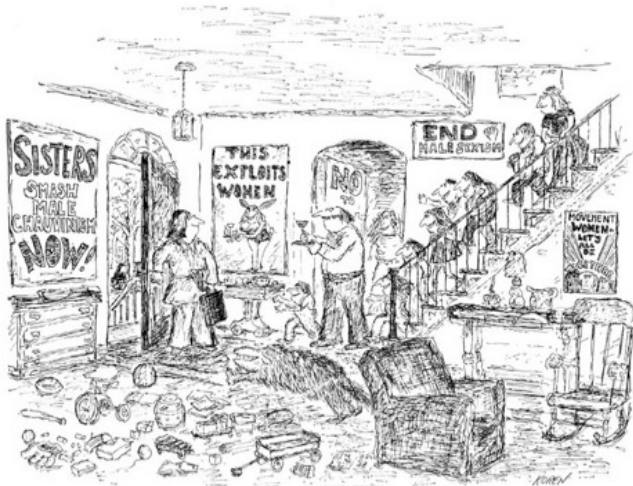


## Challenging patriarchal binaries: infusing feminist politics into learning spaces

“**Personal is political**” is perhaps the best known of all feminist slogans, a rallying cry for feminists across the world.



The phrase, used as the title of an 1970 essay by radical feminist activist Carol Hanisch<sup>1</sup>, has been interpreted in various ways: that personal experiences can be a valid starting point for political analysis; that women's personal experiences reflect patriarchal politics; or that personal life is indistinguishable from personal politics. Whatever the interpretation, the power of this slogan shines through.

“Personal is Political” is a frontal attack on the core tenets of patriarchy: the rigid separation between **public and private, mind and body, human beings and nature**. These **patriarchal binaries** are the scaffolding for the “grand narrative” of patriarchy, the discourse that normalises and justifies the subordination of women by presenting it as part of a “natural order” that cannot be questioned or overturned.

Patriarchal binaries are deeply embedded in our social institutions, cultures and traditions. They set the benchmarks for normality and rightness in every aspect of life. They are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, branching out into a constantly expanding web of exclusions and marginalisations that reify patriarchal power.

The **public/private binary** may well be the oldest and most entrenched of patriarchal binaries, given its intricate connections to the institution of marriage. Marriage and the family are the epitome of the private – protected from public scrutiny and barricaded against intrusion even by the state. The home is the “women's sphere” where they can perform their divinely ordained “natural” roles of reproduction and care. Despite the glorification of women's position at the centre of the household, the legal head of the family is usually the oldest male. The sanctity of the private space of marriage and family places a cloak of invisibility around egregious abuses from domestic violence and sexual exploitation to the denial of dignity – these are defined as “family matters” that should not even be discussed in public let alone addressed through external interventions. The punishment for those who breach this prohibition – whether women or men – can be anything from social ostracism to torture and death at the hands of the family and community. Killings of women who violate the public/private boundary – by marrying against the wishes of their families, by

<sup>1</sup> Hanisch, Carol. (1970). Personal is Political. In Shulamith Firestone and Anne Kroetz (eds) *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*. <<http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>>

refusing sex with husbands, by speaking out against incest - are valorised as “crimes of honour”.

The public/private binary is intricately enmeshed with the **body/mind binary**, the so-called “Cartesian dualism” that is the starting point of so-called “scientific rationality”.<sup>2</sup> Qualities associated with the mind (the “head”) – cognition, intelligence, rationality – are considered associated with maleness and are therefore highly valued. On the other hand, qualities associated with the heart - emotionality, compassion, gentleness - are considered female and therefore more suitable for expression within the private domain. The perception of women as “soft” in both body and mind provides an additional logic for the sequestration of women in the private sphere of home and family on the grounds of “safety”.

Apart from the ways they play out in the lives of individual women, the overlapping operations of the public/private and body/mind binaries also have long-term structural implications. For instance, because care work is seen as a dimension of women's biological role, it is exalted as a “labour of love”, a sublime expression of women's intrinsic nature that cannot be spoken of in mundane economic terms. The myth that care work is not “real work” can be sustained because it is performed within the hidden and protected private space of the family where its exploitative aspects are hidden from view. In contrast, men's work is firmly located in the public sphere and is therefore both more visible and more valued.

