possibly outweigh the horrendous consequences of oppression, especially involving groups as intimately involved as are women and men. A common explanation is, “That’s the way people (men) are. They’ll always compete for wealth, power, and prestige.” But this is the kind of circular reasoning that essentialism so often gets us into: men are that way because that’s the way men are.

An essentialist approach also ignores the prominent role that fear plays in most men’s lives. Unlike control, fear may be one of the most powerful and primal of all human motivations, more deeply rooted than greed, desire, lust, or even love. Nothing matches fear’s potential to twist us out of shape, to drive us to abandon everything we otherwise hold dear, to oppress and do violence to one another—fear of death, of loss, of pain, of shame or rejection. And the most powerfully oppressive systems are organized in ways that promote fear.

What patriarchy accomplishes is to make men fear what other men might do to them—how control might be turned on them to do them harm and deprive them of what matters most to them. This encourages men to feel afraid of being ridiculed and deprived of recognition as real men. They’re afraid other
men will use economic power to take away jobs or hold them back or make their work lives miserable. They’re afraid men will beat them up or kill them if they’re unlucky enough to provoke the wrong one. They’re afraid men will wage war against them, destroy their communities and homes, beat, torture, rape, and kill those they love. In short, patriarchy encourages men to fear all the things that other men might do to exert control and thereby protect and enhance their standing as real men in relation to other men.

Women, of course, have many reasons to fear men, but this is not what shapes and defines patriarchy as a way of life. Men’s fear of other men is crucial because patriarchy is driven by how men both cause and respond to that fear. Because patriarchy is organized around male-identified control, men’s path of least resistance is to protect themselves by increasing their own sense of control, and patriarchy provides many ways of doing that. For some, it may be holding their own in aggressive male banter, whatever their particular group’s version of ‘doing the dozens’ happens to be. Or keeping their feelings to themselves rather than appearing vulnerable at the wrong moment to someone looking for an advantage. Or learning to win an argument, always having an answer, and never admitting they’re wrong. They learn early on not to play with girls unless it’s in the backseats of cars, and they may go out of their way to avoid the appearance that women can control them. They may pump iron, talk and follow sports, study boxing and martial arts, learn to use guns, or play football or hockey or rugby. In all these ways they may try to cope with their own fear and at the same time inspire it in others, all the while maintaining an underlying commitment to men and what men do and the system of privilege that binds them together.

Men’s participation in patriarchy tends to lock them in an endless pursuit of and defense against control, for under patriarchy, control is both the source of fear and the only solution offered for it. The more invested a man is in the control-fear spiral, the worse he feels when he doesn’t feel in control. And so on some level he is always on the lookout for opportunities to renew his sense of control while protecting himself from providing that same kind of opportunity for others, especially men. As each man pursues control as a way to defend and advance himself, he fuels the very same response in other men. This dynamic has provided patriarchy with its driving force for thousands of years.

Men pay an enormous price for participating in this. The more in control men try to be, the less secure they feel. They may not know it because they’re so busy trying to be in control, but the more they organize their lives around that effort, the more tied they are to the fear of not being in control.

As Marilyn French puts it, “A religion of power is a religion of fear, and . . . those who worship power are the most terrified creatures on the earth.” Dig beneath the surface appearance of ‘great men’ and you will often find deep insecurity, fear, and a chronic need to prove themselves to other men. As president of the United States, for example, one of the most powerful positions on Earth, George H. W. Bush was obsessed that people might think he was a
'wimp.' Before him, President Lyndon Johnson continued the Vietnam War in part because he was afraid of being considered less than manly if he didn’t.\textsuperscript{14} Rather than making men feel safe, great power makes them need still greater control to protect themselves from still more powerful men locked into the same cycle. To make matters worse, control itself is a fleeting, momentary experience, not a natural, stable state. And so, as Marilyn French and Simone Weil argue, control is always on the edge of slipping away or falling apart:

Power is not what we think it is. Power is not substantial; not even when it takes substantive form. The money you hold in your hand can be devalued overnight. . . . A title can be removed at the next board meeting. . . . A huge military establishment can disintegrate in a few days . . . a huge economic structure can collapse in a few weeks. . . .

“All power is unstable. . . . There is never power, but only a race for power. . . . Power is, by definition, only a means . . . but power seeking, owing to its essential incapacity to seize hold of its object, rules out all consideration of an end, and finally comes . . . to take the place of all ends.”\textsuperscript{15}

The religion of fear and control also blocks men’s need for human connection by redefining intimacy. Men are encouraged to see everything and everyone as other, and to look on every situation in terms of how it might enhance or threaten their sense of control. Every opportunity for control, however, can also be an occasion for a failure of control, a fact that can inject issues of control and power into the most unlikely situations. Intimacy is lost as a chance to be open and vulnerable on the way to a deeper connection. Sexual intimacy in particular can go from pleasure in a safe place to a male performance laced with worry about whether the penis—that notorious and willful ‘other’ that so often balks at men’s efforts at control—will ‘perform’ as it’s supposed to. Dictionaries typically define impotence as the \textit{inability to achieve or sustain} an erection, as if an erection is something a man \textit{does} and not something he experiences, like sweating or having his heart beat rapidly or feeling happy. The more preoccupied with control men are, the more lovers recede as full people with feelings, thoughts, will, and soul and become vehicles for bolstering manhood and relieving anxiety. And even though a woman’s opinion of a man’s sexual ‘performance’ may seem to be what matters, her words of reassurance are rarely enough, for it is always a patriarchal male gaze that’s looking at him over her shoulder and judging him.

Patriarchy is grounded in a Great Lie that the answer to life’s needs is disconnection, competition, and control rather than connection, sharing, and cooperation. The Great Lie separates men from what they need most by encouraging them to be autonomous and disconnected when in fact human existence is fundamentally relational.\textsuperscript{16} What is a ‘me’ without a ‘you,’ a ‘mother’
without a ‘child,’ a ‘teacher’ without a ‘student’? Who are we if not our ties to other people—‘I am . . . a father, husband, worker, friend, son, brother’?"^{17}

But patriarchal culture turns that truth inside out, and ‘self-made man’ goes from oxymoron to cultural ideal. And somewhere between the need for human connection and the imperative to control, the two merge, and a sense of control becomes the closest many men ever come to feeling connected with anything, including themselves.

### Patriarchy as a Men’s Problem

Patriarchy is usually portrayed as something that is primarily between women and men. At first blush this makes a lot of sense given that ‘male’ and ‘female’ define each other and that women occupy an oppressed position in relation to male privilege. Paradoxically, however, the cycle of control and fear that drives patriarchy has more to do with relations among men than with women, for it is men who control men’s standing as men. With few exceptions, men look to other men—not women—to affirm their manhood, whether as coaches, friends, teammates, coworkers, sports figures, fathers, or mentors.

This contradicts the conventional wisdom that women hold the key to heterosexual men’s sense of manhood. It is true that men often use women to show that they measure up—especially by controlling women sexually—but the standards that are used are men’s and not women’s. Men also may try to impress women as ‘real men’ in order to start and keep relationships with them, to control them, or to get sexual access and personal care. This is not enough to secure manhood, however. For affirmation of that, they must go to a larger male-identified world—from the local bar to sports to work—which is also where they are most vulnerable to other men. Whether in locker rooms or the heat of political campaigns, when a man is accused of being a wimp or of otherwise failing to measure up, it almost always comes from another man. And when a man suspects himself of being less than a man, he judges himself through a patriarchal male gaze, not from a woman’s perspective.

Although men often use women as scapegoats for their bad feelings about themselves, women’s role in this is indirect at most. If other men reject a man’s claim to manhood, how his wife or mother sees him usually makes little difference, and if women’s opinions do matter to him, his manhood becomes all the more suspect to other men.^{18} Women’s marginal importance in the manhood question is plain to see in the risks men take to prove themselves in spite of objections from wives, mothers, and other women who find them just fine the way they are. The record books are full of men who seize on anything—from video games to extreme sports to being the first to get somewhere or discover something—as a way to create competitive arenas in which they can jockey for position and prove themselves among men.^{19} If a man must choose between men’s and women’s views of what makes for true manhood, he will choose
What Is This Thing Called Patriarchy?

men’s views most of the time. “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do,” is typically spoken by a man to a woman as he goes off to do something with other men, and just what it is he’s got to do is determined by men and patriarchy, not by women. It isn’t up to women to decide what a real man is. Her role is to reassure men that they meet the standards of a male-identified patriarchal culture.

When a woman does question or attack a man’s masculinity, the terms of the attack and the power behind it are based on men’s standards of patriarchal manhood. She is not going to attack his manhood, for example, by telling him he isn’t caring enough. When she uses what are culturally defined as women’s terms—“You’re not sensitive, nurturing, open, or vulnerable, and you’re too controlling”—the attack has much less weight and produces far less effect. But when women do not play along—when they criticize or question or merely lose enthusiasm for affirming patriarchal manhood—they risk the wrath of men who may feel undermined, abandoned, and even betrayed. Men may not like being criticized for failing to measure up to women’s ideas of what men should be, but it’s nothing compared to how angry and violent men can be toward women who dare to use men’s weapons against them by questioning their manhood.

In the patriarchal cycle of control and fear, no man is safe from challenges to his manhood, which is why even the rich and powerful can be so quick to defend themselves. In his analysis of John F. Kennedy’s presidency, for example, David Halberstam argues that Kennedy initiated U.S. involvement in the Vietnamese civil war in part because he failed to appear sufficiently tough and manly at his Vienna summit meeting with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev challenged Kennedy from the start, and Kennedy, surprised, responded in kind only toward the end. Upon returning home, he felt the need for an opportunity to right the impression he had made and remove any doubts about his manhood. “If he [Khrushchev] thinks I’m inexperienced and have no guts,” Kennedy told New York Times reporter James Reston, “. . . we won’t get anywhere with him. So we have to act . . . and Vietnam looks like the place.”

And so the horror of U.S. involvement in Vietnam turned on a political system organized in part around men’s ability to impress one another with claims to manhood. And this no doubt played a prominent role in the tortured progress of that war and the stubborn refusal of all sides to compromise or admit defeat.

In addition to what Kennedy’s dilemma says about patriarchal politics, it also challenges the stereotype that overt displays of manhood are largely confined to lower-class and working-class subcultures. The roots of men proving their manhood run deep in the upper classes, from Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders to President George W. Bush daring Iraqi guerrillas to “bring it on” to the enthusiastic stampede of Britain’s elite to the killing fields of World War I to the sexually compulsive behavior of Bill Clinton and John Kennedy to the San Francisco Bohemian Grove retreats where captains of business and government gather to make deals, mock women in cross-dressing skits, and
otherwise relax in the comfort of male privilege. Men, of course, are not born to this. They must be trained and given ongoing incentives.

In the early 1960s, for example, I was a middle-class first-year student at an all-male Ivy League college, a training ground for the sons of the elite. Among my classmates’ fathers were prominent figures in business, government, and the professions, who fully expected their sons to follow in their footsteps. In late fall, residents of my dorm who had been accepted to fraternities prepared for ‘sink night,’ a time to celebrate their newfound ‘brotherhood’ by getting very drunk. Before they went off, they warned freshmen not to lock our doors when we went to bed because they intended to pay us a visit later on and did not expect to be stopped by a locked door. We didn’t know what was coming, but there was no mistaking the dense familiar weight of men’s potential for violence.

When they returned that night, screaming drunk, they went from door to door and rousted us from our beds. They herded us into the hall where they lined us up and ordered us to drop our pants. Then one man held a metal ruler and another a *Playboy* magazine opened to the centerfold picture, and the two went down the line, thrusting the picture in our faces, screaming at us to “Get it up!” and resting our penises on the ruler. The others paced up and down the hall behind them, yelling, screaming, and laughing, thickening the air with a mixture of alcohol and held violence. None of us protested, and of course no one ‘measured up.’ We were not supposed to (any man who’d managed an erection would have become a legend on the spot). That, after all, was the point: to submit to the humiliation, to mirror (like women) men’s power to control and terrorize in what we later learned was a rite of passage known as ‘the peter meter.’

For them, perhaps, it was a passage to a fraternal bond forged in their shared power over the ‘others.’ For us, it was a grant of immunity from having to submit again, at least in this place, to these men, in this way. But our lack of outrage and the general absence of talk about it afterward suggest we got something else as well. As outrageous as the peter meter was, it touched a core of patriarchal truth about men, power, and violence that, as men, we found repellent and yet ultimately acceptable. The truth is that we, too, received a portion of manhood that night, for by deadening and controlling ourselves in the face of an assault, we showed that we had the right stuff. Had anyone protested, he would not have been seen as the more manly for his courage. More likely, he would have been called a sissy, a pussy, a mama’s boy who couldn’t take it. And so we both lost and gained during our late-night dip in the patriarchal paradox of men competing and bonding at the same time.22

What about Women?

In one sense, women, like all else under patriarchy, are something for men to control. The consequences are enormous because of the damage done to
women’s lives, but controlling women is neither the point of patriarchy nor the engine that drives it. This means that women’s place is more complicated than it might seem, especially in relation to competition among men.23 This works in several ways.

First, heterosexual men are encouraged to use women as badges of success to protect and enhance their standing in the eyes of other men. People routinely compliment a man married to a beautiful woman, for example, not because he had a hand in making her beautiful but because he has proprietary rights of access to her. In contrast, people are much less likely to compliment a man whose wife is financially successful—especially if she earns more than he does—because this threatens rather than enhances his manhood.

Men’s use of women as badges of success is a prime example of how men can compete and ally with one another at the same time.24 On the one hand, they may compete over who has the highest standing and is therefore least vulnerable to other men’s control, as when they vie for a specific woman or use women in general as a way of keeping score. A man who lacks enthusiasm for pursuing women may have his masculinity questioned, if not attacked, especially by being accused of being gay. In this sense, ‘getting laid’ is more than a badge of success: it is also a safe-conduct pass through perpetually hostile territory.

At the same time that men may compete with one another, they are also encouraged to bond around a common view of women as objects to be competed for, possessed, and used. When men in groups make a sport of rating women’s bodies, for example, they can usually count on other men to go along (if only in silence), for a man who objects risks being marginalized, if not made into an outcast. Even if the joke is directed at his wife or lover, he is likely to choose his tie to men over loyalty to her by letting it pass with a shrug and perhaps a good-natured smile that leaves intact his standing as one of the guys.

In this sense, the competitive dynamic of patriarchal heterosexuality brings men together and promotes feelings of solidarity by acting out the values of control and male domination. This is partly why there is so much male violence against gay men: since gays do not use women in this way, their sexual orientation challenges not so much heterosexuality per se but male solidarity around the key role of control and domination in patriarchal heterosexuality.25 John Stoltenberg argues that violence against gays also protects male solidarity by protecting men from sexual aggression at the hands of other men:

Imagine this country without homophobia: A woman raped every three minutes and a man raped every three minutes. Homophobia keeps that statistic at a “manageable” level. The system is not foolproof, of course. There are boys who have been sexually molested by men. There are men who have been brutalized in sexual relationships with their male lovers, and they too have a memory of men’s sexual violence. And there are many men in prison who are subject to the same sexual terrorism
that women live with almost all the time. But for the most part—happily—homophobia serves male supremacy by protecting “real men” from sexual assault by other real men.26

A second part that women play in men’s struggle for control is to support the idea that men and women are fundamentally different, because this gives men the clear and unambiguous turf of masculinity on which to pursue control in competition with one another.27 Women do this primarily by supporting (or at least not challenging) femininity as a valid view of who women are and how they’re supposed to be. The idea that male sexuality is inherently aggressive, predatory, and heterosexual, for example, defines a common ground for men in relation to both women and other men. To protect this, it’s important that women not be sexually aggressive or predatory because this would challenge the idea of a unique masculine sexuality as a basis for male solidarity, competition, and control.

When women challenge stereotypically feminine ways of acting, it makes it harder for men to see themselves clearly as men. This muddles men’s relationships with women and their standing as real men under patriarchy. In the film Fatal Attraction, for example, the villain embodies a predatory, violent female sexuality that sent shock waves through audiences across the country. The history of film includes legions of obsessive, murderous men, but with the appearance of the first such woman there was a rush to analyze and explain how such a thing was possible. Perhaps her greatest transgression is to trespass on male turf by violating the strictures of cultural femininity. How fitting, then, that everything should be ‘set right’ when her lover’s wife—who embodies the feminine virtues of good mother, faithful wife, and constrained sexuality—kills the madwoman who has invaded the sanctity of this ‘normal’ patriarchal household.

In a third sense, a woman’s place is to support the patriarchal illusion that men are independent and autonomous. An unemployed wife who sees herself as dependent, for example, props up images of male independence that mask men’s considerable dependence on women for emotional support, physical comfort, and a broad range of practical services. On the average, for example, men tend to have a much harder time adjusting to the loss of a spouse than women do, especially at older ages. And the standard model for a career still assumes a wife at home to perform support work, putting any man (or woman) who doesn’t have one at a disadvantage.28

The illusion of male independence and female dependence is amplified whenever men complain about the burdens of the provider role. In fact, however, most husbands would have it no other way, because for all its demands, the provider role brings with it power and status and exempts men from domestic work such as cleaning and child care. As a result, many men feel threatened when their wives earn as much as or more than they do. They cling to the idea that earning a living is a man’s responsibility that anchors male identity and
that women are little more than helpers in that role, if not ‘little women’ waiting for a man to bring home the bacon. This arrangement, however, was created largely by working-class and middle-class white men who fought for what was called the ‘family wage’ in the early 1900s. This enabled them to support their families by themselves and justified keeping wives at home where they would be financially dependent and available to provide personal services.

You might think such arrangements are a thing of the past, that with so many married women working outside the home, the provider role is no longer male identified. But the superficial appearance of gender equity and balance masks a continuing imbalance that is revealed when we consider how men and women would be affected by leaving paid employment. If the woman in a two-earner household were to give up her job, it might create hardships and negative feelings, but these would not include making her feel less than a real woman. But for a man to give up his job, he would have to contend with far more serious threats to his sense of himself as a real man, and both women and men know it. This is why, when someone in a marriage has to leave paid employment—to take care of children or ailing relatives, for example—it is generally understood that it will be the woman, regardless of who earns more.

A fourth aspect of women’s place is to help contain men’s resentment over being controlled by other men so that it does not overpower the male solidarity that is essential to patriarchy. Most men are dominated by other men, especially at work, and yet judge their manhood by how much control they have in their own lives. It is a standard against which they are bound to fall short. If they rebel against other men—as when workers go on strike—the risks can be huge and the gains short-lived. A safer alternative is compensation in the form of social support to control and feel superior to women. This provides both individual men and patriarchy with a safety valve for the frustration and rage that might otherwise be directed toward other men and at far greater risk to both individuals and the system as a whole. No matter what other men do to a man or how deeply they control his life, he can always feel culturally superior to women and entitled to take out his anger and frustration on them.

In this way, men are allowed to dominate women as compensation for their being subordinated to other men because of social class, race, or other forms of inequality. Ironically, however, their dominance of women supports the same principles of control that enable other men to subordinate them, a contradiction that is typical of systems of privilege. Men may buy into this as long as they can, in turn, enjoy the dominance that comes with applying those principles to women. The use of such compensation to stabilize systems also works with race and class inequality where one oppression is used to compensate for another. Working-class people, for example, can always look down on people receiving welfare, just as lower-class whites can feel superior to people of color. The playing off of one oppression against another helps explain why overt prejudice is most common among the most disadvantaged groups—because these are the people most in need of some kind of compensation.
Related to men’s use of women as compensation is the expectation that women will take care of men who have been damaged by other men. When he comes home from work, her role is to greet and take care of him, whether or not she’s been at work all day herself. On a deeper level, she is supposed to make him feel whole again, to restore what he loses through his disconnected pursuit of control, to calm his fears—all, of course, without requiring him to face the very things about himself and patriarchy that produce the damage in the first place.

When women fail to ‘make it better’—as they are bound to do eventually—they are also supposed to be there to accept the blame and receive men’s disappointment, pain, and rage. Men who feel unloved, incomplete, disconnected, battered, humiliated, frightened, and anxious routinely blame women for not supporting or loving them enough. It is a responsibility women are encouraged to accept, which is one reason so many victims of domestic violence stay with the men who abuse them.34

Misogyny

These days, even the slightest criticism of men, manhood, or male dominance can prompt accusations of man hating or male bashing. But only feminists seem to care about the woman hating that’s been around for thousands of years as part of everyday life under patriarchy.35

The cultural expression of misogyny—the hatred (mi- so-) of women (gyny)—takes many forms.36 It is found in ancient and modern beliefs that women are inherently evil and a primary cause of human misery—products of what the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras called the “evil principle which created chaos, darkness, and woman.”37 There is misogyny in pornography that portrays women as willing victims of exploitation and abuse, in jokes about everything from mothers-in-law to the slapping around or ‘good fuck’ that some women supposedly need. Misogyny shaped the historical transformation of ancient wise-women healers into modern-day images of witches. It has been the basis for the torture and murder of millions of women from the witch hunts of the Middle Ages to Serb terrorism in Bosnia, where rape was used as a tactic of war. It is reflected in the everyday reality of sexual coercion, abuse, violence, and harassment, in the mass media display of women’s bodies as objects existing primarily to please men and satisfy the male gaze, in cultural ideals of slenderness that turn women against their own bodies and inspire self-hatred and denial, and in the steady stream of sensationalized and sexualized mass media ‘entertainment’ in which men terrorize, torture, rape, and murder women.38

Not to be overlooked is the insulting of males with names that link them to females—sissy (sister), pussy, girl, son of a bitch, mama’s boy. Notice, however, that the worst way to insult a woman is not to call her a man or a daddy’s girl or one of the guys. It is to still call her a woman but in a maligning way—bitch,
whore, cunt. The use of such words as insults is made even worse by the fact that prior to patriarchy, many had neutral or positive meanings for women. A whore was a lover of either sex, and ‘cunt’ derives from numerous cultural sources ranging from Asia to northern Europe and including the goddesses Cunti and Kunda, the universal sources of life.

It is difficult to accept the idea that in the midst of wanting, needing, and loving women, men are involved—if only as sons in relation to mothers—in a system that identifies misogynist feelings, thoughts, and behavior as paths of least resistance. Most men would probably deny that this affects them in any way. Often the most sexist men are among the first to say how much they love women. But there is no escaping misogyny, because it is not a personality flaw. It is part of patriarchal culture, and we are like fish swimming in a sea laced with it, unable to breathe without it passing through our gills. Misogyny infuses into our cells and becomes part of who we are because by the time we know enough to reject it, it is already too late. As with everything else in a culture, some people are exposed to more of it than others, and in deeper ways, but to suppose that anyone escapes untouched is both wishful and disempowering. It is wishful because it goes against what we know about socialization and the power of culture to shape reality. It is disempowering because if we believe that misogyny does not involve us, we will not feel compelled to do anything about it.

Misogyny plays a complex role in patriarchy. It fuels men’s sense of superiority, justifies male aggression against women, and works to keep women on the defensive and in their place. Misogyny is especially powerful in encouraging women to hate the fact of being women, an example of internalized oppression. The more women internalize misogynist images and attitudes, the harder it is to challenge male privilege or patriarchy as a system. In fact, women will tend not to see patriarchy as even problematic since the essence of self-hatred is to focus on the self as the sole cause of misery, including the self-hatred.

In another sense, patriarchy promotes the hatred of women as a reaction to men’s fear of women. Why should men fear women? Because every system of privilege depends to some degree on subordinate groups going along with their own subordination. The other side of this, however, is the potential to undermine and rebel by not going along. This makes privilege inherently unstable, which makes dominant groups vulnerable. Throughout the slave-holding South, for example, white people’s fear of slave revolts was woven into the fabric of everyday life and caused many a restless night. And I suspect that much of the discomfort that whites typically feel around blacks today, especially black men, also reflects a fear that the potential for challenge and rebellion is never far from the surface.

In a patriarchal system the fear for men is that women will stop playing the complex role that allows patriarchy to continue, or may even go so far as to challenge male privilege directly. Women’s potential to disrupt patriarchy and make men vulnerable is why it is so easy for women to make men feel foolish
or emasculated through the mildest humor that focuses on them as men and hints at women's power to stop going along with the status quo. Making fun of men, however, is just the tip of the iceberg of what women can do to disturb the patriarchal order, and on some level most men know this and have reason to feel threatened by it.

In more subtle ways, misogyny arises out of a system that offers women to men as a form of compensation. Because patriarchy limits men's emotional and spiritual lives, and because men are discouraged from being vulnerable with other men, they often look to women as a way to ease the resulting sense of emptiness, meaninglessness, and disconnection. However, the patriarchal expectation that manhood requires autonomy and independence sets men up to both want and resent women at the same time. This is made all the worse by the fact that women cannot possibly give men what they want, since autonomy and independence are illusions to begin with. Caught in this bind, men could face the truth of the system that put them there in the first place. They could look at patriarchy and how their position in it creates this dilemma. The path of least resistance, however, is to resent and blame women for what men lack, by accusing women of not being loving or sexual enough, of being manipulative, withholding, selfish bitches who deserve to be punished.43

In a related sense, misogyny can reflect male envy of the human qualities that patriarchy encourages men to devalue and deny in themselves as they avoid association with anything remotely feminine. Under patriarchy, women are viewed as trustees of all that makes a rich emotional life possible—of empathy and sympathy, vulnerability and openness to connection, caring and nurturing, sensitivity and compassion, emotional attention and expressiveness—all of which tend to be driven out of men's lives by the cycle of control and fear. On some level, men know the value of what they do not have and see women as privileged for being able to hold on to it. As a result, women live a double bind: the patriarchal ideology that supports male privilege and women's oppression devalues the human qualities associated with being female yet also sets men up to envy and resent women for being able to weave those same qualities into their lives.44

Finally, misogyny can be seen as a cultural result of men’s potential to feel guilty about women’s oppression. Rather than encourage men to feel guilty, patriarchal culture projects negative judgments about men onto women. When men do feel guilty, they can blame women for making them feel this way: “If you weren’t there reminding me of how oppressed women are, then I wouldn’t have to feel bad about myself as a member of the group that benefits from it.” Anger and resentment play this kind of role in many systems of privilege. When middle-class people encounter the homeless on the street, for example, it’s not uncommon for them to feel angry simply for being reminded of their advantages and their potential to feel guilty about it. It is easier to hate the messenger than it is to take some responsibility for doing something about the reality behind the message.
As a mainstay of patriarchal culture, misogyny embodies some of the most contradictory and disturbing aspects of male privilege. When love and need are bound up with fear, envy, resentment, and the obsession with control, the result is an explosive mixture that can twist our sense of ourselves and one another beyond recognition. If misogyny were merely a problem of bad personal attitudes, it would be relatively easy to deal with. But its close connection to the cycle of control and fear that makes patriarchy work will make it part of human life as long as patriarchy continues.

The Look of Modern Patriarchy

Over its long history, patriarchy has changed dramatically in some ways and very little in others. As societies have developed new forms of control and domination, systems of privilege have changed to make use of them. Under European feudalism, for example, class privilege depended on military force, control over land, and traditional obligations between nobles and peasants. With industrial capitalism, however, class is based primarily on control over complex organizations such as corporations, government, universities, and the mass media. In similar ways, patriarchy has shifted from one base of power to another in response to social change. This has not happened in a uniform way since no single patriarchal model applies to all societies, but it has always involved some mix of the core qualities that define patriarchy as male dominated, male identified, and male centered.

In preindustrial patriarchies, the main objects of control are land and women's reproductive potential. Since families produce most of the wealth, male privilege is based primarily on men's authority as husbands and fathers and their title to land and other property. To the extent that preindustrial societies have institutions outside the family—such as separate religious, medical, military, or state institutions—men dominate those as well.

This is how it was in most patriarchies until industrial capitalism began to revolutionize social life several centuries ago. The most dramatic change was to shift production away from agriculture and land and into urban factories. This made land less valuable as a source of wealth and power, lowered the economic value of children and their labor, and drew increasing numbers of men and women into wage labor in a money-driven economy. As a result, men could no longer use the family as a basis of privilege because the family no longer had a central place in economic production. A great deal of work was still done in families, but it wasn't done for money. Since power revolved increasingly around money, and wealth was valued in terms of money, family work could not be used as a basis for privilege.

Male privilege now depended on controlling capital or earning the money that families needed to purchase goods and services in a rapidly expanding market economy. Men moved quickly to appropriate this for themselves. Since children's contribution to industrial labor quickly lost its economic value as
production became more complex, their worth became something figured primarily in emotional terms. This encouraged fathers to lose interest in children and limited women’s lives ever more narrowly to child care. As a result, child custody no longer went automatically to fathers but more typically to mothers. In some ways, the position of the father lost so much of its traditional authority under industrial capitalism that, technically speaking, the gender system was no longer patriarchal but androcratic, based on male (andro-) rather than father (patri-) dominance.

As industrial capitalism transformed patriarchy, it also profoundly affected women. Before industrialization, there was little that women could not and did not do, and husbands and wives depended on one another for survival. Industrial capitalism changed all of that, however. Individuals now could survive on their own by earning wages, which broke the age-old bond of mutual dependence between women and men. The work women did at home was marginalized and devalued because it did not involve an exchange of money, and without earnings of their own, middle-class women who stayed home became what may have been the first major group of productive yet economically dependent women in human history. As a result, women confronted the novel choice of whether to depend on men or make their way as second-class, unwelcome workers in the new patriarchal world of work where wealth, power, respect, and prestige were distributed.

Industrial capitalism was shrinking the family’s sphere of influence and shifting the focus of power outward to rapidly growing institutions such as the state, science, industry, and schools. These institutions grew out of a new way of thinking that emphasized the power of the human intellect to understand and ultimately control all it could imagine. Both natural scientists and early sociologists believed the world was governed by social and natural laws that, once understood, would enable men to exercise revolutionary degrees of control over themselves and their environment. “Man’s place in the physical universe,” a Nobel laureate declared not so long ago, “is to be its master . . . to be its king through the power he alone possesses—the Principle of Intelligence.” This kind of thinking carried the evolution of patriarchy through a quantum leap that expanded dramatically the cultural importance attached to the idea of control as an organizing principle of social life on every level, from self to society to the entire natural world and beyond. For most people, patriarchy went from being a relatively simple family system to something much larger and more complex as the tools and settings for practicing the religion of power multiplied.

The rapid rise of science, technology, politics, and other forms of control also changed how people thought about and justified male dominance. As Arthur Brittan put it:

Instead of the religious justification of gender differences, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries these differences were beginning to
be explained in a new way. Previously, they had been codified in philosophical and political doctrines. They had a rationale legitimated by God, by reason and by the nascent political authority. But, from this time onward, differences were not decreed by the church, but by “science” and its spokesmen, the “discoverers” of the essential nature of men and women. Since all human beings are subject to the laws of nature, they could be “worked on” and manipulated like other “natural” objects. Where the church had demanded that women obey men because God willed it, the new science argued that women were inferior because they were made this way.51

It is important to realize that much of this change reshaped how men competed with one another for power and control. Under the European feudalism that preceded industrial capitalism, for example, power struggles revolved around the military, the landed aristocracy, the church, and the fledgling state—all of which were patriarchal. Capitalism developed as a revolt against feudalism by a new patriarchal middle class of entrepreneurs who wanted the freedom to compete in markets. The landed aristocracy stood in their way, which made for conflict and sometimes violent revolution. None of this, however, ended the religion of power. It merely changed the terms of the struggle to control over markets rather than control over land and peasants, and later to control over production, labor, the environment, and cyberspace. The social landscape was transformed, but the major players were still men, and the new systems were still patriarchal.

We can lose sight of patriarchy in all of this social upheaval and transformation if we overlook the fact that industrial capitalism was male dominated, male centered, and male identified and sprang from and embodied the core patriarchal obsession with control. Writers such as Robert Bly and Sam Keen, for example, have a lot to say about the evils of industrialization but do not mention its connection to patriarchy.52 What changed the world was not mere industrialization or even capitalist industrialization but patriarchal capitalist industrialization. The same can be said of the socialist alternatives that developed in response to capitalism, such as in the Soviet Union and China, which, for all their progressive reforms, in many ways represented little more than a new form of competition between patriarchal systems. As Hazel Henderson put it, capitalism and socialism were two contenders in the struggle over what form industrialization would take.53

The Mystery of How We Got Here

Whenever I speak about patriarchy, someone usually asks where it came from in the first place. The question often comes from a man, motivated, I suspect, by the thought that if he’s going to give up the essentialist notion that patriarchy is universal and inevitable, he wants something to put in its place.
If patriarchy isn’t hardwired into the species, then it had to start for some reason. The problem is that what we know as history does not reach back very far and cannot tell us what we want to know without a lot of speculation mixed in. That won’t stop us from wondering about where patriarchy came from, however, because this huge hole in our understanding nags for something to fill it up. And we need some reason to hope that something better is possible, which we cannot have if we settle for essentialist explanations. What, after all, is the point of trying to change something that’s inevitable?

Another reason to look at the question of where patriarchy came from is that whatever model we use to explain what drives patriarchy now is more credible if it fits with a plausible argument about where it came from in the first place. If we are right about patriarchy as it is, we should be able to extend our understanding back in time and see a connection between how it is now and how it most likely was. This will not prove anything, for the forces that bring a social system into being are not necessarily the same as those that keep it going. But if one framework can make sense of patriarchy’s past and its present, we can quiet some nagging questions that distract us from doing something about it.

What, then, do we know about nonpatriarchal societies, and how do we know it? Some evidence comes from anthropological and historical studies of tribal societies, from the !Kung in Africa to Native American tribes to the New Guinea Arapesh. From these we know of numerous societies in which women have not been devalued or subordinated but have, in fact, played prominent roles in social life. Matrilineal and matrilocal societies have been quite common and have often included substantial female control over land and other property. Although every known society divides some tasks by gender, there is often a great deal of overlap, and in either case men’s and women’s work are valued equally. Sexual violence and the treatment of women as property are almost unknown in these societies and historically have increased only with advances in male dominance.

When we consider the rich store of archaeological evidence from prehistoric civilizations such as ancient Crete, it is difficult to deny that something other than patriarchy existed as recently as seven thousand years ago. Artifacts dating to before that time, for example, suggest the existence of Middle Eastern societies in which women and men were equally well regarded. Women’s graves were as centrally located and richly appointed with statues and other artifacts as those of men. In addition, the accumulation of statuary from ancient sites shows far more female than male figures. These consist mostly of women with prominent breasts, belly, and vagina, suggesting a clear focus on women’s role in renewing life. Only in later periods of emerging male dominance do artistic themes shift away from women and begin to portray phallic images. Evidence also suggests that organized warfare was rare if not unknown. Excavations in ancient Crete, for example, find no remnants of fortifications in the prepatriarchal period.
It is reasonable to argue from such evidence that for most of humanity’s 250,000 years on Earth, social life has not been organized around control and domination. It is also reasonable to argue that male dominance and the oppression of women are relatively recent. Not only has women’s work been regarded as central to social life, but on a deeper level, the belief that women could create life seems to have placed female imagery at the core of religious traditions. The abundant goddess imagery found in archaeological digs, for example, suggests that prepatriarchal societies were organized around a worldview centered on the idea of the female as a symbolic link between humanity and the flow of nature from which all life comes. As Miriam Johnson notes, this does not mean that men were marginalized or subordinated, only that there was reverence for cultural principles associated with women:

Matrifocality [a cultural focus on mothers] . . . does not refer to domestic maternal dominance so much as it does to the relative cultural prestige of the image of mother, a role that is culturally elaborated and valued. . . . It is not the absence of males (males may be quite present) but the centrality of women as mothers and sisters that makes a society matrifocal, and this matrifocal emphasis is accompanied by a minimum of differentiation between women and men.

Nonetheless, we are so used to the patriarchal obsession with control that it is hard to imagine that a society might exist without a dominant group. From a narrow patriarchal perspective, the logical assumption is that if the world was ever nonpatriarchal, it must have been matriarchal, especially if femaleness was valued and even revered.

Once we accept the idea that something came before patriarchy and that valuing women and gender equality were among its core aspects, then we have to deal with the question of what happened to turn all of this into a system based on control, privilege, and gender oppression. What social engine could be powerful enough to break down bonds of equality between women and men? What could create new forms of family life in which women and children became the property of men? How could kinship systems organized around mothers and their blood relatives become male identified? Why would systems of cooperation and peaceful coexistence give way to systems of competition and warfare?

Although we can never answer such questions once and for all, Riane Eisler, Elizabeth Fisher, Marilyn French, Gerda Lerner, and others have made a good case that certain social conditions played an important part. The first was the discovery of how to grow crops, which took place some nine thousand years ago. As using plows to cultivate fields replaced small-garden horticulture, societies could produce a surplus of goods. This, in turn, made it possible for some people to accumulate wealth at the expense of others. This did not cause inequality, since sharing is as much a possibility as hoard-
ing. Surpluses were, however, a precondition that made inequality possible.\textsuperscript{63} Perhaps even more important, agriculture introduced the idea of control into many human cultures as people settled into more permanent communities and discovered they could affect their environment through such practices as clearing forests and cultivating the soil. Some degree of control has probably always been part of human life, but never before had the concept of control emerged so forcefully as part of culture or been so conducive to seeing the rest of the natural world as a nonhuman ‘other’ to be controlled.\textsuperscript{64}

The changing relationship of humans to nature was related to the discovery some nine thousand to eleven thousand years ago of how reproduction worked in both plant and animal species, and the resulting domestication of goats, cattle, and other animals. Elizabeth Fisher believes this helped lay the groundwork for patriarchy in several ways. First, it transformed a relatively equal and balanced relation between humans and other animals into one of control and dominance. When hunters killed wild animals for food, they had reason to see them as creatures of equal standing in the nature of things whose deaths warranted appreciation, often in the form of ritual honoring. The lives of domesticated animals, however, are from the start dominated and controlled by people, their entire existence subordinated to human needs and ends.

Second, when animals were bred for slaughter or work, reproduction took on an economic value it did not have before.\textsuperscript{65} From this it was a short leap to the idea that human reproduction also had economic value, especially given how much labor was needed to cultivate large fields. This, in turn, created an incentive to control women’s reproductive potential, for the more children a man had, the more workers there were to produce surplus goods, which men invariably controlled.

Third, domesticating animals created an emotional dilemma around nurturing and caring for animals with the intention of slaughtering them later.\textsuperscript{66} Short of letting the animals live, the only way people could resolve the tension was to distance themselves from both the nurturing and the killing, to see nature as a separate and alien exploitable resource, an object of control and domination, even an adversary—all of which more advanced patriarchies have done to greater and greater degrees.

Fisher believes the split between humanity and the rest of nature sowed the seeds for a more general and profound disconnection in social life. It did this by providing a model for control and domination based on the distinction between self and other, an ‘us’ and a ‘them.’ Instead of seeing all life as an undifferentiated whole, the stage was now set for dividing the world into the controllers and the controlled. This was crucial to the development of patriarchy, especially given how an understanding of reproduction may have undermined the cultural reverence for women’s reproductive powers. If reproduction was not a matter of female magic and could be controlled like anything else, then women’s special connection to the universal life force could be explained away and men could put themselves at the center of things. Knowledge that
men played a role in reproduction, for example, opened the door to the belief that men, not women, are the source of life, planting their seed in the passive, fertile fields of women's wombs.

Fisher's arguments fit well with observations that the first known patriarchies were nomadic herding societies (the first to depend on raising livestock) and that male privilege and women's oppression reached their height in advanced agrarian societies that depended heavily on both human labor and animal breeding. As Riane Eisler reads the evidence, aggressive herding tribes from the northern reaches of Eurasia swept down on goddess civilizations such as Crete and converted them by force to the patriarchal model. In this we can see various factors coming together to set the stage for the emergence of patriarchy: surplus production and the possibility of inequality, development of control as a human potential and cultural ideal, an economic value placed on reproduction and the ability to control it, and the potential for competition among tribes for grazing land, water, and other resources.

The puzzle still has missing pieces, however, for although these conditions made patriarchy possible, they are not the social engine we are looking for. The problem is that just because control and oppression became possible, it does not follow that they had to take over social life, just as people do not necessarily do something just because they can, whether it be hoarding wealth, killing disobedient children, or conquering neighbors. It might seem that conflict and aggression among nomadic tribes or expanding settlements were inevitable, since these are ways to deal with conditions of scarcity. But cooperation, compromise, and sharing are even more effective solutions to the problem of scarcity, especially in the long run. Being able to produce a surplus makes it possible for some to hoard at the expense of others, but surpluses also can be used to create leisure and plenty for all.

But is it not human nature to hoard, compete, and aggress? It is, but compromise, cooperation, and compassion are also part of human nature, although under patriarchy they are culturally associated with women and devalued as not fitting the male-identified standard of human nature. If a society is organized around one set of human capabilities rather than another, human nature will not tell us why. The answer must lie in the social forces that shaped it in this way.

All of which brings us back to the nagging question of what could be powerful enough to move humanity toward male privilege and the oppression of women. This is where we need to connect what we know about the present with what is reasonable to suppose about the past. What both have in common is the patriarchal cycle of control and fear.

Modern patriarchy is driven by the dynamic between control and fear, of men seeking status and security through control, fearing other men's control over them, and seeing still more control as the only solution. And if we look at our reasonable speculations about the past, it is more than credible to suppose that this same dynamic provided the key to the origins and evolution of
patriarchy. Just as men are at the center of this powerful cycle now, so too were they at the center when that cycle emerged thousands of years ago.

But why would men be the ones at the center of the control-fear whirlwind? For men to be at the center, they had to be more likely than women to embrace the emerging cultural idea of control and to run with it. For this to happen, they had to be more likely to experience themselves and others in a disconnected way. There is no reason to believe that men did not feel a strong connection to the nature-centered goddess cultures of their societies. But there are good reasons to believe that men’s connection was weaker than women’s and that this left them more open to the cycle of control and fear and the religion of power that patriarchy would embody.

Men’s connection to the creation of new life is invisible—they must imagine how intercourse produces a child rather than feel it in their own bodies—and prepatriarchal cultures lacked even the abstract knowledge of how reproduction works. And men do not bleed in monthly cycles in tune with the moon. As a result, men have fewer reminders of the body and its relation to natural rhythms of birth, renewal, and death.

This makes it easier to live as though it were possible to stand apart from such rhythms, which is the first step to rising above, transcending, and ultimately trying to control the self and everything else as other. None of this means that individual men cannot feel deeply connected to nature and the body, or that women cannot feel disconnected and separate. But it does mean that men are more open to feeling this way and more vulnerable to being drawn into the cycle of control and fear that became patriarchy’s driving force.

Because pursuing control goes hand in hand with disconnection from the object of control, it is reasonable to suppose that as the idea of control emerged as a natural part of cultural evolution, men were more likely than women to see it as something to develop and exploit. Women’s lives, of course, also involved the idea of control—over children, for example, or gardens, or materials involved in producing goods and services that have always met a huge portion of human needs. But women have more to overcome in order to develop a sense of disconnection, and for this reason they would be less likely to pursue control to its extremes. This would fall to men, and the result would be patriarchy.

At first, the idea of control was most likely applied to the simple mechanics of altering the environment by making things and growing food. It was only a matter of time, however, before the potential to control other people became apparent. Women and children may have been the first human objects of this new potential as husbands and fathers looked for ways to enhance their resources and standing in relation to other men. But why would men do this, given all the good reasons not to? How could the idea of control be powerful enough to reorder a world rooted in connection, unity, and equality? Why couldn’t the powerful and complex bonds that joined people in prepatriarchal societies withstand the allure of control?
I believe the answer lies in the same dynamic that drives patriarchy today. It is reasonable to suppose that as populations grew and nomadic societies moved about in search of food, they must have gotten in one another's way. If men were most open to the idea of control as a solution to such problems, then they must have learned to fear what other men might do to them as well as the women and children in their societies. It would not take much to realize how control could be used to do harm, to take away liberty and the means of survival.

It is here that men find themselves caught in a bind, for the same reliance on control that created the fear in the first place can also be seen as an effective response to it. And so the path of least resistance was for men to respond to their fear of other men by increasing their own ability to control and dominate, gradually making this a central focus of social life. As Marilyn French observes, once this dynamic is set in motion, it forms the basis for an escalating spiral of control and fear. The result is an extended patriarchal history marked not only by the accomplishments that control makes possible but also by domination, warfare, and oppression, all of which are male-dominated, male-identified, male-centered pursuits that revolve around affirming, protecting, and enhancing men's standing and security in relation to other men.

This dynamic also encourages men to incorporate into their core sense of self the ability to always be in control and to invest themselves in the appearance of it as a way to present themselves to others. This becomes a valued and sought-after zone of safety and comfort, even though its ultimate effect is to undermine both. It does so by provoking fear in others (who then seek to defend themselves through a still more convincing demonstration of control) and because, like every illusion, it carries with it the potential to come crashing down with devastating effect. The patriarchal obsession with control is no testament to the inherent appeal of control but rather springs from being trapped in the dynamic relationship between fear and control that seems to offer no way out of a spiral of escalation.

Maybe it all happened this way and maybe not. But the inability to prove where patriarchy came from won't stop people from reaching their own conclusions about it. The argument that patriarchy is rooted in a cycle of fear, control, and domination is no less plausible than alternative explanations and far more plausible than many. It also has the advantage of providing continuity between what we can reasonably know and speculate about the past and how patriarchy works today.

This gives a more solid base to push off from as we work toward change. After all, if control and domination are inherently so appealing to men that they would oppress half the human race in pursuit of them, then working for change may be a hopeless war against men's 'nature.' But what if patriarchy is rooted in men's socially produced and paradoxical fixation on control, fear, competition, and solidarity with other men? Then the way is open to changing not men per se, but the patriarchal system and its paths of least resistance,
which we can see as only one of many possible forms that the natural human potential for control can take.

The Journey Out

There are many reasons to deny patriarchy its future. There is the obvious one of ending the injustice and unnecessary suffering that constitute women’s oppression—their exclusion from equal power and participation in social life, the pervasive misogyny and violence directed against them, and the denial of the fullness of their independence, autonomy, sexuality, spirituality, and dignity as human beings. Obvious reasons also include the damage men suffer for their participation in patriarchy—damage to their emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being, to their relationships with children, women, and other men, and to their sense of themselves as people. Although such goals get the most attention, they are just a beginning, because patriarchy isn’t just about relations between women and men. It encompasses an entire world organized around principles of control, male domination, male identification, and male centeredness.

Patriarchy’s roots are also the roots of most human misery and injustice, including race, class, and ethnic oppression and the ongoing destruction of the natural environment. The spiral of control and fear underlies a global reliance on militarism and toughness to solve problems and resolve disputes, from Vietnam to Bosnia to terrorism to the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Patriarchal nation states and militant movements arm themselves and develop rigid hierarchies to control their own people and defend themselves as the potential victims of other patriarchal entities. The ‘others’ are locked in the same cycle, presenting themselves as victims of unfair claims, unjustified aggression, outrageous insult, and on and on.

In this sense, the war/terror system is a self-perpetuating and self-justifying cycle of control and fear supported by the illusion that there are bad guys and good guys, with everyone laying claim to the latter. When each side defines the other as its opposite, they mask what each has in common, which is the underlying basis for the use of violence as a means of control. Beneath the good-guy/bad-guy mask is a system controlled by a deadly patriarchal dynamic in which control as a response to fear simply causes more fear.

The religion of power drives patriarchy onward from politics, religion, and economics to the smallest details of personal life. Even as the world seems to move toward political democracy, for example, economic power is increasingly concentrated under global capitalism to a degree that may soon dwarf the resources of all but the most powerful nation-states. Capitalists are driven by the fear of failing at competition, on the one hand, and, on the other, by their ongoing struggle to control and dominate labor and markets in order to maximize profit. Greed is not the problem, and a ‘kinder, gentler capitalism’—a kinder, gentler cycle of control and fear—is not the solution. Even in democratic-socialist countries like Sweden and Norway, where gender equity
is far more advanced than in the United States, patriarchy is still very much in evidence in high rates of sexual and domestic violence.\textsuperscript{74}

I don’t believe it is an exaggeration to say that in modern patriarchal societies, the default condition is to be running scared most of the time. While politicians and corporate managers struggle in vain for some semblance of control over events, bookstore shelves bulge with self-help guides telling us that the answer to our problems lies in learning to have more control—over the body, mind, spirit, love, sex, death, taxes, stress, memory, bosses, spouses, children. None of this obsession with control works—for individuals or societies—for still more control will not free us from the patriarchal obsession with control.

The depth of brutishness we see in the world today is not what human life needs to be about. Even in the jungle, the human idea of the law of the jungle does not apply. We are living in a jungle of our own making, and the journey out begins with seeing how it works and what it does to us, how we participate and how we might choose differently. For this, we need new ways to think about ourselves and the world, and the path to these revisits some old familiar territory—which is where we go next.
"You just don’t get it!” is a common complaint these days, often directed at men who are slow to grasp some aspect of male privilege. It is for men who do not understand why their repeated sexual advances at work are offensive and intolerable, for example, or men who don’t see why women get so upset over who cleans the bathroom. In some ways, ‘not getting it’ is part of privilege—what has been called ‘the luxury of obliviousness.’

It is also an effective way to defend privilege, a kind of dead-weight passive oppression that leaves to women the hard work of awareness and understanding. No matter how much energy women expend to get men to get it, it will not amount to much unless men want it to, which, most of the time, judging from their behavior, they do not. But the problem of seeing—of getting it—is more complicated than privilege. It is also a general social phenomenon that affects everyone because, like water to a fish, the social environment is about the last thing we are likely to notice as something to be studied and understood.

Everyone, for example, speaks a language without much trouble, but it takes real effort to be aware from moment to moment of how language is used to shape the world and us in it. When people insult women by calling them witches, they rarely are aware that ‘witch’ originally referred to highly respected wise-women healers and midwives who for centuries were the main providers of health care (and much of whose knowledge of medicinal plants is being ‘discovered’ by a now male-dominated medical profession). To use ‘witch’ as a way to insult a woman, then, contributes to an ongoing cultural degradation of women and their historical role as healers.

In many ways, people do not get it in the same way that audiences don’t get the sleight of hand in a magician’s magic. The secret of magic lies in directing
attention away from one thing that’s happening to other things that distract us from what becomes the magical event. Performance magic is what happens while our attention is elsewhere, and what makes us experience it as magic is our inability to tell the difference. We think we’re paying attention to what counts and yet somehow we miss it. That’s because the magic lies not in what the magician actually does but in our relation to it and our perception of it, and therein lie both the magician’s artful power and our participation in it. Such magic, in other words, is inherently relational and happens only when everyone does their part.

Societies are not magicians out to fool us. Since they are not living beings, after all, they cannot actually do anything. But our relation to society and how we participate in it can have some magical effects on how we see things.

Culture, for example, consists largely of words and ideas that we use to define and interpret almost everything we experience and do. Since every culture is finite and therefore limited in what it can include, it tends toward some versions of reality more than others. If a language does not include pronouns that distinguish by sex, such as ‘she’ and ‘he,’ people who speak that language will be less likely to see female and male as important distinctions. Whether to note the sex of the person who occupies a social position—as in chairman, policewoman, male nurse, or actress—won’t come up as an issue or call for a specialized vocabulary. This doesn’t mean that people will experience females and males as being the same, only that the distinction will be less salient, less critical to how they make sense of social life and themselves. Many cultures, however, make heavy use of gender pronouns and suffixes (such as heir and heiress), which portrays sex distinctions as relevant to every aspect of life and not merely reproduction or sexuality.

Although culture powerfully shapes what we experience as reality, we are rarely aware of this, especially while it’s happening. When we use gender pronouns, we don’t set out to shape reality in a gender-conscious way. We just obey rules of grammar and usage and fit into a culture that makes a great deal of gender. The words are just words to us, second nature and taken for granted, as is the gendered reality we assume they represent.

In this way, living in any culture is like participating in the magician’s magic, because all the while we think we’re paying attention to what is ‘really’ happening, alternative realities unfold without even occurring to us. These realities include an awareness of culture itself as culture, as one set of symbols and ideas among many that people might use to construct and interpret reality. Since we do not see our own culture as something to understand, we don’t ask critical questions about it but assume instead that what we experience as reality is reality. We defend it, and in defending it we also defend ourselves, because our involvement in it runs as deep as our need to think we know the difference between what is real and what is not. As reality goes, it’s all we’ve got—or so we think.

To see patriarchy clearly, we have to start by seeing how the reality of gender is put together in patriarchal societies. To ‘get’ the magic, we need new
ways to pay attention and a willingness to acknowledge that what we have always accepted as self-evident probably is, which is just the problem, for it winds up obscuring more than it reveals.

**Why Make So Much of Gender?**

Until the 1970s or so, the word ‘sex’ was used to refer to anything related to being biologically female or male—as in sex differences or sex change operation. ‘Gender’ was about grammatical constructions, which often had nothing to do with sex—such as classifying French and Spanish nouns as masculine or feminine. In French, for example, the gender of the noun ‘table’ is feminine, and the gender of the noun ‘virus’ is masculine. In practical terms, all this means is that adjectives used to modify the two kinds of nouns have different endings and the nouns take different articles—*le* and *la* in French (the masculine and feminine forms of ‘the’)—none of which has much of anything to do with being male or female.

This worked well enough until feminists pointed out the difference between biological and social factors that shape people’s lives. From this they argued that male privilege and women’s oppression are rooted in society, not biology, and therefore are neither inevitable nor immutable. Having a clitoris, for example, is a matter of biology. The nineteenth-century expectation that women were not supposed to enjoy sex, however, and the continuing practice in some areas of the world of removing women’s clitorises to control their sexuality have nothing to do with biology and everything to do with women’s position in patriarchal societies. To make such distinctions clear, feminists appropriated ‘gender’ from the realm of grammar and gave it a new meaning focused on social aspects of being female or male. In the new version of things, *having* a clitoris is about sex, while ideas and practices *about* the clitoris are matters of gender.

Although the distinction between biological and social forces is important, it also creates problems by making it seem as though sex is not in any way social but rather exists as a concrete biological reality that we are simply naming in an objective way. Of course, the human body is not a cultural creation, but as Michel Foucault argues, how we think about the body certainly is.

When girls reach puberty, for example, the biology of being female dictates that they will rapidly acquire most of their adult body weight. This includes a naturally higher percentage of fat than is usually found in males. By itself, this is not a problem, but in some patriarchal societies, male-identified standards of female beauty encourage pubescent girls to view their natural growth with a sense of alarm that can stay with them for their entire lives.

This contrasts sharply with other cultures, including most of Europe, whose classical art is rich with full-bodied women (and where women today tend to gain far more weight during pregnancy than do women in the United States) or Western Samoa, where large women are admired for their erotic
dancing during some public events. Even in the United States, it was not so long ago that ‘sex goddesses’ such as Marilyn Monroe were idolized for bodies that would be considered not thin enough by current Hollywood standards and the fashion industry. The obsession with female thinness—the denial of a natural body fullness rooted in biology—is nothing less than a cultural transformation of what it means to be female. In this sense, what a female actually is as a living being takes a backseat to the ideas a culture makes available for thinking about what she is.

