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How Female Choice Created Patriarchy: Traditional Masculinity as Female-Selected Status Normativity

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Abstract

Traditional masculinity comprises a recurrent cluster of status-oriented traits and obligations, including competition, dominance, courage, self-reliance, provision, emotional control, and sexual success. I propose that this complex arose principally through female sexual selection. Because women historically assigned greater reproductive value to male status, and to traits predictive of acquiring and retaining it, males faced stronger selection to compete for status. The behaviours and signals that repeatedly improved male status and reproductive success were subsequently stabilised through cultural transmission as standards of masculine adequacy. This account explains why manhood is more contingent on achievement than womanhood and why masculine norms often impose substantial costs on men while remaining reproductively consequential. Evidence from cross-cultural mate preferences, romantic attention, male status and reproductive success, and the social evaluation of masculinity is consistent with the proposed causal sequence. Competing accounts based on male contest competition, parental control, coercion, and institutional role allocation explain important components of the pattern but do not as readily explain why status-producing traits became prescriptively masculine across both dominance- and prestige-based routes. The theory generates discriminating predictions concerning female mate-choice autonomy, temporal ordering, masculine norm change, and the relation between status and recognised manhood. It also recasts patriarchy as a female-selected status aristocracy in which achieved manhood, rather than male sex alone, supplies the normative ideal of authority.

Introduction: the hypothesis

Traditional masculinity presents an explanatory problem. Traits treated as masculine in many societies exhibit a recurrent pattern. They repeatedly concern winning and competition, status, dominance, risk-taking and formidability, emotional control, self-reliance, work and provision, and sexual success. Mahalik et al. (2003) operationalised conformity to masculine norms through the eleven factors shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI) factors and correlations with total CMNI score

Factor	Correlation with total CMNI
Power Over Women	.58
Winning	.51
Violence	.46
Dominance	.46
Playboy	.46
Disdain for Homosexuals	.39
Self-Reliance	.38
Emotional Control	.36
Risk-Taking	.29
Pursuit of Status	.23
Primacy of Work	.18

Note. Values are correlations with the total CMNI score reported by Mahalik et al. (2003).

The usual treatment takes these as partly independent gender norms and asks why men conform to them. The present article asks the prior question of why this particular package became masculine in the first place.

I propose a single major explanation. Traditional masculinity is principally a male status-seeking complex produced by female sexual selection. Women disproportionately preferred males who possessed status, or traits that predicted the acquisition and retention of it. Because status consequently yielded a larger mating payoff to men, men faced stronger selection to compete for it. The behavioural means of succeeding in that competition, and the signals that made success credible, became recurrently associated with male reproductive value. Cultural transmission then converted successful strategies into prescriptions about what men ought to be. On this account, Winning, Emotional Control, Risk-Taking, Violence, Dominance, Self-Reliance, Primacy of Work, and Pursuit of Status are components of a status phenotype shaped by the mating competition.

The phrase ‘women created traditional masculinity’ is deliberately strong but does not imply conscious design. Sexual selection routinely creates traits without a chooser intending the population-level result. If individuals possessing trait T obtain more mating opportunities because members of the other sex prefer T, that preference creates selection for T. Female preferences created an asymmetric reproductive premium on male status. Male status competition responded to that premium, and culture stabilised the response as masculinity. The causal sequence is:

(a) Preference-first sexual-selection model

Ellis's biosocial female-choice theory (2001), later incorporated into his evolutionary neuroandrogenic theory (Ellis, 2011), treats female preference for competent resource provisioners as a selective pressure shaping male behavioural differentiation. Snyder (2025) applies the same logic specifically to status. Smuts (1995), from within a different theory of patriarchy, argues that women's preference for resource-rich men can reinforce male-male competition for resources, although she assigns causal priority to male coercion, alliances, and resource control. The present thesis changes both the explanatory target and the causal priority. I propose female selection for male status as the principal evolutionary source of traditional masculine normativity itself, with corresponding consequences for how the origins of patriarchy are interpreted.

For the hypothesis to hold, female mating decisions must reward male status more strongly than male mating decisions reward female status. Male status must convert into mating and reproductive success. Canonical masculine traits must function as means or signals of status rather than as an arbitrary list of male behaviours. The female-choice mechanism must also explain the structure of the masculine norm complex better than the main alternatives.

Traditional masculinity is a status complex

Mahalik et al. (2003) treat conformity to masculine norms as alignment with culturally prescribed standards of masculine conduct. The eleven factors therefore provide an empirical map of the cultural phenotype. They are heterogeneous at the surface level, but much of that heterogeneity disappears once status is treated as the organising variable.

