

Study Guide: MEN

Introduction:

MEN is a 12-part series of the Scene on Radio podcast from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. Producer and host John Biewen was joined by co-host Celeste Headlee for the season-long series.

Recent events, especially the #MeToo Movement and the widespread reports of sexual harassment and sexual assault that the movement laid bare, have put gender dynamics at the center of our society's dialogue in a new way. Sexism, misogyny, toxic masculinity, patriarchy: People are talking about the persistence of male domination in our culture and the damage that it does, above all to women but also to members of LGBTQ communities. Some argue that patriarchy is damaging to everyone—straight, cisgender men included.

Despite its title, our series is not intended as a general or comprehensive look at men or manhood. Its real focus is male dominance. Patriarchy. In this 12-part series, co-hosts John Biewen and Celeste Headlee dive into patriarchy and seek to understand it—how it developed in the first place, why it's persisted for so long, how it functions in ways many of us have been trained not to see. Along the way, they, with the help of scholars, experts, and other reporters, explore how sexism intersects with other forms of oppression—especially racism—and how it can be dismantled.

A caution: Gender is a sensitive topic and may feel threatening to many people. It's important to create an environment of safety in your classroom or discussion group. Our advice is to say something along these lines:

Subjects involving gender—and certainly discussions about unjust gender dynamics—are deeply personal to most of us and may be uncomfortable or trigger anxiety. For people who identify as female, sexism may be a sore point. Most girls and women have had bad experiences with men and male dominance, and those frustrations may be close to the surface. People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or genderqueer may be similarly frustrated about the expectations of a homophobic, transphobic, heteronormative culture.

For people who identify as male, meanwhile, and perhaps especially cisgender, heterosexual men and boys, there might be unease: Will I be presented as the bad guy in this discussion? Am I about to be attacked?

For everyone involved, please understand: The point of the MEN series, and of our discussions, is not to shame anyone. None of us chose our biological sex or our gender identity as we

experience it, nor did we create the culture or social structures that we were born into. In this class or discussion group, we're in this together, trying to understand how society's gender norms and expectations affect us all. One theme of MEN is that patriarchy imposes harmful gender expectations on everyone. Not everyone is hurt by patriarchy in the same way or to the same degree, but we all have something to gain by understanding how these systems work.

General Questions (for comprehension and discussion; identified by episode)

1. Celeste Headlee and John Biewen identify themselves by gender and race, and note that John is male, cisgender, and heterosexual. Why is it important, at the outset of the *MEN* series, for the hosts to be transparent about their own identities? Why does John say it was important that he work with a female co-host for this series? [Part 1]
2. What are the problems with sexism, misogyny, and toxic masculinity that are highlighted in the series of news clips? [Part 1]
3. When did patriarchy start, according to anthropologists, and what are the reasons given for why it came about? [Part 1]
4. What are some common explanations that people give for why male dominance first arose, for example in John Biewen's person-on-the-street interviews? What assumptions have you had about that question? [Part 1]
5. Are all people either "manly men" or "womanly women"? What are the problems with that expectation? [Part 2]
6. What evidence does Steven Pinker give for asserting that boys and men have a biological advantage over girls and women in science and math? How does Elizabeth Spelke counter his argument? [Part 2]
7. Scholar Mel Konner argues that women, as a group, are "superior" to men. What are the reasons he gives for that claim? [Part 2]
8. During the Enlightenment period, thinkers and policymakers debated the "woman question." What was the woman question? [Part 3]
9. To replace the ancient idea that women were "less than" men, Enlightenment thinkers developed the theory of "complementarity." What did it mean, and how did it work to keep women "in their place"? [Part 3]
10. What are some of the wedge issues that, historically, have separated black and white women? [Part 4]
11. Historian Danielle McGuire says that black women were an essential force behind the modern civil rights movement, and that most histories overlook an important motivating factor for the movement itself. What was the persistent problem that motivated black women to demand change? [Part 4]
12. What are the various forms of discrimination that women frequently endure in the workplace? [Part 5]
13. Women often do not complain to their employers about unequal pay, sexual harassment, or even sexual assault that occurs in the context of their jobs. Why? [Part 5]

14. Traditionally, most societies have reserved for men the role of fighting and dying in war. Given that some women would make good soldiers, why were women traditionally excluded from military service? [Part 6]
15. According to the scholars Tom Digby and Graham Parsons, do nations fight wars because men are naturally violent, or do societies have to train men to be violent so nations can fight wars? [Part 6]
16. What does Kate Manne mean by “himpathy”? [Part 7]
17. How was the 2018 movie *Crazy Rich Asians* a departure from the way Asian men have usually been portrayed in U.S. popular culture? [Part 8]
18. Describe the “strong black man,” as outlined by Mark Anthony Neal. Why does Dr. Neal want to move beyond the strong black man? [Part 8]
19. What is “transmisogyny,” and why would transgender *women* be especially vulnerable to attack in a patriarchal culture? [Part 9]
20. Psychologist Terry Real talks about the “halving” of boys and girls in a patriarchal culture. What does that mean? [Part 10]
21. Celeste Headlee says the expectation placed on boys and men that they must always be “winners” is a trap. How so? [Part 11]
22. Mel Konner says that the ability for women to choose whether and when to have children is “possibly the single most momentous change in modern times.” Why, and how does reproductive freedom help women gain power? [Part 12]

Additional discussion questions for each episode:

Dick Move (MEN, Part 1)

Reminder of episode theme: A look at the problems of male dominance. And a visit to Deep Time to explore the latest scholarship on how, when, and why men invented patriarchy.

Do you agree with the premise of this episode, that men have more than their share of power in society, which leads to problems and oppression—of women, in particular?