Why cultures would include two categories—male and female—is not hard to see, since no society can continue without reproducing its population, and it takes males and females to do it. In other words, sex makes a distinction that is certainly relevant to human existence. But it is one thing to make a clear distinction and quite another to give it cosmic importance, as if who people are as female or male were at the core of their lives, the linchpin of personal identity, and the rock foundation of society and social life.

As Sam Keen tells it, for example, we are men and women before we are people, for “God did not make persons . . . only men and women.” Robert Bly goes even further, into every cell where men’s and women’s bodies supposedly “vibrate” at different frequencies, “sing” different songs, and “dance” a different dance. Jungians (who are especially popular with the mythopoetic men’s movement) see human existence as organized around a universal core of male and female archetypes—animus and anima—that presumably exist regardless of time or place. And John Gray would have us believe that women and men are so completely and fundamentally different that they might as well come from different planets.

From a strictly biological perspective, it’s hard to see what all the fuss is about since what actually makes us male or female depends on a tiny bit of genetic information out of all other factors, genetic and otherwise, that shape who we are. Some would argue, though, that however simple sex differences may be, they are crucial and central to human life because of their role in reproduction. This has a lot of intuitive appeal, especially since reproduction brought each of us into the world. It cannot, however, carry the weight of explaining why humans have organized so much of social life around an obsession with gender. It cannot carry the weight because if we look closely, we find that human cultures assign less importance to reproduction than we think.

For thousands of years, societies worshipped fertility and used images of pregnant women as religious symbols. Studies of these traditions suggest, however, that the object of reverence and awe was not simply human regeneration or women’s part in it but the seemingly miraculous process through which all forms of life are renewed and sustained. It is not at all clear that ancient people were obsessed with human reproduction per se rather than with the regeneration of life in general on which human survival depends. Goddess figures were associated with human mothers, for example, but, more important, they were also associated with the Earth and all the manifestations of its fertile
abundance, much of which is plant based and essentially asexual. In short, before humans worry about reproducing themselves, they have to worry about the ability of all the species that provide food to reproduce themselves so that people who are already born can eat.

Of course there has to be a certain amount of human reproduction for social life to continue. This doesn’t mean, however, that reproduction and gender are any more important than other necessary ingredients of human existence. This is especially so given that in its fullest sense, reproduction is a long and complicated process that doesn’t end with birth. Human societies do not need babies in order to survive. They need fully functioning adults, and compared with what it takes to produce an adult, sexual reproduction is a walk in the park.

Some might argue that the socialization of children into adults lacks the grand mystery—and hence the fascination and importance—of sexual reproduction and, by extension, sex and gender. But why limit our capacity for wonder to that? I was awed when I saw my children being born, but my sense of wonder did not end there. I will never be able to account for the mysteries of children learning to speak and think and struggle with love, death, and loss. I will never be able to explain my feeling that my children are connected to my body and my soul even though I never carried them inside myself, neither birthed nor nursed them—indeed, like every father, had no body experience that unequivocally said they were mine. Is any of this less amazing, less mysterious, or less vital to the human condition and experience than the male-female coupling in sexual reproduction? And yet we attribute no cosmic importance to the amazing and difficult process through which people come into being or to the caring work that makes it possible—work that both men and women are capable of doing.¹⁰

Even reproduction in its fullest sense, however, is not much more important than numerous other human necessities. In fact, it may be less so if we judge from how children are actually treated. Throughout most of human history, the death of babies and infants has been a common and relatively uneventful occurrence, as have abortion and infanticide, and where infant mortality is high, babies are often left unnamed until they show that they are likely to survive beyond infancy. For children who do survive, the historical record of child care is unremarkable in much of the world. Children have a long history of being forced to work under appalling conditions or being killed, sold, bartered, and otherwise neglected and abused. This is especially true for females (who, one would think, would be cherished for their reproductive potential) in societies most obsessed with gender distinctions.

None of this means that reproduction doesn’t matter. It does suggest, however, that the obsession with sex and gender is not based on some vital interest in human reproduction. What this obsession does serve are the interests of patriarchy, by anchoring the whole idea of a male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered society. After all, if we were human beings first and women
or men second, the patriarchal order wouldn’t make much sense. Patriarchy, not some inherent human condition, requires that gender assume mythic proportions and take its place as the most defining and confining human characteristic, dwarfing all others by comparison. This is true of most systems of privilege: race distinctions, for example, would barely exist, much less matter, without their link to white privilege.¹¹

Using gender to define the core of what makes us human creates huge contradictions by requiring us to define men and women as fundamentally different from each other and yet also as full human beings. On the one hand, this cannot be done, because as soon as human traits are made gender specific, each gender is encouraged to alienate itself from a substantial portion of what makes us human. On the other hand, patriarchy depends on such divisions, because there is no basis for men to dominate women if we see human beings in all their forms as fundamentally the same as human. And this is what sets up a contradiction that can be sustained only through some peculiar thinking.

This includes, for example, the notion that men’s place in society is defined more by their manhood than their adulthood. What it means to be an adult is fairly constant across societies—the ability and willingness to take responsibility, to care for others, to be productive and contribute to family, community, and society; to be courageous, to live creatively and with awareness. Under patriarchy, however, manhood has to amount to more than this. It has to differ from adult womanhood enough to justify organizing social life in a male-identified, male-centered way. This calls for a vision of male adulthood based on a social, psychological, spiritual, and physical territory that men can identify with and defend as exclusively their own.

The only way to accomplish this cultural sleight of hand is to gender what are essentially human qualities by pretending they define manhood rather than adulthood. The idea of heroism, for example, has been assigned almost entirely to patriarchal manhood. From movies and television to literature to the nightly news, our ideas of who and what are heroic focus almost entirely on men and what they do. Where the cultural magic comes in is in the pretense that women are not heroic, which we can see when we look at what heroism actually consists of. Sam Keen, for example, describes the “heroic male identity” as a capacity to feel outrage in the face of cruelty, to protect the powerless, and to heal those who are broken. This kind of real man knows how “to take care of the place to which he has been entrusted. . . to practice the art of stewardship, to oversee, to make judicious use of things, and to conserve for the future . . . to make a decision to be in a place, to make commitments, to forge bonds, to put down roots, to translate the feeling of empathy and compassion into an action of caring.”¹²

These are all wonderful human qualities, but why should we associate them primarily with manhood and not adulthood? The answer is that gendering such qualities distinguishes and elevates men in relation to women.
The falseness of this practice is even more striking when we consider that in many ways what Keen describes as heroic is more common among women than men. If anyone puts down roots, commits to relationships, and organizes a life around empathy, compassion, caring, healing, and even protecting the powerless, it is women. This is especially true in relation to children, whom many fathers seem all too willing to abandon and all too unwilling to provide for when the going gets rough. In contrast, women rarely feel they have a choice about whether to stay with and care for their children and usually will do whatever is necessary to hold families together. Why, then, is heroism gendered as an essential element of manhood even though men are no more heroic than women? The answer is that under patriarchy such beliefs perpetuate the ruse that women and men are fundamentally different and in the process elevates men by appropriating for them a valuable chunk of symbolic territory.

Robert Bly provides another example of such contradictions when he argues that for “soft” men to get in touch with the true spirit of the “wild man,” they must overcome their fear of “wildness, irrationality, hairiness, intuition, emotion, the body, and nature.”13 Ironically, almost all of these traits are culturally associated with women, not men. In other words, Bly is telling men to become more like women as a key to being true wild men. He gets into the same kind of trouble when he complains about the suppression of the wild man, because even more striking is the suppression of wildness in women. It is women, not men, who shave the hair from their bodies, who feel compelled to deny their inherent juiciness lest they be accused of being sluts, who learn to look upon their own flesh as an enemy, who are taught that anger and rage are unbecoming in them. Women’s potential wildness so threatens patriarchy that it has been suppressed and twisted to the point of being unrecognizable and shows itself on rare and predictably controversial occasions (such as in the film *Thelma and Louise*). Instead of female wildness, patriarchy churns out images of vengeful feminists, mass media caricatures such as Madonna, and the proverbial ‘slut,’ whose wildness, for all the myths about nymphomania, serves men’s imaginations more than women’s lives.

When we gender what are inherently human qualities, we lock ourselves in a web of unreality whose main consequence is to keep patriarchy going, for if society is to remain male dominated, male identified, and male centered, women and men must be seen as fundamentally different so that men can control women as ‘other.’ But the lie cannot abide the underlying truth that all people share a common biological, spiritual, and psychological core, and that qualities such as heroism, caring, and wildness are no more about maleness than they are about femaleness.14 Rather than confront the contradiction, we obsess about gender and define it as the core of social order and ourselves. And in struggling to hold the lie together, we keep ourselves from knowing what’s really going on and what it’s got to do with us.
Patriarchy as a Personality Problem: Feminine and Masculine

The obsession with sex and gender revolves around two concepts—femininity and masculinity—that encourage us to think about men and women as different kinds of people. As the patriarchal story goes, women are essentially feminine and men are essentially masculine, and as long as each stays in their own designated territory, life goes on as it’s supposed to.

To some feminists, this splitting of the human species is the heart of the gender system and what needs to be changed. From this perspective, patriarchy is men acting masculine and women acting feminine, and the freedom to break the bonds of narrowly defined ways of being is the key to women’s liberation (and, some say, men’s and human liberation as well).

In fact, however, femininity and masculinity are not what they seem. As cultural ideas that shape how we think about gender, they play a key role in keeping patriarchy going. This occurs primarily because we spend so much time focusing on what are essentially personality issues that we pay no attention to patriarchy as a system and the privilege and oppression it produces.

In the simplest sense, masculinity and femininity are cultural ideas about who men and women are and who they’re supposed to be. Typically, they are expressed in terms of personality traits that portray women and men as ‘opposite’ sexes. According to patriarchal culture, for example, men are aggressive, daring, rational, emotionally inexpressive, strong, coolheaded, in control of themselves, independent, active, objective, dominant, decisive, self-confident, and unnurturing. Women are portrayed in opposite terms, such as unaggressive, shy, intuitive, emotionally expressive, nurturing, weak, hysterical, erratic and lacking in self-control (especially when menstruating), dependent, passive, subjective, submissive, indecisive, and lacking in self-confidence. As this shapes how we think about gender, it creates a great divide with men on one side and women on the other. As long as everyone buys into the split, whether or not it actually describes them, all can have a relatively clear and stable sense of who they are and what is what. The problem, though, is that femininity and masculinity do not describe most people as they actually are.

Part of the problem with masculinity and femininity is that the ‘trait’ approach to describing people is a shaky business with questionable validity even among psychologists. How people feel and behave depends more on the social situation than some rigid set of underlying traits that define them in every circumstance. A woman might be submissive as a wife in relation to her husband, for example, but very much in charge as a mother in relation to her children. Or a man may be dominating as husband and father in relation to his wife and children but submissive as an employee in relation to his boss or as a son in relation to his parents. Which is he, then—dominant or submissive? Is she submissive or not?
The answer depends to a large extent on the social situation and the facets of the human repertoire that paths of least resistance call for. Masculinity and femininity tell us relatively little about who we are because we are complicated beings who reveal ourselves differently from one situation to another. We are not self-contained and autonomous personalities but relational beings whose feelings and behavior are shaped in an ongoing way through our interactions with other people in particular social environments.

A related problem with femininity and masculinity is that when we split humanity in half we tend to see women and men in polar opposite terms that do not allow for alternatives. Dualities such as dominant/submissive, for example, or rational/irrational imply that if you are not dominant, then you must be submissive, or if you are not rational you must be irrational. But there is more than one alternative to being dominant (such as independent, autonomous, or cooperative), or to being rational (such as intuitive and nonlinear, which are not irrational).

Things get even murkier when supposed pairs of opposites are not in fact opposite at all, which happens often with feminine and masculine imagery. ‘Passive’ and ‘aggressive,’ for example, are routinely paired, even though the opposite of passive is active, not aggressive. When we pair aggression with passivity, we mute negative associations with aggression because now it’s seen as an alternative to passivity, which is generally devalued and regarded with contempt for what Plutarch called “the lowest of the low.” And so we transform aggression into a masculine virtue and a lack of aggression into feminine weakness or passivity. This bit of cultural magic serves patriarchal interests by elevating the social standing of aggression and making it look better than it otherwise would and by making a lack of aggression suspect.

When we disentangle aggression and passivity, we can see how patriarchal culture promotes the fiction that women are essentially inactive. This borders on the ludicrous, for it obscures the truth of women’s work, which historically has accounted for the bulk of productive labor, especially in nonindustrialized societies. The common portrayal of women as passive is simply wrong, and yet it persists because it helps sustain male privilege. Thus, it is both mythological and ideological—it both embodies and promotes core patriarchal ideas about the nature of women and men.

How is this cultural sleight of hand accomplished? One answer is that in practice, femininity applies only to women’s place in heterosexual relationships, and we conveniently ignore everything else. In characteristic patriarchal style, the entirety of women’s being is reduced to their ties with men, particularly lovers and husbands. In heterosexual relations, for example, feminine passivity takes the form of being receptive to men who are penetrating, sexually aggressive, and otherwise active during intercourse. Even in this narrow context, however, the notion that women are passive paints a false picture of what really goes on. It takes only a little imagination to think of intercourse as
What Is This Thing Called Patriarchy?

a joining together of two active parties in which the vagina embraces the penis as much as it is penetrated by it. In fact, the muscles in the vaginal wall are quite active during intercourse and can hold or expel the penis. In addition, successful conception depends on the wavelike action of thousands of cilia that direct the sperm along their path to the egg, which then changes chemically to select which sperm will actually join with the egg. So even passive women really aren’t, except in the patriarchal imagination.

Part of the confusion about women’s essentially active role in heterosexual intercourse is based on a confusion between receptivity and passivity. Receptivity is more than a state of being. To receive someone requires energy and will, not passivity (imagine, for example, what it takes merely to make someone feel truly well received into your home). If receptivity were nothing more than passivity—a state of do-nothing limp inactivity—then the ultimate receptive person would be either unconscious or dead, which clearly is not what receptivity is about.

Unless she is being coerced, when a woman takes a man into her vagina she most certainly is doing something to make it happen and not merely being done to. But patriarchal feminine/masculine imagery obscures women’s active ways of being and creates the illusion that activity is the exclusive province of men.

There are similar problems with how we view nurturing, caring, and intuition. We tend to think that women nurture, care, and draw on ‘female intuition’ simply because that’s the way women are. But in truth these activities require considerable practice, effort, initiative, and commitment. Intuition is not inborn but rather flows from “careful attention to the nuances of personal relationships, from an intelligence trained on the minutely perceptible exterior signs in people around them of loneliness, pride, disappointment, and changes of heart.”

The only thing that keeps the masculine/feminine framework going in spite of its contradictions and distortions is some cultural magic. This is aided by the practice of noticing when women and men behave according to masculine and feminine expectations but ignoring or discounting much that contradicts them. The path of least resistance is to see male leaders as logical, decisive, and capable, for example, but not women who juggle the financial, emotional, and practical work that it takes to run a household, especially when they also work outside the home. In the same way, we tend to see women who cry as emotionally expressive but not men who get angry or approach problems with detached, dispassionate ‘objectivity,’ even though emotion has a lot to do with their behavior.

There is cultural magic at work here, too, in what we choose to call emotion, which we can see if we think for a moment about how emotionally loaded a term like ‘cold-blooded’ really is. What we call ‘unemotional’ is actually a controlled emotional flatness that is no less an emotional state than depression, hysteria, rage, or grief. In not seeing this, we buy into the illusion that
masculine men are emotionally inexpressive, rational, objective, in control, and ‘above it all,’ and that being emotionally expressive precludes being rational, objective, or anything other than out of control. In truth, being masculine is not about being unemotional. It is about acknowledging or expressing only those emotions that enhance men’s control and status—anger, detachment, and rage—and it is about renaming or explaining away all the rest.

There is a double standard here that shapes perceptions of men and women in ways that support patriarchy as a system. What is culturally valued is associated with masculinity and manhood, and what is devalued is associated with femininity and womanhood, regardless of the reality of men’s and women’s lives. Courage and heroism, for example, are culturally associated with masculinity. This makes us quick to identify as courageous those people who expose themselves to physical danger rather than risk losing power or social dominance. Since courage is valued in patriarchal culture, it is identified with men in expressions such as ‘having balls,’ while cowardice is routinely associated with being female, as reflected in the practice of insulting a man by calling him a girl, sissy, or pussy. There are no equivalent female images for courage—‘having ovaries’ has yet to catch on—but it’s not unusual to hear brave women described as having balls.

Related to this is the use of ‘castration’ to refer to disempowerment through removal of the testes, which implies that women do not have such power to lose in the first place. Technically, removal of the ovaries is also a form of castration, but since ovaries have no cultural association with courage, castration—and the loss of power as a traumatic and significant experience—is never linked to women. This is consistent with the fact that the courage shown by women and by men who reject patriarchal masculinity is rarely acknowledged unless it takes stereotypically masculine forms. Daring to separate from an abusive husband and taking on the daunting challenge of single parenthood are not identified as courageous; nor is daring to be emotionally vulnerable, which is often dismissed as a natural part of being a woman, like intuition. Far from being identified as courageous, emotional risk taking is more often defined as a sign of weakness, as if making ourselves emotionally vulnerable entails no risk.

And so, men who avoid vulnerability are seen to lack not courage but the requisite skills or predispositions. Indeed, more often than not they are seen as strong. All of this serves patriarchy well, for if emotional risk taking were socially identified as courageous, men would feel compelled to pursue and measure themselves against it. This, in turn, would undermine male dominance, since men need emotional detachment and the appearance of invulnerability to enhance and protect their position in a system based on control. Through this bit of cultural magic, men can think of themselves as courageous and manly without ever having to see their lack of courage for what it is.

When all is said and done, masculinity and femininity do a terrible job of describing women and men as they actually are, and have done so across
history and across cultures. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, for example, women were seen as naturally frail or naturally tough, depending on whether the focus was on the upper class or the peasantry. There are similar problems with comparing women of different social classes and races today, or men and women who differ on sexual orientation.

Such considerations lead Raewyn (formerly Robert W.) Connell and others to argue that it is a mistake to assume that a society has only one version of masculinity or femininity. The gay male subculture, for example, includes several versions of masculinity that differ in many respects from the heterosexual, female-dominating masculinity prevalent in patriarchal society as a whole. But as Michael Schwalbe argues, this view assumes that femininity and masculinity exist as essential dimensions of the human condition, and that we must therefore identify ourselves with some version of one or the other. In fact, however, as I show below, they are cultural creations of a patriarchal society that play a key role in enacting and perpetuating male privilege.26

Although femininity and masculinity badly describe people as they are, many argue that they do describe us as we are supposed to be. As the reasoning goes, masculinity and femininity make up ‘gender roles’ that define how men and women are expected to appear and behave, and form the core of what makes patriarchy work. But a closer look reveals far more going on—and less—than we might think.

Patriarchy as Role: The Myth of Gender Roles

Talk about gender rarely goes on for long without involving the idea that femininity and masculinity are organized into gender (or sex) roles that almost magically account for most of what goes on regarding gender. As we see in Chapter 5, this is a classic liberal perspective that reduces patriarchy to men and women enacting male and female roles that they learn in childhood, and that pins hopes for change on education and individual enlightenment.

The problem with this approach is that although it may help explain how people participate in patriarchy, it tells us little about the system itself. And what gender roles tell us about men and women as individuals does not amount to much, because as strange as it may seem, it is far from clear that such roles even exist. Many who study gender have all but abandoned the concept as a distraction from the core dynamics that make patriarchy work.27

The easiest way to see the problem is to consider what social roles are. Roles are sets of ideas about what is expected of people based on the positions they occupy in social relationships. Lawyer and client, for example, are positions in a relationship, and their associated roles shape how people participate in it. Clients are supposed to tell their lawyers the truth and lawyers are not supposed to betray the confidence. Similarly, mother and child are positions with roles attached—mothers are expected to love, nurture, and protect their children, and children are expected to love and obey their mothers.
Such expectations help define the terms of relationships between people who occupy various positions in social systems. In this, roles both identify people and locate them socially. Ask a woman who is spoon-feeding her child, “What role are you playing now?” and she’ll say she’s being a mother. But that same woman who is spoon-feeding her invalid mother will answer differently because although her behavior is the same, the relationship and her position in it are different. Notice, then, how roles are tied to identifiable positions in relationships. That is what counts more than anything else in understanding roles and social behavior.

If we now try to think of what a gender role might be, the first problem we run into is that ‘male’ and ‘female’ do not name positions in relationships in the way that ‘lawyer’ and ‘client’ or ‘mother’ and ‘child’ do. Rarely, if ever, would someone answer the question, “What role are you playing right now?” simply with “I’m being a man” or “I’m being a woman,” because the mere fact of gender is never enough to tell us who someone is in a social situation. When a mother disciplines her child, is she playing the role of mother or the role of woman? And if we reply that they are one and the same, since you cannot be a mother without being female, what do we say about that same woman when she defers respectfully to her grandmother (as granddaughter) or heroically runs into a burning building to rescue her brother (as sister)? Is she playing the same role in each case, the female gender role? Since only females can be sisters, do we explain her risking her life to save her brother as conforming to the female role? No, because ‘sister’ tells us who she is socially in that situation, while ‘female’ does not.

It is true that we play many roles that are culturally associated with gender, but never are we simply being male or female. Men behave very differently as sons, brothers, uncles, husbands, grandsons, or fathers even though they are men in every case. They behave differently because although they are always men, none of those relationships is primarily about that. If they neglect or abuse an ill parent, for example, they fail in their role as sons, not as men, just as abandoning their children violates their role as fathers. It is true that failing at being fathers, mothers, employees, and such may seem to damage our standing as women and men, but this has more to do with adulthood than gender.

Having said all this, we cannot deny that whether we are identified as female or male has real and powerful effects on perceptions, feelings, and expectations. As I argue shortly, however, this takes the form of a general ideology that can be invoked as needed to help maintain male privilege and the patriarchal order.

Ideas about gender, for example, play an important part in how people are sorted into various social positions: the relative absence of women among scientists, motion picture directors, presidents, prime ministers, and corporate CEOs has much to do with how gender is used as a basis for hiring, firing, and distributing power and rewards. The same is true of the relative absence of men among secretaries, elementary schoolteachers, nurses, and day care workers.28
Ideas about gender also affect how people perform occupational and other roles and how others perceive and treat them. Sexual harassment on the job, for example, isn’t part of any job description. There is nothing about working for a government official, studying with a college professor, or working on a construction site or serving in the military that remotely calls for sexual harassment. What does promote sexual harassment is the gendered inequality of power inherent in such situations and how power, sexuality, and a sense of male control and entitlement are linked together under patriarchy. When a male soldier interprets his authority as a legitimate basis for sexually coercing a woman whose rank is lower than his own, he draws on a patriarchal ideology that goes far beyond job descriptions.

In an important sense, then, gender is linked with ideas about people that shape our perceptions and expectations as we participate in role relationships. This means that while gender may have no direct connection to a given role, it nonetheless can have powerful indirect effects. This is true of many social characteristics such as race, age, ethnicity, and social class. There are no race roles or class roles, for example, but race and class relations are shaped by ideologies that profoundly affect how we perceive and treat ourselves and one another.

As concepts, then, femininity and masculinity play an important part in social life, but not as gender roles or ways of describing men and women as they actually are. Instead, they are a key element in perpetuating male privilege. In particular, they help control potential threats to patriarchy, manage men’s competition with other men, and make oppression appear to be a normal part of everyday life.

**Maintaining the Gender Order**

In perpetuating patriarchy, femininity and masculinity are important tools for social control. This works primarily through people’s investment in maintaining a socially acceptable gender identity. Everyone needs to have a relatively stable sense of who they are and a secure place in the world. Given the importance of gender identity in patriarchal societies, attacking people as being insufficiently masculine or feminine can do a lot to control them because it both challenges their sense of who they are and makes them feel like outsiders. This can be a serious enough threat to keep people from doing anything that might undermine or even question the status quo. Attacks on people’s gender identities are also effective because masculinity and femininity are such sloppy, contradictory categories, much like insanity and sanity.

Sanity and insanity are vaguely defined concepts full of inconsistency when applied to people in everyday life, so much so that mental health professionals shun them in their work. Whether someone is sane or insane is hardly a matter of scientific certainty (how, for example, would you prove you were sane?), and whether a particular behavior is regarded as evidence of insanity
depends pretty much on who does it and the social situation. What is seen as ‘eccentric’ in a wealthy recluse might qualify as ‘nuts’ in a homeless person walking through a shopping mall, and what is considered pathological in one society or historical period may be seen as normal, inspired, brilliant, or even holy in another.

And yet, for all their arbitrary sloppiness, the categories of sane and insane can be used to devastate people’s lives and grant enormous power to anyone authorized to decide who belongs in which. During the slavery era in the United States, for example, the legitimacy of recapturing escaped slaves was reinforced by the medical diagnosis of ‘drametomania,’ defined as “an insane desire to run away.”30 In the former Soviet Union, diagnoses of mental illness were often used to justify the imprisonment of political dissidents in ‘mental hospitals.’31 And throughout the last century, mental illness diagnoses have been used to pathologize and control women’s unhappiness and rebellion against patriarchal constraints.32

Femininity, masculinity, sanity, and insanity are all concepts plagued by ambiguity, inconsistency, imprecision, and lack of clarity. This would not be a problem if it were not for what happens when they’re used to attack someone. Since no one’s masculinity or femininity can ever be proved conclusively, anyone can be challenged, and the more importance we give to gender in building a sense of who we are, the more anxious we are likely to feel about it. This is especially true for men, who, as members of the dominant gender group, have the most to lose, which helps explain why men typically get much more worked up over proving their manhood than women do over proving womanhood.

In this sense, femininity and masculinity are powerful weapons of social control that help maintain the patriarchal order. The truth of this is reflected in how inconsistently and unevenly they are applied, for they are invoked primarily when someone threatens patriarchy and its core values. Men and women often appear and behave in ways that do not fit masculine and feminine expectations but without anyone making an issue of it. With children, for example, women may be assertive and powerful and men may be emotionally expressive and tender without inviting criticism that they’re being insufficiently feminine or masculine. But when appearance or behavior raises questions about the male-identified, male-dominated, male-centered, and control-obsessed nature of patriarchy, the heavy cultural artillery comes rolling out, and gender identities get attacked left and right.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, much of whose oppression has relatively little to do with sexual behavior, identity, or orientation per se. Instead, they are attacked because they undermine the patriarchal model that defines manhood in sexual terms and sees male superiority as inherent in maleness itself.33

A key aspect of male privilege and women’s oppression is rooted in heterosexual relations that subordinate women to men’s right to sexual access and control. Gay men undermine this by not relating to women in this way,34
as do lesbians who choose women rather than men as sexual partners. By the examples set by their own lives, lesbians and gays challenge basic patriarchal assumptions and arrangements. In the process, they often provoke feelings of fear, betrayal, and rage in men who depend on male solidarity and female acquiescence to feel secure in themselves and their privilege.

Transgender women and men also violate a deep assumption about the gender order. When someone who was sex-assigned as male at birth gender-identifies as a woman (a trans woman), or someone who was assigned as female gender-identifies as a man (a trans man, as in the film *Boys Don’t Cry*), both violate the patriarchal principle that masculinity and manhood are inseparable from biological maleness. Without this assumption, there is no basis for claiming an inherent male superiority and the privilege that goes with it. It is no surprise, then, that transgender people have shared in little of the increased acceptance achieved by those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and that trans women are especially likely to be victimized by men’s violence.35

The role of LGBT* oppression in maintaining patriarchy is clear when we look at how it works in practice. When public attention was first focused on lesbians and gays, for example, it was common to stereotype couples as conforming to the model of patriarchal heterosexuality, with one partner in a dominant ‘male’ role (‘butch’) and the other in a subordinated ‘female’ role (‘femme’). In part, the stereotyping was a way to dismiss same-sex relationships as merely mimicking heterosexual couples. But it also deflected a potential challenge to patriarchy by portraying gays and lesbians as sexually deviant but socially conforming to the most important element of patriarchal heterosexuality—the domination of one partner by the other and the identification of dominance with men and masculinity (hence the tendency to describe the ‘dominant’ partner in a lesbian relationship as masculine).

This has a long social history, as anthropologist David Gilmore notes in his study of masculinity. The ancient Greeks, for example, allowed a man to have male lovers without forfeiting his manhood *unless* he “accepted the passive or receptive role in the sex act, because then he surrendered the male prerogative of control or domination.” Similarly, the Romans equated manhood with being sexually active, regardless of the lover’s sex.36 This dynamic is also reflected today in gay behavior among men in prisons, where heterosexual men do not see themselves as gay as long as they are dominant.

A related practice is the use of terms for lesbians and gays as insults against heterosexuals to control behavior or gain competitive advantage. Among

*LGBT is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Some activists expand it to include ‘queer’ (LGBTQ) a general term that refers to those who, in various ways, reject, test, or otherwise transgress the boundaries of what is culturally regarded as normal in relation to gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation and expression. Some regard it as an umbrella term for the other four components of LGBT. ‘Queer,’ of course, is also routinely used as an insult directed at LGBT people.*
young men, for example, those called ‘faggots,’ ‘fairies,’ or ‘queers’ are often heterosexuals. Rarely is sexual behavior, identity, or orientation the issue, since many younger males know little about either. Instead, what occasions such attacks is often a reluctance to support male solidarity by playing the control and domination game, especially in relation to athletics and females. The target may be a boy who enjoys playing with girls, for example, or a young man who shuns aggressive behavior, who shows little interest in contact sports, who is reluctant to take a dare, who seems emotionally sensitive or vulnerable, or who holds back from joining in banter about women as objects of male sexual conquest. Whether he is gay is irrelevant, because it is only his solidarity with patriarchal values and other males that matters. Often the target of the attack is simply someone chosen more or less at random to be a foil against which other males can assert their claim to manhood. It also creates outsiders who heighten the feeling of being an insider. So a quiet boy in gym class may be taunted as ‘queer’ as a way to embody the ‘other’ and clarify and affirm the masculine standing of male classmates.

In this way, a man can elevate himself or make himself feel more secure simply by challenging other men’s credentials as real men, like the stereotypical Old West tough guy picking a fight. There seems to be no area of social life where this does not happen—from adolescent boys trading dares to national leaders going out of their way to foster images of toughness (“Bring it on”) and dispel suspicion that they might be wimps or otherwise lacking in manly virtues. As most men learn early in life, this is almost every man’s Achilles’ heel in patriarchal systems, and the only sure protection is to find a way not to care whether other men consider him masculine.

But this brings on a whole new set of risks that come with being identified as an outsider, if not a traitor to one’s gender. As a result, for men who do not identify with patriarchal values, the path of least resistance is not to make a public show of it. When they are with other men, for example, and someone uses misogynist or heterosexist language to insult another man (‘pussy,’ ‘faggot,’ ‘queer,’ etc.), they may remain silent and thereby join in the collusion of male solidarity. Though they may be able to sustain inner lives and intimate relationships relatively free of patriarchal values, their public lives are a different story, especially in the company of men.

When women deviate from feminine expectations, the social response tends to be quite different in both quality and intensity. A woman who dons a tuxedo gets far less negative attention, for example, than a man who wears a dress. At the least he will provoke laughter—intentionally in the case of comedians—and at most he may be suspected of mental instability or risk being assaulted.

A major reason for this is that a woman in man’s clothing is seen as dressing up in the uniform of her social superiors, a socially acceptable act of identifying with the dominant group. A man who dresses as a woman, however, will be seen either as making fun of women (which is culturally acceptable) or as
identifying with women (which is not). Since solidarity with male dominance is at issue in either case, ambiguity is intolerable, and there is always a reaction of one sort or another. There is less ambiguity when women dress ‘as men’ because it is assumed they are identifying with men rather than making fun of them. This pattern repeats itself among all kinds of dominant groups, who tend to be blind to the idea that someone might actually ridicule them. This is why there are so few jokes about WASPs in Anglo-identified societies and why men are so hypersensitive when women make even the slightest fun of them as men.

Normalizing Privilege and Oppression

As elements of patriarchal culture, femininity and masculinity are part of a way of thinking that makes privilege and oppression seem acceptable and unremarkable—as simply the way things are in everyday life. They are used to portray women and men in ways that justify the oppression of one by the other, that make it seem normal that men should control women, and that give the various aspects of privilege and oppression a taken-for-granted, ‘of course’ quality that hardly bears notice, much less analysis or challenge.

This is common in all systems of privilege. In the heyday of colonialism, for example, white Europeans typically saw themselves as advanced and civilized compared to the ‘primitive,’ ‘backward,’ even ‘subhuman’ peoples of color whom they colonized. This made it seem only natural that ‘superior’ Europeans would control and exploit non-Europeans, much as they controlled and exploited domestic animals (also defined as ‘other’).

As Albert Memmi writes, much of colonial ideology is grounded not in real differences but in a racism rooted as deeply as the body itself: “Racism . . . penetrates the flesh, the blood and the genes of the victim. It is transformed into fate, destiny, heredity. From then on, the victim’s very being is contaminated, and likewise every manifestation of that being: behavior, body, and soul.”

Under patriarchy, gender is defined in similar ways with masculine and feminine imagery portraying male and female as two opposite sorts of human beings. In patriarchal ideology, each gender is assigned an immutable nature fixed in the body and permanently set apart from the other. This is to maintain an almost cosmic polarity on which the universe supposedly depends for balance and order. The fact that human variation does not take the form of opposites—that we are all fundamentally alike with far more in common than whatever distinguishes us—makes no difference at all when it comes to ideology.

As a result, women are objectified and relegated to the position of other. And men, like any dominant group, become the standard against which others are evaluated, just as colonized peoples have been measured against European cultures. As under colonialism, a critical part of this process is the practice of identifying subordinate groups with nature and the Earth and of identifying
dominant groups with civilization, science, and other institutional means of control. In patriarchy, this is used to justify male dominance and to portray women as marginal to what really counts in the patriarchal view of civilization and how it works.

The concepts of femininity and masculinity also normalize privilege and oppression by creating images of men and women as harmonious, complementary, and equal, and therefore not involved in a system of privilege at all. We are encouraged to embrace images of women and men as yin and yang, as inherently incomplete beings whose only hope for wholeness lies in joining with the other. Each has a role to play in the life of the other if only we align ourselves in the proper way and accept our predestined positions in the gendered order of things. What this has to do with patriarchal control and male privilege is lost in a haze of longing and romantic cultural imagery.

A critical approach to femininity, masculinity, and gender does not mean we are the same and that ideas to the contrary are ideological props. It does mean, however, that we need to pay attention to how we think about gender as a cultural creation and what happens when we attach so much importance to it. The patriarchal vision of men and women as separate types of human beings whose differences assume cosmic importance in social life has little to do with who we are and everything to do with perpetuating patriarchy, its core values, and the consequences they produce.

Looking for a Way Out

The path of least resistance is to focus on femininity, masculinity, and gender roles as the problem, but these are the stuff of cultural magic that in the end do little more than confuse and set us against one another and keep us stuck in patriarchy. Using femininity and masculinity to describe people puts us in a straitjacket that denies the inherent complexity of what we and our experience are all about. It backs us into a tight little corner where we are just a step or two away from having to defend against challenges to our legitimacy as men and women. And it sets us up to struggle endlessly with contradiction, ambiguity, and denial as we search for an authentic sense of who we are.

At work here is a core patriarchal illusion that we are split between our ‘natural’ masculine and feminine characters as women or men. Instead of asking questions about patriarchy, we are encouraged to busy ourselves healing the imagined split with inventions like ‘androgyny’ and workshops on how to appreciate our masculine and feminine ‘sides.’ But this just fixes our attention on the cultural fiction that feminine and masculine sides even exist, while the perpetuation of patriarchy continues undisturbed by questions about how it works and the privilege and oppression it produces.
Every struggle to change the world needs a way to make sense of where we are, how we got here, and where to go—and the women’s movement is no exception. It has developed feminism as a diverse and evolving framework for understanding gender inequality, for interpreting women’s experience in relation to men, other women, and patriarchy. But feminism goes beyond relations between men and women to include the powerful ways in which the patriarchal obsession with control shapes the relation between society itself and the Earth, including nonhuman species of life. The capitalist plundering of natural resources and the resulting environmental catastrophe of global warming are as much an issue of gender as is men’s violence against women. After more than two centuries, feminism offers a rich body of thought that is both analytical and ideological, making sense of reality and supporting work for something better.

Every struggle for change is also resisted in ways ranging from subtle to overt, from peaceful to violent, and again, the women’s movement is no exception. Trashing feminism is so routine that most women do not openly identify with feminism even when they support feminist goals and ideas. The backlash has been so successful that ‘feminism’ carries a vague and highly distorted meaning for the average person, and ‘feminist’ is often used as an accusation or insult needing neither explanation nor justification, as in, “What are you, some kind of feminist?”

Before rushing to explain this as something peculiar to feminism, it is important to realize how typical this is for any way of thinking that challenges basic cultural ideas and the social arrangements those ideas support. Galileo
nearly lost his life for pointing out that Earth revolves around the sun. Critics of capitalism are dismissed as socialists and communists in the West, just as critics of communism were called reactionaries and counterrevolutionaries in Soviet and Chinese orthodoxy. Apparently, the fact that progressive change is impossible without new ways of thinking does not protect innovators from accusations of heresy and from being punished, dismissed, discredited, and ostracized as a result. Whether the heresy is religious or political or familial, it is attacked because it scares people and undermines powerful interests. It challenges root structures and ideas that prop up social systems and give everyday life its seamless, acceptable appearance.

Like many heresies, feminism is often attacked by those who understand it least. The less that people actually know, the easier it is to assume they know all they need to know and to fall back on stereotypes that leave the status quo undisturbed. Most people in the United States, for example, identify themselves as ‘anti-Marxist’ and yet know next to nothing of what Marx wrote about capitalism and how it works and affects people’s lives, including their own. At most, they might recognize a slogan from The Communist Manifesto (a pamphlet written for a popular audience and reflecting only a small portion of Marx’s work) or, more likely, something said by Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, or Fidel Castro.

In the same way, critics of feminism rarely know much of what feminism consists of in spite of the rich body of writings available to anyone with a library card. Most people do not even know how much published feminist thought there is, largely because hardly anyone talks about it outside women’s studies programs in colleges and universities. Increasingly, feminist writers work as academics who, true to the values and rules of that patriarchal system, write primarily for one another and not for the public at large. When their work does get wider attention, mass media coverage is at most superficial, typically limited to the blandest forms of feminism or feminism’s most sensational ideas taken out of context and distorted beyond recognition. While feminism continues to broaden and deepen its analysis of patriarchy, all that most people see is the mass media recycling the same shallow analyses—about why men won’t express their feelings or how women and men have such a hard time communicating—trotting them out periodically like seasonal recipes and household hints.

Most of the time, feminism is not censored openly. It is not shouted down or burned in public. Instead, it is contained and ignored in a kind of passive oppression by writers, editors, publishers, teachers, film and television producers, and public officials. When radical feminists write about patriarchy and its legacy of men’s violence against women, they do not make the front cover of the New York Times magazine or book review, but when Katie Roiphe wrote an astonishingly uninformed book about campus sexual violence, she was embraced by the media and made the front page of both.
professor Anita Hill accused Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment, the U.S. Senate held closely watched hearings that not once sought out feminist thinking and research—the only source with much to say about what they supposedly were trying to understand. Without comment, feminism and the social reality of sexual harassment were kept invisible. Instead, we were treated to a media event and a national debate about who was telling the truth, complete with 'Honk If You Believe Anita' bumper stickers.

If feminism is invisible, patriarchy is invisible. And if feminism is distorted and discredited, patriarchy is safe from scrutiny, for feminism is the only critical perspective on patriarchy that we've got. Without feminism, we are left to understand gender inequality in patriarchal terms that invariably ignore it or justify it by turning reality upside down and calling it something else. Without feminism, it is easy not to see male dominance at all or, if we do, to explain it away as human nature or what every woman really wants, if only secretly. Without feminism, it is easy to see feminists who talk about men's violence against women as just troublemakers with private axes to grind. And it's easy to hop on the bandwagon in the mythical 'postfeminist' Oz in which inequality is no longer a problem for real women and the patriarchal obsession with control does not threaten the global economy and the future of the planet itself. But once we accept the reality that patriarchy exists, we open a door that swings just one way, and once we pass through it to the other side, feminism is our best hope for figuring out where we are and what to do next.

Since anyone can walk through the door of feminist awareness, feminism is not for women only. As members of the dominant group, men are limited in how deeply they can understand and engage with feminism, and there is always a danger that men will try to co-opt it for their own purposes. If we think of feminism as a way for women to understand their own experience, then there is little that men can bring to it, and it would be presumptuous for any man, including me, to try to explain what it's about. But a large chunk of feminism is about how patriarchy works and shapes social life on every level, from family relationships to terrorism to global warming. This involves men just as deeply as it does women, although in sometimes dramatically different ways. While women are in the best position to speak about their own experience of oppression, men have much to contribute to understanding patriarchy as a whole, and particularly male privilege and men's participation in it.3

Any full understanding of patriarchy must of course include women's experience, but this isn't going to be enough, unless we believe that women's experience encompasses the entire reality of patriarchy and its power to shape social life and the organization of entire societies and beyond. To the extent that feminism is about patriarchy as a whole and how we all participate, then change requires that both men and women understand it, since each brings distinct points of view to the work. But we all can use feminism to understand what patriarchy and its consequences are about.4
Feminists and Feminism

The word ‘feminism’ is an umbrella that covers many approaches to gender and patriarchy. In the most general sense, feminism is a way of thinking critically about gender and its place in social life, but from here it ranges in many directions. All forms of feminism take gender to be problematic in some way, but just what this means—how prominent is the concept of patriarchy, for example, or whether the focus is social systems or the psyche—varies from one branch of feminism to another.

Feminism also lends itself to many different purposes. We can use it as an intellectual framework for analyzing how social life works, from love and sex to family violence to work to the meaning of art, literature, and spirituality to the conduct of science to the dynamics of ecology and global capitalism. Feminism also provides an ideological basis for change on every level of human existence, from sexual behavior to transforming patriarchy and its core values of dominance and control as they play out in militarism and war. By focusing on how we participate in the patriarchal order, feminism challenges us to live in new ways, to question assumptions about human nature, and to confront the everyday realities of male privilege and the oppression of women.

Because feminism challenges the status quo, it gets attacked from many sides. Instead of criticizing feminism as it really is, however, most critics focus on two substitutes—‘issues feminism’ and feminists—which are easier to deal with because they avoid confronting men and leave patriarchy largely unchallenged.

Issues feminism defines feminism as little more than positions on social issues such as abortion or pornography. The result is a fractured and divisive view of feminism as a collection of contending positions—antipornography feminism, pro-choice feminism, pro-life feminism, and so on. This way of looking at things often does more to divide women from common struggle than unite them. Many women, for example, refuse to call themselves feminists because they think it automatically implies a particular position on abortion or pornography or sexual orientation.

How such divisive dynamics play out can be seen in an interview with the award-winning actor Isabella Rossellini, on the occasion of a performance of Eve Ensler’s play, The Vagina Monologues, in New York City to raise money to combat men’s violence against women.

“I don’t know about feminist,” said Isabella Rossellini. “Is this about feminism really? Violence against women is a feminist issue? I don’t think it is.” OK, but does she consider herself a feminist? Rossellini looked as if she were smelling something unpleasant. “Well, I don’t know what you mean. I would not label tonight a feminist night; it’s a women’s night. I mean, there are Republican women, there are
Democratic women, there are feminist women, and women who don’t define themselves, they’re just women against violence.”

In this exchange, Rossellini does more than reject the feminist label. She also overlooks basic questions about what patriarchy is, how it works, and how we participate in it. Such questions don’t necessarily hinge on taking particular positions on any given issue. You don’t have to be pro-choice on the abortion issue, for example, to see patriarchy as problematic and try to understand it as such. Nor do you have to be a white middle-class professional woman bumping up against the glass ceiling. But if the focus is solely on issues such as abortion or workplace discrimination to the neglect of the system that creates and shapes them, the result is the kind of endless, divisive debate where we’ve been stuck for a long time.

When feminism isn’t being fragmented into a jumble of topical issues, it is being attacked through women associated with it. Feminists are regularly trashed through stereotypes portraying them as humorless, man-hating, angry, whining, antifamily, and lesbian. Sam Keen, for example, applauds feminism for drawing attention to patriarchy’s oppressive consequences, including the obsession with control and dominance. And yet, rather than take the next step of figuring out how to take responsibility for and do something about patriarchy, he switches almost immediately from talking about feminism to talking about the behavior and motives of “some” feminists. He energetically attacks what he calls “ideological feminism,” which he describes as “animated by a spirit of resentment, the tactic of blame, and the desire for vindictive triumph over men that comes out of the dogmatic assumption that women are the innocent victims of a male conspiracy.” And having established himself as an innocent victim of such irrational, vindictive hatred of men, he never looks back or bothers to ask just what this phenomenon tells us about feminism or the women’s movement as a whole. Nowhere, for example, does he ask what men might do with all those “enlightening perspectives and prophetic insights of the women’s movement” for which he says he has such high regard. That gets no more than an approving nod as he wades into what he seems to see as the real problem—women expressing anger at men.

Keen has lots of company, for it is easier and safer to dwell on caricatures, extreme factions of complex movements, personal smears, and slogans than it is to understand a new way of thinking and what it might tell us about the world and ourselves in it. From Rush Limbaugh’s sneering references to “feminazis” to Camille Paglia’s smug characterization of Gloria Steinem as Stalin, stereotypes are vivid and powerful in the human imagination and potent weapons against change. Even Naomi Wolf, author of The Beauty Myth, a powerful feminist analysis of the role of beauty in women’s oppression, goes on in a later book to confuse feminists and feminism, to the detriment of both. In Fire with Fire, she criticizes what she calls “victim feminism,” which she presents as a mixture of theory, selected issues, and, most important, personal attitudes and behavior
of individual feminists who, for the most part, are referred to only as “them” or “some feminists.” She seems to see no significant difference, for example, between arguing that patriarchy is problematic and being personally humorless or rigid or grim in relation to other people. Seeing both as feminism makes it impossible to distinguish feminism as a framework for thought and action—what threatens patriarchy most—from feminism as an attitude or personal style.

The aggressive fusing of the idea of feminism with attacks on feminists has taken over the public imagination, prompting any number of prominent women to make a point of not identifying with feminism, including singer-songwriters Taylor Swift and Katy Perry, Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer, and even actor Susan Sarandon, an icon of feminist activism. The successful trashing of feminists means that to see feminism clearly we have to cut through the stereotypes about feminists.

**Feminists Are Antifamily**

Feminists are often described as antifamily, but most feminists I have encountered in print or in person have nothing against the family per se as a group in which children are reared and people’s emotional and material needs get met by loving adults. Many feminists do object, however, to the subordination of women inside the patriarchal family and the way this can damage the potential for nurturing, caring, and growth. They oppose the organization of family life in ways that suffocate women’s emotional and productive lives and foster a climate for the ongoing epidemic of physical and emotional abuse of women and children. They do not deny the vital importance of women’s connection to children, but many oppose how patriarchy enables and encourages men to use that connection to control women’s bodies, to restrict where they go and with whom they spend their time, and to deny them the independence and autonomy that paid employment provides.

If the patriarchal family is the only kind of family we can imagine, then many feminists will appear to be antifamily when in fact they are simply antipatriarchy. This was especially true during the feminist heyday of the 1970s, when many women were struggling with the realization of how oppressive family life can be when organized on a patriarchal model. That model is so pervasive that the only alternative can appear to be no family life at all, which easily lends itself to the impression that feminists devalue marriage and the vital work that mothers do. This may be true of some feminists, but the underlying theme is alarm over what has become of marriage, motherhood, and the family under patriarchy.

**Feminists Are No Fun**

Feminists are also accused of being angry and humorless and not knowing how to have a good time. Aside from not being true, it is a peculiar criticism to
make of a group whose primary work is to deal with the reality of privilege and oppression.

For women, however, getting angry is socially unacceptable, even when the anger is over violence, discrimination, misogyny, and other forms of oppression. Anger is unacceptable because angry women are women in touch with their passion and power, especially in relation to men, which threatens the entire patriarchal order. It is unacceptable because it forces men to confront the reality of male privilege and women's oppression and their involvement in it, even if only as passive beneficiaries. Women’s anger challenges men to acknowledge attempts to trivialize oppression with some version of “I was only kidding” or “Can’t you take a joke?” And women’s anger is unacceptable to men who look to women to take care of them, to prop up their need to feel in control, and to support them in their competition with other men. When women are less than gracious and good-humored about their own oppression, men often feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, at a loss, and therefore vulnerable. And it places women and their concerns at center stage in a male-centered world.

But what James Baldwin said about blacks, that “to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time,” is also true for women. For this reason, women often protect themselves from feeling (and appearing) perpetually angry by keeping themselves only partially aware of what is going on. But it is unreasonable to expect women to feel no anger about day-to-day oppression that is often lived in intimate relation to men who not only benefit from patriarchy but typically show little interest in knowing what it’s about or doing anything about it.

And yet that is precisely what’s expected of women who are called on to please, nurture, and soothe men and never cause them discomfort, embarrassment, or alarm. As wives and employees, women are supposed to be perpetually good natured, smiling, accepting, accessible, and yielding, lest they be thought of as cold, frigid bitches. This means that all a man has to do to challenge or discredit a woman is point out that she’s angry or, even worse, accuse her of being angry at men. Women are a unique minority in this respect. Malcolm X, for example, was often criticized for expressing rage at white racism, as was Louis Farrakhan. But while their rage may make them unpopular political figures among whites, if anything it enhances their standing as men.

**Feminists Are Man-Hating Male Bashers**

There is probably no more effective weapon against feminists than to accuse them of hating men and to characterize feminist criticism of patriarchy and male privilege as male bashing. The tactic works in part because attacking men challenges the male-identified character of society itself. In other words, since men are assumed to be the standard, to criticize men in general is to take on society as a whole, which both men and women have a stake in resisting. Just
the opposite is true, however, of the demeaning prejudice routinely directed at women and other subordinate groups.

Mainstream sexist and racist culture, for example, is full of negative images of women and blacks that devalue the idea of being female or black, but we rarely hear about female bashing or black bashing as a result. This is especially true of misogyny, something whose name has no place in most people’s active vocabularies in spite of, or perhaps because of, its pervasiveness as an integral part of everyday life. It is unremarkable and taken for granted. When feminists and people of color do call attention to sexist and racist speech, however, and demand that it stop, a hue and cry goes up about the tyranny of ‘political correctness’* and infringements on free speech.

Calling feminists man haters and male bashers protects patriarchy and male privilege by turning what otherwise would be criticism of patriarchy into questions about feminists’ personalities and motives. They are accused of creating feminism and the women’s movement as a way to act out personal hostility, bitterness, and discontent, all presumably fueled by being unattractive to men or wanting to be men themselves. Such feelings supposedly result from personal experience, maladjustment, and pathologies having nothing to do with patriarchy or the oppression of women it produces. In short, feminism is reduced to the ravings of a bunch of bitter malcontents and all of its critical insights into patriarchy are conveniently tossed aside.

The accusation of man hating and male bashing also shifts attention away from women and onto men in a sympathetic way that reinforces patriarchal male centeredness while putting women on the defensive for criticizing it. In the process, it portrays men as victims of a prejudice that on the surface seems comparable to the sexism directed at women. Like many such false parallels, this ignores the fact that antifemale and antimale prejudices have different social bases and produce very different consequences. Resentment and hatred of women are grounded in a misogynist culture that devalues femaleness itself as part of male privilege and female oppression. For women, however, mainstream patriarchal culture offers no comparable antimale ideology, and so their resentment is based more on experience as a subordinate group and men’s part in it.

Of course, men sometimes are made fun of, as in television sitcoms, and this can hurt their feelings. As Marilyn French argues, however, in almost

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*The term ‘political correctness’ was first used by social activists as a way to monitor their behavior and speech and ensure that it was consistent with their political principles. Talking about male privilege and the oppression of women, for example, in ways that focus entirely on the experience of white women would be considered politically incorrect, because while opposing one form of privilege, it tacitly supports another. Since then, the term has been appropriated, copied, and distorted by gender equity opponents who use it to refer to any infringement on any dominant groups’ freedom to speak and behave without considering the consequences for members of subordinate groups and without regard to the maintenance of privilege. Thus, the term has strayed from its original meaning in ways that trivialize the reality of privilege and oppression.
What Is This Thing Called Patriarchy?

every case, it is women who appear to make men laughable by turning them into fools trapped in the home as husbands, the one setting where women have some real power. It is more as husbands than as men that men are made to look foolish, and even in this, the status of manhood is never at much risk. Even though male characters may sometimes look foolish in the narrow confines of television or the Sunday comics, they are surrounded by an overwhelmingly male-identified, male-centered world in which misandry—the hatred of men—simply has no place. A few henpecked husbands may bumble their way through life for our entertainment, but it is funny precisely because it is such a departure from the exalted value placed on manhood, from which every man benefits. In contrast, there would not be much of an audience for a show based on a husband’s ability to belittle and control his wife.

Accusations of male bashing and man hating also work to discredit feminism because, as Chapter 2 shows, people often confuse men as individuals with men as a dominant and privileged category of people. Given the reality of women’s oppression, male privilege, and men’s enforcement of both, it is hardly surprising that every woman should have moments when she resents or even hates men. Even Phyllis Schlafly, a leader in the antifeminist backlash, led the fight against the Equal Rights Amendment by arguing in part that without protective laws, mothers would not be able to count on fathers to support their children, a judgment that reflects little regard for men.

In spite of such mainstream criticism of men—and its thinly veiled dissatisfaction and hostility—it is politically expedient for opponents of feminism to attribute such negative judgments and feelings to feminists. It makes feminists seem marginal and extreme. It obscures the fact that many feminists have deep ties to men and thereby alienates them from other women who also depend on men. And it gives many women someone to take the heat for feelings they themselves dare not express.

There is a big difference, however, between hating a dominant group in an oppressive system like patriarchy and hating the individuals who belong to it. Angela Davis once said that as an African American she often feels hatred for white people, but that her feelings for particular white people depend on the individual. She hates white people’s collective position of dominance in a racially oppressive society, she hates the privilege they enjoy at her expense, and she hates the racist culture that whites take for granted as unremarkable while she must struggle with the oppression it creates in everyday life. But Davis also knows that while individual whites can never be free of racism, they can participate in racist systems in many different ways, which include joining people of color in the fight for racial justice. The same can be said of men and women.