Winning and Pursuit of Status are the most directly status-oriented in content. In Mahalik et al. (2003), Winning was positively related to being admired and respected and to success, power, and competition. Pursuit of Status was also positively related to breadwinning, being admired and respected, and success, power, and competition. These findings show convergence with status-relevant masculinity constructs, although Pursuit of Status did not significantly distinguish men from women in their student sample. Dominance and Violence are also status-related. Dominance provides a route to status through the capacity to impose costs, and aggression and retaliation can raise male status by establishing formidability (Buss et al., 2020; Puts, 2010; von Rueden & Jaeggi, 2016). Risk-Taking connects to status

through courage. Bravery increases male status more than female status, and failures of courage can carry specifically male reputational costs (Buss et al., 2020). Primacy of Work connects to status through breadwinning and success (Mahalik et al., 2003). Self-Reliance connects through autonomy from others' influence, a defining experience of power that is itself generally associated with higher social status (Lammers et al., 2016, Wasiel et al., 2025). Emotional Control connects to status through self-command. Cognitive reappraisal predicts higher peer-rated social status, and greater self-control is associated with being perceived as more powerful and with receiving more power (English et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2024). Playboy behaviour is unusually close to status itself because male status facilitates access to multiple mates and success in short-term mating independently raises male status (Buss et al., 2020). Power Over Women arises downstream of status competition because status and resource asymmetries increase men's capacity to control intimate and social relations. These factors are therefore components of a common status-oriented complex rather than independent masculine traits. Different environments reward different routes to the same positional end.

Disdain for Homosexuals is best understood as a policing norm against male departures from the expected masculine phenotype. LaMar and Kite (1998) found that heterosexual men expressed more negative attitudes towards gay men than toward lesbians, while Yost and Thomas (2012) found more favourable male evaluations of bisexual women than of bisexual men. Female mate evaluation provides a mechanism for this asymmetry because male heterosexuality preserves eligibility for female choice and therefore participation in a major route through which masculine status acquires reproductive value. Once heterosexuality becomes incorporated into the standard of male adequacy, departures from it can acquire a specifically male status penalty and become targets of masculine policing. The status complex therefore contains enforcement norms alongside traits that contribute more directly to status acquisition.

Cross-cultural status research supports this interpretation. Buss et al. (2020) asked participants in 14 nations to judge how 240 acts, attributes, and events affect male and female status. Men's status was more strongly affected by athleticism, bravery, physical formidability, leadership, and several aspects of male sexual strategy. Retaliating after an insult benefited male status more than female status. Most strikingly, 'acting masculine' increased men's status while lowering women's, whereas 'acting feminine' produced the reverse pattern. The study did not find the predicted broad sex difference for wealth, education, industriousness, and career success, apart from hunting skill. That result prevents a crude equation of status with income. It shows in fact that human status is multidimensional. Factors such as formidability, coalition value, leadership, mating success, competence, and resource acquisition can all contribute to it. Buss et al. further predict that the relative weight of these criteria should vary across physical and cultural ecologies.

Von Rueden and Jaeggi (2016) treat status as relative standing in competition over valued resources and distinguish two principal routes to it. Dominance derives from leverage over others, whereas prestige derives from possessing qualities or capacities that others value. Human status therefore arises through both dominance and prestige and is associated with traits including physical

formidability, intelligence and skill, wealth, generosity, and political influence. Toughness and aggression belong mainly to dominance; work, provision, skill, and leadership often belong to prestige; self-control and courage can support either. Treating masculinity as a status complex therefore unifies traits that otherwise look psychologically unrelated.

The status interpretation also clarifies why the masculine ideal is structurally burdensome even when high status is advantageous. Status is positional. A norm that every man should win cannot be jointly satisfied by all men. The same is true of dominance, exceptional wealth, exceptional sexual success, or superior rank. A status-centred male ideal therefore creates an agonistic standard whose reward exists because many competitors cannot obtain it.

Female choice creates the selection gradient

The hypothesis requires an asymmetric mating return to status. Indeed, male status and resource-acquisition capacity have carried more weight in female mate choice than corresponding female status has carried in male mate choice. Evidence for that asymmetry is unusually broad, spanning cross-cultural preference surveys, meta-analytic evidence, large-scale replication, and behavioural online-dating evidence, as shown by Buss (1989), Feingold (1992), Walter et al. (2020), and Jonason and Thomas (2022).

Buss (1989) tested mate preferences in 37 samples from 33 countries, with 10,047 participants. Women placed greater weight on good financial prospects and on ambition and industriousness in prospective mates than men did. The importance of any single trait varied between cultures, but the direction of the sex difference was highly recurrent. Across culturally diverse populations, the same asymmetry recurs in traits associated with resources and status.

Walter et al. (2020) provided a large preregistered replication of these results. In a 45-country sample of 14,399 participants, women again preferred older partners with better financial prospects more than men did, while men placed greater weight on youth and physical attractiveness. The study was designed partly to discriminate evolutionary and biosocial-role explanations. Gender equality predicted smaller age differences between partners, but beyond age it did not robustly predict the major sex differences in preferences across countries. The persistence of the financial-prospects asymmetry under substantially different contemporary social arrangements is difficult to reconcile with a theory in which the preference is merely a local convention produced by one particular division of labour.

