

# Patriarchy, misogyny, & the gender system



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In a [piece](#)[1] that several radical and gender critical feminist philosophers, including me, published yesterday on *Medium*, we set out the following as a question for our opponents:

“We think that patriarchy is, definitionally, a system which structurally oppresses females, on the basis of their sex. What do you think patriarchy is? If you think patriarchy is not as we’ve described, do you think there is any system in the world, such as we have just described, whether or not you would call it ‘patriarchy’? If yes, do you think the recognition of this system is politically important? If no, on what grounds do you deny the existence of any such system?”

The reason we defined the term ‘patriarchy’ there is because we’d recently heard a talk by a philosopher at least nominally on the other side of the current debate over transwomen’s inclusion as women (whether for legal or for social purposes) use it differently. In that talk, the speaker had referred to ‘the patriarchy’ and seemed to mean a broad system that oppresses several different groups, of which female people are only one. Relatedly, in a recent [piece](#)[2] for *The Guardian*, philosopher Robin Dembroff uses the term ‘misogyny’ for the same broad system. They (Dembroff identifies as nonbinary, and so requests the use of ‘them/they’ pronouns) claim that transwomen are victims of misogyny, and that “feminism must be concerned with the interests of any group that misogyny targets”. A third term that might be used to describe this broad system is ‘the gender system’ (or ‘the gender binary’).

There’s some talking past each other going on here based on using three different terms to mean the same thing, instead of three distinct things. But there are (at least) three distinct things that matter, and we need to be able to name, and talk about, them all. Both Dembroff and the philosopher whose talk we heard (who I’m not naming, because I don’t think that talks are part of the public domain in the way that writing for the media or publishing in an academic journal both are) are using ‘patriarchy’ and ‘misogyny’ respectively for what I would call ‘the gender system’ or ‘the gender binary’. Dembroff, for example, states that three beliefs form the theoretical foundation of patriarchy: that male/female is a “natural, immutable and exhaustive binary”; that “all males should be masculine and all females should be feminine”; and that “masculinity is incompatible with and superior to femininity”. This is something different to the definition I opened with, where patriarchy is a system that structurally oppresses female people on the basis of their sex.

Here are the three things we might be interested in – which might be causally interrelated, but yet still distinct enough to treat separately – and the way I think the terms are best used in relation to them:

**Patriarchy:** the system in which female people are structurally oppressed on the basis of their sex (whether by male people, or in a way that advantages male people).

**Misogyny:** [the “law enforcement” branch](#)[3] of patriarchy (contrasted with sexism, the branch of patriarchy concerned with beliefs and attitudes about female people’s inferiority), which involves the sanctioning of feminine gender norm-violations.

**The gender system:** the system in which all people are disadvantaged by one of two sets of gender norms, expectations that are applied to people on the basis of their sex (or presumed sex).

The point I really want to make here is that even if we start with the gender system, as I am understanding it, rather than with patriarchy or misogyny as I am understanding it, we surely all agree that there are distinct groups of victims of the gender system, and that all of their interests matter.

Let me say a bit more about ‘the gender system’. I understand gender norms to include the expectation of heterosexuality (that males are attracted to females rather than other males, and that females are attracted to males instead of other females); the expectation of feminine behaviour and presentation in female people – including that female people serve male people’s interests – and masculine behaviour and presentation in male people; the priority of male over female; and the oppression of female people including male violence against women and girls. Misogyny serves patriarchy by policing and maintaining the sex hierarchy; the gender system serves patriarchy by keeping both men and women in their places. It is unusual for structures of injustice to persist without beneficiaries; in the instance of all three of these phenomena, male people are the beneficiaries, even when they are also the victims (as gay men and gender non-conforming men and transwomen are).