The distinction between groups and individuals, however, is subtle and easy to lose sight of when you’re up to your ears in an oppressive system. Of course women are going to feel and express anger, resentment, and even hatred toward individual men who may not have it coming in just that way or to
that degree or at that moment. Of course men are sometimes going to get their feelings hurt or be called on to take responsibility for themselves in ways they may not be used to. When I heard Davis talk about hating white people, and when I’ve heard women talk about hating men, I have had to get clear in my own mind about how these words refer to me and how they don’t, and it often takes some effort for me to get there. And as a white male who benefits from both male and white privilege, I’ve also had to see that it’s up to me—and not to women or people of color—to distinguish the one from the other. Too often men react to women’s anger by calling on women to take care of them, and in this way re-create the male-centered principle of the very gender order that women, feminist and otherwise, are angry about.

Feminists do exist who passionately and unapologetically hate all males simply for being male, although in all my years of work on gender I’ve encountered very few of them. The author of the infamous 1960s *SCUM Manifesto* comes to mind as one candidate.\(^{19}\) Although it’s unclear whether the Society for Cutting Up Men ever had more than one member, I have heard men cite it as a general characterization of how feminists feel about men. Given the existence of many nonfeminists who are angry at men, and given how much work lies ahead if we are to understand patriarchy and what we can do about it, putting the subject of women who hate men at the center of attention is nothing more than a defensive distraction.

**Here Come the Lesbians**

A favorite way to dismiss feminists and feminism in a single stroke is to associate both with lesbianism. It is true that many lesbians are feminists and that many feminists are lesbians. But it’s also true that many lesbians are not feminists, many feminists are heterosexual, and the women’s movement is full of disagreement among feminists of varying sexual orientations and identities.\(^{20}\) More to the point, however, is that when the label ‘lesbian’ is used to smear and dismiss feminists and feminism, it silences women who fear being labeled if they identify themselves as feminist or even talk openly about patriarchy.\(^{21}\) Such lesbian baiting leaves no room to ask about the meaning of lesbianism and its significance under patriarchy.

Adrienne Rich, for example, argues that lesbianism is not simply about women who want to have sex with other women but is a continuum of women’s sense of identification and desire to be with other women.\(^{22}\) There are reasons for this to exist in any society, beginning with every girl’s intimacy with her mother. In a male-identified, male-centered system, however, women must contend with paths of least resistance that encourage them to see and evaluate themselves as would men. As Ellyn Kaschak puts it, “The most notable aspect of current gender arrangements is that the masculine always defines the feminine by naming, containing, engulfing, invading, and evaluating it. The feminine is never allowed to stand alone or to subsume the masculine.”\(^{23}\)
This means that when women look for role models, they usually find men and women who measure themselves by male-identified cultural standards—what has been called the ‘male gaze.’\textsuperscript{24} Most Western art, for example, is created as if its intended audience were primarily male, especially when the subject is women. Similarly, when heterosexual women look in a mirror, they often see themselves as they think men would see them and judge themselves when they fail to conform to feminine ideals promoted by patriarchal culture.\textsuperscript{25} When women leave the patriarchal frame of reference, however, by also turning to one another for mirroring and standards, they challenge the assumption that the world revolves around men and a masculine point of view and that women exist primarily to please and take care of them.

For women to become woman-identified is a critical part of feminist practice, regardless of women’s sexual orientation. It is a process that every oppressed group goes through as part of its struggle to redefine itself. It is a way to throw off negative self-images constructed through lifetimes of gazing into cultural mirrors that devalue them to maintain the privilege of dominant groups. In this sense it is not surprising that many lesbians are attracted to a movement to free women from patriarchal oppression. But it also makes sense for women of all sexual orientations to shift toward woman-identified living even while participating in marriages and raising families with men.

As heterosexual women reclaim a positive, autonomous sense of themselves in nonpatriarchal terms, this will most likely happen as it has thus far—through other women acting as mirrors that help define what it means to be women. This means, of course, that women’s movement toward being woman-identified threatens men’s place at the center of women’s attention and what security women have been able to attain for themselves in relation to that center. At the same time, it challenges the male-identified, male-centered core of patriarchy as a system, calling on men to develop their own sense of themselves apart from the exploitative dependency on women that patriarchy promotes.

From this perspective, the persecution of lesbians and the use of ‘lesbian’ as accusation or insult is really a defensive attack on the larger movement of women away from patriarchal existence and toward fuller and more self-defined lives. As lesbian baiting intimidates all women into silence and blunts feminism’s potential to change how they think about gender, it defends patriarchy as a whole and the privilege and oppression that go with it.

\textit{Feminists as Victims}

A more recent attack on feminists has been the peculiar accusation that focusing on patriarchy and its oppressive consequences for women actually demeans and disempowers women by portraying them as ‘mere’ victims. Feminists have been characterized as whining ‘victim feminists’ and ‘rape crisis feminists’ who portray women as too weak to defend themselves from men who would harass, beat, sexually assault, or discriminate against them.\textsuperscript{26}
What is most bizarre about this accusation is that the women who work against male violence and exploitation are some of the strongest, toughest, most articulate, and courageous people around, and to describe them as whining victims who passively feel sorry for themselves is about as far from reality as I can imagine. What makes whining so unappealing is that it is both a call for help and a form of focused self-pity that is so intense that nothing in the way of help has much chance of getting through. In other words, whining is a manipulative setup in which actually making things better is not the point. But this is a far cry from feminist demands for an end to discrimination, violence, and sexual exploitation.

In spite of its loose hold on reality, the ‘victim feminism’ criticism works because it draws attention away from men who victimize and focuses instead on women who are victimized. In one sense, critics are correct that focusing on women as victims is counterproductive, but not because we should instead ignore victimization altogether. The real reason to avoid an exclusive focus on women as victims is to free us to concentrate also on the compelling fact that men are the ones who victimize, and such behavior and the patriarchal system that encourages it are the problem. Otherwise we may find ourselves concentrating on male victimization of women as something that happens to women without being done by men.

The shift in focus can be as simple as the difference between saying, “Each year 100,000 women are sexually assaulted” and, “Each year men sexually assault 100,000 women.” Many people feel less comfortable with the second version because it draws attention to men’s violence against women and thereby to men and manhood as problematic. Placing men at the center of the issue also makes it more difficult to explain away sexual violence as a matter of chance (like catching a cold or being in a traffic accident) or of women’s failures to be careful enough or of women somehow asking for it. Sexual violence does not fall on women out of thin air, and referring to a woman as a victim does not tell us anything about her except that she suffered the consequences of what one or more men did. To call attention to that simple fact, as many feminists do, in no way demeans or diminishes women. What it does do is challenge men and women to look more carefully at what is really going on.

The victim feminist label also works because it taps a core feature of patriarchal masculinity: the importance of ‘taking it like a man’ in order to be included as one of the guys. Men’s abuse of other men is a staple ingredient of patriarchal culture, from high school locker rooms to fraternity hazing to military training. The man who takes abuse without complaint improves his chance of being accepted as a real man who deserves to share in manhood and male privilege. A man who objects, however, who dares identify abuse for what it is, risks being ostracized as a sissy, a mama’s boy who can’t take it and who belongs with the girls (“Gonna cry and run home to mama?”). In the same way, when feminists point out that sexual harassment is abusive or that coerced sex is rape, they may be chided for being the equivalent of whining sissies.
who don’t give women enough credit for being tough and able to take it—like a man. The ‘like a man’ part usually isn’t spoken, but in a patriarchal culture it is implicit without needing to be voiced. And some of the loudest voices in the chorus are women who have achieved acceptance and success in a male-identified world.

As the attacks continue, many feminists are distracted and harried by having to explain and defend themselves from the latest provocation. More to the point, perhaps, is that the ongoing waves of criticism—whether warranted or not—are combined with a general absence of thoughtful public discussion of what feminism is about. Over time, this creates the illusion that either patriarchy does not exist or, if it does, it does not deserve serious attention. While the reality of feminism’s world-changing potential remains invisible in the public eye, male privilege and oppression continue largely unabated. To do something about that, we need a clear sense of what feminism is and how it can help us understand what’s going on.

What Is Feminism?

As a matter of principle, some feminists prefer not to define feminism at all, arguing that feminism is so diverse that no single version of it could possibly do justice to its many forms. In addition, a commitment to being inclusive and nonhierarchical makes many feminists leery of definitions, since definitions can be used to establish an exclusive ‘one true feminism’ that separates insiders from outsiders.

Nonetheless, people do use the word to describe how they think and work. Like any word, ‘feminism’ cannot be used unless it has meaning, and any meaning necessarily sets it apart from other possibilities. Without taking anything away from feminism’s diversity, I believe it is possible to identify some core ideas that most forms of feminism have in common. I have never encountered anything called feminism, for example, that did not in some way begin with the assumption that gender inequality exists and that it is problematic. How and why inequality exists, what forms it takes, and what to do about it are questions with different and sometimes conflicting answers. But the questions all reflect a common focus of attention, and this is how feminism can encompass a diversity of answers.

Having said this, it is important to emphasize the distinction between feminism as a framework for analysis and two other possibilities. Feminism can refer to a set of opinions about social issues such as abortion or equal pay. It can also simply be about being ‘pro-woman,’ as when people identify themselves as feminists because they favor gender equality or the right to choose abortion. But neither of these necessarily points to a particular way of analyzing gender inequality that one might call feminism.

For my purpose here, feminism is a way of thinking—of observing the world, asking questions, and seeking answers—that may lead to particular
opinions but does not consist of the opinions themselves. One could be pro-choice or in favor of equal pay, for example, on purely moral or liberal political grounds without any basis in a feminist analysis of gender. In this sense, feminism refers to ways of understanding such issues from various points of view, all of which share a common focus of concern.

Although all feminist thought begins with gender inequality as problematic, from there it follows various paths, especially in relation to patriarchy. In general, it is useful to distinguish among branches of feminism according to the degree to which:

- They understand various aspects of social life—such as sexual domination and violence, religion, warfare, politics, economics, and how we treat the natural environment—in relation to gender
- They explicitly recognize patriarchy as a system, as problematic, as historically rooted, and in need of change
- They see men as a dominant group with a vested interest in women’s subordination, the perpetuation of patriarchal values, and control over the political, economic, and other institutions through which those values operate

Some brands of feminism, for example, have little use for the concept of patriarchy, not seeing men as particularly problematic and avoiding anything that might challenge men or make them feel uncomfortable or raise the possibility of conflict between men and women. Others define patriarchy, male privilege, gender oppression, and conflict as basic points of departure for any understanding of gender. In some cases the focus of change is quite narrow, as it was in the turn-of-the-century struggle for women’s suffrage, while in others, such as ecofeminism, global feminism, or feminist spirituality, the focus is worldwide change spanning multiple dimensions of human experience.

Most feminist work draws to varying degrees on a handful of major approaches known as liberal, radical, Marxist, and socialist feminism. These are not the only kinds of feminist thought—in addition to those mentioned, the list includes psychoanalytic, postmodern, postcolonial, and third-wave feminism, among others—but they certainly have played a part in most attempts to understand and do something about patriarchy and its consequences. They also are not mutually exclusive. Although liberal and radical feminism, for example, differ dramatically in some ways, they also have much in common and trace back to similar roots. Thus, ‘liberal,’ ‘socialist,’ ‘Marxist,’ and ‘radical’ are not little boxes into which feminists can neatly and unambiguously fit themselves. If I tried to identify the feminist approaches that have shaped the writing of this book, for example, I would find them all in one way or another even though I lean more toward some than others. It helps, then, to think of various feminist approaches as threads woven together to form a whole, distinctive in many ways but strongest in relation to one another.
What Is This Thing Called Patriarchy?

Liberal Feminism

The basic idea behind liberal feminism—and liberal thinking in general—is that humans are rational beings who, with enough knowledge and opportunity, will realize their potential as individuals to the benefit of themselves and society as a whole. Things go wrong primarily through ignorance, bad socialization, and limited access to opportunities. Equality of opportunity and freedom of choice are seen as the bedrock of individual well-being, which in turn makes possible an enlightened society and progressive social change. Liberalism assumes that the individual person is the highest good and the key to social life. From this perspective, societies are little more than collections of people making choices, and social change is largely a matter of changing how individuals think and behave, especially through education and other means of enlightenment.

From a liberal feminist perspective, the main gender problem is that prejudice and cultural values and norms deny women equal access to the opportunities, resources, and rewards that society offers. Forcing women to choose between child care and employment; excluding women from positions of authority in economic, political, religious, and other organizations; segregating women in the job market; devaluing, objectifying, and portraying women as inferior in a wide variety of cultural stereotypes; and socializing women and men in ways that enhance all of these are identified as central to gender inequality.

The liberal feminist solution is to remove the barriers to women’s freedom of choice and equal participation, from restrictions on reproductive control to providing day care to breaking the glass ceiling at work. The liberal method is to persuade people to change by challenging stereotypes and demanding equal access and treatment. This includes rewriting school textbooks and curricula, reforming legal codes, breaking the glass ceiling and promoting women’s advancement through networking, providing victimized women with resources such as battered women’s shelters and rape crisis services, and lobbying for child care facilities and equal access to professions, corporate management, the military, and elected office. Liberal feminism calls on men to change how they think about and behave toward women, to be less violent, harassing, and exploitative and more supportive, emotionally sensitive and expressive, and committed to their roles as fathers and partners. And it calls on women to assert and believe in themselves, to strive to achieve and not be deterred by the barriers they must overcome.

In short, liberal feminism ultimately relies on men to be decent and fair, to become enlightened and progressive as they learn the truth about gender inequality and women’s true potential, to give women their due by allowing them to participate as equals in social life, and to support this by doing their fair share of domestic work. And it relies on women to believe in themselves, to strive and achieve, to push against barriers until they give way. All of this
strikes a deep chord, especially in the ‘American Dream’ consciousness whose root ideology extols the virtues of individual freedom as the answer to most social problems. This is one reason why the liberal perspective has shaped so much of the women’s movement and general public perceptions of what gender issues are all about.

Liberalism has certainly improved the lives of many women, but after several decades of hard-won gains, the women’s movement seems nearly swamped by the backlash and stalled by stiff resistance to further change. Research continues to show that a majority of working women, and especially women of color, are devalued, underpaid, segregated into a narrow range of occupations, not taken seriously, and struggling with the demands of domestic responsibilities with little help from employers, government, or, most important, husbands.\(^{29}\) None of this is the fault of liberal feminism, but it does reflect its underlying limitations as a way to make sense of patriarchy and find alternatives to it.

A basic problem with liberal feminism (and liberalism in general, including aspects of third-wave feminism) is that its intense focus on individual freedom of choice obscures the power of social systems. This is one reason why liberal feminism does not recognize patriarchy as something to be reckoned with. It rarely looks at the underlying structures that produce male privilege and women’s oppression and that shape the individual men and women whom liberal feminism aims to change.

A liberal feminist approach to getting fathers more involved in child care, for example, emphasizes changing men one at a time (or perhaps in small groups). This might be done by appealing to a sense of fairness or the importance of having closer relations with children. By ignoring patriarchy, however, liberal feminism turns male privilege into an individual problem only remotely connected to larger systems that promote and protect it. In the case of child care, this misses the fact that when men don’t do their fair share of domestic labor, they gain in terms of nondomestic rewards such as power, income, and manhood. In the dominant patriarchal culture, these rewards are valued far more highly than the emotional satisfactions of family life. In opinion polls, many men say that family life is more important than work, but when it comes to actual choices about where to invest themselves, the results reflect a different set of cultural values embedded in powerful paths of least resistance. As a result, liberal feminism often leaves women to negotiate from a position of weakness, depending on men to give up male privilege and endanger their standing in relation to other men because it’s the right thing to do and might enrich their own emotional lives or their children’s.\(^{30}\)

Liberal feminism’s individualism also backs us into a no-win position between denying that patriarchy even exists, on the one hand, and claiming that all men are engaged in a conspiracy to oppress women on the other. If nothing significant exists beyond the rational individual, then by definition the only thing larger than ourselves in which we might participate is a conspiracy or
other form of deliberate planning among individuals. Since it is easy to refute the existence of a massive conspiracy in which men gather to plot a patriarchal future, any kind of systemic understanding of privilege and oppression becomes virtually impossible, as does the hope of doing much about it.

Liberal feminism is also limited by its ahistorical character. It offers no way to explain the origins of the social arrangements it is trying to change, and it does not identify a social engine powerful enough to keep them going. Liberal feminism’s main assumption is that privilege and oppression result from ignorance, whose removal through enlightened education will clear the road to equality and a better life for all. But when ignorance and misunderstanding perpetuate an oppressive system of privilege, they become more than a passive barrier that dissipates in the light of truth. Instead, they become part of a willful defense that puts up a fight, and a good one at that. Liberal feminism is ill equipped to deal with this, for the closest liberalism comes to acknowledging the forces that perpetuate patriarchy is its frequent reference to tradition (as in ‘traditional roles’). There is no theory of history or systemic privilege here. Instead, we have a vague sense that things have been this way for a long time and for reasons that are apparently not worth exploring beyond the idea that it’s hard for people to change.

Liberal feminism’s ‘tradition’ catch-all obscures the underlying dynamics that make patriarchy work. It also trivializes privilege and oppression by making them seem a matter of habit. Imagine, by comparison, how unacceptable it would be to attribute racism or anti-Semitism to nothing more than tradition, as in ‘racism is just a matter of tradition in the United States,’ or ‘persecuting Jews is just the way we’ve done things here—for as long as I can remember.’ ‘Tradition’ does not explain anything, it merely characterizes one aspect of how it’s practiced and woven into the fabric of everyday life so that it’s taken for granted and perceived as normal.

Liberal feminism’s lack of historical perspective has serious consequences because it leads away from questions about patriarchy, which is treated as a shadow concept with no serious analytical role to play in making sense of gender. Avoiding patriarchy also fits nicely with the liberal focus on individual choice and self-expression as the be-all and end-all of human life, with little appreciation for how feelings, motivations, thoughts, and behavior are shaped by participation in larger social contexts.

From a liberal perspective, for example, men who rape are merely sick individuals, and there is no reason to ask why such a sickness would be more common in some societies than in others or how the violent coercion practiced by rapists might be related to the less violent coercion that figures so prominently in ‘normal’ patriarchal heterosexuality, especially in some of its more romanticized versions. Unless we want to argue that men are conspiring to produce violence against women on a massive scale, we are stuck with no larger understanding.

A deeper problem is liberal feminism’s single-minded focus on the right of women to be men’s equals—to do what men do in the way that men do it.
In asserting this, it does not ask what might be wrong with a way of organizing the world that encourages men to do what they do in the way they do it. As a result, when women demand access to positions of power in corporations, the military, government, religion, universities, and the professions, they also affirm the basic patriarchal character of social life. Rather than question warfare as a way to conduct international relations, for example, liberal feminism champions the right of women to serve in combat. Rather than question capitalism as a way to produce and distribute what people need to live, liberal feminism targets glass ceilings that keep women from moving up in corporate hierarchies. Rather than challenge the values that shape how professions are practiced—from medicine and law to science—liberalism focuses on equal access to graduate schools, legal partnerships, and the tenured ranks of university faculties.

This is essentially what Naomi Wolf promotes as “power feminism,” based on the idea that women should beat men at their own game and run the world (hence the title of her book, Fire with Fire). Initially, she seems to favor the more radical goal of changing the game itself rather than merely winning at it. She disagrees with Audre Lorde’s proposition that “The Master’s tools will never dismantle the Master’s house,” arguing instead that patriarchy can be undone through the use of patriarchal forms of power and domination, whether political, economic, or interpersonal. But it soon becomes clear that Wolf is not concerned with dismantling the Master’s house but with breaking down the door and getting inside. “Women,” Wolf writes, “should be free to exploit or save, give or take, destroy or build, to exactly the same extent that men are.”

On the face of it, Wolf is simply calling for the right of women to run their own lives, a core tenet of liberal thinking. As important as this is, unless it is informed by an explicit critical analysis of patriarchy as the prevailing social system, it runs the risk of failing to ask whether men should be free to do such things to the extent that they are or whether that is a good standard for organizing human societies. This is a problem with liberalism in general and liberal feminism in particular—the tendency to assume that the main thing wrong with the status quo is unequal opportunity for women to participate in it as men do, and that any choice made ‘freely’ is by definition empowering regardless of the consequences. It is not surprising, then, that Wolf never tells us what the Master’s house is by describing patriarchy and how it works.

Of course equal opportunity, equal access, and equality under the law are important goals. But there are some serious unanticipated consequences to working for equal access to a system and freedom of choice within it without also asking what kind of system it is and how it produces privilege and oppression, especially when based on characteristics other than gender, such as race, sexual orientation, disability status, and social class. One consequence of following a liberal feminist agenda, for example, is that successful white women often join men at the top of systems that oppress people of color and working-class whites, obscuring the fact that equality for women comes to mean in effect
equality for white women of a certain class. This does not mean that women should not pursue power now held predominantly by men. It does mean, however, that the liberal feminist perspective that shapes and informs such striving omits huge chunks of reality.

Because liberal feminism has little to say about how patriarchy organizes male competitive bonding and women’s oppression, it focuses on the consequences of oppression without looking at the system that produces them. Sexist behavior and attitudes, for example, are discussed out of their larger social context, as if they were simply the result of bad training, to be replaced with good training at home and in school. But socialization and education are social mechanisms that serve much larger patriarchal interests, including the perpetuation of male privilege and social institutions organized around core patriarchal values. Thus, socialization is not the problem, any more than programs that train workers in weapons factories are the key to understanding war.

Perhaps the most ironic problem with liberal feminism is that by focusing on equality only in terms of individual choice and opportunity within patriarchy, it actually undermines the liberal ideal of free choice. By ignoring how patriarchy shapes and limits the alternatives from which people choose, it ignores the power to determine just what those alternatives will be. This means that the freedom to participate in the world on patriarchal terms is freedom only in a context that ignores the nonpatriarchal alternatives that are made invisible by patriarchal culture. This also means that the limited liberal agenda for change assumes that society as it currently exists defines the limits of what is possible. But as Marilyn French points out, the freedom to choose among existing alternatives is only part of a larger feminist agenda:

For although feminists do indeed want women to become part of the structure, participants in public institutions; although they want access for women to decision-making posts, and a voice in how society is managed, they do not want women to assimilate to society as it presently exists but to change it. Feminism is not yet one more of a series of political movements demanding for their adherents access to existing structures and their rewards. . . . [It] is a revolutionary moral movement, intending to use political power to transform society. . . . The assimilation of women to society as it presently exists would lead simply to the inclusion of certain women . . . along with certain men in its higher echelons. It would mean continued stratification and continued contempt for “feminine” values. Assimilation would be the cooption of feminism.

In this sense, critics of liberal feminism would take feminism well beyond issues of gender equality. A broader and deeper feminism is about the very terms on which equality is figured. It is about women’s right to participate as men’s equals in society, but also about the power to shape the alternatives
from which both women and men may choose. It is about the power to affect the forces that shape experience, thought, feeling, and behavior. It is about the power to change society itself. It is about fundamentally changing the Master's house, if not dismantling it altogether, which is a far cry from just getting in the door.

This goes well past the limits of liberal feminism to the roots—the radicals—of the patriarchal tree, which leads us into the kinds of questions that so often provoke a backlash of resistance and denial. This is a major reason why liberal feminism is so widely viewed as the only legitimate and socially acceptable form that feminism can take, because it is also the most palatable, the least threatening, and the most compatible with the status quo and the interests of women who are best positioned to benefit from being included in it. This is also why one of its major alternatives, radical feminism, is so routinely maligned, misunderstood, and ignored.

Radical Feminism

As we move toward more radical areas of feminist thought, the landscape is taken up with far more than issues such as unequal pay. Radical feminism of course pays attention to patriarchy’s consequences and how people experience them. But unlike liberal feminism, radical feminism carries that attention to the underlying male-dominated, male-identified, male-centered, control-obsessed patriarchal system that produces male privilege and the oppression of women. Radical feminism aims to make sense of patriarchy in relation to history and social contexts that help explain not only where it came from but how and why it persists and affects us so deeply.

As we saw in Chapter 2, for example, men’s violence against women is more than an individual pathology. It is also a path of least resistance that men are expected to follow and women to accept. From a radical perspective, that path does not exist in isolation from the rest of social life but is rooted in and helps to maintain male privilege in patriarchy as a system. In similar ways, a radical perspective on family divisions of labor that still saddle women with most domestic work is quite different from a liberal view. Radical feminism sees this as more than tradition or an expression of female and male personality tendencies or a lack of appropriate training or encouragement for men. The family is an institution with a complex history as a vehicle for keeping women in their place, and men’s resistance to domestic ‘caretaking’ labor has been an important part of that dynamic. Whatever reasons individual men may offer for not doing child care and housework, it is rooted in male privilege, and its cumulative effect is to reinforce that privilege.

The connection with male privilege also appears in radical analyses of things as mundane as the difficulties women and men have communicating with each other. From Deborah Tannen’s liberal feminist perspective, for example, power and control are secondary issues in gender communication. The
real problem is that men and women use different conversational styles that reflect men’s concern with status and women’s concern with intimacy and relationships. Tannen believes these styles are “different but equally valid” and result from being socialized into different cultures, each with its own traditions.\(^{36}\)

If men interrupt and otherwise dominate conversation, for example, it’s only because that’s their way, just as the Spanish enjoy siesta and Japanese traditionally remove their shoes before entering a house. Since there is a lot of pressure these days to respect cultural differences, Tannen’s somewhat anthropological approach to gender dynamics tends to make it off-limits to criticism. Her perspective offers some comfort to those feeling stressed from gender conflict: there is no problem here that cannot be cured with a good dose of education and tolerance for differences—the classic liberal remedy for just about everything. But the comfort masks the messier reality that men and women do not grow up in separate cultures in any sense of the term but share common family, school, and work environments and swim in the same cultural sea of media imagery. However soothing it might be to think of gender issues as a matter of ‘East meets West,’ or ‘Mars meets Venus,’ it simply isn’t so.

A radical critique of Tannen’s feminism might begin with her liberal preoccupation with individual motives and how she confuses these with social consequences. Tannen bends over backward to discourage women’s anger at men who behave in dominating, aggressive ways, arguing that men do not mean to be this way. What she misses is that a hallmark of privilege is not having to ‘mean it’ in order to exercise or benefit from socially bestowed privilege, whether it be taking up conversational space or being taken more seriously and given credit for ideas. Awareness and intention require commitment and work, in comparison to which arrogance or innocence is relatively easy. And when men’s conversational style promotes privilege, whether it’s intended or not is irrelevant to the social consequences that result.

A radical perspective assumes from the start that patriarchy is real, that it does not spring from some vague wellspring of cultural tradition, and that it sets men and women fundamentally at odds with one another, regardless of how they might feel about it as individuals.\(^{37}\) Radical feminism’s historical perspective identifies patriarchy as the first oppressive system, the originator of the religion of control, power, and fear that provided a model for all other forms of privilege and oppression.\(^{38}\) As such, patriarchy is also the most deeply rooted and pervasive system of privilege and the most resistant to change. It manifests itself in every aspect of social life, making privilege and oppression part of something much larger and deeper than what they may appear to be within the rhythms of everyday life.

Because radical feminism takes patriarchy to be real, it looks hard at men as the prime beneficiaries and enforcers of the patriarchal order. Regardless of how individual men may behave or see themselves, they participate in a system that grants them privilege at the expense of women and encourages them to protect and take advantage of it. The truth of this can be seen not only in men
who behave in overtly sexist ways but in men who consider themselves sensitive to gender issues and supportive of the women’s movement, for all too often they do little about it.

Sometimes known as ‘sensitive New Age guys,’ these men rarely take the initiative to learn more about patriarchy or their participation in it. They don’t speak out publicly against male privilege and women’s oppression or confront other men about sexist behavior, including violence. They may protest that they do not want women to be oppressed and hate the idea of benefiting from it, but they also show little interest in making themselves uncomfortable to the extent of confronting the reality of what’s going on beyond their good intentions. Unless prodded into action by women, most men choose to leave things as they are, which, by default, includes male privilege. This is especially striking when it appears in men whose politics are otherwise progressively on the left. In fact, radical feminism emerged from women’s experience in New Left civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s in which male colleagues often treated them as subordinate, objectified others whose primary purpose was to meet men’s personal needs.\(^\text{39}\)

The distinction between liberal and radical feminism is important not because one is right and the other is wrong but because they focus on different kinds of questions and problems. As a result, they also lead to different kinds of answers and solutions. Liberal feminism, for example, tends to interpret sexist stereotypes as false beliefs and bad attitudes that can be corrected through exposure to the truth. The belief that women are weak and dependent, for example, can be undone by showing people how strong and independent women can be, and male attitudes of contemptuous superiority can be changed by making men aware of how injurious, unfair, and groundless such views are.

Radical feminism, however, reminds us that negative stereotypes about women do not exist in a vacuum. Especially when something is so pervasive in a society, we have to ask what social purpose it serves beyond the motives, intentions, and habits of individuals. Whose interests does sexism support, and what kind of social order does it perpetuate? From this perspective, misogyny and other forms of sexist thinking are more than mistaken ideas and bad attitudes. They are also part of a cultural ideology that serves male privilege and supports women’s subordination. Thus, a sexist attitude is more than mere prejudice: \textit{it is prejudice plus the cultural authority to act on it.}

The belief that women are weak and dependent, for example, and the cultural identification of strength and independence with manhood combine to make women’s strength and independence invisible. It also masks most men’s essential vulnerability and dependence on women and promotes the illusion that men are in control—all of which are keys to maintaining patriarchy. As a form of sexism, misogyny also helps stabilize patriarchy by encouraging men to use women as targets for the feelings of contempt, frustration, and anger that arise from their competitive relations with other men (as discussed in Chapter 3). Patriarchy sets men against other men, but it also rests on male
solidarity in relation to women. Using women as scapegoats for negative feelings maintains this delicate balance while minimizing the personal risk to men.

Because radical and liberal perspectives interpret sexism differently, they also suggest different solutions to it. From a radical perspective, the liberal reliance on socialization is short-sighted and futile, for anything that truly undermines the definition of women as inferior and men as superior challenges the entire patriarchal system and will therefore provoke resistance. By itself, socialization will not bring about fundamental change because families, schools, and other agents of socialization are dedicated to raising children who will be accepted and succeed in society as it is, not risk living their lives in the shunned status of troublemaker or radical. This is what makes liberal feminism so appealing and also what limits its ability to create fundamental change. After decades of liberal feminist activism, for example, a small minority of elite white women has been allowed to embrace patriarchal masculine values and achieve some success in male-identified occupations. For women as a group, however, oppression is still the rule. The problem is not how we train children to fit into the world. The problem is the world into which we fit them and into which they feel compelled to fit if they are going to get along and succeed.

If sexism reflected no more than a need for the light of truth to shine on the reality of men and women as they are, then it would not have much of a future, given how much knowledge is readily available. But sexism is not simply about individual enlightenment. It is not a personality problem or a bad habit. Sexism is rooted in a social reality that underpins male privilege. Thus, sexism is not going to disappear from patriarchal culture through appeals to people’s sense of fairness and decency or their ability to rationally distinguish stereotypes from the facts of who people are.

For all its limitations—or perhaps because of them—liberal feminism is all that most people actually know of feminist thought, and it therefore defines gender issues in public discussion. Radical feminism is virtually invisible in the mainstream except for the occasional distorted sound bite references to its most provocative expressions or its ideas taken out of context. As a result, radical feminism is known primarily as an attitude (man hating) or as rigid orthodoxy (“only lesbians are real feminists”) or as a form of essentialism (“women are inherently superior and ought to rule the world”). To be sure, all of these can be found somewhere in feminist thought, but they pale beside the overwhelming bulk of radical analysis of patriarchy, whose insights can help both men and women work for something better.

Liberal feminism has more popular appeal than radical feminism because it focuses on gender and individual choice and self-expression without confronting the reality of patriarchal oppression and without seriously threatening male privilege. It avoids the uncomfortable work of challenging men to take some responsibility for patriarchy rather than merely being sensitive to ‘women’s issues’ or helping women out with domestic responsibilities when it suits them. And liberal feminism allows us to stay within the relatively comfortable
familiarity of an individualistic, psychological framework in which individual pathology and change are the answers to every problem.

Under the liberal umbrella, women can comfort themselves with the idea that the men in their lives are personally okay and uninvolved in patriarchy. Successful women can enjoy their status without having to question the patriarchal terms on which they achieved it, except when criticizing ‘victim feminists’ who spoil things by calling attention to patriarchy and what it does to women. Men can reassure themselves that as long as they do not behave with conscious malevolence toward women, they are not part of the problem. Men who do not rape, harass, or discriminate against women can wash their hands of gender issues and get on with their lives, with an occasional acknowledgment of the ever-fascinating battle of the sexes and men’s and women’s ‘cultures’ and all the ins and outs of getting along with one another and appreciating gender differences.

Radical feminism is avoided, dismissed, and attacked precisely because it raises critical questions that most people would rather ignore in the hope that what they do not acknowledge will just go away. Radical feminism forces us to confront relationships that most men and women depend on to meet their needs. It challenges us to see how patriarchy divides women and men into subordinate and dominant groups with different interests that put them at odds with one another. It violates one of patriarchy’s core principles by daring to place women rather than men at the center of the discussion, focusing women’s energy on themselves and other women and encouraging even heterosexual women to identify with women rather than with a male-identified system that marginalizes and oppresses them. And by focusing on patriarchy as a social system, it opens the door to larger points of view that include intersections of gender with the complexities of race, social class, global capitalism, and the relation between human beings and the Earth.

It should not surprise us, then, that the mass media and so many people are content to settle for negative caricatures of radical feminism, to make it invisible, discredited, and ghettoized in the underground press and the shelves of alternative bookstores. But the liberal alternative is not enough to work our way out of patriarchy because it cannot provide a clear view of the system and how it works. We wind up in Naomi Wolf’s confusion between dismantling the Master’s house and getting into it, a confusion based on having no clear idea of just what the Master’s house is or what it would mean to dismantle it.

To change the system, we cannot just focus on individuals. We also have to find ways to focus on the system, and for that we have to go to its roots, which is what radical feminism is about. A purely liberal approach to gender—or to race or class or any other form of privilege and oppression—can take us just so far, as is painfully clear from the antifeminist backlash, a stalled civil rights movement, and a resurgence of xenophobia, racism, and hate crimes in the United States, especially since the events of September 11, 2001. Liberalism is a crucial first step in the journey away from oppressive systems. But that is all it is,
because it can take us only as far as the system will allow, and in systems of
privilege, that isn’t far enough.

Patriarchy and Capitalism: Marxist
and Socialist Feminism

From a Marxist perspective, it is economics, not love, that makes the world go
around. Since nothing is possible without material necessities such as food,
clothing, and shelter, Marxism argues that every aspect of social life is shaped
by how those needs are met in a society. Everything from religion to the family
to literature will look different in a feudal society, for example, than it will in an
industrial capitalist one or in a band of hunter-gatherers. If the family is small,
mobile, and nuclear in capitalist societies, and large, fixed, and extended in
agrarian ones, it is because families accommodate themselves to different eco-
nomic conditions and, as a result, survive within different systems of inequality.

How production is organized in a society can give rise to various kinds of
social classes. In feudal societies, for example, production centered on the land,
and class inequality was defined in relation to it. The land-owning class was
thereby the dominant class, while the class that worked but did not own the
land was subordinate. By comparison, in industrial capitalist societies the cen-
tral importance of land has been replaced by machinery and other technology,
and, in recent decades, by money and financial institutions. Under capitalism,
the class that owns or controls the means of producing wealth is the dominant
class, and instead of agrarian peasants, we now have various kinds of workers
who must sell their labor in exchange for wages.

In the simplest sense, Marx argued that social life is always organized
around such basic aspects of economic life. The state, for example, will generally
act to preserve a given economic system and the class that dominates it, such
as capitalist control over politics, capital, working conditions, profit, and the
Earth. Schools will socialize children to accept their position in the class struc-
ture and perform appropriately, whether as obedient workers or take-charge
managers or members of the upper class. Art, literature, and popular culture all
become commodities valued primarily by how much someone is willing to pay
for them. Because it’s hard to think of anything that can’t be bought or sold in
a capitalist system, capitalism shapes almost every aspect of human existence.

Ask a strict Marxist about gender inequality and the response will invari-
ablely center on economics. Through a Marxist lens, male privilege is a vari-
ation on class privilege, with men being the ruling class who control the most
important resources and women the subordinate class whose child rearing and
other domestic labor are exploited for men’s benefit. Or women’s oppression is
a by-product of capitalist exploitation that feeds on women’s free or cheap labor
and ready availability as part-time workers who can be hired when needed and
discarded when not.
In short, the Marxist version of feminism argues that women’s oppression today has more to do with the class dynamics of capitalism than with male privilege and dominance as forces in their own right. It is true that the working class includes both women and men, and women are often exploited in different ways than men—such as by performing unpaid child care and other domestic labor that produces new workers and cares for existing ones. But Marxist feminism argues that women’s oppression is nonetheless primarily a matter of economics. If women are kept out of the paid labor force, for example, it is because capitalism took production out of the home and into the factory, making it difficult for women to do both paid and domestic labor. In keeping with the Marxist perspective, women’s subordinate status is defined in terms of capitalist class relations, not gender relations per se.

Economics also lies at the heart of a Marxist feminist solution to gender oppression. This would be accomplished by closing the split between family and work and replacing capitalism with socialism or some other alternative. Such changes would integrate women into the paid labor force—making child care and other domestic work public and communal rather than private and individual—and would find other ways for women to be economically independent. All of this would remove the economic basis for male privilege and men’s ability to exploit women’s labor, reproductive ability, and sexuality. Since Marxism sees economics as the basis for all other forms of power, economic equality would bring about general social equality between women and men.

Marxist feminism is useful because it shows how, as patriarchal institutions, economic life in general and capitalism in particular shape male privilege. In agrarian patriarchies, for example, rather than control the flow of cash income, men own the land and have authority over wives and children. Under industrial capitalism, land ownership is no longer the major basis for wealth and power, and so the economic underpinnings of male privilege shift from the family to wage labor and controlling the occupational marketplace.

As useful as Marxist feminism is, however, its single-minded focus on economics overlooks the essentially patriarchal nature of systems such as feudalism and capitalism. It tells us little about how the interests and dynamics of patriarchy and capitalism overlap and support each other. It also doesn’t help explain women’s continued subordination in noncapitalist societies such as China and the former Soviet Union that failed to live up to socialist ideology’s opposition to all forms of privilege and oppression. The history of these societies shows that although removing capitalism can improve the status of women—as it certainly did in many ways—patriarchy can continue to exist.

Marxist feminism’s limitations are understandable, given its origins. In many ways it developed as an attempt by traditional Marxists to accommodate the challenges raised by the modern women’s movement. Using ideas they were most familiar with, Marxists forced male privilege into a relatively narrow framework of capitalist class relations. This inevitably came up against the limitations of trying to reduce everything to economics.
Marxists were on to something important, however, when they identified capitalism as a powerful force to be reckoned with in opposing patriarchy. Capitalism is organized around control and domination—whether of workers or technology or natural resources or markets and competitors—and economic life is one of the most important arenas in which the patriarchal dynamic of fear and control operates. Marxism also should be credited for focusing long ago on the origins of male privilege. Marx’s collaborator Friedrich Engels, for example, argued that social inequality originated in the family and that historically women were the first oppressed group. Criticism of Marxist feminism produced socialist feminism, which broadens and deepens the Marxist approach by focusing on the complex connection between patriarchy and economic systems such as capitalism, especially as they operate through the family. As Heidi Hartmann argues, for example, privilege and oppression involve more than psychology and social roles, for they are always rooted in the material realities of production and reproduction. In other words, historically women have been oppressed primarily through male control over women’s labor and women’s bodies— their sexuality and reproductive potential—especially in families. The goods women produce have been appropriated by men, women have been bought and sold in marriage arrangements between men, and control over women’s sexuality and the children they bear has been a staple ingredient of patriarchal marriage. The institution of monogamous heterosexual marriage has enabled men to control women’s bodies through conjugal rights of sexual access, to keep women dependent on men (through control over land or, more recently, control over the ‘breadwinner’ role), and to ensure a clear male line of inheritance. Although women are now challenging the male monopoly over the provider role, this arrangement has served men’s interests for a long time, especially in the middle and upper classes. It has enabled them to benefit from women’s personal services and to enhance men’s competition with other men over the resources and rewards that determine social class position.

One of the great values of socialist feminism is that it shows how the status of women and men has both shaped and been shaped by economic arrangements. Patriarchy and capitalism are so deeply intertwined with each other that some socialist feminists argue against even thinking of them as separate systems:

Under capitalism as it exists today, women experience patriarchy as unequal wages for work equal to that of men; sexual harassment on the job; uncompensated domestic work. Earlier generations of women also experienced patriarchy, but they lived it differently depending on the dynamics of the reigning economic system. A feudal system of gender relations accompanied a feudal system of class arrangements, and the social relations of class and gender grew together and evolved over time into the forms we now know (for example, the capitalist nu-
clear family). To say that gender relations are independent of class relations is to ignore how history works.\(^5\)

The basic insight of socialist feminism is that patriarchy is not simply about gender but is bound up with the most fundamental aspects of social life. Justice for women involves more than changing how men and women think, feel, and behave in gendered relationships, for any deeply rooted challenge to patriarchy will profoundly affect the prevailing economic system. This also applies to other institutions such as the state, religion, education, the law, and the mass media that support and reflect both economic and patriarchal interests.

**Feminism: Being and Doing**

As a way of thinking, feminism is invaluable to anyone who wants to help unravel the patriarchal gender knot. It gives us a way to question every aspect of human life. Liberal feminism provides a place to start, but sooner or later we have to move toward the roots of the problem, beyond relatively superficial change to a more fundamental restructuring and redefinition of what life is to be about and what it means to be a human being. This is precisely where we are early in the twenty-first century: standing at the edge of where liberal feminism has brought us and wondering what to do next. Some people, perhaps sensing that liberalism has taken us as far as it can, have declared a postfeminist era. But we are not in postfeminism. We are in a backlash coming at the tail end of a temporarily exhausted women’s movement.

Patriarchy is like a fire burning deep underground, spreading and burning into the Earth for thousands of years. We notice what breaks through the surface and may think that’s all there is. We may focus on not getting burned in the moment even though we can sense something larger and deeper down below. But if we are serious about change, we have to wake up to the fact that there is more going on than gendered brush fires springing up in episodes of miscommunication, harassment, discrimination, violence, and all the other day-to-day occurrences that add up to life under patriarchy. If we are serious about this, we have to dig, preferably with plenty of company and with a full appreciation of the fact that although we did not start the fire, it belongs to us now.

Many people feel threatened by feminism, especially its nonliberal aspects, because it raises questions that invite us to look more closely not only at the world but at the complex fullness of who we are in relation to it. Feminism is a window on the world and our connection to it, and it is a mirror reflecting what our lives are about. Above all, it is a powerful framework for making sense of what we are participating in, for digging beneath the surface of status quo ideology and what we take to be reality to discover the unarticulated terms on which we live our lives.

But at the same time that feminism can frighten us or make us feel uncomfortable, it can also empower us by making sense of what is going on and what...
this has to do with us. Feminism embodies an enduring truth that male privi-
lege and women’s oppression and all the consequences produced out of that
fundamental arrangement are real and problematic for everyone, and that not
only can we understand what is happening, but we must understand if we are
ever to be part of the solution and not just part of the problem.

As reluctant as many women are to embrace feminism, it is even harder
for men, who may see themselves as excluded members of an enemy class and
therefore personally to blame for patriarchy and its consequences. Even men
who don’t go to that extreme are often careful not to identify too closely or
too openly with feminism. This includes many men who actively support the
struggle against patriarchy.

The National Organization for Men Against Sexism, for example, describes
itself as ‘pro-feminist’ rather than feminist. In some ways a feminist-once-
removed identity helps counter the dominant group tendency to co-opt and
take over anything of value produced by subordinate groups—from white
people’s appropriation of Native American spirituality to the ‘new men’s move-
ment’ claim that it parallels the women’s movement.46 The pro-feminist label
also honors the fact that whatever their politics, men cannot call themselves
feminists as a kind of safe-conduct pass that obscures or denies the reality of
male privilege, of their inherently problematic status as men under patriarchy,
and of the legitimacy of women’s anger. Insofar as feminism has to do with
being rather than with thinking or doing, insofar as it reflects women’s actual
experience under patriarchy, then men should not call themselves feminists.

But men’s seemingly appropriate distance from feminism also reinforces
the idea that deep down, patriarchy, like housework, is really a women’s prob-
lem. This limits men to a supportive role in which they can ‘do the right thing’
and count themselves among the good guys. To be pro-feminist is to support
women in their fight, but it does not name the fight against patriarchy as inher-
ently men’s responsibility and therefore their fight as well. This is especially
important if we think of feminism as more than a way to think about gender
oppression and how to advance women’s interests in relation to men. Because
patriarchy is not simply about gender, because every major social institution is
grounded in core patriarchal values, feminism is, in its broadest sense, about
the way the whole world is organized.47

For all of feminism’s potential, the simple truth is that anyone who wants to
dismiss it will have an easy time of it, given how effectively feminism and femi-
nists have been distorted, marginalized, and trashed. All one need do is point
to the disagreeable views of one feminist or another to feel the approving nod
of the mainstream, the “Yes, isn’t that odd?” or “Isn’t she outrageous?” and then
move along. But any complex body of thought coupled with social movements
against a system as deeply entrenched as patriarchy cannot help but produce
enough excesses and contradictions to provide opponents with an abundant
supply of ammunition. Settling for that, however, accomplishes nothing more
than leaving us in the mess we’re in, surrounded by familiar stereotypes and
yet knowing on some level that something is seriously wrong with what patriarchy makes of gender and human life and the world we inhabit.

Ultimately, either we believe patriarchy exists or we don’t. And if we do, we need to know more about feminism, because regardless of what branch of it we might lean toward, feminism is the only ongoing conversation about patriarchy that can lead to a way out. But in the patriarchal mainstream, this is just the problem, because, as the following chapters show, there is little that does not make it harder to see patriarchy for what it is.
II

Sustaining Illusions,
Barriers to Change
Thinking about Patriarchy

War, Sex, and Work

To be part of the solution to patriarchy, we have to think about it in new ways, but to do this we have to work through how we already think about it. This is easier said than done, because in many ways what we take to be reality is up for grabs. It is hard not to get lost in patriarchy’s superficial side-shows, to fixate on male guilt or ‘gender roles’ or the communication styles of men from Mars and women from Venus. Whether we see women and men as different species or as more alike than different is a matter of social definition that has been shaped and reshaped for centuries in an ongoing struggle over what kind of reality we will live in.

How we see patriarchy—not to mention whether we see it at all—is no less contentious. Because patriarchy is the status quo, it is portrayed in the culture as normal and unproblematic, shielding it from criticism. As our main resource for defining what is real, culture reflects the experience and interests of groups with the most power to shape it, especially whites, men, and the upper classes.

There is no conspiracy here, for this is how every social system works. Reality is always being socially constructed. Whatever groups have the most access to and control over resources and institutions through which reality is shaped—from education to the media to religious dogma to political ideology—will see their views and interests reflected in the results. This means that those with the biggest stake in changing the world—lower classes, women, and people of color—typically have the fewest resources and the most difficult time getting their experience accepted as real, much less as a legitimate basis for social criticism and change.

As a social system, patriarchy has an elaborate and thick ideology that justifies its existence, and this chapter is the first of several that will explore what
it looks like and how it works in everyday life. Perhaps the bedrock of patriarchal ideology is the belief that patriarchy is necessary, socially desirable, and rooted in a universal sense of tradition, history, and human nature. On this foundation are built core ideas about social life, especially in relation to the family, war, economics, reproduction, and sex.

Patriarchy: Gotta Have It

Central to patriarchy’s continued existence is the idea that we cannot do without it. As the argument goes, societies have needs that must be met to survive, and these require a division of labor by gender and more power for men than for women.¹ From this perspective, the stereotypical middle-class white family ideal, with its homebound housewife and breadwinning husband, makes sense as a way for families and societies to survive because it is the most efficient way to raise children. It is efficient to allocate child care and other domestic work to wives and mothers and breadwinning to husbands and fathers because under industrial capitalism, family life happens in one place and work in another, because mothers have a closer physical tie to children, and so on.² David Gilmore uses this approach in his study of masculinity in tribal societies:

Manhood ideals make an indispensable contribution both to the continuity of social systems and to the psychological integration of men into their community. I regard these phenomena not as givens, but as part of the existential “problem of order” that all societies must solve by encouraging people to act in certain ways, ways that facilitate both individual development and group adaptation. Gender roles represent one of these problem-solving behaviors.³

Gilmore uses an idea that has been around in sociology and anthropology for quite a while and has intuitive appeal—that social life has a wholeness about it and that various aspects of social life are woven together to form a functioning unit. By itself, this is not a bad idea. In fact, it’s useful for drawing attention to how everything is connected to everything else, how things are usually more complicated than they seem, and how changing one thing touches everything it’s connected to. We can see, for example, that while poverty ruins many people’s lives, it also benefits others by providing a supply of people who are willing to take jobs that no one else is willing to do. If we get rid of poverty, then we also have to figure out how to get people to clean motel rooms and do other dirty work that pays poorly and earns workers little respect.

Looking at societies in terms of form and function certainly has its uses. But the idea that something like patriarchy exists because societies need it is something else. In fact, it is nothing but trouble, because while we reassure ourselves that male privilege is a key aspect of society as we know it, we forget to ask what kind of society would need such a thing and whether we ought to be thinking...
about changing that. After all, drug addicts need drugs and alcoholics need alcohol to such a degree that they may die if they suddenly go without. But I haven’t heard anyone use this to argue in favor of alcoholism or drug addiction.

By definition, every social system is a form of social order that solves ‘the problem of order’ by resisting the universal tendency of things to fall apart. Just because a system exists, however, doesn’t mean it’s a good thing or has to stay the way it is, or that the particular way that it solves the problem of order is inevitable or necessary. If that were so, then all forms of privilege and oppression would be self-justifying.

When we evaluate some aspect of social life, such as who does what in families or how men and women communicate, it’s not enough to point out that it appears to be an efficient way to organize things because it fits with society as it is now. We also have to ask how this way of organizing things is connected to other aspects of social life such as women’s subordination. We have to ask, for example, how it props up male privilege at women’s expense or how it increases women’s vulnerability to abuse or economic hardship.

In her books on gender styles in communication, for example, Deborah Tannen asserts that each gender’s style makes sense and is legitimate in its own way. Like an anthropologist who is careful to avoid ethnocentric criticism of another culture, Tannen is respectful in all directions. But what this misses is that men and women do not come from two different societies, and even if they did, what they do is legitimate only when judged within a particular cultural context. Since that context is patriarchy, what Tannen observes in women and men makes sense only to the extent that we think patriarchy makes sense. If we step back and put things in their larger context and see how style is connected to privilege and its oppressive consequences, how it serves men’s power and status interests, it becomes not only possible but incumbent on us to question their legitimacy and whether this is really how we want life to be. The alternative is the kind of self-justifying spiral that the paralysis around gender inequality has become.

Explaining patriarchy away as useful or necessary has become a popular way to deal with gender inequality. Robert Bly, for example, extols “Zeus energy,” which he defines as a “positive male energy that . . . is male authority accepted for the sake of the community . . . in all the great cultures.”

Leaving aside the question of why Bly would celebrate a god with Zeus’s reputation for degrading and raping women, he does not explain why either gender should be elevated over the other or why it should be men rather than women. Nor does he tell us what the “sake of the community” consists of or what makes patriarchal cultures—and only patriarchal cultures—“great.”

Such lack of clarity serves patriarchy well by making male privilege more acceptable, serving a greater good that could not possibly contribute to something as awful as oppression and the destruction of the natural environment. It also lends itself to mythological allusions that abound in such visions of patriarchy. Consider, for example, how Bly describes “genuine patriarchy”: 
The patriarchy is a complicated structure. Mythologically, it is matriarchal on the inside; and a matriarchy is equally complicated, being patriarchal on the inside. The political structure has to resemble our interior structure. And we know each man has a woman inside him and each woman has a man inside her.

The genuine patriarchy brings down the sun through the Sacred King, into every man and woman in the culture; and the genuine matriarchy brings down the moon, through the Sacred Queen, to every woman and every man in the culture. The death of the Sacred King and Queen means that we live now in a system of industrial domination, which is not patriarchy.8

As is typical of such arguments, Bly explains none of this. Not only does he portray men and women as split in two, but when he tells us that social systems must mirror the individual psyche, he ignores most of what we’ve learned from sociology, anthropology, and even psychology about societies, individuals, and how they are related. He goes on to imply that “genuine patriarchy” can somehow coexist with its counterpart, “genuine matriarchy,” to everyone’s benefit, but in this he ignores what the terms actually mean. By definition, patriarchy is fundamentally about power and is distinguished from matriarchy in the elevation of fathers and men over mothers and women, just as matriarchy—which, as far as we know, has never existed9—would subordinate fathers and men to mothers and women.

This kind of thinking also ignores the highly unmythological day-to-day realities of patriarchal privilege and oppression. Bly, for example, blames “industrial domination” for the death of the Sacred King and Queen and the demise of “genuine patriarchy.” Long before the Industrial Revolution, however, this supposedly golden era of “genuine patriarchy” produced an abundance of oppression, including medieval witch burnings, chronic warfare, and the class oppression of feudalism. Exhibiting a limited sense of history, Bly also ignores the connection between the emergence of industrial capitalism and the high value patriarchal culture places on control, competition, and domination.

In other words, industrial capitalism did not come out of the blue and destroy patriarchy. Instead, it was and is an economic expression of core patriarchal values that are more powerful today than ever. The problem with Bly’s reasoning is that he uses the term patriarchy to name a mythical society that never existed. He then tells us that “genuine patriarchy” was destroyed by very unmythical social forces such as industrialization. This implies either that patriarchy (and with it, male privilege and the oppression of women) no longer exists or that now we are stuck with a ‘false’ patriarchy. In either case, he suggests that some form of benevolent male privilege is not only possible but something whose passing is cause for mourning and regret.

In another widely read book on men, Sam Keen suggests that patriarchy was an adaptive part of human social evolution that “saved” humankind from
the gynocentrism of early goddess-oriented societies. Before patriarchy, Keen writes, societies labored under a “servitude to nature” that was broken by “the transcendent male God” who “sanctioned the development of individualism and the technological impulse to seize control and have dominion over the earth.” This rebellion—and, presumably, the ascendancy of masculine gods and men—was supposedly fomented by women and men alike. Given how much women had to lose, this makes little sense unless we want to resurrect the idea of female masochism. Like many new men’s movement writers, Keen implies that patriarchy and its male-identified principle of control were an upward leap in social evolution, to be regretted only for their limited success and fleeting glory:

“... Life in the garden of the goddess was harmonious but the spirit of history called for man to stand up and take charge. ...”

