

# Men, Male Bias, Patriarchy, Masculinity, Gender Relations

## What is the Barrier to Engendering Development?

By Rachel Simon-Kumar

**THE field of women-in-development (henceforth, w-i-d)<sup>1</sup> is an evolving one. Its journey – which began in 1970 – has embraced a diversity of ideas that has come from practitioners, scholars and activists in both the countries of the South and the North. As a result, the analysis of women’s experiences has also evolved over this time. At the heart of the field is the premise that women have experienced development differently – if not discriminately – from men. The source and effect of the ‘difference’, however, is contested; the literature of the field is strewn with possibilities of how discrimination comes about. Are ‘men’ responsible, and if yes, which men? Or is the source of women’s oppression a more general ‘male bias’? How is that different from patriarchy? What is masculinity? And how does that contribute to women’s discrimination?**

Each of these concepts is used to indicate the power differences that impact on women – yet they each relate to different forms of discrimination and are situated in different social spaces. This article is a whistle-stop tour of these more commonly-used concepts found in w-i-d literature. What do they mean in context? Who uses them? What kinds of analytical frameworks do they provide to understand women’s discrimination, and what strategies for action? These are discussed below.

### 1. Men

The idea that men are the barrier to women’s involvement in development entered w-i-d thinking in the early days of its inception. Contrary to what it might sound like, the ‘men’ in this context is not a reference to the men folk of developing societies – rather it was a reference to the men who came to ‘do’ the development work – the bureaucrats, the planners and the development experts in both donor and recipient countries. When Esther Boserup’s influential work *Women’s Role in*

*Economic Development (1970)* highlighted that women were neglected in the development/modernisation process, she squarely blamed women’s marginalisation on the male planners.

Male planners were charged with oversight and ignorance, i.e., they assumed that women only performed one role – that of reproductive activities, while men undertook productive/economic activities. Even though Boserup revealed that women played a dual role in developing societies, planners were still “unable to deal with the fact that women must perform two roles in society, while men perform only one” (Kabeer, 1994: 21). In fact, the failings of the planners were not *just* that they were men but – more to the point – they had “a very specific *Western (men’s) model* of what women in general should be, and what they should and should not do” (Kabeer, 1994: 22; italics added).

The emphasis on misguided male planners was part of the liberal feminist approach to social change that was prevalent at the time in western socie-

ties, but it had also particular implications for women-in-development theory and practice. For one, the prevalent belief was that development itself was gender neutral and unbiased; women’s experience of discrimination in development could be removed by appropriately training and educating male planners.

The limitation of blaming male planners for women’s unequal role in development became apparent fairly quickly when WID consultants found that these misperceptions were far more ingrained than they expected, and were not easily erased by “appropriate” training. That led to a consideration of patriarchy. But first a quick scan of what male bias refers to.

### 2. Male bias

Male bias is another term found in the early w-i-d literature that is used to explain why women have a harder deal from development.

Here too, the concept is used variously. In the first decade of women in

development, male bias was used to explain women's social development status in developing societies – it was promoted as a concept that encompassed social imbalances in attitudes, sex roles and activities, usually marked by favour towards men. Biases in intra-household allocation of resources like food and medical aid, social conditions such as mobility for women, and in development indicators such as life expectancy, sex ratios, literacy, work participation etc. were all studied thoroughly through the 1970s and 1980s at local, national and regional levels.

Boserup (1970) wrote about bias in agricultural farming systems – in Africa it was more common to find “female” shifting farming systems, while in Asia the male farming systems using plough and other mechanised methods were more widespread and discouraged women's participation. Amartya Sen's (1992) work on “missing women” pronounced the more extreme effects of social preferences towards males – at least 100,000 women and girls dead in developing countries as a result of male bias.

The problem with the concept of male bias was the difficulty in pinpointing cause and effect – most studies that sought to understand the reasons for gender differences in development revealed a set of correlates or possibilities (which could be demographic, or social, or cultural). There wasn't a strong theoretical analysis of male bias, and therefore, a robust strategy for action could not be promoted. In time, patriarchy seemed to take over the more benign-sounding ‘male bias’.