Despite women having entered the “public” sphere of paid work, the body/mind binary is reflected in their concentration in the “caring professions” – housemaids, nurses, child-minders, school teachers, waitresses, hostesses, secretaries, beauticians, personal assistants. These professions are also among the least remunerative, reflecting both the low value assigned to women's work and the conviction that women are biologically ill-suited for the upper echelons of the “public” world.



Women's experiences with mainstream medical science make visible the ways in which the mind/body binary operates to reinforce patriarchal controls on women's bodies as well as women's minds. The understanding of illness as a problem of the physical body, and the characterisation of women's reproductive functions as central to their biology allow medical science to deny the label of a “real illness” to certain women-specific conditions, affecting the social perception of the illness as well as the social status of the sufferer.

“Female hysteria” is a classic example. Various expressions of emotional distress (such as nervousness, anxiety, insomnia, excessive or reduced sexual desire or even “a tendency to cause trouble”)<sup>3</sup> were clubbed together under this label and attributed to malfunctions of the reproductive system, curable by removing the uterus. Similarly, dysmenorrhoea (painful menstruation), a condition now known to have specific physical causes, was until very recently not recognised as a disease at all but was dismissed as attention-seeking (if the sufferer was an upper-class woman) or malingering (if she was a working-class woman). In both these cases, the decision to treat the

2 [Link here to Feminist Epistemology section.](#)

3 <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female\\_hysteria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_hysteria)>

condition as a disease or dismiss it as a figment of the imagination actually rests on the conviction that women's own accounts of their bodily experiences are not trustworthy. On the other hand, the

*Nature/culture binary: consequences*

- *Radical exclusion – denying any connection between the two sides of the divide (eg asserting that human beings are not animals);*
- *Backgrounding - “forgetting” the factors that create privilege (eg denying any connection between reproductive labour and productive labour, denying the idea of limits to growth);*
- *Incorporation – defining the “other” as a part of the self (eg the term “man” is taken to include woman, “woman is the better half of man”);*
- *Instrumentalism – valuing the “other” only for what they can contribute to man (eg valuing a river only as a source of hydroelectric power);*
- *Essentialising - denying the possibility of variation or exception (eg “a woman who doesn't want children is not a real woman”).*

authority exercised by doctors on the basis of their “objectivity” and “specialist knowledge” places their decisions above scrutiny and obscures the connection between women's physical bodies and their experiences as subordinated subjects of patriarchy.

The idea of human beings as distinct and separate from the rest of the living world - the **nature/culture binary** - is deeply embedded in Western philosophy, creating a “master framework” for understanding the world, where man is the norm in relation to which everything else is defined; everything that is not man is placed on the “other”, subordinated side of the binary. In this world-view, culture - the ability to act upon and transform nature - is embodied in an active male principle, while nature is passive and female. Thus, the woman's role in reproduction is equated with that of the earth: a passive medium for the male activity of ploughing and planting the seed, thereby establishing control over procreative power.

*Adapted from Plumwood, V. (1993) Feminism and the Mastery of Nature. New York: Routledge.*

The Semitic religions provide further support for this hierarchy by asserting that man's dominion over both nature and women is divinely ordained. Non-Semitic religions such as Hinduism, while emphasising the one-

ness of human beings with nature, are nevertheless unambiguous in placing women lower than men in both the natural and the social hierarchy and in visualising nature as female.

This association of nature with the female principle has had devastating consequences for both women and the environment. For instance, women's reproductive powers are treated on par with natural resources like water - both are seen as available for exploitation without guilt and without limits. In a similar vein, female sexuality is equated with the forces of nature, destructive if not subdued and controlled by man.

The overlapping operations of the body/mind binary, the public/private binary and the nature/culture binary are clearly visible in cultural norms and codes around sexual desire. Sexuality is associated with the body and is seen as a natural phenomenon, with procreative sex elevated to the level of a religious duty. However, sexual activity is acceptable only when it is confined within the private space of marriage and the marital home. Public nudity and displays of sexuality in public are condemned as “beastly” and animal-like. Acts like breastfeeding, although defined as part of women's natural roles, are considered unacceptable in public spaces.

At first glance, the **gender binary** – the notion that male and female human beings are distinct and separate categories – would seem to be foundational to the patriarchal worldview. In fact, the idea that human beings are organised into two sexes differentiated by their anatomy is a comparatively

modern one. Feminist philosopher Maria Lugones theorises the gender binary as a function of colonialism, an outcome of the hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality imposed by the colonisers on the colonised.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the Yoruba people had no concept of gender difference, binary or otherwise, before colonisation. Similarly, many pre-colonial South Asian traditions reflect a more fluid understanding of gender identity, which is conceptualised as being located as much in the mind as in the body.

