

Demystifying Patriarchy: The Interconnectivity of race, capitalism and gender

The JASS Cross Regional Dialogue (CRD) opened its doors to three days of critical thinking and mobilizing on charting a collective roadmap for attaining women's rights and justice. Drawing 48 feminist activists from Southern Africa, Southeast Asia and Mesoamerica together for a rich and radical exchange of ideas and feminist strategies—all of this set against the backdrop of a world held firmly in the grip of patriarchy, increasing human rights violations, political crises and serious economic meltdowns.

On the first day, participants broke down power and patriarchy, bringing their own experiences across a wide spectrum of differences and diversity to bear:

Shereen Essof: *Patriarchy is a system that refers to male domination for women, and it is institutionalized - like the media, schooling systems, family. Patriarchy is very clever, and operates both in overt and covert means in terms of oppression of women. It moves and changes in context. It is a male dominated and male centred system in which women have a particular place and role, and militarism and capitalism support patriarchy in many different ways.*

Srilatha Batwala: *Patriarchy means a system of tracing your line of descent through the father. It is about men having greater control over everything, a system of privileging the male in terms of resources, decision making power, privileges and opportunities. The most interesting thing about patriarchy is that it is a very new system of social organization. The major question is has patriarchy always existed? It is only about 10 000 years old. 'Matriny' – existed before patriarchy. Patriarchy arose with the discovery of the male role in production – before that people believed women had divine power in creating, and that's why people believed in goddesses. The rise of private property is much related to patriarchy as men were sent to defend wealth and property. Patriarchy is about control of women and their sexuality. Violence and the threat of it is a constant in patriarchal spaces. One thing that keeps women off the street after hours is the fear of violence, not even real violence but the threat of it. Ideology and family institutions work by converting women into strong soldiers of patriarchy, protecting caste, racial, class and ethnic privileges. Through ideology we become conditioned to what is normal and right in order to protect that system. It operates even in the manner we bring up our children; we teach generations how to stick to the gender and societal roles. Patriarchy constructed the concept of gender and operates through key ways in which the systems are sustained and perpetuated. Patriarchy is control of poverty and resources including knowledge, influence and political power, and a construction of set of beliefs and ideas about what is normal and which is the right way to be for women and for men.*

Lori Heise: *Patriarchy is a system - a world view - a way of looking, seeing and understanding the world through the reality that male eyes or men have defined - and we have internalized it. It operates in overt and covert ways and it is difficult to see the covert ways because it is inside of us and in order to dismantle it we have to look inside of us. Patriarchy tends to look specifically at the issues and hierarchies of men and women; sexualities; ethnicities; colour of skins; races - and feminism takes on board those categories as well. Even if women have a lot in common we are not monolithic and we are affected differently by those attributes.*

Valerie Miller: *Patriarchy is a dichotomy – women and men; good and bad; you and me - everything is divided and we think in dichotomic terms and sexualize the dichotomic terms as well. Everything is female and male and the words have a male gender or female gender in them. We sexualise and make hierarchies and we say who has more power, who has more value and what has more value. Everything associated with male has more value to us than that associated with female.*

Maggie Mapondera: *In Southern Africa we call it Patrick. Patrick is an idea; a system; a persona with many faces and forms. Patrick works with cronies like racism or capitalism, and other systems that collude to oppress women. Patrick is everywhere, even in your bedroom, telling you how to have sex, with who, and how. Patrick also tells you what you must wear, how you must look, where you must work and what you must eat.*

Lisa Veneklasen: *Patriarchy is a system and an exercise of power; a world view based on male domination, perpetuated to institutional society and works closely with racism, classism and fundamentalism. It is hard to separate patriarchy from other dynamics of power. It is an understanding of power focusing on exclusion, and some women participate in it because it is part of our socialization and of the systems we are part of. There are women engaging in trying to change and break this exercise of power to create alternatives but patriarchy is so embedded in other forms of power and very difficult to quickly identify and separate. It creates hierarchies of exclusion and norms and values – it is a system of male domination. It has clearly so many different elements, and is always moving. We are foot soldiers of this system because when we resist it people look at us and condemn. Resisting it is a challenging thing for all of us. Women are very much controlled and shaped and participating in patriarchy. We must also think of how patriarchy affects men as a starting point to understanding how it affects us.*

How do we understand patriarchy in a context of different types of discrimination? It is a concept; a world vision that determines and makes the different types of oppression. It is not a single oppression but a paradigm.

