

## **Seeing Patriarchy from the Inside: A Commentary on Miki Kashtan (2020)**

**Senan Clifford**

This is a response to Miki Kashtan's recent writings on overcoming patriarchy, notably in this publication (*Self & Society*) – 'The power of soft qualities to transform patriarchy' (Kashtan, 2020), as well as her earlier blog 'Why patriarchy is not about men' (Kashtan, 2017). In both these articles she explores and explains the emergence of patriarchy, what patriarchy is about, and how this dominant system or mentality has had, and especially continues to have, such a devastating effect on us all – and now, increasingly, on all life on our planet.

Although I like so much of what Miki writes in these pieces, I am responding with the intention of exploring this patriarchal system that we so vitally need to understand and confront, undo and heal from, if we are to survive; to explore it in a different way or at least from a new perspective. This is from a position which includes and acknowledges the trauma that patriarchy creates in men, and that we have until recently failed to recognise or understand.

As Miki says in 'Why patriarchy is not about men',

patriarchy plays a foundation role in everything. Capitalism, racism, and all the other forms of exploitative oppression, war, and now environmental degradation could only come into being because patriarchy already primed us for them. At its core it's a separation from life, from self, from others, and from nature.

This is why the term 'patriarchy' is now widely used to identify the nature of the problem that is leading to a world full of conflict; the separation that patriarchy involves then becomes a system of controlling, at all levels – self, others and nature. And this is around us everywhere... – we live within this system, and as such it is then hard to see its nature from within, especially because we are all so mentality affected and shaped by this framework.

We are all born into patriarchy; it happens to boys and girls, and we unconsciously reproduce it in our children, and across every aspect of our societies. Miki continues:

It happens, almost invariably, at the hands of people who love us and want the very best for us, and still pass patriarchy on to us even while

believing they are doing it for our own good. They do it through aiming to control us, training us for obedience, instilling in us ideas about what is right and what is wrong, making our belonging conditional on us fitting into what is believed to be acceptable – for anyone, for boys or for girls, for people of our class, for people of our religion, ethnicity or race.

We all then live in the trauma of lost togetherness, ‘alone and struggling to maintain our sense of self in an environment that challenges everything we do’.

In many of the comments following her blogs and in other discussions, men express hurt that we call this toxic system – ‘patriarchy’ – with its root in father, as they feel blamed for all the ills that it undoubtedly spreads into every aspect of our lives. For a long time feminism did not see any separation between the system of patriarchy, and those carrying out the dirty work of this damaging system – men. They blamed men; they were beyond redemption: ‘All men are bastards.’ They did not see how men could be victims.

Now, however, there is a wider acceptance of the totality of patriarchy, how it reaches into everything, and how it ‘happens’ to boys and girls, albeit differently. Neither boys nor girls choose this; it’s not about hormones, nor about biological differences; modern neuroscience now shows there is virtually no difference between male and female brains at birth, and the gender stereotyping to which we are all subject is a social construct we receive from parents, peers, and social and cultural pressures, conditioning us to behave, think and feel as we do.

## **Becoming a Man**

From that very first question ‘Is it a boy or a girl?’, we are conditioned to treat boys and girls differently, in every way conceivable, and without seeing it, just as we don’t see the air we

live in. Boys are forced, through their gender-stereotyped experience of social, parental, peer and cultural pressures and expectations, to deny their core feelings, to become emotionally numb – most comfortable experiencing any feelings they may have as anger or shame. They are isolated, rejected, toughened and ridiculed so that they act out the roles that conform to the narrow uniformity of acceptable behaviours that are defined as manly or male. Without intention, boys are held less, talked to less, smiled at less, nurtured less softly, expected to be independent, strong, active, brave heroes, little doers and makers, for that is what we expect of them as men. We can’t help this any more than we can avoid seeing girls as lovely, soft, needing care and looking-after; both are limiting, both impose rules on our acceptability, both deny us our birthright to be truly ourselves.

And yet in this way the essence of patriarchy, that ‘separation from life, from self, from others, and from nature’, happens primarily to men as little boys; they are wounded to become cut off from themselves – unable to feel, and denying who they really are or what they really want, they act as automatons for the system. Thus brutalised and controlled, men act out this bullying and controlling to everyone and everything they find they have power over in the hierarchies that ensue – men over men, white over colour, rich over poor, human over animal and nature, adult over child.

Yes, men are to blame for the actions of patriarchy because they are the main perpetrators of most of the day-to-day injustices and genocides we’re becoming increasingly aware of, as we face the end-game of climate breakdown and ecological collapse, of societal disintegration, and pandemics of illness and mental un-health as well as global poverty, war and forced migrations. They are the foot-

soldiers, unknowingly obedient, acting out their roles without knowing why.

Men know they have to work, to get the job done, make money, compete, win, and even fight, kill or be killed. But it's not for any real reward: instead, men are much more susceptible to suicide, addictions of all types from work, or gambling, to porn or alcohol, as well as loneliness, poor health and lack of self-care, risk-taking and ultimately even death on the job!

The lesser evil involving the shaming, controlling, ridiculing and victimisation of women and girls was the more obvious aspect of patriarchy to be challenged, and was easier to see, as women were more able to feel the effects and hardship of their domination. Yet we have been oblivious to the degree of trauma men live with. Men are so separated and alone, living with a mask of competence and 'I'm OK' that they do not recognise the feelings bubbling up inside them until they explode in rage or self-hatred. They certainly haven't been able to explain and talk about their pain and misery; and women cannot imagine the experience of being male, particularly if still blaming men for their wounding.