Keen uses some peculiar reasoning here. He argues both that men and women participated in evolutionary rebellion as equals, and that it was men who rejected women (Mother) and ascended to a dominant position over women, nature, society, domestic animals, coal reserves, and all the rest. He links “harmony” with “passivity” for no apparent reason and perpetuates the patriarchal idea that the only alternative to passivity is domination and aggression. And in the spirit of Bly’s mythological haze, Keen invokes vague magical forces such as the “spirit of history” (whose history?) to explain a complex social transformation brought about by real people. Although Keen goes on to argue that this new order has now “outlived its usefulness,” he leaves undisturbed the idea that patriarchy delivered us all from the menacing throes of gynocentric “harmony” run amok.

Keen is right in step with patriarchal ideology when he aligns women with nature and against men and civilization, and suggests that true human progress occurs only among men and then only through rebellious separation from the “mother,” or, as Bly puts it, “a revolt against the earthly, conservative, possessive, clinging part of the maternal feminine.” By default, women and mothers stunt individual development and social progress, which means they must be controlled so that men can be free to pursue masculine individualism and control. Keen’s description of our “servitude to nature” stands reality on its head, as if servitude, hierarchy, control, exploitation, and oppression are inventions of nature and not of patriarchal society. But in Keen’s and Bly’s scheme of things, women, not nature, are the real problem, getting in the way of patriarchal manhood’s fullest expression.
Warfare: Defending Hearth and Home

A key defense of patriarchy invokes the mysteries of warfare as crucial to understanding what is seen as the natural gender order. As the argument goes, men must be aggressive and develop a capacity for violence to defend society and family. As Keen puts it, sacrifice is at the center of men’s lives as they put the welfare of others above their own: “Most men went to war, shed blood, and sacrificed their lives with the conviction that it was the only way to defend those whom they loved. . . . [S]hort of a utopian world . . . someone must be prepared to take up arms and do battle with evil.”

The violent-man-as-protector image is connected to patriarchy through the idea that men’s capacity for violence and aggression inevitably leads to male dominance over women, children, and property, since men must be more powerful than those they protect. “Men . . . must be manly,” David Gilmore tells us, “because warfare demands it.” But it is no less reasonable to also argue that warfare itself exists because patriarchal manliness and its related structures of control and dominance demand it. Cultural ideals of American national power, for example, have long been explicitly linked with ideals of manhood, especially through men’s capacity for and willingness to resort to violence—the heroic gunfighter and avenging superhero—all in the name of national greatness and America’s destiny to be preeminent in the world.

There are two major problems with using warfare to justify patriarchy. First, romantic images of war do not fit much of what we know about it. The idea that men are motivated primarily by self-sacrifice, for example, does not square with the high value patriarchal cultures place on male autonomy and freedom. According to Keen, autonomy and independence, not self-sacrifice for women and children, were a key to the patriarchal rebellion against goddess religions and men’s “servitude to nature.”

The warfare argument for patriarchy also fits poorly with the reality of warfare as most people experience it. I don’t know which wars Keen has in mind, but most that I can think of were fought for anything but defense of loved ones, and men in privileged racial and economic classes—who presumably love their families as much as the next man—have been all too willing to allow those less fortunate than they to serve in their place.

Was it love that motivated the endless bloodshed of the Roman conquests, the slaughter of countless religious wars and crusades, the Napoleonic wars, the U.S. Civil War, or the two world wars? Was it to protect women and children that the United States ‘liberated’ the Philippines from the Spanish following the Spanish-American War and then brutally suppressed Philippine resistance to becoming a U.S. colony and gateway to Asian markets? Was it for the sake of hearth and home that U.S. soldiers went to Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, and Iraq, or Soviet troops to Afghanistan? Does love of family explain the ethnic slaughter in Eastern Europe and the brutality of civil wars from Cambodia to Somalia to Syria?
Thinking about Patriarchy

It would seem not. Closer to the truth is that war allows men to reaffirm their masculine standing in relation to other men, to act out patriarchal ideals of physical courage and aggression, and to avoid being shamed and ridiculed by other men for refusing to join in the fight. As Keen himself tells us, war is “a heroic way for an individual to make a name for himself” and to “practice heroic virtues.”

It is an opportunity for men to bond with other men—friend and foe alike—and reaffirm their common masculine warrior codes. If war is simply about self-sacrifice in the face of monstrous enemies who threaten men’s loved ones, how do we make sense of the long tradition of respect between wartime enemies, the codes of honor that bind them together even as they bomb and devastate civilian populations that consist primarily of women, children, and old men? Could soldiers fighting only out of such lofty motives as love for home and hearth accumulate such an extensive and consistent record of gratuitous rape and other forms of torture, abuse, and wanton violence inflicted on civilian populations?

Certainly there are men who go to war with the sense of self-sacrificing mission that Keen describes, but to attribute warfare as a system to such altruistic motives is the kind of romantic thinking that warfare thrives on. In spite of the horrible price that many men pay for their participation in war, we should not confuse the fact of their being sacrificed with self-sacrificing personal motivations, especially when trying to explain why warfare exists as a social phenomenon.

The second problem with using warfare to explain male aggression and patriarchal dominance is that the argument is circular. As much as we like to divide the world into good and evil, every nation going to war sees itself as justified in defending what it defines as the good. Each side believes in and glorifies the use of male-identified violence to resolve disputes and uphold deeply held principles, from the glory of Allah to ethnic or racial purity to spreading democracy and capitalism and defending against terrorism or defeating imperialism.

Even the most reluctant government may welcome a breakdown of negotiations that will justify using force (unless they think they will lose), and it has become commonplace for national leaders to use war as a way to galvanize public support for their regimes, especially in election years. The heroic male figure of western gun-slinging cowboys is almost always portrayed as peace-loving and unwilling to use violence “unless he has to.” But the whole point of his heroism and the story is the audience wanting him to have to. The spouses, children, territory, honor, and various underdogs who are defended with heroic violence serve as excuses for the violent demonstration of a particular version of patriarchal manhood. They are not of central importance, which is why their experience is rarely the focus of attention.

The real interest lies in the male hero and his relation to other men—as victor or vanquished, as good guy or bad guy. Indeed, the hero is often the only one who remains intact (or mostly so) at the end of the story. The
raped wife, slaughtered family, and ruined community get lost in the shuffle, with only passing attention to their suffering as it echoes across generations with no mention of how they have been used as a foil for patriarchal masculine heroism.

Note, however, that when female characters take on such heroic roles, as in the film *Thelma and Louise*, the social response is ambivalent if not hostile. Many people complained that the villains in *Thelma and Louise* made men look bad, but I have never heard anyone complain that the villains in male-heroic movies make men look bad. It seems that we have yet another double standard: it is acceptable to portray some men as villainous but only if it serves to highlight the heroism of other men.

To support male aggression and therefore male dominance as society’s only defense against evil, we have to believe that evil forces exist out there, in villains and in governments and their armies. In this, we have to assume that the bad guys see themselves as evil and not as heroes defending loved ones and principles against bad guys like us. The alternative to this kind of thinking is to realize that the same patriarchal ethos that creates masculine heroes also creates the violent villains they battle and prove themselves against, and that both sides often see themselves as heroic and self-sacrificing for a worthy cause. For all the wartime propaganda, good and bad guys play similar games and salute a core of common values, not to mention one another on occasion. At a deep level, war and many other forms of male aggression are *manifestations* of the same evil they supposedly defend against. That evil is the patriarchal religion of control and domination that encourages men to use coercion and violence to settle disputes, manage human relations, and affirm manhood.

None of this criticism means that men cannot feel compelled to sacrifice themselves. It also doesn’t mean there is no place for ferocity in the face of danger, as the females of many species, including our own, demonstrate in defense of their young. But as we saw in Chapter 2, there is a difference between patriarchy as a system and the personal motivations of the people who participate in it. When a man goes off to war, that man may feel full of love for family and community, but this does not explain why warfare exists as a social institution or what compels men to march off to it.

In similar ways, men may put family needs before their own out of love, but this happens *in spite* of a patriarchal system that encourages them to value their competitive masculine standing above all else. How else do we explain the men who abandon families rather than work at jobs they consider beneath them and leave behind wives who are far less reluctant to do whatever is necessary to support their children? How else do we understand men who risk ‘sacrificing’ themselves only in ways that tend to impress other men?

I suspect that most men would rather work overtime or fight another man, for example, than diaper babies or risk true emotional intimacy, even if the latter provided loved ones with what they needed most. The patriarchal path of least resistance for a man whose wife is raped is not to take care of her but to
wreak heroic revenge on the rapist, an act that, if anything, makes things worse for her. But in a patriarchy, her well-being is secondary to his rights and standing as a man in relation to other men. In this sense, the rapist does more than assault a woman, for he also violates a man’s proprietary rights of sexual access and casts doubt on that man’s ability to defend his sexual property against other men. The husband’s revenge uses violence in true patriarchal fashion to reestablish his masculine rights and standing in relation not only to the rapist but to men in general.

When we romanticize patriarchy or define it as noble and socially necessary, we blind ourselves and paralyze our capacity to work for change. In truth, patriarchy is everywhere, from family, sexuality, and reproduction to global politics and economic production, and not seeing it will not save us from its consequences.

Things Are Not What They Used to Be and Never Were: Gender, Work, and Dependency

To account for patriarchy’s past, it helps to see how it works now. It’s easy to get it wrong—to shroud patriarchy in a haze of tradition, to ignore its connection to industrial capitalism, religion, or warfare, or simply to deny its existence altogether. Robert Bly, for example, organizes *Iron John* around a longing for a lost preindustrial, pre-urban era of manhood in which older men passed along to younger men the secret essence of being men in the world: “During the nineteenth century, grandfathers and uncles lived in the house, and older men mingled a great deal. Through hunting parties, in work that men did together in farms and cottages, and through local sports, older men spent much time with younger men and brought knowledge of male spirit and soul to them.”

Bly and Keen get almost wistful about the supposed loss of traditional visions of manhood. “Old male bonding rituals—sports, war, business, woman bashing, drinking, hunting—are no longer sufficient or appropriate.” Neither, however, seems curious to dig beneath the surface of this supposedly golden era when men knew who they were and liked it.

What, for example, did “knowledge of the male spirit and soul” consist of? What was its content, and how did men actually live it in relation to women, children, and other men? If there was a time when such things as war, drinking, and woman bashing were “sufficient and appropriate,” just what kind of times were those? Bly refers often to a preindustrial, agrarian past in which men owned land and felt as rooted in themselves as they did in the land. What he does not ask about is women in such societies, their lack of civil rights, their devalued status, or how they were often numbered among a man’s possessions and defended against other men—along with the land, cattle, sheep, and other domestic livestock that men ‘husbanded’—as part of fulfilling patriarchal manhood.
This kind of selective history generalizes from one period to the whole of human experience as if things are now the way they’ve always been. It has become cliché, for example, to refer to breadwinning as men’s ‘traditional’ role and to unproductive ‘domestic chores’—including childbearing and child rearing—as women’s. Men’s rights advocate Warren Farrell, for example, divides history into two stages, with the entire human experience prior to World War II lumped into one of them. During this period, he tells us, and presumably across all known cultures, things were pretty simple: “the woman raised the children, and the man raised the money” and saved women and children from starvation. Women did little more than produce children who consumed the food that men provided.23

In his cross-cultural study of masculinity, David Gilmore echoes Farrell by portraying women in nonindustrial societies as little more than passive performers of insignificant tasks whose main function is to free men to do the real work of providing for families:

Work defines manhood, but not just work as energy spent but as labor that supports life, constructive labor. . . . Hunting provides more than food alone; it also furnishes tools and clothing as well as critical ritual and religious materials. . . . [T]he Mbuti too have an image of . . . manhood [that] connects directly with male prowess in securing food, clothing, and magical objects for the group.24

This kind of imagery is used as easily with modern industrial societies as with hunting and gathering tribes. Men, Keen and Farrell tell us, are known for their willingness to work even when they’re tired or dislike the job, an observation that underlies the rueful joke that men have three choices in life—work, work, and work. As Anthony Astrachan argues, this means that technological change and the most recent influx of women into the workplace radically shifts the lives of men, who historically “grew up expecting to provide for themselves and for their family. . . . A ‘man’s job’ once required skill, strength, and the ability to work long hours—all admirable qualities that used to be thought of as exclusively male.”25

If hard work, providing, and breadwinning define manhood, and if manhood exists, by definition, in contrast to womanhood, then it’s hard not to conclude that women do not work and never have. If we extend Gilmore’s and Astrachan’s observations just a bit further, women’s labor has not been notably constructive, life-supporting, or difficult, and men somehow found a way to hunt for clothing, pottery, housing, bread, bedding, healing herbs, utensils, religious objects, and all the other goods that women have produced over the millennia through their vision, skill, and hard work. Gilmore tells us that cultural ideals of manhood are necessary to force men to perform the critical providing function, which, it seems, women cannot handle. Farrell makes a similar assertion about the ‘protecting’ function.26 Without men, we would all starve, freeze, or be devoured by wild beasts.
That such ridiculous notions persist and seem to have little trouble finding a receptive audience says a lot about the power of social mythology and ideology to shape beliefs and perceptions.\textsuperscript{27} Even today, women perform an estimated two thirds of the economically productive work in the world, provide almost half of the food, and yet receive only 10 percent of all income and own only 1 percent of property.\textsuperscript{28} In horticultural societies, in which most food is grown in small, hand-worked gardens rather than large plowed fields, the imbalance has been even more lopsided, with women providing most food and other essentials, often including the building of houses.\textsuperscript{29}

In spite of this, however, women’s labor is largely invisible, especially as recorded by modern economics. As Marilyn Waring shows, United Nations accounting systems assign economic value only to what is traded in cash markets, a standard that excludes an enormous amount of the work that women do.\textsuperscript{30} Water carried through a pipeline and sold at the other end, for example, is counted as part of a country’s gross national product. But the labor of women who walk several miles each day to carry water to their homes is not:

A young, middle-class North American housewife spends her days preparing food, setting the table, serving meals, clearing food and dishes from the table, washing dishes, dressing and diapering her children, disciplining children, taking the children to day-care or to school, disposing of garbage, dusting, gathering clothes for washing, doing the laundry, going to the gas station and the supermarket, repairing household items, ironing, keeping an eye on or playing with the children, making beds, paying bills, caring for pets and plants, putting away toys, books, and clothes, sewing or mending or knitting, talking with door-to-door salespeople, answering the telephone, vacuuming, sweeping, and washing floors, cutting the grass, weeding, and shoveling snow, cleaning the bathroom and the kitchen, and putting her children to bed. [She] has to face the fact that she fills her time in a totally unproductive manner. She . . . is economically inactive, and economists record her as unoccupied.\textsuperscript{31}

This is how Farrell can make the mistake of seeing women through the ages as economically unproductive dependents “supported for life” by their husbands and other men. When he describes men as raising money while women raise children, he ignores the fact that money has been an important factor in economic life for only a tiny portion of human existence in his pre–World War II stage. The cash market is a recent invention, prior to which people largely consumed what they produced and bartered the rest.

In portraying men as the primary providers, patriarchal culture promotes a view of men as independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient and women as dependent on them, as if women were large children. Historically, however, the only way that most men and women could survive was to work together in
economically productive families. In hunting and gathering societies, for example, men may have ranged far and wide in search of game, but without women, there would not have been much to come home to—no shelter, clothing, pottery, or cooking or other implements or, for that matter, enough food to live on, since meat has usually been a supplemental source of protein for essentially vegetarian societies.

The capitalist Industrial Revolution transformed the close economic interdependency between men and women so profoundly that it seemed to disappear altogether. This happened through a system in which, for the first time in history, goods were produced primarily for sale in cash-driven markets. Most people became employees who sold their time in exchange for wages, not independent workers who produced goods primarily for consumption by themselves and their families. This meant that people lost control over work and production, but it also meant they could rely on cash earnings to support themselves and live independently of families. Children no longer depended on inheriting a portion of a family farm but instead could leave home and find jobs. This was especially true for middle-class and upper-class white men, whose gender, race, and class privilege and freedom from child care and other domestic work enabled them to shape the emerging political economy to accommodate themselves and largely exclude women. As a result, married women became economically dependent on men for the first time in human history.

As men took over the cash economy, earning power not surprisingly became the only legitimate measure of productivity, worth, and independence, with the result that most women were defined as economically dependent nonworkers. But if we think of production and economic value in terms of providing people with what they need, then it’s clear that women have always worked, and husbands and wives have never stopped being economically interdependent. A woman who shops for food and prepares and serves meals for her family, for example, is just as engaged in productive work as any restaurant worker, and she plays a key role in making it possible for other workers to sustain themselves and perform paid labor. Even when only the husband works for pay, women sustain families as much as, if not more than, men do.

The reality of marital interdependency, however, is masked by cultural beliefs about men’s and women’s economic roles. As women’s domestic labor has been devalued and redefined as nonwork, it has also been made socially invisible, resulting in images of women as dependent, passive, unproductive, and primarily concerned with child care and ‘chores’ (what women’s work is typically called when done by other household members). In its most extreme form, such imagery produces the culturally despised ‘welfare mother’ who, to judge by popular mythology, sits around all day indulging herself at public expense, when reality is closer to a numbing daily grind full of deprivation, worry, struggle, and despair.

The devaluing of women’s work is, of course, complemented by images of men as hardworking, self-sufficient, autonomous, and even heroic bread-
winners who carry on their shoulders the sole burden of family support. Most men do work hard, of course, and many feel burdened by it. But this does not mean that women do not also work hard or that the taking on of this kind of adult responsibility has somehow become the sole province of men. Cultural mythology is often used in this way to distort what goes on between subordinate and dominant groups. It enables dominant groups to avoid seeing how much they depend on others to perform disagreeable labor in return for the low wages that help make privilege possible. Members of the upper class, for example, typically are portrayed as ‘wealth producers,’ the ones who build buildings, bridges, and empires, even though most of the work is performed by others, by ‘little people’ who pay taxes and often live lives of chronic anxiety about making ends meet. Donald Trump, we are told, ‘built’ Trump Tower, just as turn-of-the-century robber barons ‘built’ the railroads and steel mills that made vast personal fortunes possible. Entire nations also indulge in this kind of magical thinking. In the United States, for example, we rarely realize how much third world poverty subsidizes our own standard of living. We like to believe that our affordable abundance is solely our own doing, unaware of how much it has always depended on a steady supply of cheap labor and raw materials provided by countries in which much of the world’s population lives in poverty.

Part of what makes such cultural magic possible is a confusion between independence and autonomy. Dominant groups are generally autonomous in the sense of being unaccountable to those below them and not having to ask for permission to do what they want. This does not make dominant groups independent, however. The upper class may not be accountable to the working class, but their lives would fall apart without working-class labor. In similar ways, when men aspire to autonomy in relation to women, they are not looking for independence. They are not trying to live without using women to meet their needs. What autonomy means to many men is the privilege to do what they want and get their needs and wants met by women.

It is a relationship that looks a lot like what many teenagers try to have with parents, except that teenagers, being relatively powerless, usually don’t get away with it. Dominant groups, however, have the advantage of far greater control over how reality gets defined and can use this to mask what’s going on. The truth that most men depend on women—in many ways far more than women depend on men—is routinely covered up or trivialized. When men do acknowledge their dependency, especially in relation to sex, they often do so resentfully, as if women should be so accessible that men would not experience their need for women as dependency at all. In this way, women are expected to act like the accomplished servant who plays the provider role without ever making the masters aware of how dependent on the servant they really are. At its most successful, the perception is just the opposite—that it’s the upper classes who take care of their servants, the slave masters who bear the burden of caring for their slaves, and the husbands who provide for wives and children.
On some level, of course, both women and men know how men depend on the domestic and caring work that women do. Men eat the food that women buy and prepare; slide into bed and feel the clean, freshly changed sheets that have been laid out for them; accept caring when they are sick, grieving, or in despair; take emotional support when they feel doubt or fear; and benefit from countless other things that sustain them. But when men acknowledge need, they make themselves vulnerable, which under patriarchy is threatening for men to do, especially within sight of other men. As a result, men and, to some degree, the women who share lives with them often feel compelled to maintain a pretense of dependent women and independent men.

In this way, patriarchal culture makes it difficult to see the profound interdependence that has always been at the core of gender relationships. Even stickier is patriarchal thinking about heterosexuality, a key to human life that has become a linchpin of male privilege.

Sex in the Patriarchy

One thing that makes gender issues difficult to deal with is that they often seem so natural that they are not something we can make choices about. This is especially true of sexuality, which is culturally portrayed as entirely rooted in nature, embedded in emotion and the body, and so immediate that it is hard to imagine how it could be shaped by something as remote as society. Surely something like orgasm is not a social invention. But that does not mean that our experience of sexuality is all hardwired biology unshaped by the conditions of social life.

As the species with the big brain, we cannot separate how we perceive and experience sexuality from how we think about it. And how we think about it is so tied up with the society we live in that we cannot talk about sexuality as having some kind of pure existence independent of society. What we take to be normal human sexuality is actually a set of cultural ideas about sexuality, and so we have to ask how these ideas are shaped and how they affect life and our experience of it.

Less than two centuries ago, for example, ‘good’ women were not supposed to enjoy sex, much less have orgasms, and were sometimes subjected to clitoridectomies in order to ‘cure’ them of an ‘excessive’ interest in it. Today, however, healthy women are supposed to have multiple orgasms and might think there is something wrong with themselves or their partners if they don’t.

How we think about heterosexuality is key to patriarchy because ideas about gender are at the core of patriarchy, and heterosexuality and gender are defined in terms of each other. Whether a man is considered a real man, for example, or whether a woman is considered a real woman depends on their sexual feelings, behavior, identity, and relationships. In particular, as defined in most Western cultures, real women and men are exclusively heterosexual. The definition of a man is so bound up with being heterosexual that gay men
are routinely accused of not being men at all. This is also why lesbians are often likened to men because they, like ‘real men,’ are sexually oriented to women. Since real men and real women are culturally defined as heterosexual, anyone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual is stigmatized as a deviant outsider who threatens the status quo and does not deserve a socially legitimate identity. As such, they are suspect and vulnerable to ostracism, discrimination, and persecution.

Heterosexuals, however, can move through the world as socially legitimate men or women. They have the privilege of being able to assume acceptance as normal members of society, express physical affection with their partners in public, refer openly to their private lives, live in a world full of cultural images that confer a sense of legitimacy and social desirability, and live without fear that others will find out who they are. All of this is a form of privilege because it is systematically denied to those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. As with most forms of privilege, heterosexuals take it so much for granted that they do not experience it as privilege at all. It is just the way things are. But, as Charlotte Bunch points out, it would not take much for heterosexuals to realize just how much their privilege amounts to: “If you don’t have a sense of what privilege is, I suggest that you go home and announce to everybody that you know—a roommate, your family, the people you work with—that you’re a queer. Try being queer for a week.”

Under patriarchy, cultural ideals of masculine manhood and feminine womanhood are organized on a heterosexual model. This means that a real man is someone who can act out core patriarchal values by orienting himself to the task of controlling sexual access to women. He makes it clear, especially to other men, that he has a sexual interest in women and does nothing to shake the presumption that he can act on that interest and get what he wants. A real woman is one who accepts and relates to men on these terms, who subordinates her reality and sense of self to male control (such as by having sex whether she wants to or not) and defines sex from a masculine point of view.

As Marilyn Frye suggests, for example, from a patriarchal perspective, ‘having sex’ means sexual intercourse through which the man has an orgasm, and his orgasms are the measure of how many times ‘it’ has occurred. Whether her orgasms are real or faked or whether she even enjoyed herself is largely beside the point of whether they have actually ‘had sex,’ although this may reflect on his sexual performance (i.e., control) and, hence, his claim to manhood.

The patriarchal form of heterosexuality is male dominated, male identified, male centered, and organized around an obsession with control. As such, its social significance goes beyond sexuality per se, because it also serves as a general model for male dominance and for dominance and aggression in general. Whether the authority figure is a father, lover, husband, or employer, the underlying dynamic of control typically involves cultural themes tied to sexuality in one way or another. The common expression “Fuck you!” for example, heterosexualizes aggression by identifying the aggressor with men who fuck
and the object of aggression with women who are fucked. Similarly, being hurt or taken advantage of is often linked to heterosexual imagery, as in “I’ve been screwed,” “had,” “taken,” or “fucked.”\(^{37}\) The language of warfare is full of heterosexual imagery, from ditties chanted by recruits in basic training (“This is my rifle, this [my penis] is my gun; this is for fighting, this is for fun”) to high command metaphors for nuclear destruction such as “going all the way” and “wargasm.”\(^{38}\)

Power is also heterosexualized, as in “screwing the competition,” the use of “fucking” as an adjective to indicate something of awesome proportions (“fucking fantastic”), or the idea that men have the right to sexualize all women, including employees, coworkers, strangers on the street, and daughters.\(^{39}\) There is a popular romanticized notion that fathers should guard the sexual integrity of their daughters and maintain their own proprietary interest until they turn it over, reluctantly and sometimes with displays of jealousy, to husbands. The film \textit{Father of the Bride}, for example, shows how far a father will go to act out jealousy over his daughter’s impending marriage. We are supposed to take this as cute foolishness in spite of its clear basis in cultural images of daughters as romantic sexual property, images rooted in core patriarchal ideas about heterosexuality and its relation to male privilege and women’s oppression.

Patriarchy is not the only kind of society in which sexuality is socially shaped and defined. In every culture, the human potential for sexual feeling, experience, and behavior is constructed and regulated in one way or another. Everywhere people are socialized to see themselves, other people, and sexuality in certain ways. They are taught what to expect, how to interpret sensations and feelings, and how to identify what is considered appropriate and with whom.

But when power and privilege are added to the mix, the universal practice of shaping sexuality as a social reality takes on much greater significance. The major actors in heterosexuality are female and male, and women and men are also main points of reference for defining patriarchy as a system. This means that how we view heterosexuality will have a profound effect on how we view patriarchy. If we treat the patriarchal version of heterosexuality as natural, we will also treat patriarchy as natural, and if patriarchy is seen as natural, then criticism of it will be taken as an affront to human nature and our deepest sense of who we are. It is in this way that patriarchal heterosexuality serves as what Catharine MacKinnon calls the “linchpin of gender inequality.”\(^{40}\)

Seeing patriarchal heterosexuality as the linchpin of gender inequality seems to contradict a longstanding feminist argument that women are oppressed primarily through the demands of motherhood. In preindustrial patriarchies, for example, if breast-feeding requires mothers to stay close to home, they cannot participate in activities such as hunting and warfare that are tied to status and power. In industrial patriarchies, the greatest barrier to women’s advancement in the workplace is conflict between work and child care roles. Historically, however, the oppressive consequences of motherhood may be less
than they seem. As we saw earlier, raising children in preindustrial societies has never prevented women from participating fully in production, often producing more than half of necessary goods and services.

Motherhood has been more limiting under industrial capitalism, where the physical separation of work and home forces women to choose between caring for children and working outside the home. Even this, however, has not meant much to working-class and lower-class women, most of whom routinely work both inside and outside the home. This has been especially true of women of color who perform domestic work for white women during the day and then go home at night to care for their own families. Mothering thus keeps women in their place primarily in a limited economic sense that may be a relatively short-lived and class-bound phenomenon as the percentage of middle-class mothers in the labor force continues to rise.

A stronger explanation of women’s subordination is not their relation to children but to men, beginning with fathers and extending to husbands and other male authority figures. As Miriam Johnson argues, the socialization that goes on between fathers and daughters centers more on preparing daughters to be good wives than to be good mothers. And it’s a relationship often charged with romantic heterosexual ideals (as in Father of the Bride) that are much less likely to be found between mothers and sons. It is quite acceptable for a daughter to be a ‘daddy’s girl,’ for example, but a curse for a son to be called a ‘mama’s boy.’

This double standard is tied to cultural ambivalence about father-daughter incest. There is little ambivalence, however, about mother-son incest, which, as Johnson argues, may be prohibited not for deep psychosexual reasons but because a sexual relationship between a male and a more powerful woman violates core patriarchal values. To get a vivid sense of what this means, try to imagine the box-office appeal of a movie titled Mother of the Groom. In Father of the Bride, the man is the subject, and although it’s a comedy, he is not portrayed as dangerous to his daughter’s well-being—only carried away by what are regarded as appropriate feelings of jealousy. Movies that portray mothers with obsessive attachments to married sons, however, are still male-centered but now regard the parent as neurotic and destructive in ways unlikely to be viewed as funny.

The subordination of wives is supported by a host of cultural beliefs and expectations such as valuing her husband’s work and needs above her own or defining and judging her sexuality in relation to his experience and needs. When men want sex more often than women, for example, the difference is usually interpreted as indicating something wrong with women but not with men. Men may feel deprived, angry, rejected, confused, or hurt, but patriarchal culture does not encourage them to feel guilty or sexually flawed because of it. They may feel pressure to change by being more tolerant, sensitive, or understanding of women, but this does not alter the perception of women and their sexuality—not men and theirs—as problematic and thereby needing tolerance and understanding.
Women, however, are more likely to attribute differences in sexual rhythm, desire, or forms of expression entirely to themselves and feel responsible for doing something about it, such as by agreeing to have sex more often or in ways they do not like. Fittingly, the English language includes well-known terms such as ‘frigidity’ for women who are reluctant to have sex with men when and how men may want it, but nothing in most people’s vocabulary identifies men with excessive sexual desire. As with so much else in patriarchal systems, standards against which normal human experience is defined and evaluated are male identified and male centered.

The kind of patriarchal heterosexuality we live with is one version of a universal phenomenon, for every culture has ideas about sexuality and the forms it can take, from heterosexual to bisexual to lesbian and gay to polymorphous eroticism, from egalitarian pleasuring to sadomasochism, from sacred ritual to profane recreation. At its heart, the problem with patriarchal sexuality is how it joins sexuality with control and dominance and, therefore, with the use of violence as a means for achieving both. For years, many feminists in the anti-violence movement denied this by arguing that sexual violence is solely about power and not about sex. This overlooks, however, the possibility that under patriarchy, violence is about power and sex.

This could mean that sex and power operate as two independent motivations (sexual violence as ‘sex + power’). On a deeper level, however, it is important to see how patriarchal culture defines mainstream sexuality in terms of power and male privilege, and how power and male dominance are routinely conceived in sexual terms. All of this means that it’s hard to participate in heterosexual relations without issues of power coming up, or to deal in power without invoking sexual imagery. If we deny this linkage as a way to avoid seeing how sexuality has been contaminated with the potential for violence, then we cannot see the problem for what it truly is or what needs to be changed.

What is true of sexual violence is also true of pornography, which carries its own load of cultural confusion and ambivalence. To many feminists, pornography is the ‘theory’ on which the ‘practice’ of sexual violence is based. As John Stoltenberg argues, pornography reveals the connection between patriarchal oppression on the one hand and cultural ideas about sexuality on the other:

Male-supremacist sexuality is important to pornography, and pornography is important to male supremacy. Pornography institutionalizes the sexuality that both embodies and enacts male supremacy. Pornography says about that sexuality . . . : Here’s how to act out male supremacy in sex. . . . Here are the acts that impose power over and against another body. And pornography says about that action . . . : Here’s who you should do it to and here’s who she is: your whore, your piece of ass, yours. Your penis is a weapon; her body is your target. And
pornography says about that sexuality, “Here’s why”: Because men are masters, women are slaves; men are superior, women are subordinate; men are real, women are objects; men are sex machines, women are sluts. . . . Pornography also eroticizes male supremacy. It makes dominance and subordination feel like sex; it makes hierarchy feel like sex; it makes force and violence feel like sex; it makes hate and terrorism feel like sex; it makes inequality feel like sex. 

It is no wonder there is so much confusion—especially among men—about the difference between abusive and nonabusive sex, about what sexual harassment is and is not, about how to reconcile the need for intimacy with patriarchal paths of least resistance leading toward domination. The more invested men are in patriarchal masculinity, the more they value being in control and detached from their feelings and vulnerability. Vulnerability and feeling are rooted in the body, which means that in taking men away from their feelings, the pursuit of masculinity also takes them away from a connection with their own bodies.

In this way, patriarchy encourages men to disconnect from any sense of themselves as embodied sexual beings. Masculine heterosexuality becomes something outside men’s own bodies, to seek, ‘get,’ and control as a commodity or prize possessed and controlled by women. Men are encouraged to see sexuality as something women have and men do not, and therefore as a source of women’s power over men and an occasion for male resentment, rage, coercion, and aggression. This can reduce men’s sexual lives to a choice between chronic sexual deprivation and finding ways to buy, earn, win, seduce, or seize it. It can set men up to feel responsible for women’s sexual pleasure—always under pressure to perform to women’s satisfaction—as a way to demonstrate the artistry of masculine control. It is also a way to earn access to the sexuality women supposedly possess and give in carefully measured portions to deserving men. All of this may be the closest many men get to a genuine sense of connection to their own sense of being alive as sexual beings.

It is also no wonder that so many men and women can be involved as victims or victimizers in sexual coercion, abuse, harassment, or violence without seeing it for what it is. And no wonder there is so much confusion about the difference between the erotic and the pornographic, so that those who attack the latter are often accused of having hang-ups about the former. In an important sense, it is true that those who condemn pornography are antisex—not sex in a generic sense but patriarchy’s oppressive brand of it.

To find a way out of patriarchy, we have to deal with the powerful social connection that links gender and sexuality with core patriarchal values. Perhaps here, more than in any other area of human life, male privilege is embodied in ways that make it difficult to see beyond our seemingly natural experience of sexuality to what is really happening and what it has to do with
us. For this and all the other forms of myth and misperception that cloud our vision, we need to realize that we are not simply prisoners of a socially constructed reality. Reality is being constructed and reconstructed all the time, and the part we play in that, however small and unconscious, gives us both the chance and the responsibility to choose in ways that might make a difference.
Perhaps the most efficient way to keep patriarchy going is to promote the idea that it does not exist in the first place. Patriarchy, we might say, is just a figment of angry feminist imagination. Or if it does exist, it is by reputation only, a shadow of its former self that no longer amounts to much in people’s lives. To pull this off, you have to be willing to engage in a lot of denial, but you can also use some key supporting arguments—that patriarchy does not exist because many women seem better off than many men, that the generally miserable lot of the modern man contradicts the idea of male privilege, that women and men are each affected by parallel versions of a common oppression, and that men and women are equal co-creators of every aspect of social life, including patriarchy. This mind-numbing mixture serves patriarchy well by leading us in every direction but the one that counts—toward a clear understanding of what’s really going on.

Now You See Him, Now You Don’t: The Paradox of Male Invisibility

A key to maintaining male privilege is to devalue women by making them and what they do invisible. This happens, for example, when cleaning the house or taking care of children is viewed as nonwork or when a woman’s ideas are ignored, only to be noticed and adopted when suggested by a man. But social life is full of paradox, for men are also made invisible in important ways. As is usually the case with dominant groups, however, invisibility, rather than working against their interests, works for them.
One way this happens is through the male-identified aspect of patriarchy itself. Because patriarchal culture designates men and masculinity as the standard for people in general, manhood is the taken-for-granted backdrop, making it the last thing to stand out as remarkable. When we refer to humanity as ‘man,’ for example, manhood blends into humanity, and men can enjoy the comfort and security of not being marked as other. In contrast, ‘woman’ stands out as a marked category of outsiders in relation not simply to men but to humanity in general. If everyman is everyone, then woman is something else and therefore problematic, something that needs to be figured out.

The same kind of invisibility occurs around race. We hardly ever call attention to the race of white people in the news, for example, because in a white-identified society, whiteness is the standard—the assumed race. Only deviations from the dominant group are marked for special attention. So it is routine to mark white women and people of color as exceptions (policewoman, black physician, Native American artist, Asian American executive, and so on), a practice that underscores the normative and therefore taken-for-granted standing of men and whites. What is ironic in such cases is that male gender and white race so dominate social life that they become, in a sense, socially invisible. Unlike the invisibility of women and people of color, this supports privilege by allowing men and whites to move through the world with relatively little awareness of the causes or consequences of male privilege and white privilege and the social oppression they produce.

In general, women are made invisible when they do things that might elevate their status, such as raising children into healthy adults or coming up with a brilliant idea in a business meeting. Men and manhood, however, are often made invisible when men’s behavior is socially undesirable and might raise questions about the appropriateness of male privilege. Although most violent acts are perpetrated by men, for example, news accounts rarely call attention to the gender of those who rape, kill, beat, torture, and make war on others. Instead, we read about mobs, crowds, people, students, gangs, citizens, youths, fans, workers, militants, party members, teenagers, insurgents, soldiers, and so on—ungendered categories that presumably can include both women and men. If a crowd of women gather to make a newsworthy event, however, one can be sure they will be identified as women, not merely as a crowd. But such attention is rarely paid to manhood per se. And on those rare occasions when someone mentions statistics on male violence and suggests this might be a problem worth looking at, the response is yawning impatience or, more likely, a torrent of objections to the male-bashing straw man defense that all men are being accused of being murderers and rapists.

When the media do identify male gender, they rarely make much of it. With numbing regularity, we hear reports of violent crimes perpetrated by men, from wife beating, stalking, rape, and murder to the gunning down of workers and bystanders by disgruntled employees to the September 11 disaster to the mass murder of schoolchildren or the use of genocide as an instrument
of national policy. Yet rarely do we hear the simple statement that the perpetrators of such acts are almost always men. We also do not take seriously the idea that men’s pervasive involvement in such violence provides a clue to understanding why it happens. No one suggests, for example, that an ethic of masculine control might be connected to the use of violence or that there is good reason to limit the male population’s opportunities to harm others.

Note, however, the radically different response when subordinate groups are the focus. The fact that most early AIDS victims were gay men, for example, brought demands to quarantine and repress the entire gay population, even though most gay men did not have AIDS. Teenage pregnancy—a state that describes women, not men—is a hot topic in the United States but not male insemination of teenage girls. And if people of color did violence to whites at the rate that the male population produces violence against women, there would be national mobilization to do something to contain this ‘dangerous population.’

Selective male invisibility shapes how we perceive and think about gender issues. The oppression of women, for example, is routinely discussed as a women’s issue rather than as a men’s issue, making male gender invisible as part of the problem. Whether it’s job discrimination or harassment and violence, gender issues typically are seen as problems for women—the category of people who are victimized. Gender issues are rarely seen as problems for men, the category of people who actually do the victimizing and whose privilege is rooted in the same system that promotes women’s oppression.

If male gender is invisible, then patriarchy is invisible, and it’s easy to go around acting as though men have nothing to do with something that is, by definition, organized around gender. In the simplest sense, this is illogical, because something cannot be about gender and yet only be about women. If something happens to women simply because they are women, then we also have to understand why it does not happen to men simply because they happen to be men. But male invisibility is more than illogical, for it also loads both responsibility and blame onto the victim by implying that oppression is an issue for those who suffer from it but not for those who benefit from or perpetrate it.

Defining oppression as a problem only for the oppressed is as old as oppression itself. It does not protect or enhance the status of men, whites, and the upper classes to look critically at systems that privilege them over women, people of color, and the working and lower classes. Instead, the path of least resistance is to be charitable or to focus on how oppressed groups can solve their problems, resolve their issues, or advance their standing as having ‘special interests.’ But advantaged, dominant groups are rarely portrayed as problematic or even as groups, much less as even having special interests.

Dominant groups avoid scrutiny because their position enables them to define their own interests as those of society as a whole. This lays down a path of least resistance for men to protect their privilege by coasting along with the patriarchal status quo—mentoring and promoting people who look like them, avoiding domestic work, and passing laws and setting policies that reflect
a male-centered, male-identified, male-dominated world. Nothing much is made of it. No special interests at work here. But those who struggle against the consequences of patriarchy are another story. They are the other, the outsiders trying to get in, the seekers after affirmative action and other special considerations that would advance them at the expense of others.

If privilege and oppression are visible only as issues for oppressed groups, then privileged groups do not have to feel responsible or accountable or even involved. Men can feel good—even virtuous—when they show any concern for ‘women’s issues’ or just avoid behaving in overtly sexist ways. They can regard the slightest gesture in support of gender equality—from saying they favor equal pay to doing the dinner dishes—as a sign of what good people they are. And men can take comfort from the illusion that women can achieve justice for themselves by resolving women’s issues with some help from benevolent men but without radically affecting men’s lives or how patriarchal society is organized, including its male-identified core values.

Many men object to the very idea that male privilege exists, but their objection also insists on a kind of invisibility that patriarchy depends on. Few men realize how much their lives would change if women were not treated as subordinate. Instead, men take credit for their hard work and achievements without taking into account how much harder it would be if they had to compete with women on a level playing field or do without the supportive (and unpaid) domestic labor that so many wives and mothers provide. Because patriarchy defines women as subordinate and other, men can take women’s exclusion from serious competition for granted. As a result, many men have been rudely awakened by women’s entry into hitherto male-only workplaces. When men complain about the advantage some women gain from affirmative action, they ignore centuries of pro-male affirmative action that, in spite of the women’s movement, continues as the largely unexceptional default condition under patriarchy.

The more invisible male gender is, the more gender problems like violence and discrimination are identified with women and the less likely we are to notice that patriarchy even exists as an oppressive system. When we do not see the significance of the gender categories to which rapists and their victims belong, individual men who are not rapists don’t have to consider how their connection to patriarchal privilege also connects them to the sexual violence of men who are.

**Denial**

Denial can be a powerful and useful psychological defense mechanism. When something is too horrible to deal with, denial can be a lifesaver, especially for children. Usually, however, denial also exacts a price by standing between us and our power to see our lives clearly and to do something to make them better. The denial that saves a girl from confronting the reality of her abuse, for example, can eventually cripple her ability to function as an adult and drive her into therapy as a way to free herself from it and what lies behind it.
Denial can be even worse when built into the culture of an entire social system. When a family defines abuse as love, for example, or when a nation calls war ‘keeping the peace,’ or when patriarchy defines male dominance as human nature, we are up against a lot more than a personal reluctance to look at the truth. For a girl to acknowledge her own abuse, she must set aside her own denial as a defense against pain and terror. She has to give up the only safe place she has ever known—the place where she can pretend that none of it is really happening. But she also has to go up against her family’s collective denial that defines love, abuse, violence, and family in ways that make her and everyone else’s denial possible. In this sense, she risks even more by having to challenge an entire system that she depends on for a sense of belonging and identity.

Similar risks occur on a larger scale. Antiwar protesters who object to a popular war, for example, risk everything from the goodwill of their neighbors and how well their children are treated at school to their sense of themselves as true citizens who have a right to be there. “America: Love it or leave it” was a standard challenge thrown at people protesting the Vietnam War, as if only those who bought into the prevailing collective denial could count themselves among those who loved their country. And anyone who doubts that massive denial was at work from the highest levels on down need only read former secretary of defense Robert McNamara’s regretful memoir or see the film The Fog of War.

Similar antipathy was present when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. Members of Congress who even questioned the war were accused of being unpatriotic and aiding the enemy, as were citizens who engaged in public protest.

Denial takes a variety of forms. There is the denial that a problem even exists (“Rape is not an issue on this campus”) or, if it does, that it’s serious enough to worry about (“It happens once in a while, but women get over it”). When that fails, the next line of defense is to blame the victim (“She should have been more careful”) or call it something else (“It was just a misunderstanding. It’s not like it’s actual violence.”). And, then, as Stanley Cohen argues in his book States of Denial, when it becomes impossible to avoid seeing the reality of things, additional levels of denial come into play—not feeling anything about it or feeling something but not seeing it as a moral issue or, if all else fails, denying there is anything we can do.

Given how risky it can be to acknowledge painful realities, it is not surprising that we might deny that patriarchy exists rather than risk ridicule, rejection, or worse by seeing it for what it is. For men in particular, denial can be militant and confrontational, but it usually appears as a stubborn inability to see or understand. It may begin with something as simple as calling the consequences of male privilege a ‘women’s issue,’ an easy way for men to disassociate from the problems of the other. From there, denial gets thicker and harder to penetrate.

On the subject of sexual harassment, for example, men’s renowned ability to solve problems can suddenly take a holiday as they look to women to tell them what to do and what not to do. Many men complain that they don’t
know the rules anymore and can’t seem to figure them out. It’s as if harassment were some kind of female mystery that only women can understand. For some equally mysterious reason, although men control every major social institution, and although this is supposedly based in part on their superior power to make objective sense of things, they can become surprisingly slow when they enter the alien territory of women’s issues. They may retreat into a kind of earnest not getting it, some version of “I’m just no good at that.”

Denial is a reliable defense serving all forms of privilege. To some degree, it operates in every society because societies are organized to be self-justifying and self-perpetuating. No social system has a culture that values the kind of serious ongoing criticism of itself that could lead to its transformation. Instead, the status quo typically is defined as normal, legitimate, and unremarkable and slides along paths of least resistance that assume everything is basically all right. If troublemakers come along to suggest otherwise, it’s easy enough to blame them instead of listening to what they have to say—to attribute a system’s problems to anything but the system itself. Outside agitators are the problem, or disgruntled groups who won’t face up to their individual failings and get on with it.

Because every system of privilege is organized to protect the interests of dominant groups, denial serves privilege by making it tough for anyone to challenge the system. It is possible to maintain privilege simply by going about business as usual and riding the rolling inertia of the status quo. The last thing that will occur to them is to go out of their way to understand how privilege works, who gets hurt by it, and what it’s got to do with them.

This can make the most privileged groups the ones who see the least. The classic BBC television series *Upstairs, Downstairs*, for example, portrayed life among the privileged (upstairs) and servant (downstairs) classes in Edwardian England at the turn of the twentieth century. In this rigid class system, servants did virtually everything for their employers, from cooking and serving meals to keeping house to drawing baths, polishing boots, and helping family members dress themselves. In one scene, Richard Bellamy, the master of the house, must deal with a personal problem among the servants, which his inept handling has only made worse. As he attempts to deal with the situation, he mutters in exasperation, “Servants! I don’t know why we put up with them!”

On one level, the statement is insensitive and blind, even silly, and it is tempting to write it off as a personality flaw—just as some conclude that men who do not get it must be jerks. The truth, however, is more complicated. When we participate in a social system, we feel drawn toward paths of least resistance that shape how we perceive and make sense of things. Every system of privilege is organized to encourage subordinate groups to keep quiet and pretend there is no oppression going on lest the wrath of those above them make things a whole lot worse than they already are. And dominant groups are encouraged toward the subtle arrogance of not paying attention to the reality of the oppression that supports their privilege.
Not surprisingly, if anyone breaks the silence, it is usually those nearest the bottom, who also tend to have the fewest resources for making change. As a result, oppressed groups often feel backed into a corner where making trouble seems the only way to draw attention to what’s going on. Making trouble, in turn, routinely evokes official disgust, charges of extremism, and even violent repression. In democracies like the United States, a certain amount of trouble-making is tolerated to avoid openly compromising democratic values. But after a while, patience runs out, and dominant groups rise up and say, “Enough!”

Denial is so thick that women who manage to penetrate it for themselves often have to drag the men in their lives into awareness and keep them focused long enough to act. At the same time, women must also struggle with the everyday facts of gender oppression and stay healthy, clearheaded, and aware in spite of a mainstream culture permeated with the message that privilege and oppression are not real to begin with and that what is real about them doesn’t amount to much.

A common dynamic begins when a woman tries to explain why a man’s behavior is offensive or threatening, why he should feel responsible for cleaning the house, why describing what he thinks is not the same as saying what he feels, why his focus on being in control is oppressive, why his behavior is inappropriate for an employer and makes it impossible for her to do her work. He, innocently, perhaps earnestly, says he doesn’t understand and would she please explain. She does, but he argues some fine point—a definition of terms or an exception to the rule. Or his attention wanders and still he doesn’t get it, or he gets it but then loses it again after an hour or a week goes by.

It goes on this way until she gives up, which may not be very long, since this is exhausting work. He may feel stung by her impatience because he thinks he is trying to be sensitive. She feels frustrated, trapped, and furious at his often calm inability to get it (he being calm because somewhere inside himself he feels—even if unconsciously—the male-privileged knowledge that he does not have to get it). She may go to extremes to get him to move, to see, to do something. Depending on the relationship, she may threaten to break up, divorce, quit the job, file a complaint, or sue, any of which can be risky for her—from the breakup of her family to losing her job to coping with violent retaliation for being ‘a crazy woman’ or ‘such a bitch.’

Sometimes her efforts work, and for a while he may take an interest in what he still sees as women’s issues. He may even help others become more aware, including other men. But as he swims against the steady current of male privilege and the paths of least resistance that patriarchy holds out to him, he is likely to lose interest before very long. So it goes with virtually every form of privilege—the great yawn tinged with waning patience capping the conversation, “Do we have to talk about this again?”

Patriarchy is denied in every setting, from bedrooms to boardrooms. The owner of an ‘exotic dance’ club near Hartford, Connecticut, for example, advertised his business on a highway billboard that pictured two women
wearing low-cut tops and gazing vampily toward the stream of passing traffic. A few people complained, but there was little interest until two members of the National Organization for Women scaled the heights and spray-painted “Stop Graphic Rape” in large letters across the ad. **Now** the public stood up and paid attention from living rooms to radio talk shows, but not to the issue of graphic rape or the multibillion-dollar business of objectifying, appropriating, and exploiting women’s bodies and how it might encourage sexual and other violence, not to the men and who spend their money in such businesses. People wanted to talk about whether the spray-painters had violated the advertiser’s free speech rights, whether breaking the law was an appropriate or effective strategy for change, and whether it was fair to criticize the strippers for choosing this kind of work. A chorus of clicking tongues arose, admonishing women to be reasonable and engage men in constructive dialogue. Within a few weeks the tempest died down, interest shifted to other things, and the billboard remained, while the business of men buying a chance to watch and fantasize about women’s bodies went on as usual.

One theme running throughout the billboard controversy was the idea that the women from NOW were being stereotypical uptight feminist prudes, all worked up over what amounted to nothing more than normal heterosexuality. This kind of argument is a staple ingredient in the denial of patriarchy: the portrayal of what goes on around gender as obvious and natural, if sometimes a bit annoying or offensive to delicate sensibilities (but always in an ultimately charming and inconsequential way, as in ‘naughty’). If women want to take their clothes off in front of men to support themselves and their children—well, women have been doing that sort of thing for ages, and after all, it is their choice, is it not? And if men do not get it, there is no point to making an issue of it, because to judge from best-seller lists, women and men not only speak different languages but come from different planets, which means we should be grateful for those rare moments when they manage to understand each other at all. And it seems to go without saying that when it comes to the attention and skills required for human intimacy, men simply are not very good at that sort of thing (in spite of dominating the mental health profession and nearly monopolizing advice to parents). So they are readily forgiven when they do not get it and applauded when they do, however quickly they might lose sight of it again.

But not getting the reality of patriarchy and male privilege is more than a charming or regrettable incapacity. Whether conscious or not, it is also an effective way to deny patriarchy, men’s involvement in it, and their potential to be part of the solution.

**“She Did It, Too!”**: Consensus and Collusion

Openly oppressive systems of privilege like apartheid in South Africa or slavery in the United States provide a comforting clarity because it is plain to see
who oppresses whom and how it’s done. You can always tell one group from the
other, differences in privilege are obvious, abuse and exploitation are public,
and the entire system is organized around rigid segregation. The world seems
neatly divided into the innocent who are victimized on the one side and the
bad who victimize on the other.

It would be easier to see how patriarchy works if it fit this kind of model,
but it does not. Social life has always revolved around women and men living
and working together in families and communities, an arrangement that does
not lend itself to the stark contrasts separating oppressor and oppressed evi-
dent in other systems. As far as we know, women’s and men’s lives have always
been bound together in one way or another. Men have always been born to
and, with relatively few exceptions, raised by women, and women’s lives have
always been bound up with those of men, whether fathers, brothers, husbands,
lovers, sons, uncles, nephews, cousins, or grandfathers. Intimacy across gender
has always been a hallmark of human experience, and this can make it difficult
to see how it works, or to see it at all.

One way this difficulty shows itself is through the idea that since both gen-
ders share in a common social reality of everyday life, they must be equally
responsible for creating and maintaining it. This implies that neither gender
dominates the overall scheme of things. On one level this is, of course, true,
since unless people live as hermits, they have to participate in one society or
another. And unless they are going to live in open rebellion all the time—with
all the risks that come with it—they will go along to get along. So it is inevitable
that both women and men will to some degree support patriarchy as the only
way of life they know.

But going along with patriarchy also makes us part of the consequences it
produces. When the details of our lives are shaped to reflect patriarchal reality,
oppression can blend into the rest of social life in a seamless field of mundane
normality. Pain, loss, and conflict appear not as something remarkable or out
of place, but simply as what life is, or as personal problems caused by faulty
personalities, bad childhoods, or some bad luck that could happen to anyone.
What is harder to see is how systems like patriarchy promote individual trou-
bles and connect them to one another.

The tendency to fuse privilege and oppression with visions of ordinary life
is most common where the lives of dominant and subordinate groups are inte-
grated in close and interdependent ways. This was true to some degree of the
upper and servant classes in Victorian England and of slavery in the United
States, but neither of these systems compares with the intermeshing of men’s
and women’s lives over thousands of years of human experience. As a result,
the path of least resistance is to experience patriarchy as normal, consensual,
and serving everyone’s needs and values.

It should not surprise us, then, to find no shortage of women who seem to
accept their lot, and not a few who do their part to keep it going in the ‘natural
order’ of things. But this doesn’t mean women and men are equal cocreators
of patriarchy, or that patriarchy is a system that serves men’s and women’s interests equally. It is one thing to participate in a system and accommodate to it even to the point of identifying with and perpetuating it. It is quite another to knowingly choose to create it. Just because we lie down in a bed doesn’t mean we made it or even that we’d sleep in it if we had a better alternative.

Consider, for example, African blacks who were brought to the United States as slaves. Black parents who wanted their children to survive undoubtedly taught them how to avoid white violence by deferring to whites, doing as they were told, and doing nothing to question the status quo. Whites could—and often did—point to a seeming consensus underlying this way of life and claim that blacks were content or even happy as participants in a system that supposedly benefited everyone, at least in keeping with their different stations in life (which, of course, were seen by whites as natural and ordained by God).

But this is false consensus based on choosing the lesser of the evils offered by an oppressive society. Equally false is attributing the kind of responsibility that goes with free and considered choice to those who accommodate themselves to a system that oppresses them. A coal miner’s son, for example, may be said to freely choose to be a coal miner instead of a Wall Street lawyer in that no one overtly coerces him to make that choice. We could also say that a Wall Street lawyer’s son might freely choose to follow in his father’s footsteps rather than be a coal miner. But to argue that both are equally responsible for the consequences of their choices on the grounds that each exercised free choice ignores how societies limit the alternatives that people perceive as available to choose from, which is a direct result of living in a particular kind of society that privileges certain classes, genders, and races over others.

