UPSC MAINS · ANSWER PRACTICE

Essay · Essay

Patriarchy is the least noticed yet the most

significant structure of social inequality

पितृसत्ता की व्यवस्था नज़र
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सामाजिक विषमता की सबसे

प्रभावी संरचना है।

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~1200 words

Answer Hint

Meaning of patriarchy; historical roots of gender inequality; invisible structures of social power; gender roles and socialisation; unequal access to education, employment and property; unpaid care work; women's political representation; constitutional safeguards and legal reforms; intersectionality and multiple disadvantages; strategies for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Model Answer

Introduction

Social inequality is often understood through visible differences in income, education, occupation and political power. However, some of its deepest structures operate quietly through everyday customs, family expectations, social norms and institutional practices. Patriarchy is one such structure. It refers to a system in which men, as a group, tend to exercise disproportionate authority and control over social, economic, political and familial

resources.

Patriarchy is often least noticed because it is embedded in practices that appear natural or traditional. Decisions about household responsibilities, career choices, inheritance, mobility and leadership may reproduce gender

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inequality without explicit discrimination. Its significance lies in its ability to shape opportunities, expectations and power relations across generations. Addressing social inequality therefore requires not only legal reforms and economic development but also a transformation of the attitudes and institutions that sustain patriarchal structures.

Understanding Patriarchy as a Structure of Inequality

1. Beyond individual discrimination

Patriarchy is not limited to individual men discriminating against individual women. It also operates through institutions, customary practices and social expectations that systematically privilege male authority.

For example, a family may invest more in a son's education because he is expected to become the principal earner, while a daughter is expected to prioritise marriage and domestic responsibilities. Such a decision may appear to be a private family matter, yet its cumulative effect is to reproduce unequal opportunities.

2. Its invisible character

Patriarchal norms often become normalised through socialisation. Children learn gender roles from family members, textbooks, entertainment and community practices.

Boys may be encouraged to display authority and independence, while girls may be expected to demonstrate obedience, sacrifice and emotional care. When these expectations are widely accepted, inequality can persist without requiring overt coercion.

3. Intergenerational transmission

Patriarchy reproduces itself through unequal access to nutrition, education, property, employment and decision-making. Women with fewer resources may have less bargaining power within households, while their daughters may inherit similar disadvantages.

Consequently, gender inequality is not merely an individual problem; it is a structural issue that affects the distribution of opportunities across generations.

Historical and Social Roots of Patriarchy

Patriarchal structures developed differently across societies and historical periods. Property relations, inheritance systems, divisions of labour, political institutions and cultural interpretations have all influenced gender relations.

In many societies, the association of men with public authority and paid work, and women with domestic responsibilities, contributed to unequal control over resources. Restrictions on women's mobility, education and participation in public life further reinforced these arrangements.

However, culture is not static, and Indian society has never been culturally uniform. Women's contributions to literature, philosophy, agriculture, social reform and political movements demonstrate that gender relations have been diverse and contested.

The historical persistence of patriarchy should therefore not be interpreted as proof that inequality is natural or inevitable. It reflects social arrangements that can be challenged and transformed.

Major Dimensions of Patriarchal Inequality

1. Family and household decision-making

The family is often the first institution through which gender roles are established. Men may exercise greater authority over finances, mobility, marriage and major household decisions.

Women may be expected to seek permission for activities that men undertake independently. Such unequal authority can restrict women's autonomy even when they contribute substantially to household income.

2. Unpaid care work

Women undertake a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic work, including cooking, cleaning, childcare and caring for elderly or ill family members.

This work is essential to the functioning of households and the wider economy, yet it is frequently undervalued because it does not receive a direct wage.

Heavy care responsibilities can reduce women's time for education, paid employment, rest and political participation. Recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work is therefore central to gender equality.

3. Education and health

Gender-based preferences may influence access to education, nutrition and healthcare. Early marriage, household responsibilities and safety concerns can interrupt girls' education.

Although India has made substantial progress in expanding girls' educational opportunities, gaps in learning outcomes, digital access, health and school completion persist in some communities.

Equal access to education and healthcare strengthens women's autonomy and improves outcomes for families and future generations.

4. Economic inequality and the labour market

Women may face occupational segregation, wage disparities, limited access to leadership positions and discrimination in recruitment or promotion.

Career interruptions associated with unpaid care responsibilities can further reduce lifetime earnings and retirement security.

Women's labour-force participation is also influenced by access to safe transport, childcare, suitable employment and supportive workplace policies. Gender inequality in employment therefore reflects both workplace practices and broader social arrangements.

5. Property and inheritance

Control over property and productive assets can significantly influence bargaining power and economic independence.

India's Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 strengthened daughters' equal coparcenary rights in Hindu joint family property governed by the relevant law. However, legal entitlements may not always translate into effective ownership because of social pressure, lack of awareness and practical barriers.

Equal access to land, housing, credit and inheritance can reduce economic dependence and strengthen women's decision-making power.

6. Violence and control over women's autonomy

Domestic violence, sexual harassment, dowry-related abuse, forced marriage and restrictions on mobility are serious manifestations of gendered power imbalances.

Such practices can limit women's participation in education, employment and public life. Effective prevention requires legal enforcement, accessible support services, social awareness and institutions that respond sensitively to survivors.

7. Political and institutional representation

Women remain underrepresented in many decision-making institutions. Their limited representation can reduce the visibility of issues such as care infrastructure, reproductive health, workplace safety and gender-responsive budgeting.