The binary view of gender assumes that "sex", "gender" and "sexuality" are always and necessarily aligned. For example, a biological male is assumed to be masculine in appearance, character traits and behaviour, including in terms of feeling sexually attracted to biological females.

This strict division of human bodies and human experience into two mutually exclusive domains is unsupported by scientific research, and variations in genital anatomy are well documented. Nevertheless, gender identities are usually assigned at birth, based on the presence of a penis or a vagina. Any variations are considered as defects and are "treated" by surgery to make the reproductive organs seem more unambiguously male or female.

The forced "normalisation" of the genitals of intersex babies is a particularly brutal manifestation of the gender binary. The willingness of parents to subject their infant to a painful and risky procedure is evidence of the threat posed by non-conformity to the physical norms imposed by the gender binary.

If physical non-conformity is seen as pathological, non-conformity in gender self-concept is even more threatening to the patriarchal order because, along with undermining the idea that there are only two genders, it also places gender identity in the domain of the mind. Similarly, those whose sexuality does not conform to the binary norm - same-sex desiring people, bisexual people, queer people or people who refuse any of these labels – are in effect rejecting the idea that sexuality is a purely bodily phenomenon.

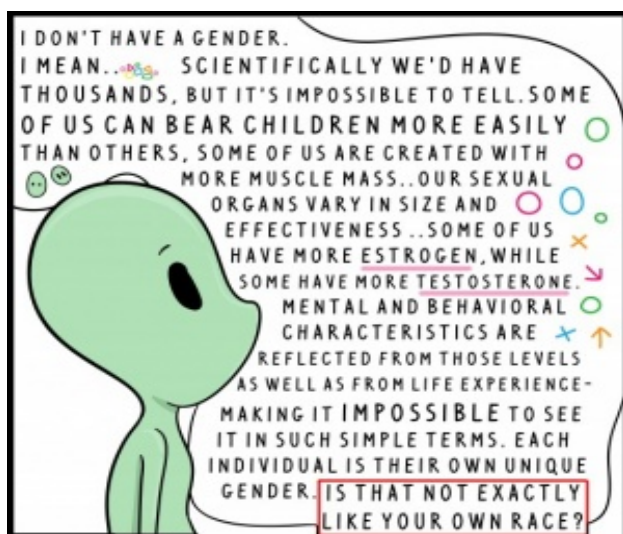


All those who do not conform to the gender binary, whether in terms of their physical sexual characteristics, their gender identity or their gender expression, are threatening to the patriarchal order. Their bodies, and their ways of being and doing, are proof that the gender binary is founded on a fiction, and is a construction designed to preserve the patriarchal *status quo*.

Patriarchal binaries are "naturalised" through the ways we are taught and conditioned to see the world, and are reflected in our personal beliefs, moral precepts, practices and ways of life, social structures and institutions.

Despite the growing strength of challenges to the gender binary by movements of gender non-conforming people, and the growing body of evidence to show that core gender identities are created through complex processes involving both bodies and minds, it is still difficult to break free of the idea of gender identities as natural, inborn, fixed and immutable.

4 Lugones, Maria (2007). Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system. *Hypatia* 22(1) (pp 186-209).



## Gender binaries in learning spaces

Learning spaces are no less imbued with unthinking binarism than any other social space. This makes them rich with opportunities to highlight, question, challenge and dissolve gender binaries.

The following examples will serve to illustrate some of these possibilities.

**“Body-work”** is the generic term for practices that can prepare participants for learning by helping them to relax, focus and ground themselves in the here-and-now of the learning space. From a feminist perspective, body-work can be a way to dissolve the mind-body binary by helping learners to become more conscious of the intricate connections between their thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations.

We have incorporated practices such as *Taichi* and *pranayama* into our workshops, usually as a starting activity for each day. These traditional practices, evolved over centuries, have been designed to strengthen awareness of the mind-body connection.<sup>5</sup>

We introduce the session on the first day by explaining our reasons for using these practices, and invite participants to reflect on their personal responses to these practices. This serves as a curtain-raiser for discussions on the mind-body binary and its connections with other binaries.