Of course, no society can exist without some degree of consensus, and both women and men do participate in life under patriarchy. But we have to ask what this consensus is based on, what different groups of people get out of it, what their alternatives are, and what are the terms on which they participate. When women go along with the inferior social standing that goes with being female, they do not do so because it is an attractive and enviable thing to do in patriarchal culture. It is true that ‘feminine’ virtues and ‘women’s work’ are valued, but they are valued primarily through their usefulness to men and in sentimental, romantic ways that have little standing in comparison with what is widely regarded as serious life and work.

Many men are quick to protest that the family is the most important of all social institutions—next to which ‘men’s work’ is second best. Women, they say, should feel privileged to call the family their turf. Although the family should be among the most important of institutions, if we judge from how resources and rewards are distributed and what men choose as their own priorities, the family clearly ranks well down the list.

Consider, for example, the tolerance of widespread violence and abuse in families, the fact that children are more likely to live in poverty than any other age group, the national child care crisis, men’s routine lack of concern
What Patriarchy?

for taking responsibility for contraception and, therefore, the consequences of unprotected sex, and the steadfast mainstream refusal of most husbands and fathers to see themselves as equally responsible for the domestic labor that makes up family life. All of these examples highlight the gulf between public rhetoric and sentimentality, on the one hand, and the reality of family life and the value placed on it by the larger society, on the other.

Most women accept their status because it is all they know or the best they can get. The alternative is to risk challenging a system defended by powerful interests, which makes going along with male privilege women’s path of least resistance. To choose different paths is of course possible, as the frequent heroism of women makes clear, but not without considerable effort and risk.

But don’t men also feel compelled to bend themselves to fit patriarchal standards? Do they freely choose to go along with patriarchy any more than women do? And don’t they pay a price for challenging the status quo? The answer is yes, but here the similarity between men and women ends, for men’s and women’s lack of freedom comes with very different consequences.

Under patriarchy, when a woman embraces her subordinate, devalued gender status, she gains precious little in return. But when a man assumes his status, he can identify with some of society’s highest cultural values—values associated with manhood, such as control, reason, strength, industry, courage, decisiveness, dominance, emotional control and inexpressiveness, toughness, wisdom, abstract principles, intellectual and artistic genius, even God. A man can take advantage of male privilege and the rewards for successfully embodying patriarchal values. By identifying himself as a man, he gains privilege by associating himself with what is socially defined as the best that humanity can be. No matter what his social standing might otherwise be, he can know that something in his masculine being connects him with ideals that elevate him above even the most highly placed woman or, for that matter, other men who, although superior in relation to other forms of privilege, seem insufficiently masculine. So the working-class carpenter can feel superior to a president’s wife because he is a man and she is not, or he can feel more of a man than a male professional who for all his class privilege seems to lack toughness and grit.

Like men, women participate in the patriarchy into which they were born and raised because they do not see an alternative. They inevitably identify with that society and even defend it to some degree. This is a far cry, however, from the notion that women share control over the shape of patriarchal society on some kind of equal footing with men in a bad case of codependency or sexual game playing.

As a system, patriarchy is not a grand battle of the sexes in which men and women pursue equal but conflicting interests as sexual superpowers. Patriarchy is an oppressive system in which women, like all subordinate groups, make the best of what they’ve got and build whatever basis of power and influence they can. If women are turned into sexual property, then they will find ways to control that property for their own advantage. If they become the emotional
caretakers, then they will develop ways to use emotion as leverage. The fact that women can hurt or deprive men does not mean that patriarchy doesn’t exist or that women and men are equal partners in it. After all, white slaveholders depended on and often lived in fear of their slaves, but this did not make blacks partners in a slave society. What we are seeing here is an inherent paradox in the social dynamics of oppressive power: the more invested people are in dominance and control, the more frightened they are of having those same forces and values turned against them—and the more powerful those beneath them may seem as a result.9

For both men and women, participating in patriarchy puts us in the middle of a huge contradiction. On the one hand, we may feel we have little choice but to live within the limits imposed by a patriarchal system that privileges men at women’s expense. On the other hand, we bring to one another some of our most compelling personal needs—whether as parents, siblings, children, lovers, or spouses—needs that are invariably distorted and perverted by a system organized around privilege and oppression.

The contradiction is so deep and the stakes so high that we do not want to know what is going on. Many men are so afraid of being blamed (just as women are of blaming them) that we find it easier to pretend that women and men are equals. We are tempted to respond to every statement about oppression with, “But women do it, too,” or “What about men?” It is easier to cast women as a bizarre variety of people who for some reason choose to help produce their own oppression. It drives otherwise intelligent people into corners where they turn and fight their way out with absurd arguments that women like being dominated and knocked around or naturally find pleasure in pain and humiliation—the convenient myth of female masochism. It is a crazy dynamic but no less crazy than patriarchy itself, a system that pits one half of humanity against the other.

False Parallels

Drawing false gender parallels creates a particularly effective smoke screen around the reality of patriarchy. To see women and men as equal conspirators who together created and maintain patriarchy, we have to ignore the fact that patriarchy gives men and women different interests, resources, and experience. We cannot lump the two genders together and treat them as an undifferentiated whole any more than we can act as if all races, classes, and ethnic groups participate and benefit equally in societies and their development. The terms of social life are not equally under the control of women and men, whites and people of color, people with and without disabilities, bosses and workers, or rich and poor. Everyone participates in social life, and thus we all play some role in creating it, including its consequences. This does not mean, however, that all groups participate in the same way, for the same reasons, or with the same results.
Nonetheless, it has become routine to respond to criticism of patriarchy or men’s participation in it with false parallels that portray women and men as interchangeable in various social situations, their experience and behavior being parallel if not equivalent. One way to do this is to match each statement about women’s oppression with something comparable about men, not seeing how patriarchy shapes men’s and women’s lives in different ways.

Cultural mythology, for example, often associates women with evil, with images of the temptress who brings about a good man’s downfall, the morally weak vessel ripe for the devil’s seductions, the wicked witch who eats small children, and so on. “But what about the Christian devil?” comes a ready retort. Isn’t he an evil figure who parallels and in some sense balances negative images of women? Isn’t this therefore a human thing rather than a gender thing?

Although male and female images of evil may seem equivalent and parallel, in fact they are quite different. The devil may be male, but his evil is not based on the fact of his being male. He is not regarded as evil because he is male, because maleness itself is associated with evil. Instead, the devil is evil because of his particular and special relation to God. If anything, this elevates him as a fallen angel who began as God’s moral sparring partner, formidable enough to be a worthy adversary of none less than God himself.

In contrast, the evil attributed to female figures such as Eve, Pandora, and witches is associated with women as women. In patriarchal culture, women are seen as naturally weak, carnal, corruptible, and corrupting. What power they do have is portrayed as disgusting, contemptible, lacking in character, and destructive. This is very different from the power attributed to the devil, who, like Hitler and other larger-than-life, monstrous figures, earns at least some degree of awe and fascination, if not respect, for his power. It is hard to imagine how patriarchal Christianity would ever develop an evil female figure powerful and substantial enough to challenge God, for this would require that women be taken seriously. In other words, under patriarchy, women are not good enough to be the devil.

False gender parallels are a powerful kind of thinking that easily lends itself to the idea that patriarchy does not exist. If everything one could say about women is matched by something comparable about men, what basis is there for talking about male privilege or female oppression? The word ‘sexism,’ for example, is often used to describe any prejudice based on gender, including negative stereotypes about men. Many men complain that affirmative action programs are sexist (‘reverse sexism’), that judges who routinely award child custody to mothers are sexist, and that women who suggest that men are jerks are sexist.

Others point out that it’s becoming more common for women to focus on men’s physical attractiveness in ways that seem to parallel the sexual objectification of women. Women talk more openly about men’s bodies, male nightclub strippers play to audiences of cheering women, and the media are quick to focus on the occasional female executive who sexually harasses a male
subordinate, whether the harassment is actual or, as in the novel and movie *Disclosure*, imagined. The cosmetics industry for men is booming in a seeming move toward the kind of preoccupation with personal appearance that has long been a burden borne almost entirely by women.

Like kids arguing over who’s to blame for a fight (“He hit me!” “Yeah, well, she . . .”), parallel complaints about antimale sexism are a routine response to any kind of serious attention to male privilege. Women complain that life is rough for them, and men complain that it’s rough for them, too. Heads nod amid a collective sigh of relief at once more avoiding honest talk about privilege. Sometimes it’s women who save the day by hastening to point out that for every female who is disadvantaged, men suffer some ill effect of their own. But no matter who does it, the typical result is a dead end or a conversation that focuses more on men’s woes than women’s, taking attention from patriarchy and male privilege and reinforcing male centeredness. In this way, even when the subject is privilege and oppression, somehow the path of least resistance is to turn the conversation toward focusing on and taking care of men.

The problem with false gender parallels is that the significance of what happens to people differs profoundly from one gender to the other. On the surface, the experience and behavior of women and men may appear to be similar, but this impression falls apart if we look at the larger reality of people’s lives. Negative stereotypes about men, for example, can make them uncomfortable and hurt their feelings. This seems to be the most common cause for men’s complaint and a major reason for women’s reluctance even to talk about sexism when men are around. But antimale stereotypes come primarily from women, a subordinate, culturally devalued group that lacks authority in a male-identified, male-dominated, male-centered society. In other words, if the source is a woman, the damage that stereotypes can do is confined to personal hurt (as in making men feel foolish in bed), with little if any effect in the larger world. This is because antimale stereotypes are not rooted in a culture that regards men as inherently dangerous, inferior, ridiculous, disgusting, or undesirable. Such stereotypes can therefore be written off as the bitter ravings of a group beneath being taken seriously.

Antimale stereotypes also cannot be used to keep men down as a group, to lock them into an inferior and disadvantaged status, to justify abuse and violence against them, or to deprive them of fair treatment. When women refer to men as jerks, for example, they are not expressing a general cultural view of men as jerks. If our culture really regarded men as jerks, the population would be clamoring for female presidents, senators, and CEOs. Instead, we routinely look to men for leadership and expertise in every area of social life, whether philosophy, government, business, law, religion, art, science, cooking, or child care. To the extent that men are culturally portrayed as jerks, it is only in areas of life defined as relatively unimportant, which is to say, in their intimate relations with women. Ultimately this damages women more than men, for the
capacity to make superiors look foolish is one of the many ways that subordinate groups of all kinds are portrayed as dangerous and in need of control.

Prejudice against women, however, has deep and far-reaching consequences that do a lot more than make them feel bad, for it supports an entire system that privileges men at women's expense. Sexist prejudice does not just target individual women, for it is fundamentally about women and strikes at the mere fact of their being women in every instance. Each expression of anti-female prejudice always amounts to more than what is said, for it reaffirms a cultural legacy of patriarchal privilege and oppression.

When a particular woman is treated as less intelligent, less serious, and less important than the men she works with, for example, this specific view of her is easily linked to the patriarchal idea that women in general are inferior to men. When men ignore her ideas and suggestions or pay more attention to her looks than to her work, they do so with a cultural authority that damages her far more than similar treatment directed at a man. Since patriarchal culture values men and manhood, the weight behind antimal prejudice is limited primarily to the individual woman who expresses it and is therefore easier to discount (“She must not like men”). And however hurt men might feel, they can always turn to the compensations of male privilege and a mainstream culture that sends continuing messages of inherent male value. In this sense, the issue is not whether prejudice hurts—it hurts everyone it touches. But prejudice against women wounds in deeper and more complex ways than does prejudice against men because the hurt is magnified by a patriarchal system that spreads it by association to all women and that systematically links it to male privilege.

Because prejudice affects women and men so differently, calling antimal prejudice ‘sexism’ distorts the reality of how systems of privilege work. ‘Sexism’ distinguishes simple gender prejudice—which can affect men and women both—from the much deeper and broader consequence of expressing and perpetuating privilege and oppression. Without this distinction, we treat all harm as equivalent without taking into account important differences on both the personal and the social levels in what causes it and what it does to people.

For example, when a man strips off his clothes in a nightclub act, he does not also take off his dignity, autonomy, and power as a human being, because there is nothing in patriarchal culture that would interpret his behavior as giving up anything of real value to the women who watch him perform. If anything, he can get the male-centered satisfaction of having his body admired by women who lack the social power to treat his body like admired property. His relation to women in the audience does not reflect a larger social reality in which men’s bodies are routinely regarded as objects to be sought after and controlled by women.

But a woman who strips does so in a very different social context that changes entirely the meaning of her behavior and that of the men who watch her. In a patriarchal culture, her body has significance primarily in relation
to men who value rights of access and use through various forms of contract, force, or purchase, from the bonds of love or marriage to prostitution to rape. Men who pay women to strip in front of them do far more than pay to watch someone they find beautiful or arousing take off her clothes. They also participate in a much wider social pattern that defines women’s existence in relation to pleasing men, to meeting male standards of attractiveness, and to being available for men’s appropriation and use. To some degree, the price of admission buys men the right to feel, if only in short-lived fantasy, a sense of indirect control over women’s bodies. Women who watch men strip, on the other hand, will find little in mainstream patriarchal culture that supports viewing or treating men in this way.

There are, of course, similarities between male and female strippers, but they don’t have much to do with gender. Both men’s and women’s bodies, for example, are often used as commodities under market capitalism. Many male athletes are treated as so much meat to be used and then thrown away when no longer needed, and men working in dangerous occupations are routinely treated as expendable. This kind of exploitation also exists in the commercialization of men’s growing attention to personal appearance, from bodybuilding to cosmetics and plastic surgery.¹³

But the commercial exploitation of women’s bodies is not simply about social class and capitalism, for it also involves a patriarchal system that normalizes and promotes sexual exploitation. When a female executive sexually harasses a male subordinate, for example, she abuses both her organizational authority and her class privilege. But she does not take advantage of female gender privilege or a general social subordination of men, because these do not exist for her to use in the first place. Her behavior is inappropriate and harmful, and she should be held accountable for it. But this does not make it the same as male harassment of women, because it does not have the formidable social authority of patriarchy and male privilege behind it.

Men as Victims

One of the trickiest patriarchal paradoxes is that although patriarchy privileges men, many if not most men do not feel privileged, powerful, or in control of much of anything, especially at work.¹⁴ To judge from what many men say about their lives, they often feel victimized, deprived, put down, disposable, and trapped. Such feelings are often associated with costs that are at least statistically tied to being male. Men die at younger ages than women and are more vulnerable to almost every cause of death (with a few exceptions such as ovarian and breast cancer). Men are more likely to work at dangerous occupations, to kill themselves—dramatically so at older ages—and to be killed by others. They are more likely to suffer from alcohol, drug, and psychotic disorders,¹⁵ to commit violent crimes, to be arrested and imprisoned, and to be homeless. Compared with women, men’s same-sex friendships tend to be
fewer, shallower, and shorter, and men do not do as well at surviving the loss of a spouse, especially at older ages. The high priority on work in men’s lives takes many away from family and intimacy. Some men feel demeaned by popular culture, such as TV sitcoms that portray men as bumbling and foolish at home and around women. And in the controversy over affirmative action, many men complain that women are getting jobs and promotions men should have had, although there is still no evidence that this is anything more than anecdotal.

How can we say that patriarchy exists if men feel so little sense of privilege in their lives and seem to pay a substantial cost for being male? Can men be both privileged and miserable? The answer is yes, because most of men’s loss and misery is linked to what is required of men to participate in the very system that privileges them. As Marilyn French argues:

A person who values control over anything else is incapable of any relation that might weaken or penetrate that surface of control; thus such a person becomes almost incapable of intimacy, equality, or trust, each of which requires the abdication of control. Needing to hold oneself apart and above so that the appearance of control may not be shattered . . . one is terrified at the nakedness and vulnerability that seem to hover beyond the carefully maintained wall of control . . . .

If the traditional patriarchal image of women has constricted them greatly, depriving them of most of life’s activities and pleasures, the traditional patriarchal image of men has deprived them greatly, of the core of life, its central “purposes” and values: pleasure, love, intimacy, sharing, and community. Women have been imprisoned in the core, and men on the fringe; and the two areas have been renamed.

The paradox between male privilege and male misery is often used to argue that women’s oppression is balanced by a similar or even worse lot for men. Warren Farrell, for example, writes that societies such as the United States are both patriarchal and matriarchal, with each gender having its own areas of oppressive domination. As with other false parallels, Farrell draws attention away from patriarchy to men as victims who deserve sympathy as much as women do. At the extreme, men’s woes are used to blame women for the price men pay for privilege, even though the price usually is exacted by other men. Men’s reluctance to open themselves fully to their inner emotional lives, for example, is based far more on fear of being vulnerable to other men or of being seen as insufficiently manly—not in control and controlled by others—than on worries about women. In similar ways, the competitive grind, insecurity, or fear of violence that many men experience is overwhelmingly in relation to other men, not women.

Men’s misery does deserve sympathy, but not if it means we ignore how men contribute to that misery, where it comes from, and what men get in exchange for it. It is all too easy to go from sympathy for men to forgetting that
patriarchy and male privilege even exist. Part of what makes it so easy is misunderstanding what privilege is, where it comes from, and how it is distributed. Many men argue, for example, that men are privileged only to the degree that they feel privileged. A key aspect of privilege, however, is to be unaware of it as privilege. In addition, even though men as a group are privileged in society, factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, and disability status affect how much privilege each man has access to and how he experiences it.

Privilege can take many forms, and its distribution among people in a society is a complicated process. Privilege can be something as simple as being heard and taken seriously when we say something, of being served promptly and courteously in a store or restaurant, or of being free to move around or express an opinion. It can take the form of wealth or power or having other people clean up after us and take care of our needs. In every case, what makes something privilege is the unequal way in which it is distributed and the effect it has of elevating some people over others. When men are listened to while women are ignored, for example, what would otherwise be a common courtesy of human conversation—taking people seriously enough to listen to them—is turned into a form of privilege.

How much privilege people receive depends on the combination of the social positions they occupy and how those positions are located and valued in society. The privilege that goes with wealth, for example, depends on other factors such as race, ethnicity, education, occupation, class background, and gender. Winning the lottery is not enough to send a working-class family into the upper class, just as no amount of professional training, occupational achievement, or income can erase the stigma of race attached to people of color in the United States. It doesn’t matter whether a family of color has enough money to live in white neighborhoods if real estate agents won’t show them houses in those neighborhoods. It does not matter whether women earn medical degrees if patients assume they are nurses and male colleagues treat them as second rate. And all the class or race privilege in the world will not protect women from being targeted for sexual and domestic violence.

In short, although we experience privilege as individuals, it is conferred on us by systems through a process that depends far more on social characteristics such as gender and race than on the personal characteristics that make us unique individuals. The distinction between the personal and the social is crucial, because it means that the only way to affect privilege is to change our social positions—for example, by going back to school, passing for white, or marrying someone from a higher class—or change social systems. We can change many of our social characteristics if we are willing to make the effort, but it’s much harder when it comes to gender and race. When such characteristics are a basis for privilege and oppression, then the usual routes to privilege such as education and occupation often are not enough. The only way out is to change the systems and social machinery through which privilege is created and distributed.
We can draw two points from this discussion that relate to the paradox of males being privileged under patriarchy but not necessarily feeling privileged. First, the fact that all men are not better off than all women does not mean male privilege does not exist. Racism undermines men of color’s access to male privilege, for example, by making it more difficult for them to earn a good living and claim the patriarchal position of male provider. In similar ways, the dynamics of class undermine access to male privilege for lower-class and working-class men. This doesn’t mean, however, that there is no such thing as male privilege or a patriarchal system that promotes and legitimates it on behalf of all men. Even the poorest men of color have access, for example, in the widespread social presumption that they should be able to assume the position of heads of families and realize the patriarchal ideal—just like white men.

In short, because male privilege is socially generated and distributed, it exists regardless of whether individual men know it or want it. When I go out at night for a walk alone, for example, I rarely think of how the mere fact of my being male grants me the freedom to move about with relatively little fear in a world that is far more threatening to women. I do not feel imprisoned in my own home after dark but instead enjoy a taken-for-granted sense of safety that is a form of male privilege.

The fact that I don’t consciously feel privileged isn’t because I am not privileged. In part it is because my privilege consists of otherwise unremarkable aspects of everyday life. Being able to take a late-night walk by myself simply because I feel like it or need a quart of milk is not the kind of thing that makes me feel privileged. But it is a privilege when a society is organized in ways that systematically deny it to some while allowing it for others. This is what Peggy McIntosh calls an “unearned advantage,” an entitlement that “none of us should have to earn.” Since privileged groups do not have to earn it, they don’t see it as a form of privilege.

Men’s blindness to male privilege is also based on the dynamics of how we compare ourselves to other people as a way to judge our relative standing. When we gauge how well off we are, we tend to look sideways and upward, not downward. In other words, if our neighbors, friends, and coworkers seem to be better off than we are, we take little comfort in noting that others are worse off, especially if the others do not resemble us in ways we consider important. So it doesn’t make people living in poverty in the United States feel better if you tell them that poverty is worse in India or Somalia, or if you tell white women bumping up against the corporate glass ceiling that working-class women are a lot worse off than they are.

Because of this, people usually don’t have to be reminded of their relative deprivation, but they may refuse to acknowledge even the possibility of their relative privilege. This is why a man in a corporation may feel unfairly disadvantaged when he’s passed over in favor of a woman, in spite of the fact that he’s surrounded by a patriarchal system in which the overwhelming majority of women are undervalued, underpaid, and locked into a small number of
dead-end occupations. It is also why people often object to Take Our Daughters to Work Day with cries of “What about the boys?” For a man passed over in favor of a woman, the path of least resistance is never to consider that if there had always been a level playing field for men and women, he might never have been in the running for that promotion he just missed. And male privilege is so normalized that it’s easy to miss the fact that without special attention to occupational possibilities and role models, girls are unlikely to get what boys can get simply by turning on the television, opening a textbook, or going to the movies: visible confirmation that people of their gender can and do perform all manner of occupations, especially those valued most highly in society. The real transgression of Take Our Daughters to Work Day is not that it actually deprives boys of something they cannot get elsewhere. It’s that it shifts attention away from boys—if only for a day—and onto girls and thereby challenges the patriarchal principle of male centeredness.

A second point about the paradox of male privilege is that many men believe that an oppressive system like patriarchy cannot exist unless the dominant group is happy, prosperous, and well adjusted. Oppression, it seems, is about pleasure and the good life for the dominant group that keeps “all the joys and privileges of the earth for themselves.” This would make an unhappy member of an oppressor group a contradiction in terms. Sam Keen argues that since “oppressors have greater access to comfort and health care, and thus live longer lives,” men’s shorter average life span proves that an oppressive relationship between men and women does not exist, except, perhaps, for the possibility that women oppress men.

But if we think for a moment about the kind of grinding daily suffering and injustice that oppression involves, the last thing we should expect is that participating in the oppression of more than half the human race—including some of the most important people in men’s lives—could ever be the basis for a thriving, pleasurable life. As Marilyn French writes:

Domination is an ill, not because of some abstract moral principle but because of a concrete moral fact: it makes people unhappy. Domination makes impossible the most essential and felicitous element in life: trusting mutual affection. . . . It is always true that those whom we control control us. Insofar as a sense of freedom, autonomy, is a basic human good, dominators, pressured and threatened on all sides, have less personal freedom than an itinerant laborer. . . . To keep a slave in a ditch, one must stay there oneself, or appoint an overseer to guarantee the slave’s obedience. But then it is necessary to appoint a supervisor who will make sure that the slave and the overseer do not collude . . . and so on. There is no place of safety for a dominator, ever; there is no security, peace, or ease. The urge to control others backfires; it cannot be satisfied and it entraps the controller. . . . The dominators of the world never have a day off.
It is apparent from this that systems do not merely create and distribute privilege. They also create and distribute risk and cost of various kinds, depending on how privilege is organized. Under European feudalism, for example, privilege was organized as a social system linking nobility, peasants, and landed estates, enforced ultimately through the elite’s monopoly over military hardware and expertise. For much of this period, the nobility maintained their monopoly by not allowing peasants to fight in wars (just as, though for somewhat different reasons, men have kept women out of combat). Noblemen paid a price for this, of course, because it meant their privilege required them to risk life and limb on behalf of their sovereigns, who granted them rights to land in exchange for military support. We do not know how the average life span of these warriors compared with that of men in peasant households, but it’s entirely possible that the privilege of noble birth was as life threatening for these men as it was life enhancing.24

For all the perils of warfare and chivalrous codes of ‘women and children first,’ in preindustrial patriarchies male survivability is generally enhanced at the expense of females—from excess female mortality in nineteenth-century Ireland25 to census reports of millions of missing female children in Asia, largely as a result of infanticide and selective neglect.26 Females may enjoy some sentimental attention, but this does not protect them from being neglected, starved, left to die as infants, or sold into various forms of servitude—including forced prostitution—when things get tight at home.27

In industrial societies, things are less extreme and male dominance does not include socially sanctioned life-and-death control over girls and women. Men do, however, control major social institutions such as the state, church, and the economy. That women in industrial societies typically live longer than men does not mean male dominance is a thing of the past but instead reflects the shifting costs of male dominance brought on by a changing world that uses different social mechanisms to generate and distribute privilege.

Systems of privilege are rarely neat and unambiguous, with dominant groups having everything good and oppressed groups having everything bad. More often, privilege is a mixed bag. This does not deny the reality of privilege, it merely complicates it. White privilege, for example, was an undeniable fact of life in the U.S. South before the Civil War, but the same economic system that produced white enslavement of blacks also produced a large class of poor whites, many of whom had little interest in fighting a bloody civil war to defend the slave property of wealthier whites.28 Although lower-class and working-class whites probably would have laughed at the idea that they were privileged, there is no doubt that they were regarded as superior to blacks and used the racist cultural presumption of white superiority as a way to compensate themselves for their economic and social deprivation, especially after slavery was abolished.29

For many reasons, the reality of life in systems of privilege is difficult for privileged groups to grasp, much less appreciate. The path of least resistance is
to deny and turn reality on its head with false parallels and misperceptions of what privilege is and how it works. There are so many ways to distort and obscure the existence of patriarchy that it’s a wonder we are able to see it at all. But as the next chapter shows, the prize for patriarchy’s boldest defense probably should go to the idea that the real problem isn’t patriarchy at all, but women.
It Must Be Women

When all else fails in defense of patriarchy, what could be more magical than turning the critical eye to women as the real problem? As the argument goes, women are the really powerful ones in social life, not men, because women are mothers, and, as every little boy knows, nothing compares with Mom.

The idea that motherhood makes women the more powerful and valued gender is often tossed off as a self-evident aside—“Well, of course, women are mothers, and that means they do what really counts.” Or it comes out in earnest, with resentment, anger, or outrage that men are seen as dominant when women are the powerful ones. Women, after all, bear and raise children who depend on them for their most profound needs and whose personalities are shaped through a lifelong dependency. Since everyone has a mother and every mother is a woman, it’s easy to go along with cultural images of maternal power that controls men by giving or withholding what they need.

In its mildest form, mother power supposedly produces envy in men who feel insignificant and left out of the life-giving process. Although men live in a male-identified and male-centered world, they may feel peripheral to the life around them. They may feel stuck on the sidelines of their children’s birth, left out as fathers, or unable to grasp the mysteries of human intimacy. Feeling left out touches feelings of powerlessness, in response to which men may project power onto women as the true insiders—selfish keepers of the keys to life. At its most extreme, the idea of mother power is used to explain patriarchy itself as a way for men to defend themselves against otherwise overwhelming odds: male dominance and all that goes with it are seen as just a troubled response to
women’s power, a way for men to establish themselves, hang on to their identities, and find some compensation for not having the real power.¹

Warren Farrell organized an entire book, *The Myth of Male Power*, around the idea that men are powerless and women have the potential to be corrupted by “absolute power.”² To make the argument work, however, he defines power only as “having control over one’s life,” a narrow definition that excludes the ‘power over’ that makes oppressive systems of privilege work. People of color, for example, are not oppressed simply in that they lack control over their own lives. The power that oppresses them is collective white control of economic, political, and other resources and both passive and active use of that control to privilege whites.

Controlling our personal lives certainly can be viewed as a form that power can take, as well as a consequence of having other kinds of power. But it isn’t the kind of power through which one group rules (the ‘-archy’ in ‘patriarchy’), exploits, or oppresses another. After all, the most powerful people in the world often complain that they don’t have lives of their own because they are under such scrutiny and have so many obligations to meet. But few would suggest that the power of presidents and prime ministers is therefore mythical and of no consequence.

Babies, Blood, and Power

It isn’t hard for men to see themselves as outsiders to the mystery of life and reproduction—scientists trying to tease nature’s secrets from her, male gynecologists and obstetricians trying to control the life process, tribal males excluded from women’s sacred mysteries, or modern Lamaze birth coaches trying to help without getting in the way. Biology supposedly renders men inadequate and estranged from reproduction, and stuck with second-best compensations such as building cities, composing symphonies, conquering nature, tuning the family car, or running the world. Women, however, are seen as biologically endowed with a core connection to life that men simply cannot have.³ From this perspective, women can appear as powerful creators of life—envied by men, feared, hopelessly loved, and held in awe by their children, and, until the advent of patriarchy some seven thousand years ago, firmly seated at the symbolic center of goddess-based religions.

In fact, men often report feeling left out of family life and other things close to the life process. As Sam Keen recounts his experience as a father, for example, the birth of his children left him feeling not only awestruck but profoundly inadequate:

In that hour, all my accomplishments—books I had written, works of will and imagination, small monuments to my immortality—shrank into insignificance. Like men since the beginning of time I wondered: What can I ever create that will equal the magnificence of this new life?
... She gives birth to meaning out of her body. Biology alone assures her of a destiny, of making a contribution to the ongoing drama of life. A man responds to her challenge by simulating creation, by making, fabricating, and inventing artifacts. But while she creates naturally and literally, he creates only artificially and metaphorically.4

Keen seems to see having babies as something that women do—like building a house or writing a book or sculpting a statue—rather than something that women experience, participate in, and become part of.5 Keen feels challenged to do something equally “magnificent” and feels inadequate and left out because he cannot. He seems to believe that biology is the root of the problem, but in fact it has more to do with how patriarchy encourages men to organize their lives around control. When control is at the center, it is hard to settle for merely being part of something or witnessing someone else’s powerful experience. Everything comes down to gaining or losing status awarded according to the ability to control and do.

Since she can do this thing and he cannot, patriarchy offers three paths of least resistance: he can devalue what she does, he can find a way to control it, or he can feel bad about himself. It is easiest to devalue her and what she does—by being indifferent to birth and babies—because devaluing women is a staple of patriarchal culture. Asserting control takes more effort: a man can become an obstetrician or a child care expert, or, more simply, come into the delivery room as a ‘coach.’ But the life process is far more than the mechanical process patriarchal medicine has turned it into. It is soul and body work, and it may be the lack of this that leaves many men feeling left out, diminished, and not up to the ‘challenge.’

When men feel left out, it’s not because they aren’t women. They feel left out because participating in patriarchy leaves them disconnected from their own sense of aliveness. We cannot practice a religion of control without alienating ourselves from everything we might seek to control. Inevitably, control becomes a standard for measuring our worth. As Keen puts it:

When men define themselves by power... they are able to feel their manhood only when they have the ability to make things happen, only when they can exert control over events, over themselves, over women. Therefore they are condemned to be forever measuring themselves by something exterior to themselves, by the effects of their actions, by how much change they can implement, how much novelty they can introduce into the slowly evolving history of nature. I did it; I made it happen; I exist.6

If men’s sense that they even exist depends on having control, then it takes very little to threaten their sense of identity and worth. Almost anything can trigger this—having to say, “I don’t know,” losing a job, not having an erection,
or having to stand by and watch someone else ‘have’ a baby. To avoid feeling threatened, men may devalue or ignore whatever does not support the feeling of being in control and focus instead on what does. It is no surprise that men typically seem less interested in the uncontrollable emotional and spiritual aspects of life and are drawn to whatever enhances feelings of control, from sports to computers to business to carpentry to orgasms to arguing about politics to getting into the Guinness World Records book for doing something longer or faster or more times than anyone else. It’s also no surprise that men so often place a premium on presenting themselves as independent and self-sufficient in relation to women: “In Andalusia, as in Cyprus or Algeria, a man is expected to spend his free time outdoors, backslapping and glad-handing. This world is the street, the bar, the fields—public places where a man is seen. He must not give the impression of being under the spell of the home, a clinger to wife or mother.”

This disconnected sense of standing alone and independent takes many forms. Men, for example, routinely diminish their connection to nature. They often ignore their own pain and mortality by pretending they are fine when they are not and acting as though they don’t need help when they do. They may put on a tough, stoic front and make a point of being able to ‘take it’ or do it on their own. Many live as though the body and its needs are repugnant (no smelly diapers for us), as though mind, spirit, and body can be separated into neat little compartments, as though the body were merely a machine, as though a life that denies or even punishes the body is superior to a fully embodied life. Nature, the body, and women become the other, objects of repressed desire and longing as well as fear—“a great swamp into which men slide when they forget to maintain control.”

For men to feel inadequate because they cannot feel in control around life’s great mysteries is silly, but it also makes perfect sense in a patriarchal worldview that encourages men to think they are supposed to control everything worth anything and to feel connected to things through controlling them. The problem is that feeling a deep sense of connection and aliveness—that we belong and matter within the mystery of life—is not about control. On the contrary, control poisons and contradicts the inherently unpredictable and messy nature of aliveness. When life is about status, control, and competition, then everything becomes an occasion to feel vindicated or challenged (even by a woman giving birth to a child the two of you have brought into the world), to feel superior or inferior, included or excluded, chosen or rejected, elevated or diminished, magnificent or insignificant. Any limitation can make men feel vulnerable by exposing them to someone else’s pursuit of competitive advantage or simply to the private worry that they don’t measure up.

As the father of two children, I know what it’s like to wonder a little enviously at women’s birth experience. But the fact that I cannot give birth does not make me inadequate, marginal, or insignificant. It does not mean I cannot connect my life to the blood mysteries of existence, a primal tie to my children...
that is rooted in flesh, cells, and nerves. It does not exclude me from the every-
day mingling of lives, from changing diapers to the mysteries of language and
talk to the struggle for a sense of who we are and what we’re doing here. If the
powerful feelings I have for these beings whom I never carried in my body do
not connect my life to something mysterious, awesome, powerful, and mag-
nificent, I don’t know what does.

This doesn’t make me powerful or magnificent, for the mystery is simply
there as mystery, and all I can do is choose how to participate in it without try-
ing to do it or control it or use it. Men who find this mystery unappealing, who
turn away from it in favor of competition, achievement, and ‘success,’ do so
not because their biology sticks them on the periphery of life. It is because they
are trapped on patriarchal paths that lead everywhere but into the mystery, the
awe, and the vulnerable, messy realities of life, the body, and ourselves.

The Hand That Rocks the Cradle

Arguments about mother power go beyond the ability to give birth, because in
the broadest sense, it takes many years to reproduce human beings with adult
capabilities. In Dorothy Dinnerstein’s analysis of the intense relationship be-
tween mothers and children, for example, she argues that infants experience
mother power as both overwhelming and ambivalent. It is overpowering be-
cause mothers have so much control over what happens, and it is ambivalent
because mothers can use their power to cause everything from the greatest
misery to the most ecstatic fulfillment of deepest needs. This supposedly pro-
duces a sense of love-hate in both boys and girls, who want and long for their
mothers on the one hand and are terrified of them on the other. The key part
of Dinnerstein’s argument is that the love-hate relationship translates into male
dominance and misogyny in men and into self-hatred and subservience in
women. Boys, she argues, will long for the mother’s power to meet their needs
but also fear an engulfing dependency on them. This produces the paradox of
patriarchal male possessiveness of women coupled with misogyny—wanting
women and hating them at the same time.

From this perspective, patriarchy can appear to be just a countervailing
force that provides shelter for both men and women from the despotism inher-
ent in women’s monopoly over child care. For boys, it requires them to both
separate from and reject their mothers and the womanhood and femininity
that mothers represent. And if boys grow up to be emotionally inexpressive,
dominant, misogynist, hostile toward women, aggressive, and obsessed with
control, it is seen as just a way to fend off this dangerously seductive mother
power. Patriarchy, then, is interpreted as an adaptive response to a system that
has made the mistake of leaving mothering exclusively to women, which also
implies that if mothering were left exclusively to men, the result would be an
oppressive matriarchy. Dinnerstein’s solution to all of this is a system of shared
parenting.
I’m all for shared parenting, but there are many problems with such arguments, primarily because they make patriarchy and male privilege invisible. In the broadest sense, they try to reduce complex social systems to simple and supposedly universal psychological mechanisms of child development, a kind of determinism that ignores most of what we know about history, cross-cultural variation, and how societies actually work.

Arguments like Dinnerstein’s also greatly exaggerate how powerful mothers really are. Connected to this are shaky assumptions about how infants experience mother power and about how this, in turn, carries over into adulthood. Just because mothers can withhold what infants need to survive, for example, doesn’t mean that infants experience mothers as omnipotent, threatening, or frightening. Adults might imagine what it would be like for them to be as helpless as infants, but, not being infants, they cannot substitute this kind of imagining for what infants actually feel. The idea that baby boys lie in their cribs worrying about what Mom might do with her power is more an adult fantasy than a credible account of infant experience. Even if infants felt these things on an unconscious level, Dinnerstein gives little credit to the human ability to reach some point where we stop relating to the world like infants.

As anyone who spends much time with children knows, mother power erodes rapidly as children move beyond infancy and start to realize their own sense of agency and power. There is a lot of truth in the old saying that children raise parents as much as they are raised by them, and anyone who has ever watched parents and children in supermarkets knows that it’s often unclear just who’s controlling whom. This shift in power can turn into a full-blown crisis when children hit adolescence and, regardless of gender, discover how easily they can drive parents to distraction by pushing the limits of adult control. If mothers have so much power to overwhelm children, they and their children certainly do not act like it most of the time. Instead, mothers are more likely to complain of doubt, worry, frustration, helplessness, bewilderment, and guilt because although they invariably feel responsible for how their children turn out, they know they are not in control of this process or its outcome.

An additional factor that limits mothers’ potential for power is the cultural principle that good mothers are self-sacrificing and love unconditionally. Bad mothers put their own interests first or openly embrace power, like that favorite terror of psychiatric mother lore, the domineering mother. Saddled with such heavy cultural baggage, women’s potential to overwhelm children turns out to be largely hollow, since women dare not use it if they value their social standing as good mothers.

This is why the misogynist stereotype of the wicked stepmother has so much cultural clout and why the public reacts with special horror when a mother abuses or kills her children—it serves to warn any mother of what might happen to her if she uses the potential power of mothers without the social constraints of motherhood. In typical patriarchal fashion, cultural images of mother power do less to empower women than to ensnare them in a
disempowering web of guilt and impossible expectations. The mother-power myth keeps women distracted and unclear about themselves and their abilities and makes it easier for husbands, fathers, physicians, therapists, child development experts, and other agents of patriarchal authority to control them.

The argument that patriarchy is a form of self-defense against mother power also fits badly with what we know about how families operate, especially historically. Patriarchy developed long before child care was defined as the core of women's existence, for example, and long before children and mothers were confined in small and isolated nuclear families. Even these patterns still do not describe most of today's nonindustrial patriarchies.

For most of human history—including all but the last few centuries of the patriarchal period—children grew up in extended families, cared for by men and women alike and integrated at an early age into productive life. Mothers had their hands full with work that included far more than child care. This is not the kind of world that would support formidable mother power, a world in which little boys would worry about how to get free of Mom. If anything, fathers are the ones who would inspire fearful childhood images of omnipotence, for under patriarchy, a father's moral and legal authority has been formidable—often including the right to abuse, kill, trade, lend, sell, or otherwise dispose of children or wives. Even Freud argued that the most fearsome figure in little boys' nightmares is not the omnipotent mama but the castrating papa. And when boys become men, the real power to unman them lies not with women but with other men.12

The myth of overwhelming maternal power seems to be invoked most often by white, middle-class men like Sam Keen. Thus, the myth is more about men's anxiety and insecurity than about the nature of child development. And in patriarchal systems, it is not women's power that makes men feel anxious and insecure. If a chronic worry dogs men's heels, it is the worry of losing status by not being able to measure up to patriarchal standards of manhood defined and enforced by other men, beginning with their fathers.

If mothers contribute to men's insecurity and anxiety, it is more likely because mothers are in a position to know how preposterous the patriarchal charade of masculine power and control really is. Mothers know firsthand how vulnerable and human people really are. After all, mothers are the ones who changed men's diapers when they were little and wiped their noses and quieted their night fears and watched them stumble their way through childhood, all of which gives them the unique potential to unmask the pretense on which patriarchal privilege rests.

But, again, even this power is not about women—for men's fear of being exposed as weak and not in control ultimately is related to other men who control and enforce images of manhood and the privilege that goes with them. It is easier and safer, however, to focus on mothers as the problem than to face the control-fear dynamic with other men that drives patriarchy. If men can see Mom as the core of their problems, then they won't have to look at themselves
or other men or what they are participating in. In the process, male privilege and solidarity stay hidden and unchallenged.

**Boys into Men, Girls into Women**

Ideas about how male identity develops are key to the argument that patriarchy is just a response to mother power. Supposedly, male identity is formed in quite different ways from female identity and with very different results for men, women, and societies. The relationship between sons and mothers supposedly compels boys to reject their mothers and ‘women’s ways’ in order to take on a socially acceptable male identity.

As this version of child development goes, both boys and girls experience a sense of closeness with their mothers that is organized around safety, pleasure, and meeting emotional and physical needs. Each boy or girl needs to develop a stable gender identity—“the simple emotional, cognitive, and bodily grounded conviction of being male or female and to being able to take this conviction for granted as a comfortable and desirable reality.”

Body, mind, and feeling come together to form a stable sense of who the individual is and how that identity fits in an acceptable way into the larger world.

As the argument goes, a girl can achieve this simply by staying with her mother and modeling herself after her, but a boy must distinguish himself from his mother by separating and building a masculine identity that clearly marks him as ‘not mother.’ Boys have to shape their broad human potential to fit a narrow masculine mold—to devalue emotional attachment, tenderness, vulnerability, and nurturing. They must objectify themselves and others, organize their lives around issues of control, dominance, and competition, and develop their potential for aggression.

This is hard and sometimes risky work, and, not being fools, boys would have good reason to hang on to what they have with their mothers, touching deep feelings, body memories, and enduring needs. But ‘manly virtues’ such as control, reason, and aggression are so highly valued in a patriarchal society that powerful rewards and punishments are used to motivate boys to walk the path to patriarchal manhood. According to this view, the core inducement is male bonding around male privilege, reinforced by various kinds of coercion, from schoolyard teasing to the kidnapping and ritual mutilation practiced in some tribal societies. In other words, boys will get the pleasure and privilege of being one of the guys and avoid the ostracism and punishment of *not* being one of the guys.

The first piece of this argument suggests that patriarchal manhood is a necessary cultural creation that men must achieve and preserve throughout their lives. A man cannot become a man simply by going through puberty and coming out looking like one. He has to *do* something, go out of his way to *be*come something, to be counted as a man among men. On the face of it, this makes good sociological sense, since just about everything that human beings
are and do is shaped by culture in one way or another. Behind this view of manhood, however, lies a false assumption about women and womanhood that undoes the whole argument.

By definition, patriarchal manhood is a negation of womanhood. Thus, if manhood is special because it has to be achieved and held through effort and courage, then womanhood must not be these things. Otherwise there would be no reason to elevate and privilege manhood above womanhood. Such an assumption, however, forces us to view womanhood as something other than a socially constructed status that women must achieve through effort, training, and sacrifice. It reduces womanhood to a natural result of a girl’s physical maturation into an adult female. All she has to do is wait passively for puberty and then womanhood will happen all by itself.

By comparison, becoming a man is portrayed as the stuff of great and noble drama, struggle, and heroism, like the stirring lines of Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If—,” whose long list of virtues—from “keep[ing] your head when all about you are losing theirs” to dreaming great dreams, living in moderation, enduring defeat and starting all over again, taking risks, working hard, and not giving up—leads inevitably to the patriarchal payoff:

\[
\text{Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,} \\
\text{And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!}\]

“If—” made quite an impression on me when I was a boy, judging from how familiar its verses are to me now. How could it not, holding out manhood as a prize more valued than “the Earth and everything that’s in it”? And to win it, all I had to do was be what might be described as a healthy, fully functioning adult who knew how to live with integrity and take responsibility—not easy by any means but a reasonable aspiration.

But there was one more little requirement, and that was that I be a boy to begin with. I don’t think it ever occurred to me that “If—” was about me, my brother, or my father but not about my sister or my mother or the girl across town I had a crush on. As I read “If—” now, however, I realize that it could not possibly be about girls turning into women (“Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it . . .!”), even though there is nothing particularly male or female in its list of qualities and virtues. In patriarchy, “If—” cannot end with a woman, because womanhood cannot command such reverence or rewards without encroaching on male privilege, which it is not allowed to do. “If—” could not end that way because womanhood is not considered an accomplishment. It just happens if a girl waits long enough.

But the reality of girls’ and women’s lives is not this simple. If we consider what a woman has to be and do in order to be socially acceptable, there is clearly a lot more going on than growing into biological womanhood. In spite of the fact that she’s a full human being, a woman is expected to content herself with being something less than half of that. She is expected to allow men to see
themselves as superior to her; to subordinate her needs and interests to his; to
accept lesser occupations, slower promotions, lower pay, and higher standards;
to shape and mute her intelligence to avoid threatening men’s egos; to endure
being ignored, unheard, and invisible because she is a woman in a man’s world;
to do the work that he will not because it is beneath his status as a man. She is
expected to accommodate herself to often impossible patriarchal standards of
beauty, an accommodation that often involves relating to her own body as an
enemy or a failure, and molding, squeezing, and even starving herself to satisfy
the male gaze. And she has to do all of this on top of being an adult in her fam-
ily and community, holding up at least half the world with her labor, keeping
herself and her family together whether her husband is there or not, raising
children, and maintaining ties with extended kin.

None of this comes naturally to any girl simply by physically maturing into
a woman. The extent of her obligations requires her to deny, mask, and distort
the fullness of who she really is or could be. The only work that hinges on bio-
logical femaleness is reproduction, but this has never been the central defining
element of women’s daily lives except perhaps in the recent sentimental patriar-
chal mythology of Western industrialized societies, and even then primarily in
the white middle class. In short, there is nothing natural or inevitable about the social transfor-
mation from girlhood to womanhood. It requires effort, training, commitment,
and a certain amount of coercion, as a girl who does not measure up discovers
all too quickly when boys don’t want to have anything to do with her. It is cer-
tainly true that being a woman is culturally devalued in patriarchal societies,
but that does not mean that becoming a woman is not a social process orga-
nized around cultural ideas about womanhood. Learning to fit into a subor-
dinate, devalued status is no more natural and no less a matter of training and
sacrifice than is learning how to claim and maintain privilege. The only reason
patriarchal culture considers adult standing an achievement among males is
precisely that it is associated with privilege, while women’s transition is not.
The other side of manhood as achievement is male privilege as entitlement.

The second piece of the argument connecting male development to patri-
archy is the idea that boys must reject their mothers. At least in Western socie-
ties, there is a consensus that healthy development requires children to separate
and differentiate from parents to some degree. As applied to gender, however,
this principle picks up the added assumption that boys must develop differ-
ently from girls by rejecting their mothers and femininity. In the romantic,
mythological view of some male writers, older men must take boys—forcibly,
if necessary—and introduce them to manly ways that are incompatible with
‘women’s ways.’ Male initiation often includes painful and frightening rites
of passage and an overt rejection of the once-cherished female figure and her
place in boys’ lives.

The presumed goal of this is to ensure appropriate male development and
the survival of society as a whole. But the process, according to David Gilmore’s
cross-cultural study of masculinity in tribal societies, is to prevent boys from giving in to “the temptation to drown in the arms of an omnipotent woman, to withdraw into a puerile cocoon of pleasure and safety.” Boys, he tells us, must be forced to renounce their mothers and join the company of men in order to discharge their responsibility to protect and provide for their families. Otherwise they would be drawn irresistibly to the passive, pleasure-oriented world of women, hanging around and having a good time while society went to hell around them, with women leading the way.

Even if we accept the idea that psychological separation from parents is necessary for healthy development, it is quite a leap from that to the assumption that boys must reject their mothers and women in general as ‘other.’ It is an assumption that rests on a grossly distorted view of women and their role in social life. It also ignores the fact that whether something is regarded as necessary depends almost entirely on its social context. When patriarchy is the context, the rejection of mothers may be necessary only to the extent that it helps perpetuate a patriarchal system by enabling boys and men to assume their privileged position in it.

The assumption that boys will be passive and inactive if they do not reject their mothers depends on the myth that the world of women is organized around passivity and inactivity. It is hard to imagine more inappropriate terms to describe the historical and cross-cultural reality of women’s lives and their enormous and irreplaceable contributions to the survival and thriving of families, communities, and societies. The only area where inactive passivity is ever encouraged in women is in submitting to husbands and fathers, and this is an important clue to what the rejection of mothers and women is really about.

The worry behind breaking boys’ connections with their mothers is not that men will not work, contribute to their families, or ensure their children’s safety and survival. After all, if men joined the world of most women, they would be in for a lifetime of hard work and sacrifice, including risking their lives to protect home and children. The real worry is that men will not feel solidarity with other men and will not assume their superior position in relation to women, and will thereby undermine male privilege and patriarchal masculine identity. The real worry is that a boy who values and retains a deep connection with his mother evokes disturbing questions about a gender system that elevates and privileges male over female, including sons over mothers. The real worry is that a boy who does not reject his mother will continue to value aspects of his humanity that do not fit with core patriarchy values and relations. Only in a patriarchal context does it make sense to require boys to reject their mothers and, by extension, all women as a way to form a stable masculine identity and promote male solidarity.

Ironically, boys are encouraged to separate from their mothers in a way almost guaranteed to keep them connected to their mothers and women in general in neurotic, conflicted relationships. To be real men, they are expected to reject their mothers and women and repress anything that seems remotely
feminine. But this does not mean ‘feminine’ aspects of themselves no longer exist or that they can live full lives by pretending they do not. Instead, the more that men reject and devalue their mothers and the qualities that patriarchal culture associates with women, the more limited their inner and outer lives become. It precludes them from knowing true intimacy with other people, estranges them from their own feelings and the bodies through which feelings are felt, and denies them powerful inner resources for coping with stress, fear, and loss.

On some level, many men know what they are missing and feel envy and anger and longing for what they do not have. They may fear women’s anger because they need women to compensate them for what they’ve lost, to refrain from unmasking men’s illusions of control, and to leave male privilege unchallenged. In this social climate, it’s no surprise to find theories of male development that cast mothers as awesome figures in relation to adult men imagining themselves to be helpless, vulnerable infants again in a world organized around oppressive uses of power.

In a nonpatriarchal world, boys would become men without having to reject their mothers or women. They would embrace the fact that where they came from and who they are have as much to do with their mothers as with their fathers. But patriarchy makes this all but impossible by wrapping masculine identity in male privilege and measuring men’s lives by control and success at not being like women. Men cannot both take their place as the dominant gender and honor and develop those aspects of themselves most associated with women and with their childhood connection to them. That so many men feel confused, incomplete, and resentful is inevitable under such conditions, as is the hope and belief that women can somehow make it better.

The problem and its solution, however, lie primarily in men’s relations with other men, and in the patriarchal order through which they define themselves and live. Many men see themselves as selling out their souls in response to women’s power to give or withhold, to approve or disapprove. The truth, however, is that the successful achievement of patriarchal manhood requires boys to give up a portion of their humanity—primarily at the urging of fathers and male teachers, coaches, and peers, not to mention a culture drenched in masculine mythology. If they want it back, they will not find it in women but in themselves.

Kings, Queens, and Wild Men

One of the most popular versions of the mother-power myth is Robert Bly’s tale of Iron John, a mythic Wild Man who represents the “true masculine”—the creative, vibrant, passionate potential inherent in every man. Bly, a poet who founded the mythopoetic men’s movement in the 1980s, uses the tale of Iron John as a way to present an analysis of how gender operates in the world, especially in relation to men. According to Bly, the Wild Man was destroyed
by the grinding forces of industrialization and, most important, by alienation between older and younger men, especially fathers and sons. But the relationship between sons and mothers is never far from the center of the story.

The hairy Wild Man is discovered in a lake and locked in a cage by the townspeople. The King gives the key to the Queen, who places it beneath her pillow, an act of great significance when we consider that the Wild Man represents the true masculine nature of both the King and the young prince. The son wants to free the Wild Man but is certain the Queen will not give him the key and is reluctant to steal it.

Why does the Queen have the key? Bly offers two different explanations, both of which ignore the fact that it was the King who gave the key to the Queen for reasons that Bly does not relate.

He begins by observing that it is a mother’s job to civilize her son “and so it is natural for her to keep the key.” Over the last century or so this may have been somewhat true of European and U.S. cultures, but historically this kind of role for mothers has been the exception, not the rule that Bly’s use of the word ‘natural’ implies. Women generally have not been granted moral authority in patriarchal societies, even as mothers. On the contrary, fathers have been the ones with the moral authority to socialize children, since women were widely assumed to have an inherently weak and inferior moral nature and therefore to be unsuited to such vital work.

Bly mentions the interesting question of how the Wild Man threatens larger social interests, but he does not ask what social interests these are. Given that every kingdom ever known has been, by definition, patriarchal, the interests of society cannot help but reflect masculine control and male privilege. Rather than ask how patriarchy affects the father’s behavior and the repression of the Wild Man, Bly moves to his second explanation for the Queen having the key to the Wild Man’s—and hence her son’s—freedom. It is simply part of a condescending, contemptuous effort to possess her son:

Attacking the mother, confronting her, shouting at her, ... probably does not accomplish much—she may just smile and talk to you with her elbow on the pillow. . . .

“I want to let the Wild Man out!”
“Come over and give Mommy a kiss.”

Mothers are intuitively aware of what would happen if he got the key: they would lose their boys. The possessiveness that mothers typically exercise on sons . . . can never be underestimated.

In just a few paragraphs, Bly shifts the power away from the King, who authorized the Wild Man’s imprisonment and who gave the Queen responsibility for keeping the key to his cage. Now the problem is the mother and her unexplained—but “never to be underestimated”—need to possess her son’s life, to imprison him and deny him his own essence. The father and his motives,
interests, and power are all invisible. Bly tells us that few mothers dream of their sons growing up to be Wild Men but does not speculate about what fathers dream. And as fathers become invisible, so too does patriarchy as a powerful force shaping both the story and what Bly makes of it.

