



Faith, Gender & Sexuality: A toolkit

Resources for faith practitioners

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Women, gender & power: Overview

This module outlines some of the links between faith, gender, power, hierarchy and socialisation. It highlights the negative consequences of patriarchy for both men and women.

- **Gender roles and expectations are learned.** They can and do change over time and, they vary within and between social, cultural and religious groups. Systems of social differentiation, like political status, class, ethnicity, disability and age, shape gender roles; and because they are constructed, they can also be re-constructed by faith leaders and communities to create more equitable gender relations.
- Understanding gender is important because **a gender-analysis can reveal how patriarchy harms both men and women**; understanding the way gender norms are created is also important because once we see how subordination and domination are constructed along the lines of gender and sexuality, it becomes more possible to also see how harmful norms can be changed.
- **Gender norms and categories are directly related to power.** They relate to ways of being that determine one's position with respect to another. Gender is a relationship and the study of gender identities concerns the exploration of power relationships within the contemporary gender landscape in relation to political, social and religious systems that assign power.

Why does gender matter?

Unequal gender relationships negatively affect both men and women. Gender inequality is created through interpersonal, structural or institutional violence and it is sustained in a number of ways, including:

- Through laws that treat gender and sexual minorities as second-class citizens
- Through social norms and customs that deprive of knowledge about their own bodies and that take away their authority to make independent decisions.
- Through endemic patterns of violence and abuse against women and LGBTI people
- Through gendered expectations that women should provide unpaid care at the expense of their own economic wellbeing

Gender power relations have left a legacy in which women are more likely to be disadvantaged than men, to have less access to resources, benefits, information and decision-making, and to have fewer rights within the household and within public life.

Why do masculinities matter?

Different kinds of masculinities

In the 1990s, researchers started to draw attention to the different ways that men and women experience (and perform) masculinities. They challenged a couple of taken-for-granted ideas, including the idea that masculinity applies only to people born with male bodies. Women and trans people, too, hold different forms of masculinity; and sometimes people who are born with male bodies, and who identify as men, may be discriminated against because they do not conform to society's expectations of what 'men' should look, or behave, like.

[Read more: Female Masculinity \[1\]](#) by J. Halberstam

Other activists and scholars have shown that some masculinities are made to be subordinate to others. The idea of 'hegemonic masculinities' is often used to explain how certain forms of masculinity are used to perpetuate patriarchy and women's subordination; and they show how 'hegemonic masculinities' oppress subordinate men.

[Read more: 'Undressing Patriarchy' \[2\]](#) in the IDS Bulletin. A good starting point for learning more is the introduction to the

Defining patriarchy

Whilst the word originates in ancient Greece, where it meant 'rule of fathers', the actual concept of patriarchy was brought into use in Europe during the mid-seventeenth century, in order to shore up feudal systems, which operated on principles of patrilineal descent and inheritance. [Theorists in the late 1800s and early 1900s] argued family-centred patriarchy was also the underlying model for a more general dominance of men in society and the concept gradually became more used in this broader sense of the rule of men in society. Twentieth-century feminist thought further popularised the term and emphasised patriarchy's associated systematic oppression and subordination of women.

Whilst patriarchy involves aspects of male supremacy, male privilege and the subordination of women, it is not the same 'thing', nor reducible to either one of those. Rather, we understand the notion to centre on some form of power system/s where gendered hierarchies of power relations are structured through some form/s of male (or masculine) lines or logic, which tends to result in male privilege – particularly the privileging of some men – and the subordination of all others, albeit to varying degrees. (Edstrom, 2015: 3)

[Read more: Undressing Patriarchy and Masculinities to Re-politicise Gender \[2\]](#)

Patriarchy is fundamentally organised around the idea of men's superiority to women. Within this system, even those men who may not conform (such as homosexuals) still stand to benefit from the privileges attached to being a man. While it cannot be argued that under patriarchy all forms of masculinity benefit equally, there is nevertheless an overwhelming consensus regarding the superiority of men over women.

What are the consequences of gender inequality?