5 [Insert link here to MF's bodywork section.](#)

**Pranayama** – a Sanskrit word meaning the expansion (*ayama*) of the life force (*prana*) - is a breath control practice and fundamental element of *Yoga*, the Indian mind/body/spirit discipline.

There are several different kinds of *pranayama*, from the simple “mindful breathing” exercises for relaxation or mental concentration, to advanced forms used by *yogis* (adepts) to control bodily functions such as temperature and blood flow, relieve pain or induce a deep trance state.

While the advanced practices require many years of dedicated practice, some simple *pranayamas* (like the ones described below) are easily learnt and can be used by anyone. If you practice them regularly, you should find yourself becoming calmer, sleeping better, feeling more alert and energetic, and more fully present “in the moment” than ever before.

### *Some simple pranayamas*

**Sahaj pranayama** or mindful breathing quiets and calms the nervous system, reducing stress and anxiety and sharpening self-awareness. Sit or stand comfortably with shoulders relaxed and the spine straight. Breathe comfortably for a few moments, noticing the quality of your breath - does it feel tense? strained? uneven? shallow? Then gradually begin to make your breathing as relaxed and smooth as possible, introducing a slight pause after each in-breath and out-breath. Once the breath feels relaxed and comfortable, notice the movement of the body. As you inhale, the abdomen naturally expands; as you exhale, feel the slight contraction of the abdomen. Try to gently and consciously assist the natural expansion of the abdomen on the inhale, then contract the abdomen while exhaling in tune with the natural movement of the diaphragm. Experience the pleasure of giving yourself a full, relaxed breath. Continue for 6 to 12 breaths.

**Sitkari pranayama** sharpens mental focus, reduces anxiety, and cools down the body. Sit comfortably on the floor on a chair with your shoulders relaxed and spine straight. Open the mouth slightly with your tongue just behind the teeth. Inhale slowly through the space between the upper and lower teeth, letting the air wash over your tongue as you raise your chin toward the ceiling. At the end of the inhalation, close your mouth and exhale through the nostrils as you slowly lower your chin back to neutral. Repeat for 8 to 12 breaths.

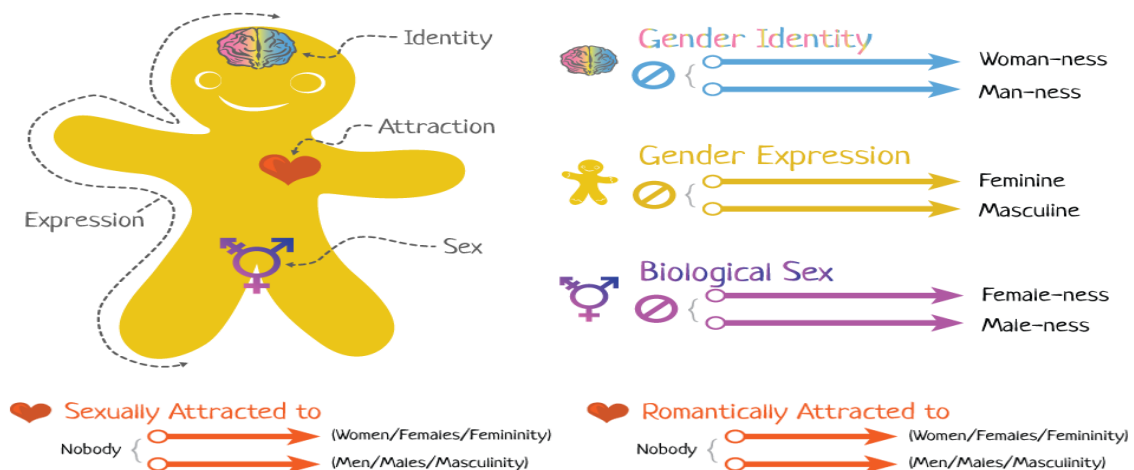
**Udgeeth pranayama** combines mindful breathing with chanting and induces a feeling of deep calm while bringing the mind and body into harmony. Sit or stand with the spine straight and the hands in the praying pose, palms pressed together lightly and thumbs touching the middle of the breastbone. Breathe in deeply through the nose. Feel your diaphragm move down, allowing your lungs to expand and pushing your abdomen out; then feel your chest expand with your collar bones rising last. Exhale very slowly while saying the syllable 'Om', drawing it out as slowly as you can. According to Hindu philosophy, *Om* is the primeval sound that represents the beginning of creation. If it is unacceptable to you for religious or other reasons, you can use any other syllable with a long vowel sound (even 'Amen' would work). Repeat at least three times.