Bly, for example, says nothing about how a patriarchal world organized around the oppression of women might encourage mothers to hang on to sons in various ways, including unhealthy ones. Instead, he presents possessive maternal tendencies as universal and inherent in the relationship between mothers and sons. “That’s just the way mothers are,” he remarked in one of his workshops for men.23

With fathers, however, Bly takes a very different approach, asserting that they routinely neglect and abandon their sons, not because that is the way fathers are, but because fathers are victimized by social forces that separate them from their families. The implication is clear that men can be good fathers under the right social conditions, to which Bly longs to return. Mothers, however, are by nature selfish, possessive, and bent on denying their sons the passion and fullness of their own lives—provided, of course, that Dad hands over the key.

Given what patriarchy does to men, it should not surprise us that mothers often have powerful and ambivalent feelings about giving their sons up to it. It is a staple of mother love to want children to fit in and to anguish over sons coming home from school after being taunted, ostracized, or beaten up for not being accepted by other boys. As much as mothers want their sons to become socially acceptable men, however, their work as mothers makes it difficult to live with the consequences.

As Sara Ruddick argues in her book Maternal Thinking, the kind of work we do affects how we think, and taking care of children is work.24 Maternal work is so rooted in nurturing and so close to the raw basics of human need and vulnerability that you cannot do it without appreciating what it takes to make a human life and what pain and suffering really amount to in human experience. This gives mothers powerful incentives to notice the destructive potential of patriarchal masculinity and to resist it. It was Argentinean mothers—not fathers—who organized protests demanding accountability for the thousands of sons and daughters who had been ‘disappeared’ at the hands of the military. There is a Mother’s March for Peace and a Mothers Against Drunk Driving and a Women in Black but nothing comparable for fathers. Mothers support their sons’ entry into patriarchal manhood because they want them to fit in and succeed, even though sons will suffer at the hands of patriarchy no matter what mothers do. And that suffering—and the root of the problem of turning boys into men—is not inflicted primarily by women. It comes from men and boys acting on core patriarchal values and building and defending personal identities and an entire world based on them.

It also should not surprise us that mothers do not welcome their sons’ rejection of women and the breaking of a powerful emotional bond that patriar-
chal culture dismisses as unworthy and inferior. A mother’s ambivalence about letting go of her son reflects a classic double bind. If she lets him go, she gives him up to patriarchal manhood, aids and abets her own oppression, and risks being blamed for it in the end. If she hangs on, she is accused of being a bad, selfish, devouring mother who makes her son weak and neurotic.  

The root of the problem does not lie with mothers. But blaming fathers is not the answer, either. At its core, patriarchy is not about villains and victims, although there is no shortage of either. It is about paths of least resistance that encourage mothers and fathers to participate on different and highly unequal terms in a powerful process that shapes their own lives and the lives of their daughters and sons. And it is about how we choose to live in relation to those paths and how we might learn to choose differently.

Who’s Afraid of the Wild Man?

If Bly’s story is telling us that the Wild Man is caged to safeguard the interests of civilization, then we have to ask whose interests are most closely associated with what we call ‘civilization.’ Since civilization as we know it is patriarchal, safeguarding the interests of civilization has less to do with queens and mothers than with kings and fathers and the patriarchal system that promotes male privilege. Why, however, should an archetypal figure of manhood like the Wild Man threaten a system dominated by, identified with, and centered on men?

A clue can be found in a closer look at the Wild Man himself, for although Bly makes much of the Wild Man’s connection to manhood, ironically, the Wild Man has a deeper connection to what is culturally associated with women. He is a symbolic link to life energy, the Earth, pleasure, and the body, all of which are tied to cultural images of womanhood, especially in industrial patriarchies.

Early in the story of Iron John, for example, Bly notes that as the boy leaves for the forest, riding on the Wild Man’s shoulders, “he has to overcome, at least for the moment, his fear of wildness, irrationality, hairiness, intuition, emotion, the body, and nature.” In other words, the Wild Man represents what is most difficult for humans to control, which from a patriarchal perspective looks more female than male.

The most uncontrollable force in human life is nature, which patriarchal culture routinely characterizes as female. Women are regarded as irrational beings ruled by emotion, intuition, and the rhythms, needs, and desires of the body. In patriarchal culture, truly dangerous wildness is female, for it is female wildness that threatens male privilege.

This is why so much energy is expended trying to control girls and women. It is why sexually active girls are more likely to be institutionalized as incorrigible than are sexually active boys. It is why openly sexual women are often regarded by men as asking for men to assert control by raping them. It is why the Wild Woman is so often portrayed as a nymphomaniac whose wildness is
not true wildness at all but a compulsion that winds up primarily serving men’s sexual fantasies. It is why ‘a good fuck’ is the standard patriarchal ‘cure’ for women whose ‘condition’ is the wildness of female autonomy and power and a hairy, carnal juiciness that defies male control.

Ultimately, the Wild Man symbolizes defiance of the patriarchal obsession with control. Since patriarchy makes control a manhood game, men and not women are the ones most threatened by the Wild Man. As Bly tells us, the persecution of the Wild Man has been going on for centuries, but he does not mention that the power behind this always has been male-dominated institutions such as the church and state. The Wild Man is imprisoned and murdered by a patriarchal system whose core values contradict everything he represents. The Grand Inquisitor is never a woman, because women cannot be allowed such power. This is especially so when power is combined with wildness, which is why Bly’s story is about the Wild Man and not the Wild Woman.

To control the passionate Wild Woman and what she represents, patriarchy makes her invisible or defines her as pathological or evil, to be co-opted, cured, exorcised, tortured, burned, murdered, raped, tamed, or otherwise transformed. In the Middle Ages she was burned as a witch. In ancient China her feet were bound and crippled in the name of beauty. Today her Western counterpart is poured into a tight dress and jacked up onto high heels so she can barely move, much less run. In nineteenth-century Europe and the United States she was treated with ‘rest cures’ and clitoridectomies to curb ‘excessive’ female pleasure and desire. In many parts of Africa and the Middle East her genitals are mutilated and sewn up. Around the world she is sold and treated as marital and other sexual property. And advertising routinely exploits her sexuality to sell everything from spark plugs to alcohol. Her life is medicalized to justify intervention from patriarchal medical institutions—from weight loss to mood control to PMS, menopause, and childbirth. Murdering the Wild Woman draws on a rich cultural legacy that defines women as sexually passive and subservient in relation to men, that dismisses clitoral orgasms as immature and female physiology as pathological, that still labels women who avoid sex with men as ‘frigid,’ and that defines women’s sexuality primarily in terms of its appeal and accessibility to men. The particulars change, but the overall result remains the same.

Neither King nor Queen in Bly’s story has the power to free the Wild Woman/Man, but patriarchy places the King a lot closer than the Queen to the heart of what keeps him locked up. As Miriam Johnson argues in *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives*, the real power in turning boys into men comes from fathers, male peers, and a culture that provides few alternatives to male dominance, patriarchal manhood, and the rejection of mothers and women.

Research shows, for example, that U.S. fathers are far more concerned than mothers about children behaving in culturally defined gender-appropriate ways. It also shows that if sexual orientation is linked to social factors, it has more to do with how children relate to fathers than to mothers. Outside the
family, boys soon learn to fear the potential violence and ostracism other boys use to establish masculine identities and compete for status in the male hierarchy. Boys who do not go along with rejecting all things female are easy targets for male aggression.

Boys do not devalue their mothers and women in response to some overwhelming mother power that imprisons the Wild Man in every male. There is nothing inherent in child development that requires boys to reject their mothers in order to find themselves as men. It does not take much for a boy to see how he resembles his father or to want to be like him. It does take some doing, however, to get a boy to deny and devalue how he resembles his mother, to reject his tie with her, to deny his own human needs, and to embrace dominance and control as guiding values in his life.

The struggle for boys is to respond to a patriarchal ultimatum: either you identify with and join men as a dominant group defined by rejecting women and privileged by promoting solidarity and competitive abuse among men, or you struggle to live at the margins of male society, excluded or excluding yourself, sexually suspect, distrusted if not persecuted by other men, and yet not fully acceptable to the company of women. Of course, it is not all one or the other, and many men wind up somewhere between the two extremes. But the tension between these two polarities is powerful, and every boy and every man must come to terms with it in his own way. And every woman must come to terms with the consequences of how men do that.

When boys reject their mothers as a requirement to join the patriarchal order, they break a connection to a profoundly important human being in their lives. But they also damage their own internal erotic and life-giving sense of humanity, which, under patriarchy, they experience first and most powerfully through the mother-son relationship. The damage often takes the form of a hole in men’s being, which they will try to fill. But as long as they are stuck in the denial that brought them to patriarchal manhood in the first place, the hole will remain.

Patriarchy discourages other men from making up the difference, for they are all in the same boat. Men have reason to fear letting other men even know they feel something lacking in themselves, and rarely do they dare to identify, much less question, the patriarchal basis of what is going on. And so, ironically, men often turn to women and feel daunted by what can seem to be women’s power to save them or not. But this often amounts to handing over responsibility for men’s dilemma to women and holding them accountable for what men lack and for what men do with their feelings about it.

What’s Wrong with Dad?

The great power falsely attributed to women is often associated with men feeling empty, devalued, dependent, excluded, or simply not good enough. Sam Keen, for example, portrays women as holding tremendous power to make
men feel good or bad about themselves, intimidating men with their anger, and evoking sometimes frantic efforts to satisfy women in exchange for approval, affection, and sex. When men talk about gender, they often report feeling vulnerable to women—feminist women in particular—who can withhold what men need, make men feel bad, and undermine masculinity by refusing to play their complementary role as ‘real’ women.

New men’s movement writers such as Keen and Bly make an issue of men not feeling very good about themselves or their lives. They attribute most of this to relationships with women and their mysterious powers. As Keen puts it:

The average man spends a lifetime denying, defending against, trying to control, and reacting to the power of woman. . . . We have invested so much of our identity, committed so much of our energy, and squandered so much of our power in trying to control, avoid, conquer, or demean women because we are so vulnerable to their mysterious power over us. Like sandy atolls in a monsoon-swept ocean, the male psyche is in continual danger of being inundated by the feminine sea. And this fragility is not psychological, not neurotic, not a symptom of abnormality, but is an ontological fact rooted in our being.³⁰

Many men probably do feel bad about their lives, but we cannot make sense of this by ignoring the patriarchal context that shapes those lives. If men feel bad about themselves in relation to women, it is not because of who women are, what they have, or how they behave. This pervasive pattern of feeling is rooted in men's participation in patriarchy that shapes who they are, what they lack, and the resources patriarchy provides for dealing with it. As with other aspects of patriarchal societies, the price men pay for male privilege has more to do with their relationships with other men and the social institutions that men control than it does with women. It is easier and safer to project power and responsibility onto women, but, like so many paths of least resistance, it takes us away from the truth.

Consider, for example, one of Bly’s favorite themes, the lack of close, supportive relationships between young males and older men. On the surface, he seems to attribute this to industrialization, but it does not take long to realize that he thinks women are the real problem. The desire to control sons, he tells us, is only the tip of the maternal-possessiveness iceberg. To hang on to her son, a mother will do almost anything. She will tear the father down to compete for the son’s affection, draw her son into a conspiracy to oust the father from the family’s emotional circle, and abandon the father to face alone the ravages of an alienated industrial society. In Bly’s version of history, “Those sensitive mothers who prefer[red] white curtains and an elevated life” undermined the father’s position in the family by playing a key role in the cultural devaluing of physical labor so that fathers would abandon manual occupations and take their place in alienated offices.³¹ And with fathers absent much of the time,
sons can only experience their fathers through their mothers’ eyes, which, Bly claims, always see the father’s masculinity in negative, disparaging terms. Instead of clear male models from which to derive a stable sense of himself as a man, the son is left with a negative, trashed image promoted by his mother.

The image of absent fathers and their sons struggling to sort out manhood is a powerful one, but Bly’s understanding of where all this comes from is rooted more in myth and misogyny than in the facts of history and family life. His explanation of what carried fathers away from both manual labor and their families completely ignores industrial capitalism and the emerging class system that turned manual labor into a commodity and subordinated and demeaned the men and women who performed it. He also ignores the fact that most women’s domestic work is overwhelmingly manual and anything but genteel. It is women, after all, who clean most people’s houses, who learn to take feces, urine, garbage, dirt, roaches, rats, and vomit in their stride. This is not true of women whose class position enables them to hire other women to do such work for them, but to attribute to most women some general cultural devaluing of physical labor and those who do it does not fit the facts of women’s lives. If anything, the working-class women Bly refers to were looking for a way out of the crushing class oppression of workers and their families and, perhaps, the common practice of husbands violently venting their misery on wives and children.

Even more difficult to fathom is Bly’s argument that wives and mothers—the people most closely associated with nurturing, empathy, softness, self-sacrifice, and emotional support—are systematically trashing, undermining, and shutting out their husbands, their life partners in creating families. These are the same women who are so reluctant to give up on marriages with alcoholic or abusive husbands and who, more often than not, are roundly criticized for staying and enduring it all long after they should have walked out and saved themselves.

Undoubtedly, many men feel devalued and diminished as fathers, but the reason is not that wives and mothers, for mysterious feminine reasons, tear them down. And the problem is not simply industrial capitalism, which cannot be invoked out of thin air as if it has nothing to do with patriarchy and its core values. The competition that patriarchy encourages among men positions most men in relation to industrial capitalism as workers or managers, and this profoundly affects how men feel about themselves. Industrial capitalism, for example, does not explain men’s absence from family life. Millions of women, after all, work at full-time jobs and then go home to cook supper, help their children with homework, clean house, pay the bills, and tuck the children into bed. A substantial percentage of working-class and lower-class women of color in the United States have always done this kind of double duty, often by taking care of white people’s houses and children by day and their own by night.32

If men are absent from family life, it is because patriarchy makes that choice a path of least resistance that men who identify with patriarchal values
find hard to resist. Their choice is not an easy one, just as such choices are difficult for women, but they are choices nonetheless. This does not mean that men are to blame for what has become of fatherhood in industrial capitalist patriarchies, for they did not create the paths of least resistance that shape their lives. But if they want better paths to follow, they will have to do something to acknowledge and resist existing paths and create and support new ones.

Men who feel devalued and powerless as fathers are often caught up in patriarchal notions of what fatherhood is about. In patriarchal terms, fatherhood was once a linchpin of male privilege because fathers were the heads of families and families were the primary owners of land and producers of wealth. When industrial capitalism transformed economic life, both land and families lost much of their economic and political significance, which took away much of fatherhood’s appeal as a way to enhance status and control. As the family shrunk in social importance to an intimate group organized around meeting personal needs, reasons for men’s ambivalence grew. What remains of fatherhood is often a romanticized way to feel special, emotionally fulfilled, and looked up to and admired by one’s children, or to share in tender yet fleeting moments of play and special family occasions.

Regardless of which era of fatherhood we look at, patriarchy shapes it to overlook the daily job of taking care of children, of cleaning up, watching, soothing, worrying, disciplining, transporting here and there, being constantly on call, and generally keeping track of who is where and doing what. Patriarchal fatherhood overlooks such domestic work because domestic work is culturally devalued labor that men typically regard as beneath them because it is associated with women and does nothing to enhance or preserve manhood. Cleaning and ongoing child care are kinds of work that most men simply will not do except under exceptional circumstances, and even those who do such work on a more regular basis typically see themselves as doing wives a favor. When it comes to shunning the dirty domestic work of the world, no one holds a candle to men in patriarchal societies, regardless of their social class.

When mothers complain about fathers, it is not to tear them down in some competition for sons’ loyalty and affection. More likely it is because they resent the division of labor that works against women whether or not they work outside the home, that leaves to them most of the domestic work and denigrates that work at the same time.

If men feel bad about their lives, it is not because women tear them down or do not build them up. The answer lies primarily among and within men and their participation in patriarchy. This does not mean that individual women do not behave in ways that undermine men or make them feel bad. But this cannot explain the widespread patterns of disaffection and unhappiness that Bly, Keen, and others see among men. At most, what goes on between women and men is only symptomatic of the deeper contradictions and tensions created by life in patriarchy. If men project great power onto women, feel rejected,
denied, and shut out by them, it is because men’s participation in patriarchy sets them up to feel powerless, vulnerable, and inadequate and yet to deny they feel that way. The path of least resistance is to cut themselves off from the core of human life, making it difficult to get what they need from anyone, and to project all of that onto women rather than deal with the reality of patriarchy and the role men play in it.

Paradoxes of Power

Men’s frequent complaints about their lives often reflect the patriarchal paradox that organizing yourself around control, power, and privilege usually makes you feel worse rather than better. The paradox can produce surprising consequences, such as men feeling relatively powerless or envying women’s position in society even though they are not about to assume it for themselves. There really is no safe place in oppressive systems of privilege, and the lack of safety can, paradoxically, make dominant groups feel powerless, frightened, vulnerable, dependent, and even worse off than those they dominate.

Many men, for example, complain of feeling less in charge of their lives than women feel. Typically, men project such feelings outward and downward: men feel this way because women have more power than men do, because they make men feel bad about themselves, because they cut men down. In reality, men are set up to feel vulnerable, powerless, and bad about their lives in two ways: by cutting themselves off from other people and their own sense of humanity, and by depending on women to go along with male privilege, to prop up men’s egos, and to compensate men for what male privilege costs them as human beings.

Many men feel powerless, for example, not because women are so powerful but because men follow the patriarchal path of organizing their lives around control. This not only sets men up to expect absurd levels of control in their own lives but deeply affects how they experience others and themselves. The more that men pursue control and judge themselves by their success at it, the more they experience everyone and everything outside themselves as objects. This happens in part because one way to justify control over others is to see them as ‘less than’—as adults often see children or the elderly as inferior, incomplete, or damaged, as employers often see workers, or as teachers may see students. Unlike full-blown people, objects do not have wills or complex inner lives and needs that must be taken into account. They can be handled, used, or dealt with as their betters see fit. This provides a rationale for controlling others: that male superiority gives men the right, if not the obligation, to control women, or controlling women is for their own good or reflects the natural order of things. ‘To husband’ is an active verb that takes an object that the subject manages “with prudent economy” (according to the dictionary), whether it be livestock, money, or wives.
To objectify people is to strip them of their essential character, the ‘subjectness’ of experience, wants, needs, and desires. This is why we feel diminished by paternalistic treatment, even when it’s supposedly for our own good. This is a core element of all dominant-subordinate relationships, the arrogant freedom to substitute our own experience for that of the other, to assume their experience is not important enough to consider, that they need or want only what we let them have, that we are all that really matters. In this way, we see them as estranged from us (rather than us from them or all of us from one another), as ‘other,’ as objects in relation to us as subjects. This is why it is commonly assumed that animals cannot feel pain or terror, or that wartime enemies do not value human life as ‘we’ do.

Stripping people of their ‘subjectness,’ however, also does something to the objectifiers by making it difficult to relate to others. When we objectify, we close ourselves not only to who the others really are but to how they experience us. In this way, objectification disconnects us both from others and from ourselves. The human self is highly relational in the sense that who we think we are and how we experience ourselves cannot be separated from how other people mirror and treat us. The more invested we are in controlling them, however, the less reason there is to care about how they see us and the more limited our own sense of self becomes. This is one reason why those most obsessed with control are so often flat and dull figures, the Eichmanns, the lifeless bureaucrats, the schoolyard bullies.

The patriarchal obsession with control also diminishes men’s lives when they turn it on themselves as objects of control, with self-control as a hallmark of manhood. Instead of experiencing emotion (except for anger and rage) as a simple aspect of who they are, for example, men are encouraged to see it as something to control, a feminine side split off from the rest of themselves, threatening to become a loose cannon that threatens their stability and status. When my mother died, for example, I went through a period of grieving that made me feel like crying much of the time, whether I was driving down the road or turning the corner in a supermarket aisle. When people asked me how I was, I often told them—sad, in grief, missing my mother, struggling to grasp the reality that death really meant she was gone utterly and forever, that I was now someone in the world without a mother.

In mainstream patriarchal culture, this kind of emotional openness often makes men feel uncomfortable because the line separating it from seeming out of control or womanlike is too thin. Living authentically in the emotional moment is too close to messy, chaotic, unpredictable, and uncontrollable Wildness. If you buy into control as a core value, you need to shield yourself from such possibilities, and many men compartmentalize their emotional lives and carefully control who is aware of what, including themselves. They cultivate transcendence—the ability to rise above it all—as a value, holding themselves above the inherently uncontrollable flesh-and-blood realities of human existence. They cling to abstract principle and theory, or immerse themselves
in the concrete, predictable world of machines, computer software, and other selfless objects. The result is a self reduced to a collection of objectified parts, aspects, and potentials to be managed for best effect and advantage and for minimal vulnerability.\textsuperscript{37}

The more that men organize their lives around control, the more they disconnect from everyone, including themselves. They become trapped in avoidance of attachment, denial of need, and an endless quest to substitute abstract meaning for what Joseph Campbell called “the authentic feeling of being alive.”\textsuperscript{38} Living this way often brings with it feelings of emptiness, a simultaneous longing for and denial of what is lacking, creating monuments to control and achievement as a substitute for a self. Since most men have little actual power, they may struggle between acting as if they were in control, on the one hand, and feeling frustrated, angry, and helpless on the other, between powerful needs for connection at one moment and the supposed safety of disconnection in the next, between seeming to have control of things and acting like children in relation to women, whether whining, complaining, or bullying. They may live with little real pleasure rooted in feeling and the body. They may feel anxious and uncertain, which often comes out as feeling powerless.

Another paradox is how patriarchy sets men up to depend on women in ways that make men feel vulnerable and, therefore, powerless in relation to them. In one sense, this is a common feature of systems of privilege that depend on subordinate groups to go along, to ratify privilege as legitimate, and to refrain from challenging the status quo. The potential to not go along, however, is always present as a form of power, and dominant groups know it. Unlike most systems of privilege, patriarchy generates an interdependency that goes deeper than merely going along with the status quo. Because ideas about manhood and masculinity play such a prominent role in patriarchal dynamics, men need women to present themselves in ways that make men’s claim to a unique and privileged gender identity credible. Because manhood is defined as not feminine, men need women to provide a clear point of contrast.

A major reason why women are not supposed to be aggressive, for example, is so that men can be aggressive as a way to demonstrate manhood. When women do not play this complementary role, they undermine men’s ability to distinguish themselves as what women are not. If women can be just like men, then masculinity as the negation of femininity loses its meaning as a basis for privilege. Women’s potential to be like men allows women to use the simple choice of how to be as women to influence how men feel about themselves as men. Women’s power to pull the rug out from underneath men in this way is often attributed to women as some kind of negative personality trait—the castrating bitch, for example, or Bly’s image of mothers who undermine fathers in competition for a son’s loyalty and affection. But it is actually the system of patriarchy that sets up this dynamic and the feelings that go with it.

In patriarchy, men also need women to support patriarchal images of men as powerful and larger than life, what an Avon Cosmetics ad describes as,
“What every man wants, what every woman wants him to have: That sense of triumph.”

Patriarchy encourages men to use women as what Virginia Woolf described as mirrors that reflect them at twice their natural size. Without this power,

the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown. . . . [M]irrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. That serves to explain the necessity that women so often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism; how impossible it is for her to say to them that this book is bad, this picture is feeble, or whatever it may be. . . . For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgement, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books . . . unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is?

There is nothing about being born male that means men have to see themselves as larger than life, but there is something about patriarchal manhood that makes it tough to feel secure about being merely life-size when control and competition are the order of the day. Most men know they are neither extraordinary nor powerful. In patriarchy, however, every man is diminished if he cannot sustain a self-image in which somewhere, in someone’s eyes, he is seen as triumphant, a winner, dominant, heroic, or at least in control. Since competition makes it hard to get this from other men, heterosexual men typically turn to women to pump them up and may complain openly to women who do not actively make them feel like more than they are. Women—often out of a sense of compassion and caring—may respond in a supportive way to bolster a male pride that, ironically, is a cornerstone of women’s oppression.

This use of women to anchor male identity does not run equally in the other direction, for the path of least resistance is for men to feel little if any obligation to avoid appearing feminine in order to protect women’s sense of themselves as women. When men are insufficiently masculine, women may disapprove or feel uncomfortable, but women rarely respond as though their own identity were seriously threatened. In part, this is because gender is a basis of privilege for men and therefore entails higher stakes than it does for women. Women can play with the cultural lines separating the genders with relatively little at stake, but a man who does so takes a much bigger risk.

While much about patriarchy works in such paradoxical ways, there are also many ways that men can work for change if they can see how their participation helps to maintain and perpetuate it. The path of least resistance, however, is to project power and therefore responsibility onto women in general and mothers and wives in particular. When men feel inconsequential, it
is easier to blame women than it is to confront patriarchy—the true source of the diminishment and lack of meaning in so many men’s lives. When men feel unloved and disconnected, it is easier to accuse women of not loving them well enough than it is to consider men’s own alienation from life. It is easier to think of women as keeping men from the essence of their own lives than it is to see how men’s participation in patriarchy can suffocate and kill the life within themselves. It is easier to theorize about powerful, devouring mothers than to confront the reality of patriarchy.

Beneath the massive denial of men’s power and responsibility and its projection onto women is an enormous pool of rage, resentment, and fear. Rather than look at patriarchy and their place within it, many men will beat, rape, torture, murder, and oppress women, children, and one another. They will wage mindless war and offer themselves up for the slaughter, chain themselves to jobs and work themselves to numbed exhaustion as if their lives had no value or meaning beyond controlling or being controlled or defending against control, and content themselves with half-lives of confused, lost deprivation. What men lack women did not take from them, and it’s not up to women to give it back.
III

Unraveling the
Patriarchal Legacy
If this book has done what I intended it to do, it should be clear by now that no amount of denial or cultural magic can alter the simple fact that patriarchy exists and that no one is personally to blame for it. Patriarchy is, however, a legacy in which we all share ownership. It involves everyone—men and women alike—although in different ways, especially when we take into account factors such as social class, race, and sexual orientation.

We have seen that patriarchy is driven by a powerful and self-perpetuating dynamic between control and fear. This dynamic is coupled to a system of male privilege that is paradoxically grounded in competitive solidarity among men. As in every social system, patriarchal paths of least resistance can make it seem natural, even invisible. They encourage men to perpetuate an oppressive system that privileges them at women’s expense, and encourage women to accept the terms of their own oppression even to the extent of resisting change. Instead of seeing patriarchy for what it is, we are more likely to dwell on gender differences, masculinity and femininity, and ‘gender roles.’ We normalize discrimination, prejudice, coercion, and violence against women. We confuse systems with individuals, personalize patriarchy, and get stuck in cycles of guilt and blame. We devalue, discount, and dismiss feminism and feminists. We get lost in denial, blaming the victim, and false gender parallels.

Where, then, do we go from here? How can we build on this kind of understanding and awareness? What can we do?

The first step is to realize that doing something about patriarchy is taking responsibility for it. For men in particular, taking responsibility entails responding rather than merely reacting. It is acting from a clear sense of why things are as they are, and what about them needs to be changed. It is seeing
how different aspects of patriarchy are connected to one another, to other aspects of social life, and to each of us. Taking responsibility is proactive, not passive. It means taking the initiative to become more aware, going out of our way to pay attention. It means not waiting to be told something is wrong but paying attention in such a way that we can see it for ourselves. Taking responsibility means doing whatever it takes to come up with our share of analysis and insight—reading, watching, listening, and learning to question our assumptions. It requires an ongoing commitment to see and understand what we are participating in, how we participate, and the consequences this produces. Without this commitment, we stay stuck in merely being part of the problem rather than also being part of the solution. Men who commit themselves to understanding patriarchy and its paths of least resistance are unlikely to complain about the changing rules of sexual behavior and to ask women to explain sexual harassment to them. They will come to know intuitively what is appropriate and what is not in each situation, and when they are unsure, they will at least sense that something is wrong and needs their attention.

Dominant groups, however, typically do not show this kind of attention and commitment to the dynamics of their own dominance. They might see themselves as burdened with the responsibility that comes with power—bosses for workers, or ‘protecting’ and ‘providing’ husbands for wives and children. There are few incentives, however, for them to assume responsibility for the systems that give them power. Instead, dominant groups typically take responsibility for whatever affirms their superior status and reinforces their privileged position. Warren Farrell, for example, and other men’s rights activists complain that many men feel stuck with the breadwinning role in families.1 Undoubtedly, many men do feel stuck, but this is not the whole story. It ignores, for example, the well-documented relationship between earnings and decision-making power in families, the common tendency to see the breadwinner as the head of household, men’s resistance to letting wives share the breadwinning role (especially when women earn more than men), and the cultural devaluing of people who do not ‘work’ (i.e., earn money) for a living and the respect and elevated status for those who do.

Taking responsibility for patriarchy means not only trying to be aware of what is going on and to understand it but also daring to act from this understanding in ways that do more than make us comfortable with things as they are. To do this, we have to lay claim to patriarchy and own it as something on which we have an obligation to act. If we keep seeing it as someone else’s problem or some cosmic force having nothing to do with us, we will not take responsibility for doing something about it. We have to act from a sense of obligation—that it is up to us to act—because without that, when things get tough, it is too easy to let go and leave it for someone else.

Responsibility begins with acknowledging that patriarchy exists to be understood, that we are connected to it and its consequences, and that we have
both the power and the obligation to do something about it and how we participate. Its present and its future have some small thing to do with the choices each of us makes, and taking responsibility means living with an open awareness of that simple fact. To paraphrase William James, we must act as though what we do makes a difference. We may not be able to do much, but it does not take much from each of us to produce change.

Who Takes Responsibility?

What we are prepared to do about patriarchy depends on how we see ourselves in relation to it. Most men do nothing about the problem of sexual violence, for example, because they see it as an individual problem: “Unless I do it or it’s done to someone I care about, it’s someone else’s problem, not mine.” Women who have succeeded in male-dominated professions may take a similar attitude toward women who have not, especially by denying the existence of male privilege, discrimination against women, and other aspects of patriarchy they think they have avoided in their own lives.

Not surprisingly, the ones most likely to take responsibility for systems like patriarchy are the people oppressed by it, usually as a matter of survival. Just as people of color have done most of the work in the struggle against racism, women have contributed most to figuring out patriarchy. With few exceptions, women have been the personal and public risk takers. They have formed consciousness-raising groups to probe how patriarchy shapes their lives. They have written a huge literature analyzing the history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, economics, politics, and everyday details of life under patriarchy. And they have paid attention, watched, listened, questioned, confronted, challenged, and taken to the streets. Many women, of course, have not done such work, but where it has been done, it is almost always women who have done it.

With rare exceptions, men have taken almost no responsibility for patriarchy. Some men confuse taking responsibility with being sensitive to women, offering emotional support, or tolerating women’s anger and frustration. Men can be sensitive, however, without doing anything to challenge or undermine male privilege or to define gender issues as men’s issues, especially to other men. Even sensitive men can be drawn to the path of least resistance that defines problems such as housework, workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, and violence as women’s issues. This makes it easy for men to see themselves as loving helpers, loyal supporters, or valiant defenders who help women in a patient and caring way.

What such men often do not do is the work of taking the initiative to decide what needs to be said, asked, listened to, discussed, fought over, attended to, and cared for to overcome the status quo’s foot-dragging inertia. When women get tired or confused or distracted by the everyday details of their lives, the responsibility these men take often lies dormant until the next time a woman
feels compelled to risk making trouble by raising a ‘women’s issue.’ And when women express anger at always having to carry the burden of figuring out patriarchy and doing something about it, these sensitive and supportive men may react as if they are being unfairly criticized or even attacked, their exceptional and seemingly generous efforts unappreciated, their supposed immunity from reproach unfairly snatched away.

Sensitive men are particularly likely to feel vulnerable to angry accusations of sexist behavior. Robert Bly, for example, argues that when men respond to feminist criticism and demands by being ‘soft,’ ‘sensitive,’ and ‘passive,’ they set themselves up to be punished and manipulated by vengeful women. This is the sensitive man who turns up his soft underbelly to a woman, only to have her stab him and turn the knife slowly with relentless demands and criticism.\(^3\)

This is not, however, a case of men taking responsibility and being punished for their trouble. In my experience, men who take responsibility for patriarchy are the last men most feminist women want to attack. More often than not, the men Bly refers to present the appearance of taking responsibility without the substance, because they do not have a clear sense of what taking responsibility actually means or what there is to take responsibility for or are unwilling to do the emotional and intellectual work that taking responsibility entails. They may claim to be on women’s side because doing the right thing makes them feel good about themselves or because they value relationships with women and fear women’s displeasure and anger, but this merely avoids taking responsibility. It is a stance that dominant groups often take, and women and other minorities rightly distrust it and feel insulted by its implicit condescension.

Why, then, do men avoid taking responsibility for patriarchy? In the simplest sense, men may not realize that patriarchy exists and therefore not be aware there is any responsibility for them to take. Also, the path of least resistance is to see themselves as not having to do anything. The status quo is organized in their image and in their interests, reflecting manhood in its highest ideals and images. Why, then, work for change? Why question, much less give up, what they have and risk other men’s disapproval, anger, and rejection, not to mention feeling disempowered, diminished, and ‘softened’ to a position of equality with women? And why should they do this when they may not feel terribly good about their own lives in the first place?

Many men feel threatened by the idea of taking responsibility not only because they would have to give up a great deal of what they have been taught to value but also because they would have to confront what they have given up already to participate in patriarchy. There is among men in modern industrial patriarchies an enormous pool of loss, pain, and grief, some of which, as Bly rightly argues, is tied to the lost relationship between younger and older men. But this reflects a much deeper loss traceable to the portion of men’s humanity that they give up as part of their solidarity with older men and the patriarchal society whose interests both groups identify with. For men to feel their deep and deadening disconnection from their own and other people’s lives is...
potentially so painful and frightening that most men simply do not want to know about it.

Perhaps the most important barrier to men taking responsibility, however, is their reluctance to expose themselves to the ocean of guilt and shame they believe awaits them if they acknowledge that patriarchy and male privilege exist. The negative power of guilt and shame is especially significant for men who are otherwise most sympathetic to women and most likely to oppose patriarchy. These are the men who are most aware of male privilege and the price women pay for men to have it, which also makes them most prone to feeling blame-worthy. They are in this trap because (as shown in Chapter 2) both women and men often confuse individuals with systems and often place blame where it does not belong. Add to this how easy it is to confuse guilt and blame with taking responsibility, and it is understandable why even men sympathetic to justice avoid going down the road of taking responsibility.

The Power of Guilt and Blame

Women are bound to have moments when they feel angry at men and blame them for the oppressive consequences of male privilege. For all the ways there are to joke about, rationalize, and sentimentalize male dominance, on some level most people know that it is real and that women pay for it much more than men do. To the degree that women and men find ways to love one another, it is in spite of patriarchy and the misogynist paths of least resistance patriarchy holds out for men and women to follow. Whether women are feminist or not, many know they have reason to resent men as a group, for you do not have to go very far beneath the surface of gender relations to see that there is more going on than a lively battle of the sexes or a fascinating case of opposites who attract. There is an oppressive system of privilege at work, and men are its beneficiaries. Not only that, but, as Marilyn French points out, men have also been primarily responsible for perpetuating it:

We must face the fact that the greatest impediment to the acceptance of women as full members of the human race comes from men. . . . If we put aside subjectivity, if we stop insisting that we, or our spouses or relatives, are not like that, and look quietly at the account of women’s past, the facts are clear.

On every level, men block women’s use of their abilities outside the private sphere. . . . There can be no question that men as a class have made a continuous, unremitting effort to keep women under male control.

Women resenting men collectively is quite different, however, from holding individual men accountable for the existence of patriarchy and blaming them simply for being men. In other words, when a woman says, “I hate men,” this
does not necessarily mean she hates me, Allan. But living in a society dominated by individualistic thinking makes it easy to lose sight of the crucial distinction between men as individuals and men as a category of people. A woman may get angry at a specific man when it is patriarchy and male privilege she is really mad at, or overreact to his behavior by piling anger at the system on top of appropriate anger at him. There probably is not much we can do about it, except be aware that it’s going to happen from time to time and deal with it as best we can.

Men in particular can learn not to take it personally, to develop thicker skins, to let it slide rather than get sidetracked into arguments about whether they deserve this particular bit of anger. Women’s anger is an important engine for change, and if women have to tiptoe around worrying about whether it might hurt a man’s feelings, they’re going to be silenced. I have seen this over and over again in workshops where women take care of men by silencing themselves rather than voice feelings about male privilege. Certainly there is room to talk about how women express anger at men, to sort out the individual man from the group as we go along. But occasional misplaced anger is no reason for men to get huffy and defensive if their real concern is doing something about patriarchy. Making room for the anger is a price men have to pay for privilege, and as prices go, it isn’t very high.

The problem, though—and a major reason men may feel blamed even when they are not being blamed—is that most men’s identification with patriarchy runs so deep (consciously or not) that they experience criticism of the system as a personal attack. The evidence of women’s oppression is everywhere, and it is hard not to know that cultural misogyny is real and that men and manhood are culturally defined as superior. When men and women list women’s disadvantages in the workplace, their lists match to a degree that surprises everyone. In other words, many men know that male privilege exists and yet find it hard to resist going along with the status quo and basing their identities at least in part on the rejection and negation of women. So, when most men hear criticism of patriarchy, they have a hard time not taking it personally and feeling defensive because on some level, the criticism does involve them. Since each man’s participation benefits him at women’s expense—regardless of his personal attitudes or behavior—it is hard not to feel bad about it, which easily brings up feelings of blame and guilt.

Guilt and Blame Don’t Work

Guilt can be a powerful motivator to change behavior, but often only in the short run. In the long run, personal guilt does not give enough leverage for social change, and almost always provokes a backlash. People have a limited tolerance for feeling bad about themselves or for making other people feel bad about themselves. This is especially true around gender, because women’s and men’s lives are so bound up with one another. We have become so wary of
invoking bad feelings that we have stripped ourselves of the ability even to talk about what is really going on. Words like ‘feminist,’ ‘oppression,’ ‘patriarchy,’ ‘sexism,’ and ‘radical’ have become such buzzwords that the only people who dare use them are the very people who are most likely to be stereotyped as man-hating extremists. Because patriarchy is real, however, and since feminism and its radical, root-seeking varieties are fundamental to figuring it out, if we don’t dare talk for fear of retaliation, we retreat into powerless silence.

Dominant groups typically show the least tolerance for allowing themselves to feel guilt and shame. Privilege, after all, should exempt one from having to feel such things. This means that sooner or later, dominant groups experience reminders of their potential for feeling guilt as an affront that infringes on their sense of entitlement to a life unplagued by concern for how their privilege affects other people. The right to deny that privilege exists is an integral part of privilege itself, so men can be quick to complain about being made to feel guilty without actually *feeling* guilty. I have met few men who seem genuinely guilt-stricken over male privilege, just as I rarely meet white people who seem guilt-stricken over racism. Such people exist, but they are not the ones who complain so loudly about being made to feel guilty.

Guilt also fails as a strategy for social change because it relies on a false model of how social life works. A system like patriarchy cannot be blamed or made to feel guilty, because systems do not actually *do* or feel anything and therefore cannot be held accountable as people can. This means that blame and guilt psychologize and individualize something that is also rooted in systems.

The guilt strategy also doesn’t work because it disempowers people to act for change. Fear can get people to look at what is going on as a way to survive. Guilt, on the other hand, typically has just the opposite effect. For every man whose guilt has spurred him to dig deeper into the reality of patriarchy, there are thousands more who would rather dig a deep hole of denial to hide in. To make men feel guilty simply because they are men puts them in a box, which all but ensures they will never make a move toward changing themselves or anything else. They are far more likely to detach from whatever the guilt is about (“I wasn’t there, I never knew, it never even happened”) or angrily defend themselves against the unfairness of being blamed simply for being male or get off the hook by saying they’re sorry or seem to change their ways, promising to be more careful in the future.

A different response to guilt is the overt celebration of manhood, as in the mythopoetic men’s movement. While guilt can make men feel culpable for patriarchy, singing the praises of being a man goes the other way by ignoring patriarchy in the rush to make men feel better about themselves as men. This is part of an increasingly widespread denial that male privilege even exists, which in the hands of the men’s rights movement often takes the form of self-pity and angry defensiveness.

A good example of denial is Warren Farrell’s *The Myth of Male Power*, which reflects men’s fear of being blamed and how far some will go to avoid it.
Farrell seems obsessed with blame, from his early days as an ally of the women’s movement when he enjoyed women’s approval for his public criticism of other men as Neanderthals, to his recent work, in which he repudiates feminism and promotes men’s rights. The purpose of The Myth of Male Power is to persuade readers that men are not inherently bad or solely responsible for the evil in the world. A feminist understanding of how patriarchy works leads to the same conclusion, but Farrell gets there by an entirely different route and from different motives.

Farrell seems so worried and angry about guilt and blame that he goes off the deep end to argue that men are not powerful at all and are, instead, worse than slaves. He does this in part by adopting a narrow definition of power that has little to do with how systems of privilege actually work. But the weight of his argument is a breathless series of thumbnail observations and assertions that are often illogical and groundless.

He tells us, for example, that since men may die trying to protect property (even though it is largely theirs), this makes them somehow of less value than property and therefore of less value than women, whom he acknowledges are treated like men’s property. He asks us to believe that men and boys taunt and challenge one another for not being masculine enough for no other reason than to develop men’s capacity and willingness to protect women. He goes on to argue that culturally sanctioned torture such as Chinese foot binding is about female beauty and nothing else, that engagement rings symbolize the amount of physical protection a man offers a woman (“The bigger the diamond . . . the greater the protection”), that gay men are persecuted solely because of “their unwillingness to protect women,” that no one ever jokes about women being raped, that people routinely ridicule unemployed men, that the only reason men do not share their feelings with women is to keep from worrying them, and that men routinely support women for life. He tells us that men’s high suicide rate reflects the powerlessness of men as a group, ignoring the fact that blacks have dramatically lower suicide rates than whites, and black women the lowest rates of all, which would seem to imply that black women are the really powerful ones and that white males are at the bottom of the heap. And since slaves open doors for masters and help them put on their coats, Farrell reasons, and men are often expected to do the same for women, men are therefore deferential and subservient to women just as slaves are to their masters. He tries to make it all right again by saying that men and women are both dominant and subservient to one another, but in different areas of life. Like Farrell’s definition of power, this all but mocks what social domination and subordination are really about.

The real problem here is not how Farrell turns reality on its head. It is the individualistic guilt-and-blame model that drives him and other men to such extremes to avoid feeling bad about themselves as men and, whether they intend it or not, to perpetuate male privilege through massive denial. And the problem is the chord Farrell still touches in many men who do feel bad about
their lives, who measure themselves by control and power, and who welcome permission to deny that there is anything going on around male privilege that might explain their predicament and call for taking some responsibility. The mere fact of being a man, of belonging to the social category that dominates the patriarchal system, is not a basis for feeling guilty or being blamed by anyone. It is, however, a reason to feel responsible for making informed choices about how we participate. The struggle to end patriarchy needs men with the courage to face both a powerful system and other men, and there is no way this can happen if men are fixated on guilt and blame.

How, then, can we think about taking responsibility in a way that gets us beyond the individualistic model?

Claiming the Legacy

To take responsibility for patriarchy we have to feel responsible for it, which means looking at our connection to it without being swallowed up by a sea of men’s guilt or women’s rage. Patriarchy is a legacy handed down to us without our ever being asked to give our consent. Growing up in patriarchy, the path of least resistance is to see it as normal, unexceptional, and how things ought to be. Like people in most social systems, we are largely oblivious to what we are participating in and fall easily into denial and rationalization when the status quo is challenged. But beneath our lack of awareness, the legacy and our connection to it remain. Simply by living under its terms and going along its paths of least resistance, we keep it going and pass it on.

Since everyone participates in patriarchy, everyone shares in the legacy. But like dominant and subordinate groups in general, men and women are connected to patriarchy in different ways. This means they share in the legacy and responsibility for it in different ways and to different degrees.

Like all subordinate groups, women play a role in their own oppression, and a lot of feminist work focuses on reminding women of this and identifying alternative paths. Like all dominant groups, however, men are far more problematic because patriarchy gives them so many reasons to actively or passively perpetuate male privilege. Since patriarchy exists in men’s name and primarily for their benefit, men have a special responsibility to face the patriarchal legacy and themselves in it, to know what has been passed on to them and why it matters.

In taking responsibility for patriarchy, men cannot hide behind arguments that patriarchy is about someone else, that others benefit from it more or suffer from it less, or that we are the exceptional nice guys who never hurt anyone. We cannot pass off the enormous complexity of patriarchy to bad parenting or flawed personalities. We cannot hide behind the damage we do to ourselves as we participate (“Leave me alone. It hurts me, too.”), for how we damage our own lives does not remove responsibility for how patriarchy destroys the lives of others. Suicide does not balance homicide, just as men’s abuse of themselves and one another does not balance men’s abuse of women.
Men cannot hold out until women agree to take care of men’s wounds along with their own or even to stop blaming men individually or collectively, fairly or not. And we cannot take refuge in issues of race or class by reducing patriarchy to the power of upper-class white males. Men privileged by race and class are in a better position to benefit from core patriarchal values, but they do not have a monopoly on identifying with and defending them. Patriarchy is about all of us.

**Involving Men**

Sooner or later, finding a way out of patriarchy has to involve men, in part because they collectively control most social systems and resources, but also because men’s and women’s lives are so bound up with one another.¹¹ On a deeper level, men can offer a unique perspective on the reality of male privilege, just as only women can fully understand the reality of female subordination.

Coming to grips with patriarchy poses special challenges to men, whether pro-feminist or diehard defenders of men’s rights. There have always been a small number of men who openly ally with women in search of equality and justice, from John Stuart Mill to Frederick Douglass to Alan Alda.¹² There are now a growing number of men’s studies courses in colleges and universities, a handful of journals devoted to understanding and exploring patriarchal manhood and masculinity, and an expanding literature of men trying to figure out how patriarchy works and what they can do about it. It is hard work, not only because no one likes to focus on human suffering or give up privilege or risk feeling guilty but also because the path of least resistance in a male-centered system is for men to focus on themselves and their own needs and concerns, not on male privilege and the oppression of women.

Contemporary men’s movements are a varied lot, but they all call for some scrutiny simply because as men’s movements they are organized around membership in a category of people that is socially dominant and privileged. Inevitably, such groups must resist being drawn to their own interests and maintaining their privilege. We would not expect a white people’s movement, for example, to do much for people of color, or a rich people’s movement to advance the interests of the working class, or a men’s movement to end male privilege and female oppression.

Some men’s movements are openly hostile to the women’s movement, especially those organized around fathers’ rights and divorced men’s associations. At the other extreme are academics who write and teach about patriarchy and male privilege, and men’s groups that work to mitigate some of the worst aspects of patriarchy, especially violence against women. On a larger level, the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) sponsors annual conferences on gender and organizes task forces on gender issues that include pornography, homophobia, fathering, male-female relationships, spirituality, and men’s violence. In its statement of purpose, the group says:
As an organization for changing men, we strongly support the continuing struggle of women for full equality. . . . NOMAS advocates a perspective that is pro-feminist, gay affirmative, anti-racist, dedicated to enhancing men’s lives, and committed to justice on a broad range of social issues including class, age, religion, and physical abilities. We affirm that working to make this nation’s ideals of equality substantive is the finest expression of what it means to be men. . . . We applaud and support the insights and positive social changes that feminism has stimulated for both women and men. We oppose such injustices to women as economic and legal discrimination, rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and many others. 13

Although NOMAS strongly supports the women’s movement, it calls itself a men’s movement in part to stress that male privilege gives men a special responsibility for doing something about patriarchy. This also avoids the appearance of trying to co-opt the women’s movement.

Even among pro-feminist men, however, there are problems with identifying a social movement with male gender. By casting a men’s movement as parallel to the women’s movement, it is easy to see men as parallel to women in other ways as well, such as being oppressed or victimized as men. This makes it relatively easy for an otherwise well-intentioned men’s movement to drift toward blaming women for men’s troubles or ignoring patriarchy and male privilege in a self-centered rush to make men feel better.

While NOMAS, for example, has not fallen into the trap of blaming women, it has been seen by some as focusing too much on heterosexism and gay rights and too little on the dynamics of male privilege that go beyond issues of sexual orientation. Part of the NOMAS emphasis on gay issues is based on the realization that heterosexual privilege and the oppression of gay men are links in the chain of patriarchal oppression of women. It may also reflect, however, a patriarchal path of least resistance that encourages men to focus on their own interests.

In some ways, this phenomenon is similar to white women who advance their concerns—such as breaking corporate and professional glass ceilings—and ignore white racism, in the mistaken belief that an analysis of male privilege from a white, middle-class point of view will also work for women of color. They may think that because they know what it’s like to be oppressed as women, they also understand what racial oppression is like, even though they belong to the privileged race. 14 In similar ways, gay men may believe that their own experience with oppression obviates the need to look at sexism.

A related danger is that men’s sympathy with women’s oppression may sensititize but not radicalize their view of patriarchy. It may make men more caring in the face of women’s pain, for example, and turn them into more sympathetic listeners or supportive partners or coworkers. But if it does not also take them toward the roots—the radicals—of that pain to confront its connection with
male privilege, they are in danger of becoming sensitive New Age guys who mean well without sharing in the hard and risky work of confronting privilege.

Many men, of course, are no strangers to radical thought and action, having been radicalized through experiencing their own oppression around issues other than gender. Some men have become radicalized around issues that require them to denounce one or more of their own privileged statuses, as when whites work openly against white privilege. Typically, however, people who have various forms of privilege cling to at least one of them while fighting against the rest. It is a rare person who renounces them all, and, for men, the holdout is often gender. As noted previously, radical feminism was born out of white women’s experience of blatant sexism from men in the New Left anti-war movement of the 1960s. These men were on the leading edge of struggles against class and white privilege, but they were oblivious to their own male privilege and contemptuously defensive when women called attention to it. For men to be radicalized around gender is far more difficult than with other forms of oppression, because men have no experience of being oppressed as men, and because all men, regardless of race or class, have access to some degree of male privilege.

Mythopoetics and the Men’s Movement

The tendency of men to focus on themselves as victims rather than on patriarchy is nowhere more evident than in the mythopoetic men’s movement, most closely associated with the work of Robert Bly, Sam Keen, and various Jung-inspired writers and activists. Through books, journals, and workshops, the movement brings men together to focus on men and manhood and to heal the suffering and loss many men experience—spiritual damage, emotional impoverishment, poor relationships with women and children, and estrangement from other men, especially fathers.

Such problems are prominent in many men’s lives, but this is not an organized male response to the patriarchal system whose dynamics produce much of men’s loss, suffering, and grief. Contrary to Bly’s claim, it is not a parallel to the women’s movement with a “different timetable.” It may be a response to genuine emotional and spiritual needs that are met by bringing men together to drum, chant, and share stories and feelings from their lives. It may help to heal some of the damage patriarchy does to men. But without a focus on the system and the gender dynamics that actually cause that damage, it does more harm than good by encouraging men to pursue private solutions to what are social problems.

In some ways it is hard to see the mythopoetic men’s movement as a movement at all, since it focuses on personal rather than social transformation—in contrast, for example, to the civil rights, environmental, and women’s movements. A social movement is more than a group of people trying to change their individual lives. It is also an organized effort to change the **collective**
terms on which those lives are lived. In this sense, this men’s movement is no more parallel to the women’s movement or the civil rights movement than is the tendency of many in the United States to use psychotherapy or twelve-step programs as a way of coping with life. More than anything, the mythopoetic men’s movement is about self-discovery, personal redefinition, and catharsis among members of a relatively privileged group trying to ameliorate the emotional, spiritual, and social consequences that go along with that privilege. The only time the movement shows any interest in social forces is to portray fathers and other men as mere victims of those forces, and to defend men against feeling guilty about women’s oppression by pretending that men and women are equally oppressed or that men are worse off than women. But this men’s movement shows no interest in the idea of men taking any responsibility for something larger than themselves, such as patriarchy, or their participation in it.

The pursuit of private solutions to social problems reduces the dynamics of societies to individual psychology and interpersonal relations, following a general tendency in this culture to psychologize social problems. To judge from Bly and Keen, societies amount to little more than what goes on between parents, children, and spouses, and social problems—from war to oppression—can be reduced to bad parenting, interpersonal misunderstanding, or bad habits. If masculinity is a problem, they argue, it is not because it is connected to privilege and oppression but because it is “worn out,” “undependable,” “unsatisfying,” and “no longer works” in men’s lives. The solution is not social change but the individual’s transformation through a heroic inner journey.

Intense individualism, combined with denial that patriarchy even exists, backs the mythopoetic men’s movement into a corner from which it invariably looks for someone to blame for men’s pain and loss. Usually it is not industrialization. More often than not, anger and resentment go toward women. Sometimes the blame is out in the open, sometimes hidden. Mothers and wives come up a lot in discussions of men feeling diminished, incomplete, and unfulfilled. At one of Bly’s daylong workshops, it was not talk about the evils of industrialization that aroused grumbling recognition from a huge roomful of men. Rather, it was the “Great Mother” who keeps men from developing discipline; “the earthly, conservative, possessive, clinging part of the maternal feminine” that suffocates men’s souls and denies them their manhood; the mother whose power over infants is so awesome that boys and men have to organize their lives in response to it; the Queen who keeps the key to the Wild Man’s freedom beneath her pillow, whose tendency to cling to her son can never be overestimated, who competes for her son’s affection by diminishing, undermining, and trashing her husband and refusing to redeem him from his own “dark side.” It is women—especially feminist women—who want men to be docile, soft, and weak, rather than bold, independent, and courageous. It is women whose anger and demands inspire fear and guilt in men.

Strangely enough, husbands and fathers are nowhere to be seen in the definition of the problem. Bly mentions that fathers are rule makers and that the
King is the one who gives the Queen the key to the Wild Man’s cage. Otherwise, men come out as hapless victims at the mercy of women and social forces such as industrialization. Apparently, male dominance is not privilege at all but a burden men must bear—this business of having to be on top all the time. Fathers slouch about in the shadows, drowning in their own darkness, pushed from their families by women and the demands of work, their fierceness and pride gone. Every once in a while someone mentions that, yes, of course, some awful things are happening to women in all of this, but that is quickly forgotten in the rush to portray women as, almost magically, the truly powerful and privileged ones.

Although the mythopoetic men’s movement claims to have no political agenda, its effect is profoundly political in denying the existence of patriarchy and any need to take responsibility for it. It routinely renders women as other, outsider, and the ultimate source of men’s problems. It portrays patriarchal masculinity as problematic only insofar as it makes men unhappy, not as an ideology for an oppressive system that privileges men. The movement does not protest male dominance per se, only the price it exacts from men (because it doesn’t ‘work’ anymore), and seeks more satisfying ways for men to be in society as it is:

[The men’s movement] is not, fundamentally, about uprooting sexism or transforming patriarchy, or even understanding masculinity in its various forms. When it comes to the crunch, what it is about is modernizing hegemonic masculinity. It is concerned with finding ways in which the dominant group—the white, educated, heterosexual, affluent males . . . —can adapt to new circumstances without breaking down the social-structural arrangements that actually give them power.22

Coming to terms with patriarchy is hard work, and men have good reason to support one another in it. But there are serious problems with male solidarity around the common experience of men as men, because male solidarity too easily ignores how patriarchy privileges men as males. The mythopoetic men’s movement perpetuates patriarchy and its consequences for both men and women, including the pain, loss, and grief that draw many men together in the first place.