Ain't No Amoeba (MEN, Part 2)

Episode theme: For millennia, Western culture (and most other cultures) declared that men and women were different sorts of humans—and, by the way, that men were better. Is that claim not only wrong but straight-up backwards?

What are some commonly-held beliefs about “masculine” and “feminine” traits—the ways in which boys and girls, and men and women, are “naturally” different from one another? What’s misleading, or incomplete, about these notions that are based on binary gender and patriarchy?

After listening to this episode, and based on your own experience, what are your thoughts about gender difference? Does it exist at all? If so, is it partly biological or “innate,” or entirely learned from our culture?

Skeleton War (MEN, Part 3)

Episode theme: A few hundred years ago, Enlightenment thinkers began to declare that “all men are created equal.” Some of them believed that “universal” human rights should apply to women, too. Those feminists—many of them men, by the way—lost the fight.

Does it surprise you to hear that sexism was seriously discussed, and theoretically could have ended, several hundred years ago? How does that affect the way you think about sexism and male dominance today?

Feminism in Black and White (MEN, Part 4)

Episode theme: The struggles against sexism and racism come together in the bodies, and the lives, of black women. An exploration of male dominance and white supremacy in the United States, and the movements to overcome them.

What are some other ways to apply “intersectionality”: Other divisions, and forms of oppression, besides—or in addition to—racism and sexism, that can overlap and multiply and make life more difficult for people?

More Than Paper Cuts (MEN, Part 5)

Episode theme: The #MeToo Movement has shed a harsh light on sexual harassment in the workplace. Just how bad, and how pervasive, is sexism on the job in the U.S., from day-to-day expressions of disrespect all the way to rape?

The hosts connect men’s mistreatment of women in the work force to the traditional male-female relationship under patriarchy: Men are in charge, women’s role is to serve men. And, related to that, the workplace is a *public* space and therefore, under traditional patriarchy, the domain of men. What are other ways in which those traditional gender roles affect our everyday lives?

Warriors (MEN, Part 6)

Episode theme: Do nations fight wars because men are naturally violent? Or do societies condition men to embrace violence so they’ll fight the nation’s wars? Masculinity and war, in part through the eyes of women in the military.

Do you agree with the experts in this episode that fighting in war is unnatural for human beings, including most men? What would be the benefits, and perhaps the costs, if society stopped venerating warriors?

Himpathy (MEN, Part 7)

Episode theme: Several years after Janey Williams was sexually assaulted by her former boyfriend, Mathew, she told some of her closest friends, and her mother, what Mathew had done. Janey was so troubled by her loved ones' responses, or lack thereof, that she went back to them years later to record conversations about it all.

Kate Manne calls misogyny the “enforcement arm” of patriarchy. It’s not a general dislike of women, but punishment for women who don’t fill traditional (subordinate) gender roles. Does that definition of misogyny ring true to you? What are some of the ways that misogyny, understood in this way, commonly rears its head in our society?

American Made (MEN, Part 8)

Episode theme: American history—law, economics, culture—has built different notions of masculinity (and femininity) for people of varying races and ethnicities. A trip through a century of pop culture and the stereotyped images that white supremacy has manufactured and attached to Asian and African American men.

Why do you think that a U.S. culture dominated by white men would tell stories that paint Asian men and black men, and other men of color, as violent, and in particular as a danger to white women? Do you see examples of those stereotypes that persist today?

Be Like You (MEN, Part 9)

Episode theme: Lewis Wallace, female-assigned at birth, wanted to transition in the direction of maleness—in some ways. He shifted his pronouns, had surgery, eventually starting taking testosterone. None of that meant he wanted to embrace everything that our culture associates with “masculinity.”

Lewis Wallace’s mother, Raven, tells him “I now know you weren’t trying to be more like your dad or your brother. You were trying to be like you.” What did she mean? Can you imagine a world in which no one is looked down upon for their gender identity, *whatever* it is?

The Juggernaut (MEN, Part 10)

Episode theme: Writer Ben James and his wife Oona are raising their sons in a progressive and “queer-friendly” New England town. They actively encourage the boys to be themselves, never mind those traditional gender norms around “masculinity” and “femininity.” All was well. Until the elder son, Huck, went to sixth grade.

Does the discussion of “halving”—the cultural expectation that children will separate themselves into “male” and “female” and, accordingly, take on “masculine” or “feminine” characteristics, resonate for you? Do you feel that you personally lost, or gave up, important parts of yourself in that process?

Domination (MEN, Part 11)

Episode theme: Host John Biewen dips into the world of sports talk radio, where guys talk not just about sports but also about how to be a man in twenty-first-century America. What John finds is more complicated than he expected, with revelations both encouraging and sobering.

Sports talk radio host Jim Rome talks a lot about men who are winners. “*The guy.*” Do you agree that our culture puts extra pressure on men to be high achievers in comparison with other people (perhaps in comparison to other men in particular), and to behave as if they’re always in control and invulnerable? What are some results of those pressures? Would you like to see those pressures eased, and if so, how could we achieve that?

The End of Male Supremacy? (MEN, Part 12)

Episode theme: In our season finale, co-hosts Celeste Headlee and John Biewen talk about where American culture goes from here, sexism-wise. And we hear from scholar Melvin Konner, who argues that we are in fact witnessing—and bringing about—“the end of male supremacy.”

What do you think of Mel Konner’s argument that male dominance is in the process of ending before our eyes? If you identify as female or non-binary, what do you most look forward to in a more equitable world? If you identify as male, how does the prospect of a more gender-equitable society sound to you? What patriarchal advantages are you willing to give up, or not?