To understand gender we have to look beyond gender norms and examine roles and stereotypes as a wide set of practices that reflect the gendered nature of power. This includes looking at the economic and political spheres of our social life.

Unchallenged cultures of male dominance lead to the subordination and even exclusion of many women, and also many

men who do not conform to 'hegemonic' forms of masculinity. **This effectively sidelines more than half of the world's talent, experience and knowledge, leaving our societies operating at under 50 per cent capacity.**

Looking specifically at women: there is a growing and compelling body of evidence which shows that women not only bear the brunt of poverty but, that women's empowerment is a central precondition for its elimination.

[Read more: Pathways of Women's Empowerment](#) [3]. Learn more here about efforts to promote gender equality in Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia and West Africa

Poverty elimination can only be achieved by addressing the disproportionate burden of poverty, lack of access to education and health services, and lack of productive opportunities borne by women. Gender inequality represents a huge loss of human potential, with costs for men as well as for women. Gender equality is therefore integral to democracy, development and a human rights system to which all people are entitled.

[Read more: Interactions Empowerment of Women and Girls](#) [4]. Resources and information about unpaid care work, activism against gender violence, health in urban areas and women's economic empowerment

Rigid norms related to gender and power differentials between groups of men, mean that many men are vulnerable to violence (the leading cause of death for young men worldwide) and are less likely to seek health services when needed as compared to women. Programme interventions at the local level have shown tremendous success in engaging men and boys in promoting their own health and well-being and that of women and girls.

Want to learn about ways that men and boys are working to challenge patriarchy, and create new avenues for gender equality? There are many great organisations working on these issues. A few include:

[Read more: Sonke Gender Justice](#) [5]

[Read more: Engendering Men: Evidence on Routes to Gender Equality \(EMERGE\)](#) [6]

Violence

Violence, privilege, injustice and impunity are intimately linked. Violent behaviour is generally perceived to be an integral part of male behaviour and as a normal feature of being a man. Violence is, in fact, culturally 'masculinised.' Gender-based violence is related to systems and feelings of power – the oppression of women and certain groups of men. Gender inequality perpetuates a culture of violence. When women are viewed as something less, as persons subjected to male authority, men feel less hesitation in using and degrading women for their own satisfaction as their satisfaction is deemed to be of greater importance.

Unfortunately, culturally dominant norms of masculinity that encourage men to use violence limit not only men's but also women's and girls' choices, safety and behaviour.

Activities

These activities allow participants to explore issues of power, patriarchy and gender norms using free discussion and creative methods.

Activity 1: Debating the issues (60 minutes)

This activity, based on the MenEngage Africa Training Initiative, allows participants to think about how they 'do' gender, sexuality, femininity and masculinity etc. They are asked to respond to a series of questions.

[Download the pdf of this exercise \[7\]](#)

Activity 2: Who is on Top? (80 minutes)

This activity is based on 'Transforming Masculinities Towards Gender Justice; Regional Learning Community for East and Southeast Asia (RLC)' from Partners For Prevention. Using creative methods, it explores the definition and workings of hegemonic masculinity and identifies alternative images and messages about masculinity and femininity that could promote greater gender justice.

[Download the pdf of this exercise \[8\]](#)

Further reading

There are many useful resources on this topic. We've selected a few and include a brief description of each resource under the link, so that you can see if it's something you'd like to read more about. If you have additional resources you would like to share through this toolkit, please send them to us by email at spl@ids.ac.uk

Source URL: <http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-gender-faith/women-gender-power-overview>

Links

[1] <https://www.dukeupress.edu/female-masculinity>

[2] http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7311/IDSB_45_1_10.1111-1759-5436.12062.pdf?sequence=1

[3] <http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/>

[4] <http://interactions.eldis.org/>

[5] <http://www.genderjustice.org.za/>

[6] <http://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/>

[7] http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sites/spl.ids.ac.uk/files/module_4_activity_1.pdf#overlay-context=sexuality-gender-faith/sexuality-and-gender-diversity/activities

[8] http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sites/spl.ids.ac.uk/files/module_4_activity_2.pdf#overlay-context=sexuality-gender-faith/sexuality-and-gender-diversity/activities