Now, those in a language community have to figure out how to use words, and maybe it will turn out that we should use ‘patriarchy’ in the way Dembroff prefers. That’s why we asked, as part of our question for our opponents, whether there’s some system that structurally oppresses female people on the basis of their sex. If there is, we can call it something else for the sake of argument, but we ought to have it on the table. In the rest of this piece, I’ll use the terms in the way I’ve specified above.

Note, then, that we and our opponents agree that there’s a ‘broad system’ that has many victims. Although it is ultimately an empirical claim, it’s plausible that there are at least four distinct groups of victims (whose membership partly overlaps) and these are groups we’re already familiar with thinking about. For example:

(i) Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are hurt by a norm of heterosexuality, and have interests as a group relating to liberation from the enforcement of such norms.

(ii) Gender non-conforming people are hurt by the norms about presentation and behaviour that depend on sex, and have interests as a group relating to liberation from the enforcement of such norms. For example, butch women, effeminate men, gay and lesbian people, androgynous people, and trans people all, to different degrees, violate the norm that male people be masculine and female people be feminine, and all suffer the policing that accompanies such norm-violation.

(iii) Female people are hurt by the expectation that male people take priority, because this frustrates their claim to equal respect and consideration, and female people are also hurt by male violence (whether or directly or in virtue of managing the threat). Female people are also hurt by expectations that they be feminine (consider for example a female person who is utterly uninterested in her appearance, and therefore struggles with being expected to be an aesthetic object for men).

(iv) Male people, even though it's more complicated because they also benefit from it, are also hurt by the expectation that male people take priority, because this makes them likely to be complicit in injustice and frustrates their ability to engage in truly egalitarian relationships with women (whether as romantic partners, friends, colleagues, or otherwise). Male people are also hurt by expectations that they be masculine (just consider a male person who is shy and therefore struggles with being expected to 'take the lead' in relationships).

We can argue about whether and how the policing of each of these different groups of victims of the gender system works. For example, I find it more plausible that a non-passing transwoman is policed for violating the norm of masculinity that male people are expected to conform to, just as an obviously gay man is policed for violating the norm of heterosexuality that male people are expected to conform to, than that such people are policed *as female people are* in virtue of exhibiting 'feminine' traits (presenting in a way that involves some femininity, or showing sexual interest in men).

For this reason, I don't think the frequently invoked concept of 'transmisogyny' is likely to apply very often, at least in application to transwomen. If a transwoman passes as a woman she will be subject to misogyny but not transphobia; if she does not pass as a woman then she will be subject to transphobia but not misogyny. (The concept likely will, however, apply to transmen, who can simultaneously be clocked as being both female and trans). To answer this decisively we'd have to get inside the heads of transphobes to see what they were really thinking and responding to, or we'd have to catalogue the kinds of actions undertaken by transphobes to see whether they were more like those taken against non-conforming women or non-conforming men. Without information of either sort, we certainly shouldn't assume that transphobes are treating their transwomen victims *as women* because of minor displays of feminine-associated behaviour, rather than treating them as men, just because that's the narrative offered to us by trans activists. (And certainly we should not defer to the testimony of transwomen themselves on this subject, as we are so often implored to do, given that they have an obvious vested interest in one interpretation).

Because female people are the biggest group of victims of the gender system, and because the male violence they experience as a group is so severe, they have a strong claim to have their interests given priority. That's not to say the others don't matter, or that there shouldn't be people fighting for each of the groups of victims. We can give our moral and political attention to a group without it being true that the group is the most oppressed. But I do think this should give us pause when it comes to claims that *other* groups hurt by the gender system deserve to be centred in our efforts to fight it.