In spite of all this, the various men’s movements have at least helped many men acknowledge that there is something deeply wrong in their lives and that this has to do with their status as men. This awareness has opened up avenues of communication, experience, and expression among men that encourage them to explore their inner lives. But whatever books, workshops, and weekend retreats in the woods may accomplish in terms of men’s feelings, these will not move us toward a society in which those feelings are lived openly. They will, instead, live on as personal solutions extending not much further than the relatively privileged subculture that shapes and nurtures them.
A key step for men who want to participate in change is to connect their inner lives to the outer reality of patriarchy, to go beyond vague attributions to society to a clearer understanding of how social systems work and how our participation makes them happen. If the new men’s movement is to be part of the solution rather than merely a self-absorbed, increasingly entrenched part of the problem, men are going to have to learn how to take responsibility for this social system that bears their name.

Becoming part of the solution involves a fundamental moral choice about whether to use gender privilege to further that privilege or to join feminist women in taking responsibility for the patriarchal legacy. Men should either empower themselves to move toward taking their share of responsibility or they should make way for those who will. Until men begin to share seriously in the emotional, intellectual, and practical aspects of struggling with our legacy, not only will change be seriously limited, but men and women will continue to feel at odds with one another, because in fact they will be at odds.

Men’s alternatives are not appealing, but neither are the alternatives for women or racial and ethnic minorities trying to deal with oppression. Like all dominant groups, men are often stuck in a state of arrested development that can wrap them in an almost childlike obliviousness, grandiosity, and sense of entitlement in relation to women. This insulates them from the adult responsibility to be aware of what is happening and to move toward doing something about it, a responsibility that includes coming to terms with the reality of privilege and the oppression that supports it. The reality of life under patriarchy has forced many women to change in order to survive and work for something better for us all. It demands nothing less from men.
There are important lessons to be learned about change by paying attention to what has changed and how, but it is also important to be clear about what has not and why. In the years that led to my writing *The Gender Knot* and in the years since, I have spent much of my professional career applying the framework that I describe in these pages, trying to understand the power of systems of privilege, and patriarchy in particular, to shape social life at every level, including my own. I have seen many things change, but I am also struck by aspects of patriarchy that seem impervious to change in spite of their horrific consequences.

I often suggest taking the long view when it comes to systemic change, but, even so, we should be able to understand the difference between what changes first and what changes last, what is most resistant and why. This is especially true when it comes to men’s violence—not only against women and girls but everyone else, including themselves and the Earth. If violence were a sickness caused by a virus, the amount of suffering and destruction resulting from it would prompt the declaration of a public health emergency not only in the United States but in most of the world. Governments might even launch a War on Violence (without pausing to note the irony, which provides a clue right there). But men’s violence is not caused by a virus and there is no public health emergency in the news. In fact, what we have is just the opposite. It is as if this profoundly destructive gendered phenomenon isn’t even there.

In December 2012, for example, a young white man named Adam Lanza broke into an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, less than fifty miles from my home, and massacred—I don’t think that is too strong a word—more than twenty small children and a handful of teachers and staff. I have...
grandchildren of the same age as the children who were killed, so this mass murder has stayed in my mind longer than most. But it was especially difficult to listen to the national conversation about gun violence that came after, because it seemed so familiar and was being carried on in a way that I knew would guarantee that such violence will continue. Which, of course, it has done in spite of decades of feminist activism and analysis.

What does that conversation look like? In the aftermath of a mass murder in Aurora, Colorado, just five months before Newtown, I watched a PBS news anchor display photographs of the four most recent U.S. mass murderers and then pose to some experts the question of what the perpetrators had in common with one another. The experts looked at the photos and then shook their heads before saying, “Nothing,” and going on to explain that there were no significant overlaps in the men’s psychological profiles. All men, but with nothing in common.

I watched again after the massacre in Newtown as a public television moderator expressed exasperation at the steady stream of killings that seemed to defy explanation, adding to her earnest question that was being asked all over the country—*Why is this happening?*—what seemed almost an afterthought. She wanted to know if the fact that all of the shooters were young men might hold a clue (not to mention their being white, which, as I recall, she did not). The expert replied as if he had not heard the question, and she did not bring it up again. I pick on PBS only because they seem so enlightened and serious compared with all the rest, and if they cannot see what is staring them in the face, then I don’t know who among the media can.

This, then, is the puzzle: with the answer to what all these men had in common in plain sight, how can intelligent, educated people who have made careers out of examining and understanding what is happening in the world act as if what they are looking at isn’t there?

I used to think people did not notice such things because of ignorance, like fish not noticing the water because it’s everywhere. I do not believe that anymore. They have eyes that see, and they are not stupid. We know this because if you point out to them that all the shooters are male, they will not say, “They are?” (and the moderator did ask the question even if she didn’t follow up). On some level, then, they do know what they’re looking at, and so does everyone else.

Why, then, do they—and just about everyone else of consequence—act as if they do not, as if the question is not worth the asking, much less holding out for a serious reply? Even when children are gunned down at school—shot indiscriminately and multiple times at close range so as to be rendered unrecognizable to their own parents—people in positions of influence and power again and again look into the camera and act as though they cannot see and do not know. How can this be possible?

It is not only possible but commonplace, normalized, the default condition, because we are participating in a patriarchal system that produces an epidemic
of men’s violence in the first place and at the same time makes obliviousness and denial in the face of it a path of least resistance. As I argue shortly, both arise from the same set of core principles around which patriarchy is organized. And those principles are to be found at the heart of a worldview that is powerful enough to keep us in a dangerous state of unreality in which even the most powerful among us—including the president of the United States—feel helpless to understand what is happening, much less know how to protect even our children from it.

Understanding Men’s Violence

How do patriarchy’s organizing principles—male dominance, a masculine obsession with control, male centeredness, and male identification—make violence a path of least resistance for men to follow or to encourage other men to follow or, at the very least, to give tacit support by remaining silent? We have looked briefly at some aspects of this question in earlier chapters, but it is worthwhile to revisit them here to lay a foundation for the patriarchal worldview that makes men’s violence not only prevalent but so resistant to scrutiny and change.

Before going any further, it might be worthwhile to say something for readers who are wondering about women who commit violent acts and does this not make violence something human rather than a gender issue and, more specifically, a problem for men. As human beings, of course, women are capable of behaving in violent ways. But men’s far greater likelihood of perpetrating violence makes it clear that there are paths of least resistance operating for them that do not apply to women in the same way or to the same degree. As with the rest of this book, it is those systemic paths and not the character of individual men that is at issue here.

How, then, do we understand the pervasive pattern of men’s violence? To begin, the patriarchal principles of male dominance and the male-identified obsession with control combine to encourage in men the expectation of being or appearing to be in control at all times, which includes not being controlled by others. Because violence is the most extreme instrument of control, then the capacity for violence—whether or not individual men actually make use of it—is central to the cultural definition of manhood.

Every man and boy faces the challenge of signaling either their own capacity for violence or their support if not admiration for that potential in other males, if for no other reason than to solidify their standing as real men (or boys) and to discourage acts of violence and ridicule that might be directed at them. It is a dynamic that begins early—in locker rooms and schoolyards—and extends in one form or another throughout men’s lives. No one, no matter how powerful, is exempt from having to deal with the cultural imperative of patriarchal manhood.
Presidential candidates, for example, must demonstrate their qualifications to be the nation’s commander in chief—that is, their willingness and readiness to make use of and direct the U.S. military’s massive capacity for violence in the interest of controlling what happens in other countries. A president’s stated beliefs about avoiding war rarely seem to matter when confronted with the actual choice of using violence. The current president, Barack Obama, for example, ran on a campaign platform critical of war and yet now orders drone strikes in foreign countries with which the United States is not at war, attacks that take the lives of innocent women, children, and men who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, including weddings, family gatherings, and schools.

Men’s acceptance of the cultural association of manhood with control makes them complicit in its consequences, including the use of violence. Acceptance need not be conscious or intentional. Individual men need not be violent themselves. Mere silence—the voice of complicity—is enough to accomplish the effect, and to connect them to the violence that other men do. When a young man who is feeling wronged or is insecure in his manhood straps on body armor and takes up a gun, he is pursuing by extreme means a manhood ideal of control and domination that has wide and deep support in this society, including among men who would never dream of doing such a thing themselves. That our culture is saturated with images of violence—from television and video games to the football field—is not the work of a lunatic fringe of violent men. Nor is the epidemic of actual violence. All of it flows from an obsession with control that shapes every man’s standing as a real man in this society.

Male dominance and the obsession with control apply to relationships with women in particular, but in some ways even more so with other men. Since control is at best a temporary state and therefore a shaky basis for a stable identity, and since most men have relatively little power and cannot avoid experiencing some degree of domination by other men (as at work), there is an ongoing tension between the reality of most men’s lives and cultural ideals of dominance and control.

How are men to reconcile this contradiction without disidentifying with the cultural ideal of manhood itself? One way is to identify with male figures who appear powerful and in control and to vicariously share in the experience—by cheering on a football team or vocally supporting a war or playing violent video games, or by watching pornography in which other men sexually dominate women or movie heroes who demonstrate a capacity for violence—action superheroes, rogue cops, soldiers, the man who avenges a wrong or saves the planet from destruction.

Note that all of these role models act from a profound belief in the rightness of their violence, that they are winning the game or defending justice or righting a wrong or taking back what was taken from them or rescuing a damsel in distress (from the clutches of another man) or justifiably exacting
revenge. They are not merely aggrieved or angry or heroic but driven by a sense of entitlement and authority that flows directly from the core of patriarchal manhood: he has a right, even an obligation, to resort to violence. As Wayne LaPierre, executive director of the National Rifle Association (NRA), stated as part of his opposition to gun control following the Newtown massacre, “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” The sticking point, of course, is who gets to decide who is good and who is bad. Patriarchal culture provides an answer for this as well: a real man will decide such questions for himself as one more way to demonstrate his manhood.

When observing other men’s violence is not enough, a more extreme response to the contradiction between the reality of men’s lives and expectations of manhood is for men to initiate violence themselves. This is the man who screams verbal abuse or kicks the dog or slaps the child or puts his fist through the wall; who practices road rage; who goes to the courthouse and guns down not only his former wife who has just been awarded custody of their children but the judge who made the decision and the attorney who argued on his wife’s behalf; who goes to his workplace and kills the manager who failed to promote him or laid him off and some coworkers who were never very nice to him; who goes home from work and shoots his wife and then his children, and her lover, and her mother; who goes to school and shoots his classmates who have teased or bullied him; who stabs the man who insulted him in the bar or berated his favorite team or cut him off in traffic; who beats his wife for showing any sign of autonomy or independence and then kills her when she tries to leave.

It is not unusual for such a man to end the violence by killing himself, less from a sense of guilt or remorse than a determination not to allow anyone to decide what will become of him. He will die what he imagines is the lone hero’s death, in control of his own destiny right down to the end.

Men’s violence is facilitated by a lack of empathy that might otherwise interfere with asserting control by reminding them of the pain and suffering that may result. The shortage of empathy is itself a consequence of the expectation of patriarchal manhood that men will always be in control, a state that is fundamentally at odds with empathy. A key to being in control is to see yourself as unaccountable to the object of control. A lack of accountability, in turn, encourages seeing the objects of control as having no feelings or a life of their own, as ‘others,’ things with no point of view to take into account and nothing in common with you.

Since manhood requires men to be in control of themselves, a lack of empathy encourages them to be ‘good soldiers’ who show neither fear nor pain, while external enemies are transformed into unfeeling monsters who do not value human life, or unruly women who are bitches or whores, or villains who are out-of-control psychopaths who can only be stopped with a bullet (or ten or twenty) from a good man’s gun, that being the only thing that ‘evil’ understands.

The principle of male centeredness adds another dimension by fostering the expectation that the natural and proper place for boys and men is always
at the center of attention. A real man has a place to go where everything will always be about him and where someone—a woman, if he is heterosexual—is there to be fascinated by whatever he has to say even if he does not apply that same standard to himself when it comes to her. He is successful and admired and makes a lot of money, the athlete or the class president or the one all the women want to date or the class clown everyone thinks is cool. And if he is not any of these things, or if he is but it is not enough, and he finds himself feeling lonely, isolated, ignored, excluded, invisible, or inferior, he may think that something is wrong with him, that he is less than a man. But male centeredness offers an alternative path—that he has been wronged, that it is unfair that he should feel this way, that the failings of others are responsible for the painful condition in which he finds himself. More than that, he is encouraged by the principle of male dominance and abundant cultural imagery to believe in his manly authority as an agent of punishment and revenge for those he holds responsible, to set things right, to attract their attention in a way they will not forget.

And so we have a steady supply of men doing violence in this society, socially isolated, their only friend the computer and the Internet, perhaps, and their guns—all of which they can manipulate and control—men who want someone to pay for the pain they feel. Or they want to make a name for themselves, to be noticed and seen, to top the record of the last mass murderer, to go out in what they imagine to be a blaze of self-righteous glory that will set them apart so that people will notice and remember and perhaps be sorry for how they were treated and how unhappy they were when they were alive. Sometimes they will dress themselves in the warrior uniform of a soldier or a dark superhero.

Whatever the scenario, it is not the loneliness or the isolation or the anger per se that are the problem, for we all know these things at one time or another. The problem is the socially patterned masculine response to such conditions that arises all too often from men’s participation in a patriarchal system that shapes not only their inner experience but their perception of other people, who they imagine themselves to be in relation to them, and what they feel they have a right to expect and do.

All of this is rooted in the last and most complex piece of the puzzle: male identification, the idea that men and manhood are the cultural standard for human beings in general and are thereby superior to women and womanhood. With manhood as the cultural standard, men’s point of view is privileged over that of women, to the extent of being seen as the only point of view, laying down a path of least resistance for men to see what they do as more important than what women do and to define core cultural values from a masculine perspective.

When members of any group are identified as superior to another group, not for anything they have done but simply for membership itself, it confers a sense of special status that can be seen even in children. The cultural folklore
about ‘boys being boys,’ for example, especially in response to dares, and, most important, not being held accountable for the consequences, is presented as if it were merely a reflection of the way men and boys are by nature. The perception is most powerful when applied to adult men, whose unrestrained, outrageous, and even criminal behavior (especially when drunk and in the case of rape) is routinely portrayed as something to be tolerated and excused, if not admired or made an object of good-natured humor.

This reflects a cultural mythology of male autonomy, independence, and superiority fostered from an early age in the freedom of movement and association still allowed to boys more than girls; in the visible daily example of a wife or mother’s obligation to subordinate herself to the personal needs of others, from which fathers and husbands are noticeably exempt; in the routine use of female referents as terms of insult (‘girl,’ ‘pussy’), which any boy cannot help but notice includes his mother, grandmother, and other female relations; in books, films, television shows, news reports, and history lessons focused on men and boys and what they do; in male-identified language by which ‘man’ and ‘guy’ and ‘brother’ are treated as synonymous with ‘human being’; in the routine and pervasive mass media objectification of girls’ and women’s bodies for the sole purpose of satisfying the male gaze. All of this and more projects a sense of masculine elevation, inflation, and exceptionalism that shapes not only how men and women are perceived but what is expected of them. This, in turn, fosters a sense of arrogance, entitlement, authority, and lack of accountability as part of the patriarchal manhood ideal.

On the surface, the manhood ideal might seem to apply only in relation to women, but it also creates a template for relations among men through the idea that it is possible for a category of people to be inherently superior or inferior, higher or lower, accountable or not—an idea introduced by patriarchy some seven thousand years ago. When elementary schoolteacher Jane Elliott, for example, conducted her famous classroom experiment with young children in which she divided them according to eye color and treated one group as being better than the other, she found that children quickly began treating their peers, including friends, with condescension, contempt, and a lack of empathy, believing their unearned advantage was theirs by right. Elliott and others were surprised by how quickly the introduction of such systemic divisions could shape how children saw themselves and others and how they behaved as a result.

The elevation of men and manhood is a sword that cuts both ways. Because the assumption of male superiority is based on a fiction, because men are not inherently superior by virtue of being male, the conferred sense of elevation, inflation, and exceptionalism is inherently unstable and always vulnerable to being exposed as a sham. This creates a chronic source of anxiety, especially in relation to other men, because it is men who control whether an individual man qualifies for continuing membership in the fraternity of true manhood. Anxiety, in turn, fuels the familiar patriarchal dynamic of fear and control in...
which men are encouraged to solidify and defend their claim to manhood by successfully creating doubt about that of other men (which is why gay men are so often the targets of men’s violence).

The result is a continuing pattern of men jockeying with other men for advantage and control, seeking out and exploiting vulnerability and defending against the same. It is often unconscious and can take many forms, from ‘friendly’ verbal banter to public humiliation to physical violence. It happens routinely in almost any venue where men interact with one another, from locker rooms, fraternities, and the neighborhood bar to corporate boardrooms, hospitals, faculty meetings, the military, and government. And when it is not happening, men are encouraged to be on guard for the moment when it does.

The elevated status conferred by male identification encourages men’s violence by sending the message that men have a compelling interest in the right to exercise control over anyone or anything within what they identify as their sphere of authority, from the family dog to a neighboring country to whatever planet it is possible to reach. By privileging men’s point of view, male identification also undermines empathy by encouraging men to dismiss or not even be aware of the needs and experience of others, and to base moral decisions, including whether to use violence, solely on abstract notions of principle and dignity, honor and authority, and ‘being in the right’ without also taking into account the consequences of what they do.

The fear and anxiety that go with trying to live up to the fiction of male superiority and control, coupled with men’s chronic vulnerability to other men trying to do the same, fuels the escalating dynamic between fear and control that on every level is the driving force behind patriarchy itself. Because the patriarchal antidote to fear is still more control, it is inevitable that some men will respond with violence.

The consequence of all this is an ongoing epidemic of male aggression and violence directed not only at women and girls but at other men and boys. While the cost to girls and women is hard to miss, less appreciated is the huge price paid by men and boys, including the rate at which they die from homicide and suicide and suffer from various forms of nonlethal self-destructive behavior. Feminism has often been blamed for this, especially when it comes to the difficulties many boys experience in school. In a sense, the critics are correct, but not because girls are now being privileged over boys or because maleness itself is being rejected and devalued. It is because feminism has challenged the assumption of male superiority without being able to remove it as a powerful cultural standard against which boys and men continue to measure themselves. In other words, by exposing the illusion of male superiority, feminism has increased the level of tension and anxiety in boys and men by making it more difficult to avoid the glaring contradiction between the cultural ideal of manhood and control and the reality of life as men and boys actually live it.

Most men and boys do not themselves engage in violence, of course, but with the odds loaded as they are by the ideals and contradictions inherent in
patriarchy as a system, it does not take a very large percentage of the population of men to create an enormous amount of suffering, especially with guns being as widely available as they are in the United States, accounting for more than two-thirds of all homicides and more than half of all suicides. And yet on the subject of men’s violence, there is almost complete silence. Why?

Worldviews and the Great Silence

On the most basic level, the silence about men’s violence results from interpreting ‘men’s violence’ using an individualistic model in which good things are done by good people and bad things by bad people and everything bad is somebody’s fault. From this perspective, when you ask what it means that most violence is perpetrated by men, the question appears to link violence not simply to the individual men who do it but to maleness itself, and the overwhelming majority of perpetrators have maleness in common not only with one another but with every man.

Now the issue appears to no longer be violence or violent men, but the mere fact of being a man as if that were problematic in itself and open to scrutiny. “Are all men violent?” comes the incredulous reply. “Is that what you’re trying to say?”

This is where the conversation often ends with an angry defense of men, which is the most immediate reason not to bring it up at all. Not daring to upset members of the dominant group, we are a nation tiptoeing around men’s anger, men’s ridicule, men’s potential to withhold resources (jobs or promotions or funding for battered women’s shelters and sexual assault programs), men’s potential for retaliation, violent and otherwise, men’s defensiveness, and the possibility that men might feel upset or attacked or called out or put upon or made to feel vulnerable or even just sad. In other words, we are going out of our way to avoid anything that might make men feel uncomfortable as men, that might interfere with their access to male privilege by identifying it as a problem.

I have seen this again and again over the years that I have worked on the issue of men’s violence. Whether testifying before a governor’s commission or serving on the board of a statewide coalition against domestic violence or consulting with a commissioner of public health, when I point out that since men are the perpetrators of most violence, they must be included in naming the problem—as in men’s violence against women—the response has been the same: We cannot do that. Men will get upset. They will think you’re talking about them.

What makes this complicated is that when men protest that most men are not violent, they are undoubtedly correct. Then what is all this talk about ‘men’s’ violence? Why not just ‘some men’s’ violence? Which takes us back to the individualistic model and how to make sense of the question.

If we think of ‘men’ as referring to the sum of individual men, then the objection makes sense. But we know that nothing is as simple as a collection
of individuals, that we are always participating in something larger than ourselves, an ‘it’ and not a ‘them,’ and that ‘men’ also names a category that locates people in relation to other categories and a social context that profoundly shapes experience and behavior. Now the question has a larger scope: Is it significant that the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of violence occupy the same social position? Is there something about the paths of least resistance that go along with that position in relation to others that might explain the pattern? This is what the question of ‘men’s violence’ really asks, but we never get that far because the combination of the individualistic model and defensiveness narrows the issue to whether individual men are good or bad.

The avoidance of displeasing men is just the outer layer of what sustains the silence. Given the power of a patriarchal worldview to shape what we think about, it is also likely that men’s violence is left unquestioned because much of the time it is not even considered, at least not long enough to form the basis for serious attention. I imagine there must be a moment as the experts stare at the photographs when they really do see, not to mention the people watching at home, the unmistakable pattern flashing through their minds. But I suspect that something happens then to make it go away, because to truly recognize what we are looking at will bring up deeper questions that are more disturbing than men’s anger could ever be. They are disturbing precisely because they are not about any men in particular. They are about men in general, which touches our need to see men in a positive way as part of a worldview that gives meaning and stability to our lives.

A worldview consists of everything that contributes to an ongoing sense of what is real and what matters. It is the sum total of what we know or think we know or just assume, consciously or not, a vast collection of interconnected beliefs, values, attitudes, images, and memories. Most of the time our worldview is the deep unconscious background that enables us to navigate reality from one moment to the next. It shapes how we see everything, from the cosmos and what happens when we die to why people do what they do. It provides the material out of which we construct a taken-for-granted reality that we do not have to question or even think about. It shapes not only what we perceive as real but how we make sense of it, how we explain what happens and what is and is not, and how we justify what we do in any given situation.

My worldview, for example, includes the belief that gravity is real. It has been established by science (also in my worldview) and I therefore do not question its existence. I think I know how it works and how to live in relation to it, so much so that I do not think about it most of the time, and when I hear about someone falling off a roof, I have no trouble understanding why they fall and why they get hurt or don’t survive, which is why I avoid high places.

If core aspects of a worldview are disrupted, it is a serious thing because what is happening is not just an idea or matter of fact being called into question, but our overall sense of reality itself. If this is not true, then how can I be sure of anything? Imagine that all of a sudden people and everything not tied
down start floating up into the air, or baseballs hit out of the park just keep on
going. Or that the route you drive every day suddenly is no longer the same—
streets not where they were, two-way streets now one-way, the signs and names
all changed around. Or one friend after another reveals they never really liked
you after all. You go along day after day thinking you know what’s what, how
things work, what to expect, and then something comes along and turns it all
upside-down.

Worldviews shape not only how we experience what is right in front of us
but also what we cannot see and what has not yet happened. If I see the world
as a dangerous place, for example, I will feel the need to protect myself from
things that have not happened and possibly never will, while if I see the world
as relatively safe, I will not. When women, for example, are asked to name the
precautions they take every day to protect themselves from sexual assault, they
typically produce lists whose length surprises many men, whose own lists are
altogether empty, reflecting a striking difference in worldviews.

Because worldviews enable us to assume that we know what is real from
one moment to the next, it is not hard to see why we would feel we cannot live
without them, which is why opposing worldviews can provoke such extreme
reactions. To nullify the threat, we draw on those same worldviews to under-
stand opponents in ways that leave our worldviews intact while discrediting
theirs. If we can manage it, we might even pretend they are not there.

Worldviews also come into play in situations where we lack information
that is important to us and often compensate by making it up, with our world-
view serving as the primary source. We cannot really know what is going to
happen in the next moment, for example, and we cannot really know why peo-
ple believe and do what they do. We cannot see into their hearts and minds.
But that does not keep us from acting as though we can. When I’m sitting in
my car at an intersection, for example, I don’t actually know what the driver of
that other car is going to do in the next ten seconds, but I act as if I do.

We continually make up reality as a way to avoid the anxiety and fear that
can come from uncertainty and from the need to feel solid ground beneath us.
We draw on our worldviews, on what we think we know or assume we know,
to create a credible version of what we do not. This includes the stories we tell
ourselves about ourselves and one another, who do we think we and other
people are, what are we capable of, the content of their secret lives, including
our own pasts. But then we forget—if we ever knew—that this is what we have
done, and go on as if the reality we have created is the actual person or group or
thing that it’s about.

The higher the stakes, the more important the stories become, which is cer-
tainly the case with worldviews that arise from living in a patriarchal society.
Unlike with most systems of privilege, women and men live in close intimacy
with each other in highly dependent relationships, especially in families. This
would be impossible were it not for the ability to construct beliefs about who
people are, including what they think and feel and what they are likely to do.
As part of this, we are drawn to the belief that unless they show otherwise, the men in our lives—fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, friends, lovers—are good men with whom we are safe. Because gender is part of what defines so many of our most important relationships, and because intimacy requires a level of trust that makes us vulnerable to others, we have a deep vested interest in violence not being gendered, in believing that gender is not a determining factor in either the cause of violence or in who winds up as perpetrators or victims.

It is no small thing, then, to identify men's violence as something that is not only real but the basis for an ongoing and often terrifying epidemic reported in the daily news, everything from the individual beating, rape, or murder to the massacre of children that can tear a community apart and stun the nation with its sudden and ferocious brutality. Again and again we hear people say they never expected violence from this man or that, a quiet neighbor, they say, friendly, even kind, a good father to his children, until for some reason they cannot fathom, shaking their heads, he drowned his children in the bathtub or strangled his wife or opened fire in the parking lot at work. We almost never see it coming, and yet all of these men are in families and workplaces and schools and churches. That we have no idea is a profoundly disturbing thing to realize, calling into question a worldview we depend on to provide predictability and order in our lives. If this man, this mother’s son, this woman’s husband, this children’s father, can do such things, then what is it that makes me believe this other man will not? We often fall back on telling ourselves the man was crazy, but even if that were so, then why is it that almost all the violent crazy people are men?

Unless we manage to put such questions from our minds, sooner or later we come around to the larger question of what kind of social system would lay down paths of least resistance such that if most people follow them most of the time, an epidemic of men’s violence would be the result. But to judge from the depth of the silence around this issue, we have so far managed to keep the patriarchal worldview intact by preventing such questions from taking up residence in our minds or public conversation.

There is a still larger and deeper level beneath the silence, one that goes beyond concerns about the individual men in people’s lives. In a male-identified worldview, manhood is defined not only as an ideal for men and boys but as a universal standard that applies to everyone, the purest expression of what it means to be a superior human being. Patriarchal manhood is a prerequisite to greatness and the defining attribute for any position that is culturally defined as worthy of honor, admiration, and respect. Any woman who aspires to be president, for example, or a firefighter, a soldier, a corporate CEO, or a hero of any kind, will be measured by the standard of patriarchal manhood, while a male rival will not be judged on his ability to meet the expectations of womanhood.⁶

Male identification also applies to society itself, to the idea of America, for example, and what it means to be American. Every society has a mythology,
the living collection of images and stories, folktales and songs, documents and history lessons, films and anthems, monuments, flags, speeches, and commemorations that we rely on to tell us who we are and what our nation is about. Richard Slotkin’s detailed account of the origins and evolution of American mythology reveals a national story that for hundreds of years has centered on men and their ability to dominate and control. The objects of that control have included the Earth and its nonhuman species, Native Americans and Mexicans who refused to surrender their land to American expansion, enslaved Africans and other people of color whose exploited labor was indispensable to American wealth and power, Southern secession and rebellion, white workers and immigrants, Filipinos who refused to become a colony of the United States following the Spanish-American War, and a long list of nations and groups considered to be a threat to American interests.

From The Last of the Mohicans and Custer’s Last Stand and ‘The Greatest Generation’ of World War II to Navy SEALs storming the refuge of Osama bin Laden, the focus of the American story has been not merely on men but on a masculine view of national strength, pride, superiority, and exceptionalism, the liberty and power to dominate and to act in the world without restraint. All of this is ultimately backed by a capacity for violence and the willingness to use it. Theodore Roosevelt, twice elected to the presidency, stated repeatedly that the most important measure of America’s national strength is its virility, that to be truly American is to be virile, and that virility has no higher or more powerful expression than a nation’s ability to impose its will on others, including, and especially, through the use of violence. Presidents since Roosevelt may have been less explicit, the language more coded, but the mythology has remained the same: nothing elicits the kind of national angst and outrage that follows an American combat defeat, or matches the thrill that comes with victory. And there are few ways to more quickly cast doubt on presidential leadership than for a president to show a reluctance in the use of force.

The people of the United States have not, of course, been of one mind about this story. There has always been vocal and sometimes passionate dissent. But manly violence as an instrument of American will and an indicator of national character and greatness has ruled the day almost from the beginning. With the exception of the Vietnam War, the withholding or withdrawal of that support has not been prompted by the belief that the use of violence was wrong or excessive but because a war has not been successful, a failure to win in a timely way. With recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, public support weakened primarily because the wars came to be seen as going on for too long and not worth the monetary cost and continued loss of American lives. There has, however, been no national outpouring of opposition or regret, much less shame, for the suffering and loss of life in local populations resulting from the U.S. invasion of these countries.

Manhood and the capacity for violence are not, of course, the whole of the American mythology, but without them and the consequences they have
produced and continue to produce, the story would be all but unrecognizable. This is why so much is at stake in the decision whether to openly acknowledge the reality of men’s violence, for to do so is to risk confronting the principle of dominance and control that lies at the core of the patriarchal worldview that, in turn, informs and shapes both individual lives and the nation as a whole. To avoid that, we focus on the idea that what we tell ourselves amounts to nothing more than the actions of a few evil or crazy individuals, instead of questioning the patriarchal system and its core principles. So great is our reluctance to look at the centrality of manhood and its link to violence that we remain silent and act as if there is nothing we can do because it is beyond our understanding, even if it means failing to protect our children.

A Worldview Is Hard to Crack

By their nature, worldviews are difficult to change. We tend not to be aware they even exist or how complex they are. Expose one part to scrutiny and doubt and you cannot help but bring others into question, from who you think you are to childhood heroes to feeling safe to national identity and pride.

When I consider why it is so hard to change a worldview—whether someone else’s or my own—I find that it depends on how it came to be there, what authority is behind it, and how ‘centrally located’ or interconnected it is in relation to the rest. My worldview, for example, includes the belief that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light. That bit of reality got added in when I read about it somewhere. I don’t remember where or when it was, but I do know I adopted this piece of information because the source was identified as science and, as with gravity, my worldview includes a general trust in what scientists claim as true, knowing all the while that it can change as new evidence comes to light. Adding this to my worldview happened in a particular moment in a particular way and from a particular source, and I could have decided against it or withheld judgment for one reason or another, as I sometimes do.

What I take to be real about the speed of light is a simple and isolated piece of my and many other people’s worldview. It is not connected to other beliefs that matter to me and has little effect on my life, so I don’t really care whether it’s true and would not hesitate to give it up if scientists came out and said it was no longer so.

It is a very different matter with something like the patriarchal definition of manhood that is acquired without our knowing it, being almost literally in the air we breathe from the moment we are born, repeated and affirmed over the years in stories and images and what people say and do. As it becomes embedded in an expanding web of belief, values, experience, and feeling, it acquires so many connections to other parts of our worldview that it can seem to originate from everywhere at once and to have been for all time, giving it an authority far more wide and deep than any particular source. Instead of being the belief of a person or a group or even a society, it appears as something
beyond the reach of mere evidence or opinion or time and place, not a belief at all but intuitively true, undeniable, obvious, the way things are, what everybody knows, ordained by God, an immutable fact.

So it is that the core principles of male dominance, male identification, male centeredness, and the masculine obsession with control come to be embedded in and indispensable to contemporary worldviews, providing generation after generation with a lens through which to perceive, interpret, and shape what is taken to be real.

The idea that women and men are inherently different is one piece of this complex constellation of belief. Unlike adopting an idea about the speed of light, we do not decide one day that from now on we are going to believe that men and women are inherently different. To the extent that we believe it, it is because we grew up knowing it to be so, a knowing connected to ideas not only about how women and men differ but about how they should not be the same. Men, for example, are still widely considered in the United States to be most desirable to the extent that they are aggressive, forceful, independent, and competitive, while women are valued for being yielding, emotional, and focused on relationships. Such views lost some adherents during the tumultuous 1970s and 1980s but since then have remained remarkably widespread and resistant to change. This is in spite of the strides women have made toward gaining access to positions of power and influence, although such progress slowed to a crawl more than twenty years ago.¹¹

At the heart of the patriarchal worldview is the male-identified obsession with control that shapes every major social institution, and it is here that we also find the cultural mythology about men's violence. This mythology is especially resistant to change because the emotional, cultural, and political investment runs so deep and across so many generations, and without our even knowing that’s what it is. Its deepest and most sacrosanct expression is to be found not in the daily depiction of heroic men with guns in television shows and films and video games and the news but in parks and village greens in every town and city in America. It is embodied in the monuments, statues, and cemeteries erected to honor the loss of men who have died in war beneath the weight of other men's violence. There are women who have lost their lives as well, but the place of these monuments in the national mythology is not about women or womanhood.

Nor is it simply about the individual men who have died and will continue to die as long as patriarchy continues. On a deeper and more powerful level it is about violence itself and the national mythology of manhood that gives it meaning and purpose. These men's sacrifice happened only through their participation in war, a patriarchal institution whose sole aim is victory through campaigns of mass killing, for which these men were trained as part of a role they were encouraged to accept from an early age. Whatever the reason given for a particular war, the fact of their deaths is the result of their being unable to kill other men before being killed themselves. And those other men were only
trying to avoid being killed themselves, with the ones who failed memorialized in towns and cities in nations around the world.

Obscured by the noble words, the historical accounts, the patriotic displays, and beneath the grief of those who suffer loss, war memorials are monuments to men’s violence and the patriarchal mythology of nationalism, manhood, and control that makes it happen.

Some will object that this does not distinguish ‘good’ violence from ‘bad,’ that it does not allow for the difference between what it takes to win a war and what Adam Lanza did on that morning in Newtown, including the taking of his own life. And I suspect they would not state their objections as a simple issue of fact but with some emotion, as in “How dare you?”

What makes the juxtaposition of war memorials and Adam Lanza so difficult, so objectionable and disturbing, is that it forces us to confront a deep ambivalence arising from the patriarchal worldview of men’s violence and the version of manhood that embodies it.

On one side of this ambivalence is a profound identification with manhood and the exercise of manly control, including the use of ‘heroic’ violence. This includes the man who stands alone against impossible odds, the only one who can save us from certain doom. Or the enraged hero or coolly detached professional ‘just doing his job’ who believes he is paying out revenge or enacting justice or combating evil or breaking through the enemy line in defense of national honor, pride, and freedom, acting from what he believes not only to be right but his right as a man in a society identified with men and manhood.

On the other side of our ambivalence is the man, also enraged or calmly professional, also believing in his claim to the use of violence in setting right what he believes to be wrong or unfair or not his just deserts or a threat to what he considers his own, the man who beats the woman who has dared to defy him one more time, or blows up a building as an act of political protest, or takes revenge on those who have deprived him of a living or issued the restraining order or ruled against him in court or caused injury to his honor and dignity. Or there is the man who feels so broken or tormented or humiliated by what he has done in the name of manhood, or failed to do, that he turns the violence on himself.

Put the one side of our ambivalence in your left hand and the other in your right and hold them up and ask what truly separates them in that moment when a man—whether he be the president of the United States or an unemployed factory worker—exercises what he has been taught to believe is his manly right to control, to decide when violence is called for and not, in that moment when he gives expression to the forceful, independent, aggressive manhood that is so widely expected and admired in a patriarchal world.

The point is not that the two sides of our ambivalence are the same. They are not. The point—as history and the daily news make so painfully clear—is that we cannot have the one without the other. The only way to see this is to bring the two together and allow ourselves to feel the depth of the ambivalence.
We cannot celebrate and idolize a male-identified obsession with control without also elevating, privileging, and celebrating men’s violence as an instrument and expression of it. And in a culture that associates the idea of manhood with ideals of autonomy and independence that authorize ‘real men’ to decide when and how to enact their manhood, we do not get to pick and choose the results before the damage has already been done.

The act of stepping back to examine the dominant worldview in any society is both necessary for change and full of risk. Even when we manage to do it, as many have in the past and continue to do today, the way forward is a difficult road. The reason for this lies in the nature of worldviews themselves, the core of which originates outside and prior to the individual. That core is a legacy passed down across so many generations that it can appear to have no origin at all but to have always been so. Because of this, it is easy to feel that we lack authority as individuals to call into question what appears to be reality itself. This is especially powerful because even those who disagree with the dominant worldview tend to assume that most other people do not. And so, to a lack of authority we must add feelings of ostracism, exclusion, isolation, and alienation that can be particularly painful and disempowering. It is not surprising, then, that in the face of this, so many people may not see what is right in front of them or realize what they are looking at.

None of this makes change impossible, but it does call on us to begin the journey with an awareness of what we are up against and what it will take to sustain ourselves as we set out to discover how to make a difference.
What is the knot we want to unravel? In one sense, it is the complexity of patriarchy as a system and worldview—the tree, from its roots to the smallest outlying twig. It is misogyny and sexist ideology that keep women in their place and men in theirs. It is the organization of social life around core patriarchal principles and the powerful dynamics of fear and control that keep it going. It is the fate of the Earth itself as the patriarchal obsession with control drives an economic system wreaking havoc on the environment on which we and every other species of life depend.

But the knot is also about our individual and collective paralysis when it comes to gender issues. It is everything that prevents us from seeing patriarchy and our participation in it, from the denial that patriarchy even exists to false parallels, individualistic thinking, and cycles of blame and guilt. Stuck in this paralysis, we cannot think or act to help undo the legacy of privilege and oppression.

To undo the patriarchal knot we have to undo the knot of our paralysis in the face of it. A good place to begin is with two powerful myths about how change happens and how we contribute to it.

**Myth 1: It’s Always Been This Way and Always Will Be**

Given thousands of years of patriarchal history, it is easy to slide into the belief that things have always been this way. Even thousands of years, however, are a far cry from what ‘always’ implies unless we leave out the more than 90 percent of humanity’s time on Earth that preceded it. Given all the archaeological evidence pointing to the existence of goddess-based civilizations and the lack
of evidence for perpetual patriarchy, there are plenty of reasons to doubt that life has always been organized around some form of privilege (see Chapter 3). When it comes to human social life, the smart money should be on the idea that nothing has always been or will be this way or any other, that the only thing we can count on is change. Reality is always in motion. Things may appear to stand still, but that is only because we have limited attention spans. If we take the long view—the really long view—we can see that everything is in process all the time.

Some argue that everything is process, the space between one point and another, the movement from one thing toward another. What we may see as permanent end points—global capitalism, Western civilization, advanced technology, and so on—are actually temporary states on the way to other temporary states. Even ecologists, who used to talk about ecological balance, now speak of ecosystems as inherently unstable. Instead of always returning to some steady state after a period of disruption, ecosystems are, by nature, a continuing process of change from one arrangement to another and never go back to the way they were.

Social systems are also fluid. A society is not some thing that sits there forever as it is. Because a system only happens as people participate in it, it cannot help but be a dynamic process of creation and re-creation from one moment to the next. In something as simple as a man following the path of least resistance toward controlling conversations (and a woman letting him), or being silent in the face of men’s violence, the reality of patriarchy in that moment comes into being. This is how we do patriarchy, bit by bit, moment by moment. It is also how individuals can contribute to change—by choosing paths of greater resistance.

Since we can always choose paths of greater resistance or create new ones entirely, systems can only be as stable as the flow of human choice and creativity, which is no recipe for permanence. In the short run, patriarchy and its worldview may look stable and unchangeable. But the relentless process of social life never produces the same result twice in a row, because it is impossible for everyone to participate in any complex system in an unvarying and uniform way. Added to this are the dynamic interactions that go on among systems—between capitalism and the state, for example, or between families and the economy, or between ecosystems and human populations—that also produce powerful and unavoidable tensions, contradictions, and other currents of change. Ultimately, systems cannot help but change, whether we notice it or not.

Social systems often seem stable because they limit our lives and imaginations so much that we cannot see beyond them. This is especially true when a social system has existed for so long that its past extends beyond collective memory of anything different. As a result, it lays down terms of social life—including various forms of privilege—that can easily be mistaken for some kind of normal and inevitable human condition.
But this masks a fundamental long-term instability caused by the dynamics of privilege and oppression. Any system organized around an obsession with control is ultimately a losing proposition because it contradicts the uncontrollable nature of reality and does such violence to basic human needs and values. As the last two centuries of feminist thought and action have begun to challenge the violence and break down the denial, patriarchy has become increasingly vulnerable. This is one reason why men’s resistance, backlash, and defensiveness can be so intense. Talk radio is full of men complaining about their lot, especially the inability to realize ideals of control in relation to their own lives, women, and other men. Fear and resentment of women are pervasive, from railing against affirmative action to worrying about being accused of sexual harassment or rape. Even the mildest criticism of men or mention of patriarchy is enough to elicit angry—and worried—charges of male bashing.

Patriarchy is also destabilized as the illusion of masculine control breaks down. As we saw in the financial collapse of 2008, corporate leaders alternate between arrogant confidence and optimism on the one hand and outright panic on the other, with banks becoming so large and complex that even their CEOs are no longer able to understand how they work. At the same time, governments lurch from one crisis to another, barely managing to stay in office, much less solving major social problems such as poverty, violence, terrorism and war, health care, middle-class angst, and, of course, the excesses and recklessness of global capitalism and the climate crisis it has caused. Computer technology supposedly makes life and work more efficient, but it does so by chaining people to an escalating pace of work and giving them less rather than more control over their lives.

The loss of control in pursuit of control is happening on a larger level as well. As the patriarchal obsession with control deepens its grip on everything from governments and corporations to schools and religion, the overall degree of control actually becomes less, not more. As out-of-control banks and other financial institutions illustrate, the scale on which systems are out of control simply grows larger. The stakes are higher and the capacity for harm is greater, and together they fuel an upward spiral of worry, anxiety, and fear.

As the illusion of control becomes more apparent, men start doubting their ability to measure up to patriarchal standards of manhood. We have been here before. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was widespread white male panic in the United States about the feminization of society and the need to preserve masculine toughness. From the creation of the Boy Scouts to Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders, a public campaign tried to revitalize manhood as a cultural basis for revitalizing a male-identified society and, with it, male privilege. A century later, the masculine backlash is again in full bloom with the warrior image re-emerging as a dominant ideal, from superhero movies to right-wing militias to images of war being invoked for everything from the search for a cancer cure to curbing illegal drug use.

Neither patriarchy nor any other system will last forever. Patriarchy is riddled with internal contradiction and strain. It is based on the false and
self-defeating assumption that control is the answer to everything and that the pursuit of more control is always better than contenting ourselves with less. The transformation of patriarchy has been unfolding ever since it emerged seven thousand years ago, and it is going on still. We cannot know what will replace it, but we can be confident that patriarchy will go, that it is going at every moment. It is only a matter of how quickly, by what means, at what cost, and toward what alternatives, and whether each of us will do our part to make it happen sooner rather than later and with less rather than more destruction and suffering in the process.

Myth 2: The Myth of No Effect and Gandhi’s Paradox

Whether we help change patriarchy depends on how we handle the belief that nothing we do can make a difference, that the system is too big and powerful for us to affect. In one sense, the complaint is valid: if we look at patriarchy as a whole, it is true that we are not going to make it go away in our lifetime. But if changing the entire system through our own individual efforts is the standard against which we measure the ability to do something, then we have set ourselves up to fail. It is not unreasonable to want to make a difference, but if we have to see the final result of what we do, then we cannot be part of change that is too gradual and long term to allow that.

We also cannot be part of change that is so complex that we cannot sort out our contribution from countless others that combine in ways we can never grasp. Problems like patriarchy are of just that sort, requiring complex and long-term change coupled with short-term work to soften some of its worst consequences and lay the groundwork for what is to follow. This means that if we are going to be part of the solution to such problems, we have to let go of the idea that change does not happen unless we are around to see it and that what we do matters only if we make it happen. In other words, if we free ourselves of the expectation of being in control of things, we free ourselves to act and participate in the kind of fundamental change that transforms social life.

To get free of the paralyzing myth that we cannot, individually, be effective, we have to change how we see ourselves in relation to a long-term, complex process of change. This begins by changing how we relate to time. Many changes can come about quickly enough for us to see them happen. When I was in college, for example, there was little talk about gender inequality as a social problem, whereas now there are women’s studies programs all over the country. But a goal like ending male privilege takes far more time than our short lives can encompass. If we are going to see ourselves as part of that kind of change, we cannot use the human life span as a significant standard against which to measure progress.

To see our choices in relation to long-term change, we have to develop what might be called ‘time constancy,’ analogous to what psychologists call ‘object constancy.’ Infants lack object constancy in the sense that if you hold a toy in
What Can We Do?

front of very young children and then put it behind your back while they watch, they cannot find the toy because they apparently cannot hold on to the image of it and where it went. In other words, if they cannot see it, it might as well not exist. After a while, children develop the cognitive ability to know that objects or people exist even when they are out of sight. In thinking about change and our relation to it, we need to develop something similar in relation to time that enables us to carry within us the belief that significant change happens even though we are not around to see it.

Along with time constancy, we need to get clear about how our choices matter and how they do not. Gandhi once said that nothing we do as individuals matters, but it is vital that we do it anyway. This touches on a powerful paradox in the relationship between society and individuals. In terms of the patriarchy-as-tree metaphor, no individual leaf on the tree matters. Whether it lives or dies has no effect on much of anything. But collectively, the leaves are essential to the whole tree because they photosynthesize the sugar that feeds it. Without leaves, the tree dies.

Leaves matter and they do not, just as we matter and we do not. What each of us does may not seem like much, because in important ways, it isn’t much. But when many people do this work together, they can form a critical mass that is anything but insignificant, especially in the long run. If we are going to be part of a larger change process, we have to learn to live with this sometimes uncomfortable paradox rather than go back and forth between momentary illusions of potency and control and feelings of helpless despair and insignificance.

A related paradox is that we have to be willing to travel without knowing where we are going. We need faith to do what seems right without necessarily knowing the effect our actions will have. We have to think like pioneers who may know the direction they want to move in or what they would like to find, without knowing where they will wind up. Because they are going where they have never been before, they cannot know whether they will ever arrive at anything they might consider a destination, much less what they had in mind when they first set out. If pioneers had to know their destination from the beginning, they would never go anywhere or discover anything.

In similar ways, to seek out alternatives to patriarchy, it has to be enough to move away from social life organized around dominance and control and to move toward the certainty that alternatives are possible, even though we may not have a clear idea of what those are or may never experience them ourselves. It has to be enough to question how we think about and experience different forms of power, for example—how we see ourselves as gendered people, how privilege and oppression work and how we participate—and then open ourselves to experience what happens next. When we dare to ask core questions about who we are and how the world works, things happen that we cannot foresee, but they do not happen unless we move, even if only in our minds. As pioneers, we discover what is possible only by first putting ourselves in motion, because we have to move in order to change our position—and hence our
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perspective—on where we are, where we have been, and where we might go. Alternatives begin to appear as we imagine how things might be, but first we have to get past the idea that things will always be the way they are.

In relation to Gandhi’s paradox, the myth of no effect obscures the role we can play in long-term transformations. But the myth also blinds us to our own power in relation to other people. We may cling to the belief that there is nothing we can do precisely because we know how much power we do have and are afraid to use it because people may not like it. If we deny our power to affect people, then we do not have to worry about taking responsibility for how we use it or, more significant, how we do not.

The reluctance to acknowledge and use power comes up in the simplest everyday situations, as when a group of friends starts laughing at a sexist or homophobic joke and we have to decide whether to go along. It is a moment in a sea of countless such moments that constitutes the fabric of all kinds of oppressive systems. It is a crucial moment because the group’s seamless response to the joke reaffirms the normalcy and unproblematic nature of it and the system of privilege behind it. It takes only one person to tear the fabric of collusion and apparent consensus.

On some level, we each know we have this potential, and this knowledge can empower us or scare us into silence. We can change the course of the moment with something as simple as visibly not joining in the laughter, or saying, “I don’t think that’s funny.” We know how uncomfortable this can make people and how they may ward off their discomfort by dismissing, excluding, or even attacking us as bearers of bad news. Our silence, then, is not because nothing we do will matter. Our silence is our not daring to matter.

Our power to affect other people is not simply about making them feel uncomfortable. Systems shape the choices people make primarily by providing paths of least resistance. We typically follow those paths because alternatives offer greater resistance or because we are not even aware that alternatives exist. Whenever we openly choose a different path, however, we make it possible for people to see both the path of least resistance they are following and the possibility of choosing something else.

The choice is both radical and simple. When most people get on an elevator, for example, they turn and face front without ever thinking why. We might think it is for purely practical reasons—the floor indicators and the door we exit through are at the front. But there is more going on than that, as we would discover if we simply walked to the rear wall and stood facing it while everyone else faced front. The oddness of what we were doing would immediately be apparent to everyone, and would draw their attention and perhaps make them uncomfortable as they tried to figure out why we were doing that. Part of the discomfort is simply calling attention to the fact that we make choices when we enter social situations and that there are alternatives, something that paths of least resistance discourage us from considering. If the possibility of alternatives in situations as simple as where to stand in an elevator can make people
feel uncomfortable, imagine the potential for discomfort when the stakes are higher, as they certainly are when it comes to how people participate in oppressive systems like patriarchy.

If we choose different paths, we usually will not know if we affect other people, but it is safe to assume that we do. When people know that alternatives exist and witness other people choosing them, things become possible that were not before. When we openly pass up a path of least resistance, we increase resistance for other people around that path because now they must reconcile their choice with what they have seen us do, something they did not have to deal with before. There is no way to predict how this will play out in the long run, and there is certainly no good reason to think it will not make a difference.

The simple fact is that we affect one another all the time without knowing it. When my family moved to our house in the woods of northwestern Connecticut, one of my first pleasures was blazing walking trails through the woods. Sometime later I noticed deer scat and hoofprints along the trails, and it pleased me to think they had adopted the trail I’d laid down. But then I wondered if perhaps I had followed a trail laid down by others when I cleared ‘my’ trail. I realized that there is no way to know that anything begins or ends with me and the choices I make. It is more likely that the paths others have chosen influence the paths I choose.

This suggests that the simplest way to help others make different choices is to make them myself, and to do it openly so they can see what I am doing. As I shift the patterns of my own participation in patriarchy, I make it easier for others to do so as well—and harder for them not to. Simply by setting an example—rather than trying to change people—I create the possibility of their participating in change in their own time and in their own way. I can thus widen the circle of change without provoking the kind of defensiveness that perpetuates paths of least resistance and the systems they perpetuate.

It is important to see that in doing this kind of work we do not have to go after people to change their minds. In fact, changing people’s minds may play a relatively small part in changing systems. Rather than turning die-hard misogynists into practicing feminists, we can shift the odds in favor of new paths that contradict core patriarchal values. We can introduce so many exceptions to the patriarchal worldview that the children or grandchildren of die-hard misogynists will start to change their perception of which paths offer the least resistance. Research on men’s changing attitudes toward the male provider role, for example, shows that most of the shift occurs between generations, not within them.5

This same dynamic is what has driven the dramatic change in attitudes toward same-sex marriage in the United States. In the ten years between 2003 and 2013, for example, the percentage of Americans reporting favorable images of lesbians and gays rose from 38 percent to 58 and 54 percent, respectively, while the percentage supporting same-sex marriage rose from 51 to 72 percent. Much of this change reflects the greater level of LGBT acceptance among
young people: 65 percent of those eighteen to twenty-nine years old support same-sex marriage, for example, compared with just 39 percent of those age sixty-five and older.\(^6\)

All of this suggests that rather than trying to persuade individual people, the most important thing we can do is contribute to shifting entire cultures so that patriarchal forms and values begin to lose their ‘obvious’ legitimacy and normalcy and new forms emerge to challenge their privileged place in social life. And when this happens, the structures of privilege—the unequal and oppressive distribution of wealth, power, resources, and opportunities—become harder to maintain.

In science, this is how one paradigm replaces another.\(^7\) For hundreds of years, for example, Europeans believed that the stars, planets, and the sun revolved around Earth. But Copernicus and Galileo found that too many of their astronomical observations were anomalies that did not fit the prevailing paradigm: if the sun and planets revolved around Earth, then they would not move as they did. The accumulation of such observations made it increasingly difficult to hang on to an Earth-centered paradigm. Eventually the anomalies became so numerous that Copernicus offered a new paradigm, for which he, and later Galileo, were persecuted as heretics. Eventually, however, the evidence was so overwhelming that a new paradigm replaced the old one.

In similar ways, we can think of patriarchy as a system based on a worldview that shapes how we think about gender and organize social life in relation to it. The patriarchal worldview has been under attack for several centuries and the defense has been vigorous, with feminists widely regarded as heretics who practice the blasphemy of male bashing. The patriarchal worldview weakens in the face of mounting evidence that it produces unacceptable consequences. We help weaken it by openly choosing alternative paths in our everyday lives and thereby providing living anomalies that do not fit the prevailing paradigm. By our example, we contradict patriarchal assumptions and their legitimacy over and over again. We add our choices and our lives to tip the scales toward a worldview that does not revolve around control, privilege, and oppression. We cannot tip the scales overnight or by ourselves, and in that sense we do not amount to much. But on the other side of Gandhi’s paradox, the poet Bonaro Overstreet reminds us that it is up to us to decide where to place “the stubborn ounces” of our weight.\(^8\) It is in such small and humble choices that patriarchy and the movement toward something better actually happen.

**Stubborn Ounces: What Can We Do?**

There are no easy answers to the question of what to do about patriarchy. There is no twelve-step program, no set of instructions for turning it into something else. Most important, there is no way around or over it—the only way out is through.