Marusia Lopez:

Jojo Guan: *Patriarchy is not about women and men but about masculinities and femininities. It is also done by women. During orientation sessions on lesbian relationships in my country and elsewhere it happens; when hetero-normative norms are brought into relationships, norms of believing that men have more power, should be dominating and should do violence to show strength.*

Hope Chigudu: *Patrick is found in a bar after midnight even if he is tired because going home means he is weak. When he wants to cry he looks around and hides in a toilet and then cries secretly because being seen crying means he is weak. When abused, he checks his penis and puts it back. Patrick is seen in our parliaments, on the streets, and has been taught to be aggressive.*

Alda Facio: *We must never forget that men have the power. When you involve them even in teaching patriarchy they turn everything around and suddenly they are the ones that are violated, and they say there are more men violated and discriminated against than women – and this is dangerous for advancing women's rights.*

Tiwonge Gondwe: *Patrick won't allow women to take their rights – he just starts feeling powerless. It is sad how women have become gate keepers in patriarchal systems as well. Some women are fond of telling you what to do and how, and sometimes they use culture to justify it.*

Thoko Phiri: *Women are taught to be subjects and men to make decisions. An elderly woman would rush to a young brother to ask for permission to do things, in the name of culture.*

Rudo Chigudu: *If a man feels that he cannot cry, how does he behave towards a woman? If he is treated badly because he doesn't have son,s how does he treat the wife who is going to bear the children? How Patrick affects men will determine how it further affects the women.*

Atila Roque: *It is an intersection of systems – it is not so easy to do in the daily struggles and the way movements relate to each other. Even feminists themselves struggle with issues of racism; it is hard even for feminist women to incorporate the dimension of race in their practical and theoretical lives. There is a tendency to look at things from a hearer perspective and in doing so we tend to obscure and overlook important issues.*

Revai Makanje: *“We have to acknowledge that as colonialism tightened itself in the region, so was patriarchy and religious fundamentalisms; men who felt they were losing grip tightened their grip around the household, and around women. Patriarchy is inextricable from power and dominance.”*

It is important to always employ a historical analysis in our discussions of patriarchy: Historical reminds us that a system that came into being because of certain conditions cannot be easily taken out of being. We have to look at it as a system that is dynamic but not as incapable of being dismantled.

Batiwala

Azola Goqwana: *Patriarchy has affected feminism and our definitions of it are not going to be the same. I can't speak about it without speaking about racism and imperialism – how different women are treated in certain spaces, for example the lesbian killings in South Africa are not happening to just anyone but to certain women because of how and where women are placed so how do we speak about it without speaking about our history. Lesbian killings only happen to black women in the townships, and never to white women in the affluent suburbs. Even talking of ourselves as feminists – how we relate to patriarchy and how we reproduce it. We call ourselves feminists but have done so much to reproduced patriarchy. We need self critique. Generally the position of South African women as we know - they are poor, less educated and have few or no resources. This makes them seem less important in making decisions. Women do not get to sit in parliament, political parties, in the organisations - and the status quo stays. Then because of how history is situated in South Africa as a nation that evolved out of apartheid and imperialism, black women continue to lag behind. Even when I am educated what I can do to survive is to be accepted in the spaces where power lies, and this continues to affect the development of women.*

Revai Makanje: *It is curious how patriarchy has flipped around issues to blame women for their positioning. In Zimbabwe men are always ready to say women are their worst enemies, to an extend where a paper on what has been coined the Pull Her Down Syndrome (PHD) was written by a woman who works in a mainstream research organisation and circulated. Men have celebrated this paper because it is not about them but about us upon each other and exercising power and discouraging each other; and the effect is to make us see each other in very bad light.*

Shereen Essof: *History is playing out in ways that work against the majority of women. National struggles for liberation in Southern Africa involved women in different ways at different times. Women took a position to say these are critical issues of women's discrimination within those national struggles but got subsumed for what were considered 'bigger' issues after independence. In Zimbabwe and South Africa, Zambia even, there were windows of opportunity at independence where certain gains were enshrined in constitutions, but Patrick reconfigured itself quickly and the men took on the role of Patrick, in purely white imperialist ways and we ended up with black patriarchs. Capitalism continues to protect and privilege certain people and even though the power changed, patriarchy still plays out in different ways to disadvantage women.*