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.

Source URL: http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-gender-faith/women-gender-power/why-do-masculinities-matter

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