The Constitution's 73rd and 74th Amendments created reservation provisions for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies. Women's participation in local governance has demonstrated the potential for greater representation, although barriers such as proxy control, inadequate resources and social pressure remain.

Why Patriarchy Often Remains Unnoticed

1. Normalisation of gender roles

Practices repeated across generations may be accepted as tradition rather than examined for their effects on equality.

2. Unequal power within private spaces

Household decisions are often treated as private matters, making unequal bargaining power less visible to public institutions.

3. Economic invisibility

Unpaid domestic work is not fully reflected in conventional measures of economic output, despite its essential contribution to social reproduction.

4. Internalisation of stereotypes

Women and men may themselves internalise expectations about appropriate occupations, behaviour and responsibilities. These beliefs can influence choices even in the absence of direct coercion.

5. Institutional neutrality in appearance

Policies that appear gender-neutral may have unequal effects when people begin from different social and economic positions. For instance, a workplace requiring unrestricted overtime may disadvantage employees carrying disproportionate care responsibilities.

Consequences for Society and Development

Patriarchy affects not only women but also the broader development of society.

- **Economic losses:** Excluding women from productive employment wastes skills and talent.
- **Human development deficits:** Gender disparities in nutrition, health and education affect family and community well-being.
- **Democratic limitations:** Unequal participation weakens the principle of equal citizenship.
- **Mental health burdens:** Restrictive gender expectations can create stress and constrain individual identity.

- **Intergenerational inequality:** Children may inherit discriminatory attitudes and unequal access to opportunities.
- **Restrictions on men:** Patriarchal expectations can discourage men from expressing vulnerability, sharing care work or choosing non-traditional occupations.

Gender equality therefore benefits society as a whole by expanding freedom, productivity and human potential.

Constitutional and Legal Framework in India

The Indian Constitution establishes a framework for equality and protection against gender-based discrimination.

- **Article 14:** Guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws.
- **Article 15:** Prohibits specified forms of discrimination, including discrimination on grounds of sex, while permitting certain constitutionally authorised special provisions.
- **Article 16:** Provides equality of opportunity in public employment.
- **Article 21:** Protects life and personal liberty, providing a foundation for safeguarding dignity and autonomy.
- **Article 39(a):** Directs the State towards securing adequate means of livelihood for men and women equally.
- **Article 39(d):** Addresses equal pay for equal work for men and women.
- **Article 42:** Directs the State to make provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.
- **Article 51A(e):** Makes it a fundamental duty to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

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Important legal measures include the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013; and laws addressing child marriage and other forms of exploitation.

The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 provides for reservation of approximately one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies and the Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, subject to the constitutionally specified implementation process linked to a future census and delimitation.

Nevertheless, laws alone cannot eliminate patriarchy. Their impact depends on effective implementation, public awareness, accessible justice and changing social attitudes.

Intersectionality: Recognising Multiple Disadvantages

Patriarchy does not affect all women equally. Gender intersects with caste, class, disability, religion, ethnicity, geography and other social conditions.

A woman from a disadvantaged caste may experience both caste-based discrimination and gender inequality. A woman with a disability may face additional barriers in education, employment and access to support services. Women in rural or remote areas may encounter greater difficulties accessing healthcare, transport and legal assistance.

Policies must therefore recognise differences in lived experiences instead of treating women as a homogeneous group.

Way Forward: Transforming Patriarchal Structures

1. Gender-sensitive education

Schools should promote mutual respect, equal capabilities and shared responsibilities. Textbooks and teaching practices should avoid reinforcing restrictive gender stereotypes.

2. Redistributing unpaid care work

Affordable childcare, accessible eldercare, parental leave and shared domestic responsibilities can enable women and men to participate more equally in paid and unpaid work.

3. Strengthening economic independence

Women require equal access to education, skills, formal employment, credit, digital resources, property and entrepreneurship opportunities.

4. Improving safety and justice

Police, courts, workplaces and support institutions must respond effectively to gender-based violence. Survivors should have access to legal assistance, counselling, safe accommodation and timely justice.

5. Increasing political participation

Women's representation in legislatures, local governments and public institutions should be supported through effective implementation of legal provisions, leadership training and institutional accountability.

6. Engaging men and boys

Gender equality requires men to challenge discriminatory norms, share care responsibilities and support women's autonomy. Patriarchy must be addressed as a social structure rather than reduced to individual blame.

7. Promoting gender-responsive governance

Governments should assess how budgets, infrastructure, transport, healthcare and employment policies affect different genders. Reliable gender-disaggregated data can improve programme design and evaluation.

8. Transforming social attitudes

Media, community organisations, families and religious or cultural institutions can help challenge stereotypes and promote dignity, equality and mutual respect.

Conclusion

Patriarchy remains one of the most significant structures of social inequality because it influences everyday behaviour, economic opportunities, political representation and control over resources while often appearing natural or invisible. Its persistence demonstrates that inequality is sustained not only by explicit discrimination but also by deeply embedded norms and institutional practices.

India's constitutional commitment to equality provides a strong foundation for transformation, but lasting change requires more than legislation. It demands equal access to resources, recognition of unpaid care work, effective protection against violence, women's participation in decision-making and a fundamental shift in social attitudes.

A just society is one in which gender does not determine an individual's freedom, opportunities or dignity. Dismantling patriarchy is therefore not merely a women's issue; it is essential to democracy, inclusive development and the full realisation of human potential.