The term made a comeback with Diane Elson's (1991) *Male Bias in the Development Process*. Elson's use of the concept is closely linked to gender relations as being socially constructed (see gender relations below). Her 1991 book refers to the masculine perspectives embedded in the macroeconomic knowledges that form the foundation of development, as well as the societies where they are undertaken. Individuals – both men and women – merely play out the roles assigned with-

in their social systems. Unlike the liberal view, for Elson development was not gender-blind, but rather “these supposedly gender-neutral terms [such as ‘formal sector’, ‘the household’, etc.] are in fact imbued with male bias, presenting a view of the world that both obscures and legitimates ill-founded gender asymmetry...” (Elson, 1991: 9).

The term ‘male bias’ concedes that women are constructed as deviant in most societies, but these constructions can be changed – a flexibility not found in the concept of patriarchy.

### 3. Patriarchy

‘Patriarchy’ is a term associated with the radical feminists of the west – the genre of feminism that advocates the universal condition of male domination over women in all institutions of society: from the state, to motherhood

to marriage. Patriarchy is the extreme form of gender relations where women are always disadvantaged by male control.

In the w-i-d literature, ‘patriarchy’ started to be used alongside, if not replace, ‘male bias’ in the early 1980s. The use of the term ‘patriarchy’ was a means for scholars and practitioners to grapple with the deeply systemic nature of female disadvantage, and the fact that mere training and education were not enough to change the course of women's discrimination in development. Consequently, where writers used patriarchy, they also tended to refer to “gender ideologies”, and “subordination” – terms that acknowledged that gender discrimination was structural and linked to the organisation of the productive and



Photo: Sam Buchanan

Women, and a man, Umphien Mai refugee camp, Thailand.

reproductive spheres (Beneria and Sen, 1981; Sen and Grown, 1987). Let me point to two ways in which the term patriarchy appears:

(a) *Societies were patriarchal*: Deniz Kandiyotti is particularly known for her work *Bargaining with Patriarchy* (1988). She pointed out that all societies had their own blueprint of patriarchy (patriarchy in the Muslim Middle East is different from patriarchy in East Asia, for instance). Women, she argued, created their own pacts with patriarchy, developing strategies of accommodation and resistance within the broad style of prevailing patriarchy. Similarly, although he does not use the term 'patriarchy', Sen (1990: 123) notes "the systematically inferior position of women inside and outside the household in many societies". Sen seeks to see how women can improve their bargaining power within households by improving their entitlements, through activities like income generation. The recommendation for improving women's condition is fairly apparent; once the scripts or rules of patriarchy are understood, it might be an entry point to improve women's ability to bargain with patriarchy.

(b) *Capitalist development is patriarchal*: In the late 1970s, there was a strong strand of critical w-i-d theorists who argued that the cause of women's disadvantage was not marginalisation from development, but rather, their integration into it. International economic development was deeply flawed, it was argued, because it built on exploitative capitalist structures. Capitalism was not gender-neutral; on the contrary, widespread evidence demonstrated that capitalist production targeted women for low paid work especially in the informal sector, and unpaid domestic work – all means to keep cost of production low at the expense of exploitation of women. By all accounts, thus, capitalism was also deeply patriarchal. It was into this production system that development was seeking to integrate women. Maria Mies' book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986) was

a powerful indictment that the source of women's discrimination was more than just a local, project design malfunction – the source of disadvantage was far wider and deeper than mind-sets and planning tools.

Patriarchy, along with its attendant notion of subordination, was useful in its time but suffered from several shortcomings. It could not explain why all women were not equally subordinated, and why some men were. It also did not adequately connect reproduction and production spheres to understand women's disadvantage. And finally, patriarchy and capitalism, it seemed, could only ever be overcome by the radical overthrow of international structures – a solution that seemed a bit distant on the horizon. What it did do was pave the way for the idea that women's discrimination was rooted in 'gender relations' instead.

#### 4. Gender relations

Gender relations appeared in the 1980s – championed as the concept developed by Third World feminists. Gender relations was a breath of fresh air because it sought to move away from simplistic and universal ideas of disadvantage, and analyse how women, and disadvantage, were a part of wider social relations.