For video tutorials on *pranayama*: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOTvC5Buq4Y>>



The “**Genderbread Person**” is a non-threatening way for learners to understand and get used to the idea of gender as a fluid construct rather than a rigid binary. The image can be used in different ways to introduce learners to the idea that gender identity, gender expression, biological sex and

## The Genderbread Person v3.2 by its pronounced METROsexual com



sexual orientation are interconnected but independent of one another. You could invite learners to mark their own positions on each of the criteria, while assuring them that the exercise is personal and does not have to be shared. This could be followed up by asking people to invert their position on any one criterion (for instance those who have placed themselves on the high end of masculine gender expression could now switch to feminine gender expression, and vice versa) and then imagine how this might change their lives and relationships even if everything else remained the same.

	Interior	Exterior
Individual	<b>A</b> <b>"I"</b> Personal meaning and sense of self	<b>B</b> <b>"IT"</b> Body and interpersonal behaviors
Collective	<b>D</b> <b>"WE"</b> Culture and shared values	<b>C</b> <b>"ITS"</b> Institutions, systems and processes, nature

**Mapping exercises** can help in unpacking the ways in which patriarchal binaries are normalised, and make the connections between them more clearly visible. Ken Wilber's "four quadrants" model can be used as the template for the mapping exercise. Learners can be invited to map each of the binaries onto a separate template, then compare the maps in the second step of the exercise.

<b>Individual/internal/invisible</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belief that patriarchal binaries are the basis of social order.</li> <li>• Fear of punishment.</li> <li>• Fear of losing love and support of family.</li> <li>• Fear of losing respect of others.</li> <li>• Shame about being different.</li> <li>• Confusion about who I really am.</li> </ul>	<b>Individual/external/visible</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acting “normal”, behaving like everyone else.</li> <li>• Avoiding those who act different, because I don't want to be seen like them.</li> <li>• Being careful to keep up appearances, not show my real self to others.</li> <li>• Being myself only at home.</li> <li>• Being politically correct at all times.</li> </ul>
<b>Collective/internal/informal</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social punishment for those who challenge binaries, break the boundaries.</li> <li>• Social prestige comes from “living by the rules”.</li> <li>• Policing of others’ ways of being and doing seen as a social duty.</li> </ul>	<b>Collective/external/formal</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patriarchal binaries codified and sanctified by religion.</li> <li>• Laws/policies mirror religious codes, rest on “given-ness” of patriarchal binaries.</li> <li>• Economic policies based on family as unit of society.</li> <li>• Family assumed to be loving, safe, altruistic.</li> </ul>

Identifying binarism and binary thinking in systems of knowledge production and dissemination such as books, newspapers, films and other written and audio-visual materials is an essential skill for feminist facilitators.<sup>6</sup> Learners can be invited to **“spot the binaries”** in a random selection of textbooks, popular magazines, TV clips and newspapers. Learners can also be encouraged to look for binary thinking in workshop reading materials and handouts, and to suggest ways in which this can be addressed.

## Readings and resources

- **“Personal is Political”. The original essay by Carol Hanisch.**  
<<http://www.carolhanisch.org/Chwritings/PIP.html>>
- **Neimanis, Astrida, (2014). Natural Others? On nature, culture and knowledge. In Evans et al (Eds) SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory.**  
[https://www.academia.edu/7800293/Natural\\_Others\\_On\\_Nature\\_Culture\\_and\\_Knowledge](https://www.academia.edu/7800293/Natural_Others_On_Nature_Culture_and_Knowledge)
- **Maria Lugones. Towards a decolonialised feminism.**  
<<http://ceapedi.com.ar/imagenes/biblioteca/libros/177.pdf>>
- **Gender identity.** <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender\\_identity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_identity)>
- **Bullshit Binaries and Challenging the Enlightenment** (video lecture).  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qNX4q-h-U8>>
- **Non-binary gender factsheet**  
<<https://rewritingtherules.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/non-binary-gender-factsheet.pdf>>
- **Breaking through the binaries** <<http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2011/11/breaking-through-the-binary-gender-explained-using-continuum/>>

6 [Insert link here to Feminist Epistemology piece.](#)



