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Final Paper

How Patriarchy is Bad for Men, but Why that Doesn't Matter

In this paper I will acknowledge that patriarchy is bad for men, yet argue that this fact is not important, and can even be dangerous, in understanding what patriarchy is. I will first elaborate on what I mean by “is bad for men” to defend how patriarchy is bad for men. Then I will summarize Marilyn Frye’s explanation of oppression in her essay, *Oppression*, to define patriarchy. I will use her definition to discuss why harm to men is unimportant in understanding what patriarchy means by drawing a distinction between the harm to men and patriarchal oppression. I will follow with potential dangers of focusing on how patriarchy is bad for men, and how this can distract from feminist objectives and undermine the reasons to dismantle patriarchy. I later will discuss a foreseeable objection to my argument along with my response in defense.

I assert that patriarchy is bad for men, but I want to clarify what I mean by “is bad for”. By this I mean that there are some aspects of patriarchy that negatively affect men. Not in a net way, because overall, patriarchy does more to help than hurt men (the entire purpose is to benefit men!), but that does not mean there are not ways men can be negatively impacted by patriarchy. Patriarchy gives men power in society and largely excludes women, and this is closely related to the gender stereotypes, as men are considered powerful and women considered weak. The pressure to conform to these standards of femininity and masculinity is bad for both men and women, as it is psychologically taxing for anyone to have to fit unrealistic expectations. Men are expected to always exude strength, power, aggression, and suppress emotions to be “manly.” This toxic masculinity is often a catalyst for violence, depression, sexual assault, homophobia, and other ways of showing “toughness”. So yes, this pressure and its effects are indeed “bad for men” by harming men. Men are more likely to commit suicide than women and are more likely to be perpetrators of violent crimes, suggesting that the custom of men having to suppress feelings leads to more dangerous emotional outlets. While there are various, very real examples of how patriarchy is bad for men, I would like to reiterate how in general, patriarchy is intended to be good for men. Men have historically held political and social power, excluding women as a result, so it is unfair to say that the system of patriarchy is overall more harmful than beneficial to men. This would ignore the main problem with patriarchy, which is how it oppresses women in order to benefit men.

I will now summarize Marilyn Frye’s definition of oppression and use it in my definition of patriarchy. In her essay, *Oppression*, Marilyn Frye describes how oppression consists of connected systemic forces that she compares to wires of a birdcage. One at a time, the barrier is not too confining, but it is the system of barriers that completely restrains the bird, just as the system of societal barriers is what confines women. According to Frye, an oppressive structure must be made of a system of forces intended to immobilize and maintain the inferiority of a specific group. Although one may feel suffering, even deep, sincere misery, it is not oppression unless it is part of a systemically oppressive context. Obstacles to women that prevent them from gaining power and status in various societal facets are interconnected and therefore a system of

oppression according to Frye. In this essay she also discusses how a barrier can be felt by those on either side of it, although it is intended as a restriction for only one side, that side being the oppressed one. The gender boundaries that exclude women can also be restrictive to men, but the boundary exists for the benefit of men, and is therefore only oppressive to women. By this logic, although men may be harmed in ways by patriarchy, they are not oppressed by it since it is a system of barriers to restrict women, not men.

I will use this definition of oppression to explain why the fact that patriarchy is bad for men is not important in understanding patriarchy. Patriarchy is defined as the system of oppression against women. It is the societal structure of the men holding power, and it is designed to perpetuate this gender hierarchy. Even if patriarchy has aspects that are bad for men, men are not oppressed by it. Women are underrepresented in global leadership, receive lower pay for the same jobs as men, are frequent victims of sexual assault and violence and overall considered socially inferior. These are clearly examples of barriers that oppress women, which is different from how patriarchy is bad for men. The negative effects of toxic masculinity do not relate to an overall system designed to restrict men, since patriarchy does the opposite, so it is wrong to say patriarchy oppresses men. In dismantling the patriarchy, it is necessary to understand the systemic depth of it, which must include an acknowledgement of the system of oppressive structures. If patriarchy is bad for men it is still not oppressive to men, and if patriarchy is defined by oppression, the negative impact on men is not important to understanding what it is.

I also will mention potential dangers of focusing on how patriarchy harms men, and why this could undermine the feminist fight to dismantle patriarchy. The system of patriarchy, as I have mentioned, is how society is set up to elevate the status of men and oppress women as a result. Women are the intended victims of this system that is created and maintained by men. I do not find it unreasonable to acknowledge how patriarchy can harm men, but I do think it can be counterproductive to prioritize this fact and include it as a valuable part of defining patriarchy. Discussing how a system harms a group implies that this group is a victim. It is not true that men are victims to the overall system of patriarchy, so there is a fine line between acknowledging how patriarchy's effects can impact men and considering them the intended victims of the system. Patriarchy, by definition, makes women the victims of oppression, and in order to fight it, it must be correctly understood in this way. Focusing on the impact on men to an extent that makes it necessary in the definition of patriarchy takes away from defining patriarchy as oppressive. If oppression is not considered the main quality of patriarchy, the system of barriers to women will not be correctly understood or, by extension, be able to be broken down. Anyone that truly understands why and how patriarchy is bad would not need the fact that it has the potential to harm men, and should still have the urgency to dismantle the system even if it did not harm men at all. In recognizing how patriarchy can be bad for men, it is necessary to still understand how the system is overall oppressive to women and beneficial to men.

I will now present a foreseeable objection to my argument, and attempt to defend myself in response. It is possible that my argument (that patriarchy's impact on men is not important in understanding what patriarchy is) can be seen as insensitive or not truly sympathetic to the severe harms of toxic masculinity. Some may argue that considering the impact on men unimportant to understanding patriarchy implies that it is unimportant in general. If this was the only issue of patriarchy, and the oppression of women was nonexistent, then this would be sufficient and necessary to understanding patriarchy. However, the context of patriarchy is not so. Its main societal function is to subordinate women and raise the status of men, and this

should be how we define patriarchy. I do not mean to say that the effects of toxic masculinity are unimportant. They are real, many men suffer from them, and this should be acknowledged and handled. However, patriarchy's negative effect on men should not be included in the definition of patriarchy. It can be recognized as a real effect and make proponents of feminism have an extra reason to dismantle patriarchy. Yet the definition of patriarchy and the main understanding of it must be about its systemic oppression, which does not include harming men, as that is not oppression. Making the negative impact on men unnecessary in defining and understanding patriarchy does not mean it is not an important issue, it just means it is a separate issue from the oppressive patriarchal structures.

In conclusion, patriarchy is bad for men, even though it is overall more good than bad for men, as is the intention of patriarchy. Patriarchy is the system of oppression that subordinates women and maintains the power and status of men, and based on Marilyn Frye's definition, this oppression consists of systemically connected barriers intended to confine women specifically. It is for this reason that the oppression does not apply to men, and therefore the definition of patriarchy does not require that men be harmed. It can be acknowledged that toxic masculinity and gender stereotype pressures are harmful to men, yet we must be cautious of prioritizing this to an extent that takes away from the understanding of patriarchy as being oppressive.

Bibliography

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