Societally, we have not acknowledged that men need liberating, nor considered some of the problems of the sexes from a man's perspective: it seems to go without questioning that men behave badly in so many ways, just because they are men; we don't ask why. This leaves many men feeling bitter and defensive, and unable to see the freedoms that feminism represents; they reject and attack the ideas, ultimately leading to a war of the sexes which has probably disempowered the swell of change that feminism might have achieved last century. We cannot challenge the patriarchal system we do not see clearly.

Is there a 'crisis in masculinity', for men and boys? Without a doubt, it has been a crisis since the emergence of patriarchy thousands of years ago; a crisis of men killing men, killing and raping women, dominating and destroying nature, and we are now facing the point of no return! It is a system we all propagate, so we all have the response-ability to respond to this crisis, together.

## How Can We Respond?

In Miki's interpretation of evolutionary developments and the transition from matriarchal societies into a patriarchal one, she cites the likely causes as linked to traumata of varying natures, such as famines, floods or invasions of other groups of people. From their experiences of such shocks, people lost trust with the natural flow of life in which indigenous peoples feel secure, and this prompted our ancestors to begin accumulating, saving resources, hoarding against possible future threats.

If we look at this emergence of patriarchy, through a view that does not recognise the core of trauma that patriarchal conditioning imposes on men, there is a danger that we judge those early men as patriarchs before patriarchy even existed. In matriarchal societies, humans had evolved in extended family groups, co-operating and sharing in all aspects of communal living – a 'Where one eats, we all eat' mentality. Parental bonds were stronger between mothers and children than for men owing to uncertainty over paternity and even lack of focus on the link between having sex and pregnancy; and so overall, men would be less bonded to children, and less tied to biological connections, less concerned about paternity. The roles men filled were directed towards whole group benefits; hunting for food for all to enjoy, or defending the group for dangers or attacks – their empathies were for everyone in their tribe, and

all the children. So when people started accumulating food and other resources to calm their fears of future threats, this would have been for the whole group.

I imagine separation and conflict would arise primarily between different groups rather than within them, and with this a subsequent role separation as men were needed to become warriors, or more effective and long-distance hunters. There would then have been a need to control other men, and there the whole patriarchy thing takes off, with its central theme of toughening up, of isolating men from themselves, from each other and from everyone else. It is a result of this patriarchal trauma and the resulting sense of insecurity, of rejection and loneliness, that then drives men's needs to control women, children and their environment. Men are not born naturally controlling; it's patriarchy that trains them to be so.

I understand and agree with Miki's explanation that in order to create the capacity for transforming patriarchy into something more healthy and which might then allow a possibility for human survival, we need an alternative approach, based on togetherness and compassion. And that individual healing is never going to be achieved on the scale needed within the time-frame we see before us, and that likewise, attempting to fight against and conquer patriarchy is a self-defeating aim, and also extremely unlikely to achieve much against the capitalist machine.

Instead, the starting-point Miki proposes on which to grow our hoped-for antidote to patriarchy is in embracing our softness in order to melt patriarchy from within, starting with mourning our predicament and all that we have lost to end up as we are. So the deep mourning she sets out therefore needs to include the full story, and must embrace the mourning for men's

deep wounding that I see at the heart of patriarchy. Perhaps our inability to sense this wound, to be aware of the trauma men carry within themselves, such that they then act out on to everything around them, has hindered the growth of feminism over the last 50 years.

Miki suggests, in my simplified translation, that we focus on restoring our capacity to be the humans we can be, if and when we are no longer dominated by the harsh separations inherent in patriarchy, and that we achieve this through embracing choice, to create togetherness, such that flow blossoms. Choice requires that we acknowledge all the ways patriarchy has affected us, both men and women, everywhere in the world, and that we are open to learning and listening with compassion. Then vulnerability becomes possible, from this place of security, knowing acceptance rather than distrusting and fearing blame. And it is imperative that men are able to feel safe enough, and are adequately supported to connect with their vulnerable selves, to be able to weaken the straight-jackets within which patriarchy holds them.

Engaging with each other in this way, more honestly and welcoming everything we find in each other, allows better opportunities for creating the viable communities that our dreams suggest we need, and in which we could thrive; communities based on mutual care, support, togetherness and shared purpose. We know humans are 'hard-wired' for co-operation, communication and love – we have seen how powerful and effective this is during the recent Covid-19 pandemic as well as in other emergencies; and more importantly, we know how good it feels to be part of such heartfelt endeavours. And in the end, we do not know whether we can succeed in halting the tide of extinctions and disasters, the floods and famines that we are already beginning to experience, bringing the miserable sense of fear and

loneliness that our current separation leaves us with. But if we can choose a path of togetherness we can create hope and joy, and we do know how much better these feel.

## References

- Kashtan, M. (2017). Why patriarchy is not about men. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/y2xldlc3> (accessed 2 October 2020).
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## About the contributor



**Senan Clifford** has been interested and involved in men's work for 30 years; everything from men's groups to domestic-violence projects, 'rites of passage' events to social history. During this time, he has also been a carpenter, and school teacher, a designer and craftsman; and now, having just turned 60 years old, is at last writing his book about patriarchy and men.