We will not end oppression by pretending it isn’t there or that we don’t have to deal with it. Some may complain that working for change is divisive
by drawing attention to oppressive systems of privilege. But when members of dominant groups mark differences by excluding or discriminating against subordinate groups and treating them as other, they are not accused of being divisive. Usually it is only when someone calls attention to how differences are used as a basis for privilege that the charge of divisiveness comes up.

In a sense, it is divisive to say that oppression and privilege exist, but only insofar as it points to divisions that already exist and to the perception that the status quo is normal and unremarkable. Privilege and oppression promote the worst kind of divisiveness because they cut us off from one another and, by silencing us, cut us off from ourselves as well. Not only must we participate in privilege and oppression by living in society, but we also must act as though they don’t exist, denying the reality of our own experience and its consequences for people’s lives, including our own.

What does it mean to go out by going through? What can we do about patriarchy that will make a difference?

**Acknowledge That Patriarchy Exists**

A key to the continued existence of every oppressive system of privilege is people being unaware of it, because privilege contradicts so many basic human values that it invariably arouses opposition when people know about it. The Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, for example, were riddled with contradictions that were so widely known among their people that the regimes fell apart with barely a whimper when given half a chance. Something similar happened in 2011 when Egypt’s authoritarian ruler was deposed as a result of popular protests. An awareness of privilege can compel people to break the silence on which continued privilege depends. This is why most cultures mask the reality of privilege with a worldview that denies its existence, trivializes it, calls it something else, blames it on those most damaged by it, or draws attention to other things.

It is one thing to become aware and quite another to stay that way. The greatest challenge when we first become aware of a critical perspective on the world is to hang on to it. Every system’s paths of least resistance invariably lead away from critical awareness of the system and how it works. Therefore, the easiest thing to do after reading a book like this is to forget about it. Maintaining a critical consciousness takes commitment and work. An alternative worldview is something we either maintain in the moment or don’t. And the only way to hang on to an awareness of patriarchy is to make paying attention to it an ongoing part of our lives.

**Pay Attention**

Understanding how patriarchy works and how we participate is essential for change. It’s easy to have opinions, but it takes work to know what we’re talking
about. The most available place to begin is to make reading about patriarchy part of your life. Unless you have the luxury of a personal teacher, you cannot understand patriarchy without reading, just as you need to read about a foreign country before you travel there for the first time. Many people assume they already know what they need to know about gender since everyone has a gender, but they are invariably wrong. Just as the last thing a fish would discover is water, the last thing we will discover is society itself.

This means you have to be open to the idea that what you think you know is, if not wrong, so deeply shaped by the patriarchal worldview that it misses most of the truth. This is why feminists talk with one another and spend time reading one another's work—seeing things clearly is tricky and difficult work. This is also why people who are critical of the status quo are so often self-critical as well, for they know how complex and elusive the truth really is and what a challenge it is to work toward it. People working for change are often accused of being orthodox and rigid, but they can be among the most self-critical people around.

There is a huge feminist literature available through any decent library and, increasingly, online, although you might never know it to judge from its invisibility in the mass media and mainstream bookstores. In fact, it is a good idea not to rely on mass media for meaningful analysis of privilege in any form. The media ignore most of what is known about privilege and routinely focus on issues that have the least to do with it (“Do men and women use different parts of their brains?”), that reflect the most flawed models of social reality (“Men are from Mars, . . .”), and that set women against one another, especially when women attack other women. Most feminist work is virtually invisible to book reviewers, journalists, editorial writers, columnists, and publishers. So, to know what’s going on, it may take an Internet search followed by a trip to the library or an interlibrary loan request or a special order at the bookstore. But we can do more than that—we can also tell librarians and bookstore managers how surprised we are that they do not stock such essential reading for understanding the world.

As you educate yourself, it is important to avoid reinventing the wheel. Many people have already done a lot of work that you can learn from. There is no way to get through it all, but you don’t have to in order to develop a clear enough sense of how to act in meaningful and informed ways.

A good place to start is a basic text on women’s studies. Men who feel there is no place for them in women’s studies can start with books about patriarchy and gender that are written by men. Sooner or later, however, men will have to turn to what women have written, because women have done most of the work of figuring out how patriarchy works. Those who expect feminist writings to be full of animosity toward men should prepare themselves for a surprise. And while it is important not to swallow anything whole and uncritically, it is also important that men believe what women say about their experience of oppression under patriarchy. These are,
after all, our mothers, sisters, daughters, lovers, wives, and friends telling us in a resounding collective voice of centuries of oppression from perspectives that we as men cannot duplicate. When the stories originate from women of so many ages and racial, class, and ethnic backgrounds, and when they echo across cultures and so much history, they call on men to have enough respect and humility to be silent for a while and listen.

Reading, though, is only a beginning. At some point you have to look at yourself and the world to identify what you are reading about. Once the phrase ‘path of least resistance’ entered my active vocabulary, for example, I started seeing them all over the place. The more aware I am of how powerful a path is, the more I can decide whether to go down it each time it presents itself. When this kind of awareness is shared openly among people, the possibilities for alternative paths multiply rapidly, especially when you realize that you don’t have to feel guilty for what you’re leaving behind.

If we focus on paths and people’s choices in relation to them rather than on the content of their character, we can leave guilt and blame behind and work to identify new paths and support ourselves and other people in choosing them. It doesn’t have to be about continually pointing to ‘what’s wrong’ with ourselves or someone else, because the truth is that individuals are not the problem. The primary problem is the system we participate in and the consequences that result from the choices we make in relation to it. Seeing this and seeing how we can participate differently is not easy or fun. But it is a way for women and men to reclaim important parts of their lives that are now compromised, distorted, and damaged under patriarchy.

There are endless opportunities to participate in change, because paths of least resistance connect us to all kinds of systems. At work, the path of least resistance for managers is to mentor and promote people who most resemble themselves, which in most companies turns out to be white men. Whether at work or on the street, sexual harassment results from men following paths that define both male and female sexuality in male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered terms. In everyday conversation, the path of least resistance is for men to dominate and be heard and for women to defer and be unheard. In school, patriarchal paths draw teachers to pay more and better attention to boys than to girls, draw boys to take advantage of it, and draw girls to expect less than they need or deserve. In politics, leaders routinely act as though compassion and compromise are weakness and domination and control are the only valid measures of strength and success. And on it goes, from one social situation and system to another, as the patriarchal worldview shapes how we perceive alternatives and how we choose among them without even knowing it. The challenge is to know it by becoming more aware of both the paths inherent in those situations and the choices we make about them.

It helps to be like anthropologists, participant observers who watch and listen to others and ourselves, who notice patterns that come up over and over in social life. We can pretend we are strangers in a strange land who know
nothing about where we are and know that we know nothing. This keeps us open to mistaken assumptions and the surprise of realizing that things are not what they seem.

This is especially challenging for men, whose privilege tells them they should not have to work to figure out someone else, that it’s up to others to figure them out. It is easy for men to fall into the trap of being like impatient, arrogant tourists who do not take the initiative to educate themselves about where they are and their place in it. But taking responsibility means men not waiting for women to tell them what to do, to point out what is happening, or to identify alternatives. If men are going to take their share of responsibility, it is up to men to listen, watch, ask, and listen again, to make it their business to find out for themselves. If they do not, they will slide down the oblivious path of male privilege. And then they will be just part of the problem, and they will be blamed, and they will have it coming.

Learn to Listen

This is especially difficult for members of dominant groups. If someone confronts you with your own behavior that supports privilege, step off the path of least resistance that encourages you to defend and deny. Do not tell them they’re too sensitive or need a better sense of humor, and do not try to explain away what you did as something else than what they are telling you it was. Do not say you didn’t mean it or that you were only kidding. Do not tell them what a champion of justice you are or how hurt you feel because of what they’re telling you. Do not make jokes or try to be cute or charming, since only privilege can lead someone to believe these are acceptable responses to something as serious as privilege and oppression. Listen to what is being said. Take it seriously. Assume for the time being that it is true, because given the power of paths of least resistance, it probably is. And then take responsibility to do something about it.10

A student of color in one of my classes, for example, once told me that she noticed me cutting her off during class, something she did not think I did with white students. I could have weighed in with my professorial authority and said it wasn’t true, that she was imagining it, that I treat all my students the same, that she was being too sensitive, that I travel all over the country speaking about issues of inequality and injustice, so certainly I was above such things. But what I said to her was that I was truly sorry she’d had that experience. I was not aware of doing that, I told her, but the fact that I did not consciously mean to was beside the point.

To respond in this way, I had to decenter myself from my position of privilege and make her experience and not mine the point of the conversation. I ended by telling her I would do everything I could to pay attention to this in the future to make sure it did not happen in my classes.
It is important to note that my goodness or badness as a person was not the issue. The issue was the existence of pervasive racist patterns through which privilege is enacted every day and whether I was unconsciously reproducing those patterns and, most important, whether I was willing to take responsibility for paying attention to my own behavior as a participant. I believe that most of the time, members of subordinate groups are not looking for dominant groups to feel ashamed or guilty, because this will do nothing in itself to improve their own lives. In my experience, the true goal is to end privilege and oppression and to get dominant groups to commit themselves to doing whatever they can to make that happen.

_Little Risks: Do Something_

The more you pay attention to what is going on, the more you will see opportunities to do something about it. You do not have to mount an expedition to find them, because they are all over the place, beginning in ourselves.

As I became aware of how I gravitated toward controlling conversations, for example, I also realized how easily men dominate group meetings by controlling the agenda and interrupting, without women objecting to it. This pattern is especially striking in groups that are mostly female but in which most of the talking nonetheless comes from a few men. I would find myself sitting in meetings and suddenly the preponderance of male voices would jump out at me, an unmistakable hallmark of male privilege in full bloom.

I have had to decide what to do about this little path of least resistance and my relation to it that leads me to follow it so readily. With some effort, I have tried out new ways of listening more and talking less. At times it has felt contrived and artificial, like telling myself to shut up for a while or even counting slowly to ten (or more) to give others a chance to step into the silence. With time and practice, new paths have become easier to follow and I spend less time monitoring myself. But awareness is never automatic or permanent, for patriarchal paths of least resistance will be there to choose or not as long as patriarchy exists.

You might be thinking at this point that everything comes down to changing individuals after all since doing something is a matter of people's behavior. In a sense, of course, it is true that, for us, it all comes down to what we do or do not do as individuals since that is what we are. But the key is always to connect our choices to the systems we participate in. When we openly change how we participate in a system, we do more than change our own behavior, for we also change how the system itself happens. When we change how a system operates, we change the social environment that shapes other people's behavior, which, in turn, further changes how the system operates. And when we do that, we also change the consequences that come out of the dynamic relationship between systems and individuals, including patterns of privilege and oppression.
Sometimes stepping off the path of least resistance is a matter of directly calling attention to the system and how it is organized. As we will see shortly, for example, it might involve calling attention to the distribution of power and resources in an organization: Why are all the secretaries women and all the executives men? Why is the custodial staff mostly people of color and the management staff entirely white? Choosing to call attention to such patterns means changing our own behavior, but it does more than that, because the focus of our actions is the system itself.

In short, since the world happens as it does through the dynamic relationship between individuals and social systems, changing the world has to involve both.

As we see more of what is happening, questions will come up about what goes on at work, in the media, in families, in communities, in religion, in government, on the street, and at school—just about everywhere. The questions do not come all at once (for which we can be grateful), although they sometimes come in a rush that can feel overwhelming. If we remind ourselves that it isn’t up to us to do it all, however, we can see plenty of situations in which we can make a difference, sometimes in surprisingly simple ways. Consider the following possibilities:

Organize, organize, organize was the advice given by the writer, abolitionist, and former slave Frederick Douglass. Work with other people. This is one of the most important principles of participating in social change. From expanding consciousness to taking risks, it makes all the difference in the world to be in the company of people who support what you are trying to do. You can read and talk about books and issues and just plain hang out with other people who want to understand and do something about patriarchy. Remember that the modern women’s movement’s roots were in consciousness-raising groups in which women did little more than gather to talk about themselves and their lives and try to figure out what that had to do with living in patriarchy. It may not have looked like much at the time, but it laid the foundation for huge social movements. One way down this path is to share a book like this one with someone and then talk about it. Or ask around about local groups and organizations that focus on gender issues, and go find out what they’re about and meet other people. After reading a book or article that you like, write to the author in the care of the publisher or by e-mail. Don’t be stopped by the belief that authors do not want to hear from interested readers, because the truth is that they usually welcome it and respond. Make contact and connect to other people engaged in the same work. Do whatever reminds you that you are not alone in this, and in so doing, you will remind others that they are not alone either.

Make noise, be seen. Stand up, volunteer, speak out, write letters, sign petitions, show up. Like every oppressive system of privilege, patriarchy feeds on silence. Breaking the silence is especially important for men, because it un-
dermines the assumption of male solidarity that patriarchy depends on. If this feels too risky, men can practice being aware of how silence reflects their investment in solidarity with other men. This can be a place to begin working on awareness: “Today I said nothing, colluded in silence, and this is how I benefited from it. Tomorrow I can try something different.”

Find little ways to withdraw support from paths of least resistance and people’s choices to follow them, starting with yourself. It can be as simple as not laughing at a sexist joke or saying you don’t think it’s funny. Or writing a letter to the editor objecting to sexism in the media. When my local newspaper ran an article whose headline referred to sexual harassment as “earthy behavior,” for example, I wrote a letter pointing out that harassment is anything but.

The key is to interrupt the flow of business as usual. You can disrupt the assumption that everyone is going along with the status quo by not going along yourself. This stops the flow, if only for a moment, and in that moment other people can notice and start to think and question. It is a perfect time to suggest the possibility of alternatives such as humor that is not at someone else’s expense or of ways to think about harassment and violence that do justice to the reality of what it is and how it affects people’s lives.

We often like to think of ourselves as individuals—especially in the United States. But it is amazing how much of the time we compare ourselves to other people as a way to see how well we fit in. Anything that disrupts this process in even the smallest way can affect taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie social reality. It might help to think of this process as inserting grains of sand in an oyster to irritate it into creating a pearl of insight, or as a way to make patriarchy itch, stir, and scratch and thereby reveal itself for others to see, or as planting seeds of doubt about the desirability and inevitability of the way things are, and, by example, planting seeds of what might be.

Dare to make people feel uncomfortable, beginning with yourself. At the next local school board meeting, for example, ask why principals and other administrators are almost always men, while the teachers they control are mostly women, especially in elementary school. Ask how students are being prepared to deal with gender issues in their lives, including men’s violence and the use of social media to stalk and harass women and girls.

It may seem that such actions do not amount to much until you stop for a moment and feel your resistance to doing them—your worry, for example, about how easily you could make people feel uncomfortable, including yourself. If you take that resistance to action as a measure of power, then your potential to make a difference is plain to see. The potential for people to feel uncomfortable is a measure of the power for change inherent in such simple acts of not going along with the status quo.

Some will say that it isn’t nice to make people uncomfortable, but patriarchy does a lot more than make people feel uncomfortable, and it certainly
isn’t nice to allow it to continue. Besides, discomfort is an unavoidable part of any meaningful process of education. You cannot grow without being willing to challenge your assumptions and take yourself to the edge of your competencies, where you are bound to feel uncomfortable. If you cannot tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, and discomfort, then you will never go beneath the superficial appearance of things or learn or change anything of much value, including yourself.

Openly choose and model alternative paths. As you identify paths of least resistance—such as women being held responsible for child care and other domestic work—you can identify alternatives and then follow them openly so that other people can see what you are doing. Patriarchal paths become more visible when people choose alternatives, just as rules become more visible when someone breaks them. Modeling new paths creates tension in a system, which moves toward resolution (like the irritated oyster). You do not have to convince anyone of anything. As Gandhi put it, the work begins with us as we work to be the change we want to see happen in the world. Anyone who thinks this has no effect need only watch how people react to the smallest departures from paths of least resistance, at how much effort people expend trying to ignore or explain away or challenge those who choose alternative paths.

Actively promote change in how systems are organized around patriarchal values and male privilege. There are almost endless possibilities here because social life is complicated and patriarchy is everywhere. You can, for example:

- Start where you live by paying attention to and speaking out on issues of gender equity in your family. Cultural ideas about wives and husbands, mothers and fathers are linchpins of male privilege.
- Speak out for equality in the workplace.
- Promote awareness and training around issues of privilege.
- Support equal pay and promotion for women.
- Oppose the devaluing of women and the work they do, from the dead-end jobs most women are stuck in to the glass ceilings that keep women out of top positions.
- Support the well-being of mothers and children and defend women’s right to control their bodies and their lives.
- Object to the punitive dismantling of welfare and attempts to limit women’s access to contraception and other reproductive health services.
- Speak out against violence and harassment against women wherever they occur, whether at home, at work, or on the street.
- Object to media coverage of men’s violence in all its forms that ignores gender.
• Support government and private support services for women who are victimized by men’s violence.
• Volunteer at the local rape crisis center or battered women’s shelter.
• Call for and support clear and effective antiharassment and abuse policies in workplaces, unions, schools, professional associations, government, religious institutions, and political parties, as well as public spaces such as parks, sidewalks, and malls.
• Join and support groups that intervene with and counsel men who perpetrate violence against women.
• Object to pornography in theaters, fraternities, and neighborhoods and on the Internet. This does not require a debate about censorship—just the exercise of freedom of speech to articulate pornography’s role in patriarchy and to express how its opponents feel about it.
• Ask questions about how work, education, religion, family, and other areas of social life are shaped by core patriarchal values and principles. Some accept women’s entry into combat branches of the military or the upper reaches of corporate power as progress, for example. But others question what happens to people and societies when political and economic institutions are organized around control, domination, ‘power over,’ and, by extension, competition and the use of violence. Is it progress to allow selected women to share control with men over oppressive systems of privilege?
• Speak out to expose the connection between patriarchy and the way social institutions are organized—how the masculine obsession with control, for example, is connected to militarism and war, ways of responding to and defending against terrorism, government surveillance and the invasion of privacy, the exploitation and destruction of the natural environment, and the oppression or working people and people of color.

Openly support people who step off the path of least resistance. When you witness someone else taking a risk—speaking out, calling attention to privilege and oppression—do not wait until later to tell them in private that you are glad they did. Waiting until you’re alone makes it safer for you but does them little good. Support is most needed when the risk is being taken, not later on, so do not wait. Make your support as visible and public as the courageous behavior that you’re supporting.11

Because discrimination and persecution targeting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people is a linchpin of patriarchy, support the right of women and men to be who they are and to love whom they choose. Raise awareness of homophobia and heterosexism. Ask school officials and teachers about what is
happening to LGBT students in local schools. If they do not know, ask them to find out, since it is a safe bet that LGBT students are being harassed by other students and in other ways oppressed at one of the most vulnerable stages of life. If you find alternatives to heterosexuality to be unacceptable for moral or religious reasons, then consider how the treatment of LGBT people is used to perpetuate patriarchy and the oppression of women. Whether in the media or among friends, when gender identity and sexual orientation are discussed, raise questions about their relation to patriarchy. Remember that it is not necessary to have answers to questions in order to ask them. Offer support to those who question and challenge the rigid dualisms of sex and gender, female and male, masculine and feminine, on which the patriarchal worldview depends.

Because patriarchy is rooted in principles of domination and control, pay attention to racism and other forms of oppression that draw from those same roots. There has been a great deal of struggle within women’s movements about the relationship between patriarchy and other forms of privilege, especially those based on race, social class, and sexual orientation. There has also been debate over whether some forms of privilege are more important to attack first or produce more oppressive consequences than others.

One way out of this conflict is to realize that patriarchy is not problematic just because it emphasizes male dominance but because it promotes dominance and control as ends in themselves. In that sense, all forms of privilege draw support from common roots, and whatever we do that draws attention to those roots undermines them all. If working against patriarchy is seen as enabling some women to get a bigger piece of the pie, then some women will succeed at the expense of others who are disadvantaged by race, class, or sexual orientation. But if we identify the core problem as any society organized around privilege, then changing that requires attention to all forms of privilege and oppression. Whether we begin with race or gender or disability status or class, if we name the problem correctly, we will wind up going in the same direction.

Do not keep it to yourself. A corollary of looking for company and organizing is not to restrict your focus to the tight little circle of your own life. It is not enough to work out private solutions to social problems like patriarchy and other forms of privilege and keep them to yourself. It is not enough to clean up your own act and then walk away, to find ways to avoid the worst consequences of patriarchy at home and inside yourself and think that is taking responsibility. Patriarchy is not a personal problem and it cannot be solved through personal solutions alone. At some point, taking responsibility means acting in a larger context, even if it means letting only one other person know what you are doing. It makes sense to start with yourself, but it is equally important not to end with yourself.

If all of this sounds overwhelming, remember again that we do not have to deal with everything. We do not have to set ourselves the impossible task of
letting go of everything or transforming patriarchy or even ourselves. All we can do is what we can manage to do, secure in the knowledge that we are making it easier for other people—now and in the future—to see and do what they can do. So, rather than defeat yourself before you start:

- *Think small, humble, and doable rather than large, heroic, and impossible.* Do not paralyze yourself with impossible expectations. It takes very little to make a difference. Small acts can have radical implications. If the main requirement for the perpetuation of evil is that good people do nothing, then the choice is not between all or nothing but between nothing or *something.*

- *Do not let other people set the standard for you.* Start where you are and work from there. Make a list of all the things you could actually imagine *doing*—from reading another book about patriarchy to suggesting policy changes at work to raising questions about who cleans the bathroom at home—and rank them from the most risky to the least. Start with the least risky and set reasonable goals (“What small risk for change will I take today?”). As you get more experienced at taking risks, you can move up your list. You can commit yourself to whatever the next steps are for you, the tolerable risks, the contributions that offer some way—however small it might seem—to help balance your inability to avoid being part of the problem. As long as you do something, it counts.

In the end, taking responsibility does not have to be about guilt and blame, about letting someone off the hook or being on the hook yourself. It is to acknowledge your obligation to make a contribution to finding a way out of patriarchy and to find constructive ways to act on that obligation. You do not have to do anything dramatic or earth-shaking to help change happen. As powerful as patriarchy is, like all oppressive systems, it cannot stand the strain of many people coming together to do something about it, beginning with the simplest act of speaking its name out loud where others can hear.
Appendix

Resources for Unraveling the Knot

Here are some resources for acting on the suggestions in Chapter 11. They fall into four general categories—periodicals and books, feminist bookstores, websites, and examples of how women and men can organize to work together on these issues.

READINGS

In putting together a collection of recommended periodicals and books, I’ve thought primarily of what might be useful after reading *The Gender Knot*. The titles listed here are only a tiny portion of the huge literature that is available. I tried to choose books that have interesting things to say, whether I agree with them or not, that are readable and available in paperback, that do not assume a lot of prior knowledge of gender issues or any particular academic discipline, and that touch on one or more of the major issues involved in patriarchy and gender inequality. To make the list easier to use, I have grouped the suggested readings by type of publication and subject matter.

Periodicals and Journals

| Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work | Feminist Studies |
| Asian Journal of Women’s Studies | Feminist Teacher |
| Association Journal | Gender and Development |
| Australian Feminist Studies | Gender and Education |
| Berkeley Women’s Law Journal | Gender and History |
| Canadian Women’s Studies | Gender and Society |
| Columbia Journal of Gender and Law | Gender, Place, and Culture |
| European Journal of Women’s Studies | Harvard Women’s Law Journal |
| Feminism and Psychology | Hypatia |
| Feminist Economics | Indian Journal of Gender Studies |
| Feminist Media Studies | Irish Journal of Feminist Studies |
| Feminist Review | Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion |
Journal of Gender Studies | Violence against Women
Journal of Lesbian Studies | Voice Male
Journal of Women and Aging | Womanist Theory and Research
Journal of Women's Health | Women and Criminal Justice
Journal of Women's History | Women and Politics
Lesbian Review of Books | Women and Therapy
Ms. | Women's Health
National Women's Studies | Women's Health Issues
Nordic Journal of Women's Studies | Women's History Review
Off Our Backs | Women's International Network News
Psychology of Women Quarterly | Women's Review of Books
Sex Roles | Women's Rights Law Reporter
Signs | Women's Studies
Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State, and Society | Women's Studies International Forum
Sojourner: The Women's Forum | Women's Studies Quarterly
U.S.-Japan Women's Journal | Yale Journal of Law and Feminism

**Texts, References, and General Anthologies**


Appendix


Economy and Work


Family


Feminism


**Global Perspectives**


**Health and the Body**


**Heterosexism, Homophobia, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation**

Appendix


History


**Men (by or about)**


**Patriarchy and Gender Inequality**

Appendix

**Race, Class, and Gender**


**Religion and Spirituality**


**Schools and Learning**


**Science**


**Violence, Harassment, and Pornography**


**Feminist Bookstores**

Feminist bookstores are a great source not only of books you’d have to special order anywhere else but of like-minded people and news of events and groups and other opportunities to stretch ourselves and do something about patriarchy. They vary in their...
emphasis—especially regarding gay and lesbian issues—but have something to offer everyone who cares about gender issues.

RESOURCES ON THE INTERNET

There are numerous excellent starting places on the Internet for finding all kinds of resources related to gender inequality and patriarchy.

American Association of University Women  
www.aauw.org

American Medical Women's Association Information  
www.amwa-doc.org

Boston Women’s Health Book Collective  
www.ourbodiesourselves.org

Center for American Women and Politics  
www.cawp.rutgers.edu

Center for Reproductive Rights  
http://reproductiverights.org

Ecofeminism  
www.ecofem.org

Ending Violence Everywhere Foundation  
www.evefoundation.org

Factbook on Global Sexual Exploitation  
www.catwinternational.org/Factbook

feminist.com  
www.feminist.com

Futures without Violence  
www.futureswithoutviolence.org

Gender across Borders  
www.genderacrossborders.com

GenderWatch  
(database available at various locations on the web)

Institute for Law and Justice (domestic violence and sexual assault links)  
www.ilj.org

Institute for Women's Policy Research  
www.iwpr.org

International Alliance for Women in Music  
www.iawm.org

MenEngage: Boys and Men for Gender Equality  
http://menengage.org

Men's Bibliography  
www.mensbiblio.xyonline.net

Men's Bibliography (resources on rape by fraternities and gangs)  
www.mensbiblio.xyonline.net/violence.html#Gangs

National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education  
www.ncwge.org

National Criminal Justice Reference Service (domestic violence statistics)  
www.ncjrs.gov/app/topics/Topic.aspx?topicid=86

www.ncjrs.gov/spotlight/family_violence/publications.html#Statistics

National Museum of Women in the Arts  
www.nmwa.org

Pixel Project  
www.thepixelproject.net

Promundo  
www.promundo.org.br/en

Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network statistics  
www.rainn.org/statistics

Rape Is . . .  
www.rapeis.org

Religion and Women  
www.womenshistory.about.com/od/religion

Society for Women’s Health Research  
www.womenshealthresearch.org

United Nations Secretary-General’s Campaign to End Violence against Women  
http://endviolence.un.org

UN Women  
www.unwomen.org
You will find a wide range of approaches as you explore this territory. This is especially true of the *Men’s Bibliography*, which includes everything from the address for the National Organization of Men Against Sexism to men’s rights organizations that deny patriarchy even exists and believe women have all the privilege and power. I found many of these in Virginia Sapiro, *Women in American Society: An Introduction to Women’s Studies*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003). My thanks go to the author.

**DOING IT TOGETHER**

How you work with other people on these issues depends in part on what you want to accomplish. You can do a lot to deepen your understanding of patriarchy and how it works, for example, by reading and getting together with other people to talk about it and how it relates to your own life. This can be done in consciousness-raising groups, study groups, adult education classes, and, if you have access to a local college or university, women’s or men’s studies courses. This kind of work does not require formal organizations—all it takes is people who want to do it and a place to meet.

If you want to work with other people to change patriarchy, lots of organizations already exist. And you can always start your own, especially one that incorporates local concerns. To get some idea of what people are doing, consider the following.1 Hundreds of women’s organizations focus on everything from how to succeed in business to securing health care for women to combating violence. There are women’s associations in law, medicine, business, public administration, engineering, science, sport, and the media. Some organizations focus especially on the perspectives of black women and of Hispanic women. Some, such as the National Organization for Women and the American Association of University Women, have state and local chapters as well as a national organization. Here is a sampling:

*American Association of University Women*
1111 16th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036
www.aauw.org

*Canadian Women’s Health Network*
419 Graham Avenue, Suite 203
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C OM3
Canada
www.cwhn.ca

*Feminist Majority Foundation*
1600 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 801
Arlington, VA 22209
www.feminist.org

*Legal Momentum: The Women’s Legal Defense and Education Fund*
5 Hanover Square, Suite 1502
New York, NY 10004
www.legalmomentum.org
WORKING AGAINST MEN’S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

From rape crisis services to shelters for women who have been battered, thousands of local services need volunteers in all kinds of capacities. For information on how you can connect to this effort, you have several possibilities. The National Domestic Violence hotline is 800-799-7233. It is a twenty-four-hour crisis intervention line. For information on what you can do, contact one or more of the following:

Battered Women’s Justice Project: 800-903-0111
FaithTrust Institute: 206-634-1903
National Health Resource Center on Domestic Violence (focusing on health care issues): 415-678-5500
National Resource Center on Domestic Violence: 800-537-2238
Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody: 800-527-3223

MEN WORKING WITH MEN

Men have formed a number of organizations that use varying mixes of small group meetings, education, and political action to raise consciousness, deepen understanding, and do something about sexism and violence against women. For an in-depth history of these efforts, see Rob Okun, Voice Male: The Untold Story of the Profeminist Men’s Movement (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2014).

Men Against Domestic Violence
P.O. Box 1536
Santa Barbara, CA 93102
Tel. 805-963-4458

Men Against Racism and Sexism
517 Sacramento Drive
Austin, TX 78704
www.conscoop.ottawa.on.ca/mensnet/MARS_og.html

Men as Peacemakers
205 W. 2nd Street, Suite 15
Duluth, MN 55802
Tel. 218-727-1939
www.menaspeacemakers.org

Men Can Stop Rape
1130 6th Street NW, Suite 100
Washington, DC 20001
www.mencanstoprape.org
National Organization for Men Against Sexism  
3500 E. 17th Avenue  
Denver, CO 80206  
Tel. 720-466-3882  
www.nomas.org

Rape and Violence End Now  
1914 Olive Street, #300  
St. Louis, MO 63103  
http://ravenstl.org

Twin Cities Men’s Center  
3249 Hennepin Avenue South, Suite 55  
Minneapolis, MN 55408  
Tel. 612-822-5892  
www.tcmc.org

Unitarian Universalist Men’s Network  
P.O. Box 3070  
Madison, WI 53704  
Tel. 800-227-6670  
uumensnet.org

Violence Intervention Project  
22 US Oval, Suite 218  
Plattsburg, NY 12903  
Tel. 518-563-7208  
www.bhsn.org/vip.php

All of these groups began when women and men were willing to start talking about the reality of gender inequality, how it affects people’s lives, and what we can do about it. If you do not live in communities that have such groups, you can do what they did: talk with people about what is going on and what it has to do with all of us.
CHAPTER 1


Notes


14. My thanks go to Nora L. Jamieson, who helped me navigate through this psychological territory.


20. For a provocative and insightful discussion of what becomes of the values supporting free speech and those opposed to oppression and inequality, see MacKinnon, *Only Words*.


24. For more on sex and gender as socially constructed categories, see Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough,” *The Sciences,*
Notes to Chapter 1


25. Foucault, History of Sexuality.

26. Martin and Voorhies, Female of the Species.

27. For more on this, see Marilyn Frye, The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983).


30. See, for example, McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone, “Sexual Harassment, Workplace Authority, and the Paradox of Power.”

31. See Frye, Politics of Reality, 1–16.


34. It is useful to note that in thirteenth-century Europe, peasants were not allowed to participate in battle, since the nobility’s monopoly over the tools and skills of warfare was its main basis for power and domination over land and peasants. Although knights undoubtedly suffered considerably from their endless wars with one another, one could hardly argue that their obligation to fight rendered them an oppressed group. Whatever price they paid for their dominance, the concept of oppression is not the word to describe it. For a lively history of this era, see Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror (New York: Knopf, 1978).


36. Keen, Fire in the Belly, 133.

CHAPTER 2


3. Although the game analogy is useful, social systems are quite unlike a game in important ways. The rules and other understandings on which social life is based are far more complex, ambiguous, and contradictory than those of a typical game and much more open to negotiation and making it up as we go along.


14. Some would no doubt argue, with good reason, that our social selves mask more essential selves, but that’s another argument for another place.


20. For example, the more dominant males are in a society, the more frequent sexual violence becomes. See Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

21. As Masters and Johnson documented in their classic studies of human sexuality, intercourse isn’t a reliable way for most women to have orgasms, but as Nora L. Jamieson points out, this doesn’t prevent filmmakers from routinely portraying women having orgasms during intercourse (personal conversation).


24. My thanks go to Donna Garske of Marin Abused Women’s Services for emphasizing to me the importance of this aspect of men’s violence against women.


27. For a classic discussion of the forms that privilege takes, see Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies” (working paper no. 189, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, 1988).

CHAPTER 3


2. Of course, some feminists—lesbian separatists in particular—have suggested this solution.


12. A form of ritual aggression most often associated with African American males in which the contest is to trade progressively harsher insults until one or the other contestant either gives up or cannot better the previous insult.


17. This was the subject of a now-classic experiment in social psychology. See Manford Kuhn and Thomas McPartland, “An Empirical Investigation of Self Attitudes,” American Sociological Review 19 (1954): 68–76.

18. Anyone who doubts this needs look no further than the nearest school playground and the persecution endured by boys who show any interest in playing with girls. Among adults, woe betide the man who openly prefers the company of women. See Barrie Thorne, Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

19. I haven’t done the research, but I’d guess that men comprise the overwhelming majority of entries in the Guinness World Records book.


22. Women in this position, of course, would only lose.


27. This is a confused area of thinking about gender that I try to clear up in Chapter 4.


34. See Ann Jones, *Next Time She’ll Be Dead: Battering and How to Stop It* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).


36. It is notable that although a word for the hatred of men exists—misandry—it wasn’t included in most dictionaries until very recently. The closest the English language comes to the hatred of males is misanthropy, which actually refers to the hatred of people in general. Once again, patriarchal culture identifies males as the standard of humanity, while women are marginalized as a hate-worthy ‘other.’


39. It’s true that ‘prick’ is a form of insult, but it doesn’t have nearly the weight of likening men to women.


41. I first heard this metaphor from Nora L. Jamieson.


43. It should come as no surprise that abusive men tend to be very emotionally dependent on the women they abuse. See Ann Jones, *Next Time She’ll Be Dead*; and Thomas J. Scheff and Suzanne M. Retzinger, *Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1991). See also Claire M.
44. I suspect a similar phenomenon occurs in other forms of oppression. Whites, for example, may look upon stereotypical characteristics of people of color with a mixture of contempt and envy. I’ve heard some whites say they would like to have the feeling of strength and wisdom that many African Americans have developed to survive in a racist society.


46. Today custody has become a hotly contested terrain as children’s emotional value has increased and its potential as a weapon in marital disputes has been recognized. For some history and analysis, see Susan Crean, *In the Name of the Fathers* (Toronto: Amanita Enterprises, 1988); and Jocelyn Elise Crowley, *Defiant Dads: Fathers’ Rights Activists in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).


48. See Waring, *If Women Counted*.

49. Except, perhaps, in the upper classes, in which such dependency was more common. In the United States, it also wasn’t true of most working-class and lower-class women and women of color, who have always had to work both inside and outside the home.


53. Henderson, who describes herself as a futurist and alternative economist, made this remark at a conference at Western Connecticut State University, March 31, 1989. See also Hazel Henderson, *Creating Alternative Futures: The End of Economics* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 1996); Hazel Henderson, *The Politics of the Solar Age*, rev. ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Knowledge Systems, 1988); and Hazel Henderson, *Paradigms in Progress: Life beyond Economics* (Indianapolis, IN: Knowledge Systems, 1991). Socialist feminists might object that there’s nothing inherently patriarchal about socialism in theory, contrary to socialism as it has thus far been practiced in modern times. Capitalism, however, with its emphasis on control, competition, and the inherently exploitative relationship between capitalists and labor, embodies core patriarchal values both in theory and in practice.

54. I base what follows on my understanding of a sizable literature that, for reasons of space, I don’t try to summarize in a comprehensive way. Readers who want more should consult the fascinating and well-written sources cited throughout this section and decide for themselves.

56. In *matrilineal* societies, lineage is traced through the mother’s blood relatives, not the father’s. In *matrilocal* societies, a married couple must live near and be integrated with the wife’s family.


59. There are historical records of societies in which the male reproductive role was unknown. It also would seem beyond dispute that knowledge of reproductive biology was something humans had to discover, perhaps through the domestication of animals. See Fisher, *Woman’s Creation*.


61. The ‘locality’ of family systems refers to marriage rules governing where married couples live—matrilocal (with the wife’s mother) and patrilocal (with the husband’s father). Together with the way lineage is figured, locality has profound effects on the degree to which social relationships are woman identified or man identified.


64. See French, *Beyond Power*, 47.


66. Ibid., 197.

67. This is also true of racism in some respects. Slavery, for example, is most common in agricultural societies. See Patrick Nolan and Gerhard Lenski, *Human Societies*, 11th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

68. Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*.

69. See, for example, Keen, *Fire in the Belly*; and Lee and Daly, “Man’s Domination.”


71. French, *Beyond Power*. 
72. For views on the connection between patriarchy and how we treat the environment, see Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein, eds., *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990).

73. See, for example, Richard J. Barnet and John Cavanagh, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

74. The men who controlled the Chinese and Russian revolutions said some noble things about gender equality and made a few changes that improved women’s standing. In practice, however, they did little to challenge the underlying nature of patriarchy or men’s position in it. For reports on men’s violence against women in Norway and Sweden, see Katrin Bennhold, “In Norway, Gender Equality Does Not Extend to the Bedroom,” *New York Times*, October 24, 2011; and Lizette Alvarez, “Sweden Faces Facts on Violence against Women,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2005.

CHAPTER 4

1. This is known in philosophy as epistemic privilege.


10. Sara Ruddick describes this as “maternal work” in her powerful and insightful book, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). She emphasizes that it can be performed by both women and men, although it is, of course, almost always women’s responsibility.


17. E. Anthony Rotundo provides a clear analysis of the historical process through which aggression became defined not as a problem but as a masculine virtue. See Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

18. See, for example, Bly’s reference to women as historically passive and only now becoming “active.” Iron John, 60.


20. Even Andrea Dworkin, who uses much of her provocative book Intercourse (New York: Free Press, 1987) to argue that heterosexual intercourse is inherently aggressive and oppressive, finally acknowledges that it is the patriarchal version of heterosexuality that is this way, not heterosexuality per se.


23. In Iron John, Robert Bly provides vivid examples of this kind of thinking. See, for example, pages 61–63 and 221.


25. Nora L. Jamieson first made me aware of this connection.

27. For the best such statement that I have seen, see Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, “Hard and Heavy.”

28. Although the association of gender with ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ may seem obvious, it is less so in light of the fact that in some societies women may marry other women, and even in the United States there is a growing recognition of marriage among gays and lesbians. One can be a woman’s spouse without being a man, which means that the relationship between husbands and wives bears a particular relationship to gender—a relationship that varies from one society to another. We should also note that just as ‘husband’ has meaning beyond the confines of marriage, being a good wife has similar cultural connotations about caring, support, and self-sacrifice in relation to one’s spouse that need not necessarily be confined to women. As Judy Sylers put it, “My God, who wouldn’t want a wife?” “I Want a Wife,” Ms., December 1979.

29. Beyond informal everyday usage, ‘sane’ and ‘insane’ are primarily legal terms.


32. This has been particularly true of the authority that the male-dominated health profession has used to determine what constitutes a healthy adult woman. See Phyllis Chesler, Women and Madness (New York: Doubleday, 1972); and Ehrenreich and English, For Her Own Good.


34. This is not to say that gay men can’t be misogynist.


37. For an insightful discussion of such issues in the history of American manhood, see Rotundo, American Manhood.

38. See Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 38–40.


41. The cultural association of women with nature is not universal in patriarchal societies, but whatever is associated with women tends to be devalued in favor of what is associated with men.

CHAPTER 5


2. Katie Roiphe, _The Morning After: Fear, Sex, and Feminism on College Campuses_ (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993).


4. For more on this point, see bell hooks, _Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center_ (Boston: South End Press, 1984), chap. 5.

5. There are far more approaches than I can cover here. For a more complete look at feminist thinking, an excellent place to start is Margaret L. Andersen, _Thinking about Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender_, 9th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 2010); and Rosemarie Tong, _Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction_, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013).

6. See, for example, Wendy Kaminer, “Feminism’s Identity Crisis,” _The Atlantic_, October 1993, pp. 51–68.


9. Ibid.

10. Limbaugh routinely refers to feminists in this way on his radio and television talk shows. Paglia made this statement on the television show _Sixty Minutes_ on November 1, 1992.


13. Women may make jokes among themselves that play off their subordinate position (as also do blacks, Jews, and other groups targeted by prejudice) that would never be tolerated coming from members of dominant groups. The difference is that when it comes from other women, it heightens awareness of their common standing as women and can help reinforce their sense of solidarity with one another, but when it comes from men, it is more of an assertion of men’s dominant position under patriarchy.


17. At a lecture on April 11, 1991, at Trinity College, in Hartford, Connecticut, Davis made this comment in response to a young black man who supported black women’s struggle for equality but felt stung by their negative comments about men in general.


27. Naomi Wolf, for example, argues that “the right question to ask is simply how to get more power into women’s hands—whoever they may be, whatever they may do with it” (*Fire with Fire*, 127).

28. For a more extensive description and analysis of liberal feminism, see Tong, *Feminist Thought*, chap. 1.


39. See Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*.

40. I have much more to say about the problem of change in Chapters 9–11.

41. See Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life*.

42. Cooking and child care, for example, might be done collectively in communal living arrangements that break down women’s isolation from one another and the larger community.


46. I have much to say about this topic in Chapter 8.


CHAPTER 6

1. In sociology, this view is most often associated with Talcott Parsons’s functionalist theories of society. In trying to understand how societies hold together with some sense of order, Parsons argued that various aspects of social systems are all related to one another to form a whole society based on a consensus about core values defining what is most important or desirable. Through these relationships and this consensus, societies function and survive. We can understand each aspect of life in a system—such as male dominance—in terms of its connection to what a particular society needs in order to function, which, of course, varies from one society to another. From this perspective, a


4. This is what physicists call entropy.


31. Ibid., 15–16 (emphasis in original).


35. Bunch, “Not for Lesbians Only.”


42. The technical term is *satyriasis*.


**CHAPTER 7**


Notes to Chapter 7


6. Naughty is derived from naught, meaning “amounting to nothing.”


8. Sam Keen suggests that women and men have done this with patriarchy. See Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 176, 205.


12. The possible exception is child custody cases, about which there’s a lot of controversy. Women typically get custody of children, for example, but when men actively seek custody, they are successful much of the time. Custody has a long and difficult history, with men automatically getting custody in the nineteenth century, when children had economic value, and custody then routinely going to women when children lost that value and became an economic burden. Now, as the emotional value of children has grown over the past century and custody can be used as a bargaining chip, equal treatment of mothers and fathers in custody decisions has become an issue.


15. Women are more likely to experience depression, a finding that occurs across an enormous range of cultural and racial groupings. They are especially likely to be depressed if they are employed outside the home and have sole responsibility for child care. See U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Division, Women in America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011); and Ellyn Kaschak, Engendered Lives: A New Psychology of Women’s Experience (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 173–174, 182, 183.

16. French, Beyond Power, 323.

17. Ibid., 297.

18. Farrell, Myth of Male Power, 18. This is logically impossible—since each refers to a society ruled by one gender or the other—unless we distort the meaning of the concepts out of recognition, as Farrell often does. This is similar to Robert Bly’s assertion that “genuine matriarchy” and “genuine patriarchy” can coexist in peace and harmony (as discussed in Chapter 6).

20. Ibid., 36.
24. For an engaging history of this period, see Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror* (New York: Knopf, 1978).

CHAPTER 8

5. For a powerful discussion of these and other issues related to motherhood, see Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976).
16. In *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives*, Johnson makes a compelling argument that motherhood is not the key factor determining women’s subordinate position under patriarchy.
17. The Japanese, by contrast, find the Western emphasis on separation and individuality somewhat alarming and work to counteract this in their young.
27. Bly acknowledged in one of his workshops (at “Interface,” Watertown, MA, spring 1990) that patriarchy has done terrible things to the Wild Man. But he offers virtually no analysis of patriarchy, and his idea of patriarchy is so confused that it’s difficult to know just what such statements mean to him. He made this comment in reply to a question I asked him about why patriarchy was never even mentioned during an entire day devoted to men, masculinity, and the tale of Iron John.
33. Two excellent discussions of historical shifts in fatherhood and masculinity are Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993),


35. Even in upper-class families, it’s wives who typically are responsible for overseeing the servants who perform the dirty work and for ensuring that it’s done.

36. In my unabridged Random House dictionary, *paternal* has the meaning of intrusive control, but *maternal* does not.

37. This probably sounds familiar to women as well, since this has become a pervasive model for ‘normal’ human development—yet another example of the male-identified character of patriarchal societies.


**CHAPTER 9**


3. This attitude is expressed both in Bly’s writings—particularly in *Iron John*—and in one of his workshops attended by the author.


8. As I mention in Chapter 8, Farrell defines power as merely the ability to control our own lives, with no reference to the power that people and groups have to control resources and other people.


19. Although sociologists recognize ‘expressive’ movements as a form of social movement, such movements differ greatly in method and goals from other types of movements and should not be confused with them. Movements designed to heal individuals or make them feel better through personal transformation are very different from those dedicated to changing social systems.


21. See especially Keen’s list of key questions on page 131 of *Fire in the Belly*.


CHAPTER 10


12. Ibid.

CHAPTER 11


9. See the Appendix for a reading list.

10. The examples in this paragraph are based on suggestions from Joanne Collahan. My thanks go to her for making me aware of this issue.

11. I thank to Joanne Callahan for this example.

APPENDIX

1. I found much of this material on two websites—the Feminist Majority Foundation (www.feminist.org) and a section in the Men’s Bibliography (www.mensbiblio.xyonline.net) compiled by David Throop. I appreciate the availability of this information and should stress that there are no guarantees that the information provided here is still correct.
Glossary

Words in italics can be found as main entries elsewhere in the glossary.

agricultural society A society in which economic activity centers on the production of food through the cultivation of large fields, usually involving the use of a plow or its equivalent and draft animals.

androcracy A social system organized around the principle of male dominance (see also patriarchy).

attitude Positive or negative evaluation of people, objects, or situations that predisposes those who hold it to feel and therefore behave in positive or negative ways.

belief A statement about reality, about what is regarded as true or false.

capitalism An economic system in which the means of production are privately owned by some but used by others (workers) who sell their time in return for wages and produce goods and services.

cisgender person A person whose inner sense of who they are as masculine or feminine matches the sex assigned to them at birth (see also transgender person).

cissexual person A person whose internal sense of themselves as biologically male or female matches the sex they were assigned at birth (see also transsexual person).

class (see social class).

communism An economic system in which the means of production are collectively owned by those who use them to produce goods and services.

crone A female elder.

culture The accumulated store of symbols, ideas, and material objects associated with a social system.

denial A psychological defense mechanism through which unacceptable beliefs, ideas, or experiences are kept from being considered.

ecofeminism A branch of feminism that focuses on the ways in which life under patriarchy shapes the relationship between human beings and the natural environment.

essentialism Applied to gender, the belief that gender differences, relations, and inequality are rooted in the biological characteristics of females and males.
false parallel  An apparent similarity in the experience and behavior of groups in comparable situations that rests on a misperception of differences in interpretation of what is happening and the social consequences that result.
femininity  A set of cultural ideas used to define the ideal and essential nature of women.
feminism  An ideology and framework for the analysis of human life based on the belief that gender inequality is real and problematic.
feudalism  An economic and social class system based on military power, control over land, and traditional obligations between nobility, peasantry, and ruling monarchs.
gender  Cultural ideas used to construct images and expectations of those identified as female or male.
genderqueer  A person who gender-identifies as neither a man nor a woman (genderless) or as some combination of the two.
gender role  A collection of social expectations based on gender.
gynocentrism  A principle of social organization that emphasizes the centrality and importance of the generative power associated with femaleness.
heteronormativity  A cultural standard by which heterosexuality is defined and enforced as the 'normal' sexual orientation.
heterosexism  Practices, ideas, and social arrangements that promote, justify, and sustain heterosexual privilege.
homophobia  Fear of or aversion to same-sex attraction.
ideology  A set of cultural ideas used to explain and justify the status quo or movements for social change.
individualism  A way of thinking based on the idea that everything that happens in social life results solely from the thoughts and feelings of individuals without reference to their participation in social systems.
industrial capitalism  (see capitalism).
intersex person  A person born with a combination of ‘female’ and ‘male’ sex characteristics.
lesbian continuum  A concept expressing the idea that women vary in the degree to which they identify with and desire the company of other women.
LGBTQ  An acronym standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer.
liberal feminism  A branch of feminism based on the idea that knowledge and freedom of choice and opportunity are the solution to gender inequality.
luxury of obliviousness  An aspect of systems of privilege by which members of dominant groups have the option of choosing whether to be aware of the true extent, causes, and consequences of privilege and oppression.
male centeredness  An organizing principle of patriarchal systems by which the path of least resistance is to place males and what they do at the center of attention.
male dominance  An organizing principle of patriarchy by which the default condition is for men to hold positions of power.
male gaze  The imagined universal male observer that women are encouraged to use as a standard for evaluating their appearance and behavior.
male identification  An organizing principle of patriarchy by which males are taken to be the standard for human beings and are thereby regarded as superior to females.
Marxist feminism  A branch of feminism that understands gender inequality as a result of economic systems in general and industrial capitalism in particular, especially through the dynamics of social class.
masculinity  A set of cultural ideas used to define the ideal and essential nature of men.
**matriarchy** A society organized around the principles of female domination, female identification, female centeredness, and an obsession with control gendered as feminine.

**matrifocality** A principle of social organization emphasizing the centrality and importance of motherhood.

**matrilineal society** A society in which lineage is traced exclusively through the mother’s blood relatives.

**matrilocal society** A kinship system in which married couples are expected to live in or near the household of the wife’s mother.

**means of production** Tools, machines, resources, and technology used to produce goods and services.

**misandry** The hatred of males.

**misogyny** The hatred of females.

**nadle** A word used among the Diné (Navajo) of the American Southwest to designate an *intersex person* born with a mixture of female and male characteristics.

**norm** A social rule of appearance or behavior that links beliefs and values to rewards and/or punishments.

**oppression** In a social system, the subordination, exploitation, and mistreatment of one group by another as an assertion of privilege.

**paradigm** A framework of guiding assumptions, theories, and methods that define a particular approach to observing, interpreting, and understanding reality.

**passive oppression** The perpetuation of privilege and oppression through inattention, insensitivity, neglect, or lack of awareness.

**path of least resistance** In a social system, the path of least resistance in a particular situation consists of whatever behavior or appearance is expected of participants based on their position in the system.

**patriarchy** A social system organized around the principles of male dominance, male centeredness, male identification, and an obsession with control that is gendered as masculine.

**political correctness** Originally, a standard used by social activists as a way to monitor their behavior and speech to ensure that it was consistent with their values, beliefs, and political principles.

**power** In a narrow patriarchal sense, power is the ability to have an effect, including the assertion of control and dominance, in spite of opposition.

**power feminism** The idea that the solution to gender inequality is for women to assert the power to run their own lives rather than changing patriarchy as a system, whose existence power feminism does not recognize.

**prejudice** A positive or negative attitude directed at people simply because they occupy a particular social status.

**privilege** An advantage that is unearned, exclusive to a particular group, and socially conferred by others.

**queer** A general term for people who, in various ways, reject, test, or otherwise transgress the boundaries of what is culturally regarded as normal in relation to gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation and expression.

**radical feminism** A branch of feminism based on the idea that patriarchy is real and problematic and can be understood as a social system that exists and shapes human life beyond the conscious thoughts and intentions of the people who participate in it.

**reality** (see social construction of reality).
role A set of cultural beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes associated with a particular position in a social system that shape how people participate in and experience social life in relation to the occupants of other positions (as in the role of wife in relation to husband).

sex Cultural beliefs about biology and physical appearance used to define the categories of female, male, and others.

sexism Anything that has as a consequence the enactment or perpetuation of privilege based on gender.

social category The collection of all people who occupy a particular social status (e.g., college students).

social class In general, distinctions and divisions resulting from the unequal distribution of resources and rewards such as wealth or power in a social system. A Marxist approach focuses on how relationships among capitalists, workers, and the means of production produce inequality. More mainstream approaches focus on people’s ability to satisfy wants and needs, especially through income and the use of prestige and power.

social construction of reality The social process of interaction using language and other symbols through which people’s perceptions of what is considered to be real are constructed, shared, and maintained.

socialist feminism A branch of feminism that seeks to combine a radical feminist analysis of patriarchy with a Marxist feminist analysis of gender under capitalism.

socialization The process through which people acquire the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and predispositions expected of those who occupy a particular social status in a social system (how children learn to function as adults, for example, or employees in a job).

social status A position that people may occupy in a social system that locates them in relation to the occupants of other statuses (e.g., parent/child).

social structure The patterns of relationships and distributions that characterize the organization of a social system. Relationships connect the various elements of a system (such as social statuses) to one another and the system itself. Distributions include valued resources and rewards such as power and income as well as the distribution of people among social statuses.

social system An interconnected collection of structural relationships and distributions; ecological arrangements; cultural symbols, ideas, and objects; and population dynamics and conditions that combine to form a whole. Complex systems are composed of smaller systems that are related to one another and the larger system through cultural, structural, ecological, and population arrangements and dynamics.

sociobiology A field of study based on the idea that social arrangements and behaviors among various species, including humans, have a biological basis.

structure (see social structure).

transgender person A person whose internal experience of themselves does not match the sex they were assigned at birth (see also cisgender person).

trans man A person who was sex-assigned as female at birth and who gender-identifies as a man.

transsexual person A person who either has undergone or wants to undergo a medically assisted transition to bring their body into alignment with how they experience themselves in terms of gender (see also cissexual person).
**trans woman**  A person who was sex-assigned as male at birth and who gender-identifies as a woman.

**value**  A cultural idea about relative worth, goodness, or desirability used to make choices among different alternatives. In a *patriarchy*, for example, maleness is valued above femaleness, and being in control is valued above not being in control.

**woman-identified woman**  A woman who takes other women as the standard of comparison in evaluating her appearance, behavior, and life.

**worldview**  The collection of interconnected *beliefs, values, attitudes*, images, and memories out of which a sense of *reality* is constructed and maintained.
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