By drawing on gender relations, the analyses also started, for the first time, to put the spotlight on men as well – not necessarily as oppressive influences (as patriarchy suggested) but as part of the rich and complex interactions that explain women's experiences of development – some of which may be disadvantageous.

The idea of gender relations has been useful in developing a more sophisticated analysis of gender discrimination – What are the rules of gender relations? Who has access and who has control of resources? What are the ascribed roles and responsibilities for men and women?

Although still widely used, gender relations is critiqued because "while it offers useful tools for thought, it is rath-

er thinner on tools for action" (cited in Cornwall, 2003: 1326). In practice, there is still a tendency to either focus on women, or carry on the stereotypes of "women as victims" and "men as problems".

#### 5. Men (again) and masculinities

Men started to emerge once more in w-i-d literature in the late twentieth/early twenty first century. This time the focus was on the male counterparts of women-in-development. This renewed interest in men was positive and was spurred by a couple of developments within the field in the 1990s. First, there was the emphasis in the reproductive health/rights debates to 'bring in the other half' and for greater male responsibility if development was to succeed. This was an important move in the field – until now, men had been left out of the reproductive sphere just as much as women in the previous decades had been forgotten in the productive. This convergence was seen as the natural analytical framework if gender relations were to be studied comprehensively.

A second development, also during the 1990s, was the rise of the human rights approaches to development and the recognition that men, too, were entitled to the rights of development; a point that seemed to be diminishing with the emergence and rise of women in development. The key idea that was being advocated was that it wasn't the *presence* of men that was thwarting the development of women but rather, their *absence*. The emphasis, particularly at the level of practice, was to seek ways to bring men into the fold of women-in-development. This twenty-first century focus on men and masculinities take away some of the earlier simplistic analyses around men as 'good/bad'. It pitches men as partners in women's quest for gender justice.

Alongside this focus on men, there was also an interest in masculinities or the social norms of what it means to be male. The concept of masculinities developed from the idea that gender is constructed. W-i-d literature has start-

ed to emphasise the importance of masculinities because often it is masculine social norms that condition men's actions; men behave in particular ways because that is what is expected of them. An example given is that although many men *want* to have fewer children, often they have no choice but to conform to the expectations of male behaviour (Chant and Gutman, 2000).

Masculine norms can make men as powerless as they do women. Researchers suggest that the obligations to masculine norms can also create resentment – which can be taken out on women in violent forms (Chant and Gutman, 2000). The implication here is that there are complex negotiations between individual men, and social norms that have bearing on women's lived realities.

So – where is the problem?

If anything, what the evolution of the w-i-d literature tells us is that there is no one cause, and no one effect. The context in which the inequalities between women and men develop is complex – it is an outcome of norms and structures, ideologies and politics, people and attitudes, both historical and contemporary.

Gender disadvantage in development is drawn as much from local causes as global disparities. Men, masculinities, patriarchy, bias – these are all manifestations and causations in a problem that is ever shifting, ever fluid. In isolation, each of these con-

cepts presents part of an analytical lens to understand discrimination and the barriers that hinder equality between men and women in development. Put together, they remind us that there are no easy solutions to engendering development.

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#### Note

1. I am using w-i-d as a shortcut reference to the literature on women and gender issues in developing societies. This is intended to include works from WID or Women in Development, WAD or Women and Development, and GAD or Gender and Development, and any that fall outside of these categories.

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## Gender distribution among CID member leaders

CID member groups are more likely to be headed by men than women. Of the 90 directors, 53 percent are men and 47 percent are women. If this group is broken down into large, medium and small/voluntary agencies, the women leaders are found to be disproportionately with either the small and voluntary agencies or those agencies with a specific focus on women's issues (UNIFEM, Zonta, Soroptimists etc). Of the 15 large agencies, 10 are headed by men, for example.

A gender survey of CID members showed that most governing boards had women members. However, eight percent of organisations that responded to the survey had no women currently as board members.

Gender awareness needs to start at home!