

Women as their own barriers in patriarchy

Why in News?

- Ratna Pathak Shah challenged one of the most common statements about women: “**A woman is a woman’s worst enemy.**” Calling it one of the worst “**jumlas**” she has heard, she argued that the phrase itself hides a much deeper truth about how patriarchy works inside families.
- According to Ratna, women are often blamed for enforcing rules and controlling other women, while the larger system that creates those rules remains invisible.



The gun is fired from our shoulders'



- Ratna used a powerful example to explain how patriarchy operates. She said that the “**gun is fired from our shoulders**” because women are often made responsible for enforcing rules created by a patriarchal system.

- The orders, she explained, come from the system, but women are frequently the ones expected to carry them out.
- This can make it appear as though women themselves are responsible for restricting other women. But Ratna's point is that the problem is bigger than one mother, one daughter, or one family. The system creates the rules, while women are often placed in the position of enforcing them.

Now coming to global level, **UN Women** notes that Indian women face a substantial burden of **unpaid domestic and care work**; earlier estimates found women performing almost **seven times as much domestic and unpaid care work as men, with unpaid care and domestic work estimated at around 39% of GDP.**

- **India** also continues to show substantial gender inequality in political representation: **women held about 14.7% of seats in Parliament as of February 2024.**
- **UN Women** also reports that **23.3%** of Indian women aged **20–24** had married before age 18, showing how deeply early marriage remains embedded in social structures

The “police dog” inside the household

The household can become the first institution where gender norms are monitored.

- Father establishes the rule → **mother enforces it**
- Community judges the family → **mother disciplines the daughter**
- Society defines “good womanhood” → **women transmit these expectations**
- Daughter resists → **conflict occurs between mother and daughter**

Thus, the **visible enforcer may be a woman, while the invisible structure is patriarchy.**

What Thinker’s say?

Simone de Beauvoir – “The Other”

- Women are socialised into prescribed feminine roles rather than simply born into them.
- A mother who teaches her daughter that “a good woman sacrifices” may unintentionally reproduce the very gender hierarchy that constrained her own life.





Pierre Bourdieu – Symbolic Violence

→ Patriarchal domination often becomes so normalised that people themselves reproduce it without recognising it as domination.

→ Women judging another woman's clothes, sexuality, career choice or marital status represents **internalisation of patriarchal norms**.

Antonio Gramsci – Hegemony

- Dominant values survive not merely through force but through **consent and common sense**.
- Ideas such as “***girls must compromise more***”, “*women belong to the home*” or “*family honour depends on women's behaviour*” become accepted as common sense—even by women.

Talcott Parsons – Gender Socialisation

- The family historically assigns **instrumental roles to men and expressive roles to women**
- When women are made primarily responsible for socialising children, they can become important transmitters of gender expectations from one generation to another.

Bell hooks

- Women can participate in reproducing patriarchy, but this does not make women the *source* of patriarchy.

Kimberle Crenshaw

- There is no single experience of “**womanhood**”; gender interacts with other structures of power.

Sylvia Walby

- Patriarchy operates through multiple structures, including **household, paid work, state, sexuality and culture.**

But women are also each other's strongest allies

Women have also historically challenged patriarchy through **collective solidarity.**



→ **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)** have enabled women to develop economic networks, collective bargaining power and political participation.

→ **SEWA** demonstrated how collective organisation can transform women from isolated workers into a collective force.

→ Women-led movements against **dowry, domestic violence, sexual harassment and liquor abuse** have also demonstrated women's capacity to challenge patriarchal structures collectively.

→ The **#MeToo movement** demonstrated how individual experiences could become collective action when women shared experiences and challenged institutional cultures.

- ◆ #MeToo movement in Bollywood

Best practices: From women policing women to women supporting women

- **Transform gender socialisation** : Teach boys and girls that care, autonomy and responsibility are human responsibilities, not feminine duties.
- **Redistribute unpaid care work** ; UN Women recommends recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid work rather than simply expecting women to absorb it.
- **Strengthen women's economic independence** : Employment, property ownership, financial literacy and access to credit increase bargaining power.

- **Build women's collectives** : SHGs, cooperatives and community organisations can convert individual vulnerability into collective agency.
 - ◆ Kudumbshree of Keralam , MAVIM of Maharashtra
- **Engage men and boys** : Gender equality cannot be achieved by asking women alone to change.
- **Replace “protection” with autonomy** : Instead of restricting women's mobility, improve safe transport, policing, public spaces and institutional accountability.

The Punjab's idea

Fighter jet as gift for her, Razia Sultan story: Punjab textbooks smash gender bias

Nur Jahan to Razia Sultan as leaders, and married daughters taking care of their parents, Punjab textbooks smash gender bias



Breaking Gender Bias through Education

- **Gender-sensitive curriculum**: Introduce stories and examples that challenge stereotypes from an early age, as seen in Punjab's textbooks.

- **Teacher sensitisation:** Train teachers to identify and challenge subtle gender biases in classrooms, not merely teach gender-related chapters.
- **Role-model approach:** Highlight women in diverse roles—pilots, entrepreneurs, scientists, political leaders and soldiers—to expand children's aspirations.
- **Shared domestic responsibilities:** Teach that household work and caregiving are **shared responsibilities**, not inherently women's duties.
- Question ideas such as “*married daughters belong to another family*”, “*boys don't do household work*” and “*certain careers are unsuitable for women.*” – aka - Paraya Dhan.

Conclusion

Women are therefore not inherently “**women’s worst enemies**”; rather, they can become the unwitting enforcers of a patriarchal social order. The solution lies not in blaming women but in transforming the institutions, norms and power relations that make women police one another. True empowerment begins when women cease to be merely transmitters of inherited norms and become collective agents of social change.

UPSC CONNECT :

- 1) In the patriarchal world women themselves are the worst enemy of women. Critically examine. (150 Words, 10 Marks)
- 2) “Patriarchy is reproduced not only by men but also through the socialisation of women.” Critically examine. (150 words, 10 marks)
- 3) Gender-sensitive education can play a transformative role in challenging traditional gender roles and promoting women’s empowerment. Discuss with suitable examples from India. (250 words, 15 marks)



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