



Building Momentum • Fostering Activism

Stripping the layers of patriarchy bit by bit for a violence free world

The first time my daughter came home and insisted to me that she was a girl as if that was brand-new information, it turned out that a teacher had commented disapprovingly about her short, unstyled hair. “Girls do their hair, mummy,” she had parroted. A short while later, she had preened and twirled as her father told her how pretty the bead-bedecked hair extensions he had taken her to get made her look. That night, even as she complained about how uncomfortable the style was, she asked me if I too thought it was pretty. Not long after that, she developed a fixation with pink tutus and frilly skirts. “Girls wear skirts, mummy,” she would say. I had always known it would happen eventually, but still it shook me that my daughter, at just over two years old, was already internalising social norms around femininity.

Before any of the “girls do” and “girls don’t” that she currently believes, my now almost-four year old girl was an outsize toddler who was often dressed in cargo shorts and graphic t-shirts, and strangers would invariably talk about how big and strong and active ‘he’ was. At first I would correct them, but after a while I stopped telling them ‘he’ was actually a girl because their beaming approval would automatically morph into concern. Suddenly they would become worried about her clothes, the potential for scarring her knees when she fell, her loud voice, her lack of earrings. They went from “he’s a big boy!” to “she’s quite tall for her age”; from “ah, be careful, don’t hurt yourself” to “come and sit down”; from “he’s so strong” to “she’s so pretty.”

My daughter’s personality and character are her own, but they are forming in the broader context of the patriarchal society we live in. So for example, my baby has already picked out a boy named JD to marry. Being the precocious, opinionated and bullying child she is, she has decided that she will be the husband and JD, the wife. My daughter’s concept of marriage is interesting to me for many reasons, chief among them being how it exposes gender relations as a social construct based on power and its distribution. A ‘husband’ is, to my 3 year old, really just a person who gets to call the shots. And to her, the privilege of calling the shots has nothing to do with being a ‘man’, which is why even though she insists to me that “mummy, I’m a girl!” she also somehow sees no logical problem with being a husband.

Unfortunately, I am under no illusions that the ideas that I allow my daughter to have about her place in the world will be left unquestioned by everyone else. My home may be a small island where gender does not hold sway, but it is hardly a sovereign state. As soon as we set foot outside, patriarchy is waiting. It is there in the men who feel justified in sexualising my toddler, the women who try to draw me aside to remark about dressing ‘like a mother’, siblings who say “you may think that women are equal to men, but that’s just your opinion”, fathers who seem to think it is just as important to be pretty as it is to be strong, teachers who talk about how mothers cook and fathers finance the family, aunties who insist on sitting ‘like a girl’...

Patriarchy is pervasive, persistent and pernicious. In abiding by its dictates on gender, we continue to allow unequal distributions of power, autonomy and rights among people. We start telling people what they can and cannot do from childhood, and in so doing we also tell them who they can and cannot be; what the limits of their lives are. When we tell girls to keep quiet so as to be ‘ladylike’, insist that women talk too much, and decry women’s emotionality and lack of logic, we simultaneously reinforce the notion that women are not to be listened to or taken seriously. That belief, for example, contributes to the often subconscious logic of rape apologists who imply that women who speak up about assault are not credible.

When we teach boys that aggression is 'manly' and that showing or dealing with emotion is 'for women', we rob them of the tools to resolve conflict in healthy ways. When we tell girls that their bodies are by default a 'temptation' that must be hidden from men so as to prevent untoward sexual behaviour and tell boys that sexual prowess must be proven at all costs, we incubate a rape culture that removes all possibility of accountability. By teaching boys that endless persistence is the type of romantic attention that girls really want, we teach them that 'no' is negotiable. By telling girls that their virginity is their value and they are never supposed to want sex, we make it impossible for them to develop and enforce healthy sexual boundaries. When we teach women that marriage is the be-all and end-all of their existence and tell men that wives exist to serve and obey them, we enable domestic violence.

The ways in which patriarchy creates and reinforces inequality vary on the individual level, but none of us ever escape it. Further, as we scale up our perspectives, we get an ever broader picture of just how far-reaching and violent the system is, especially as it interacts with other social categories like class, race, sexual orientation and gender identity, religion etc. Patriarchy is constructed such that power is concentrated in the hands of men, which translates into them being privileged with largely unquestioned access to and control of the institutions that underpin our societies, as well as power over the citizens of these societies. This imbalance of power also makes accountability incredibly difficult to enforce. The result of this is ceaseless violence against people with little power, such as women and girls.

To end patriarchy, we must all commit to its destruction. Leaving it to women and girls to address patriarchal violence and its effects means that the people who both benefit from and wield violent power within the system are not actively contributing to dismantling it. It is just as important for men to challenge patriarchal norms among themselves and in their spaces as it is for women to do so. That way, instances of sexual, domestic and other kinds of violence can be tackled within the spaces where they originate *before* they occur, rather than being addressed by victims, survivors and other disenfranchised groups after the fact. It is important that the system be dismantled both from outside and from within, so that we can collectively rebuild a social contract of power that is more equitable and thus less violent for all.

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