So even if we granted the terms 'patriarchy' and 'misogyny' to what I've been calling 'the gender system', we'd still need a word for the oppression of the largest group in virtue of their being members of the female biological sex class. (Even if our opponents disagree about what causes women's oppression *now*, between 'being female', 'being treated, socially, as a woman', and 'identifying as a woman', it's clear that what caused women's oppression *in the past* was being female, in particular having their reproductive labour exploited by men, and being excluded from public life. This historical oppression has had long-lasting effects and needs mitigating, and that remains true regardless of the way that the concept of 'woman' as a class might be changing). We might also want a word for the system that positions female people at the bottom of the sex class hierarchy 'male ->female', and we might want a word for the sanctioning and policing by male people (and some female people) that goes into violations by female people of feminine gender norms. And finally, we'd still have perfectly good reason to think that this large group of people needed a political movement to advance their interests, without being told to take on everyone else's problems all the time. I call that movement 'feminism': the fight for the liberation of female people (from expectations of heterosexuality, femininity, and subordination; and from subjection to male violence).

Many of our opponents give the term 'feminism' to the fight against the gender system more broadly (not to mention loads of other fights, like against climate change and capitalism). The point is that merely re-naming things doesn't actually change anything about the interests of the group that was originally

named. There might be some reason, sometimes, to pursue different interests under the same umbrella, e.g. to pursue lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights together under the 'LGB' umbrella, or to pursue the interests of gender non-conforming people and trans people together under a 'gender expression' umbrella. There might even be some cases where we judge that some differences don't matter enough to justify separate terms, like we might think it's better to use 'lesbian' for all exclusively same-sex attracted female people, rather than to seriously maintain two strict categories like 'gold star lesbian' and 'lesbian'.

But the distinct victim groups harmed by the gender system are not like this. Male non-conformity to masculine gender norms is a different thing to female non-conformity to feminine gender norms and is policed differently (there is 'corrective rape' of lesbians, but not of effeminate men, for example). The only people whose interests are served by the glossing over of differences between victims of the gender system, and by the appropriation of the feminist movement for a wide range of disparate causes, are the male people who succeed in shifting attention onto their own causes (as some transwomen have done), and the male people who have an interest in the weakening or dismantling of a strong and effective feminist movement.

I end by urging our opponents to further consider leaving 'patriarchy', 'misogyny', and 'feminism', to the understandings given here, and using something like 'the gender binary' or 'the gender system' where they want to talk about the larger system that has several disparate social groups as its victims. Then we can have the real arguments.

One such argument is about whether it's feasible to 'go to the roots of the system' or not. For example, capitalism is a broad system that has multiple groups of victims, e.g. animals and the global poor. We think it's perfectly permissible to fight for animal liberation alone rather than to have to fight all the fights resulting from capitalism with limited resources, and rather than to have to 'go to the roots of the capitalist system', whatever that would mean.

Another such argument is whether we can help one group without that being at the expense of any other: would animal liberation hurt the global poor, rather than just not help them? It seems that exclusive action for animal liberation would be permissible if the latter is true, but may be impermissible if the former is true. Does the fight for female liberation hurt gay and lesbian people, or gender non-conforming people? That doesn't seem plausible, given that female liberation includes lesbians and female gender non-conformists. Is there any reason to think female liberation actively hurts the male victims of the gender system?

A third such argument is over whether we must be strict 'prioritarians' (i.e. give exclusive priority to the group that is the least well-off). If this were just a matter of which group has the numbers, female people would obviously win hands down. But it can't be just numbers; the types of harms and their magnitudes surely matter too. But then we need to have the difficult discussions about how to aggregate and trade off particular physical harms – like murder, or intimate partner strangulation, or rape, or domestic assault – against particular psychological harms – like the distress a trans person might feel as a result of being misgendered, or the domination a woman might feel as a result of knowing male people can access spaces where she is vulnerable (even if no actual violence occurs).

### **Links:**

[1] Doing better in arguments about sex, gender, and trans rights – archived at hollylawford-smith.org and online at <https://medium.com/@kathleenstock/doing-better-in-arguments-about-sex-and-gender-3bec3fc4bdb6>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/19/valerie-jackson-trans-women-misogyny-feminism>

[3] <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/down-girl-9780190604981?cc=au&lang=en&>