Questionnaires, however, measure stated ideals, not actual choice. Eastwick and Finkel (2008) reproduced the familiar sex difference in stated ideals for attractiveness and earning prospects, yet found no sex difference in the association between romantic interest in real-life potential partners and those partners' earning prospects. This is a serious objection to any argument that simply reads evolutionary selection from self-report preferences. Their study concerns romantic interest in people actually encountered rather than long-term pair formation or reproductive success. Later behavioural

evidence therefore bears on a different outcome by measuring incoming romantic attention in online dating rather than stated ideals.

Jonason and Thomas (2022) analysed more than 1.8 million online daters across 24 nations. Education and income increased romantic attention for both sexes, with the effect of resource-acquisition ability almost 2.5 times stronger for men. The sex difference appeared in every country and varied in magnitude. Resource-acquisition ability is closely tied to status because von Rueden and Jaeggi (2016) explicitly include material wealth among their measures of male status and define status as relative access to contested resources. The substantially greater romantic-attention return to these status-linked resources among men therefore provides behavioural evidence for an asymmetric female evaluation of male status.

Clark and Cummins (2025) appear, at first, to threaten the argument more directly. Using more than 33 million English marriages and 67 million births from 1837 to 2021, they find no meaningful average female hypergamy by family social status. Brides and grooms came, on average, from families of similar status. But this result concerns realised matching between family-status strata, not the marginal effect of a man's own status on his mating value. In a mainly monogamous population with approximately one-to-one pairing, average female 'marrying up' cannot be large unless low-status men and high-status women are differentially excluded from marriage. Assortative mating can therefore coexist with female preference for male resources.

The social-role alternative developed by Eagly and Wood (1999) raises a more serious causal challenge. On their account, sex-differentiated mate preferences can arise because societies allocate men and women to different economic and domestic roles. If women have less direct access to resources, preference for a resource-rich male becomes an adaptive response to an already existing social structure. The causal arrow would then run from gendered institutions to female preferences rather than from preferences to institutions:

Gendered institutions allocate men greater access to resources

Gendered institutions allocate men greater access to resources
(sex-differentiated social roles)
↓
Female dependence on male-controlled resources
(structural resource asymmetry)
↓
Female preference for resource-rich and high-status males
(socially calibrated mate preference)
↓
Greater male reproductive returns to status and stronger status competition
(differential reproductive success)
↓
Cultural masculinisation of status-producing traits
(traditional masculine normativity)

(b) Institution-first social-role model

The available evidence makes a purely social-role origin difficult to maintain. Walter et al. (2020) found robust cross-cultural sex differences even when gender equality varied widely, and found little robust moderation beyond partner age. Jonason and Thomas (2022) found a sex difference in the romantic-attention return to income and education across all 24 countries in their behavioural sample, with country-level patterns more consistent with evolutionary than simple sociocultural predictions. The stronger evolutionary interpretation of female status preference is therefore that social roles modulate the expression and payoff of an older preference rather than originating it ex novo.
Taken together, these studies show a recurrent sex difference in the mating value of status-linked resources. The asymmetry appears in stated preferences and romantic attention even though it need not translate directly into immediate attraction or population-level hypergamy.

Status becomes reproductive success

For a mating advantage to generate evolutionary selection, it must ultimately affect reproductive success. The second empirical requirement is therefore a relationship between male status and reproductive success. Von Rueden and Jaeggi (2016) provide a direct synthesis. They meta-analysed 288 associations from 46 studies in 33 non-industrial societies, measuring status through physical formidability, hunting ability, material wealth, and political influence, and reproductive success through mating success, what the authors term “wife quality”, fertility, offspring mortality, and surviving offspring. The overall association between male status and reproductive success was positive ($r = .19$). It was substantially smaller than the association reported for non-human primates, but it did not disappear among foragers and did not depend significantly on the particular status measure or subsistence system. Status was connected more consistently to fertility and mating outcomes than to improved offspring survival.

This result establishes a necessary empirical condition of the hypothesis by showing that the reproductive value of male status is not confined to a culturally local association. Independent evidence likewise links successful hunting with higher reproductive success across several widely separated foraging populations (Gurven & von Rueden, 2006; Smith, 2004). Among the Tsimane, both dominance and prestige predicted reproductive advantages within marriage, while higher-status men also reported more extramarital affairs (von Rueden et al., 2011).

Greater variance in male reproductive success increases the potential for selection on traits that predict male mating and reproductive success. Human populations commonly show greater reproductive variance among men than women, although its magnitude varies substantially across mating and subsistence systems (Brown et al., 2009; Puts, 2010). This asymmetry became more pronounced with increasing sedentism and subsistence intensification. Betzig (2012) found that the range and variance of male reproductive success increased from hunter-gatherer societies through herder-gardener societies to early agricultural states, while female reproductive variance remained comparatively constrained. Snyder (2025) hypothesises that this historical increase was linked to the greater accumulation and inheritance of resources following the Neolithic transition, which increased differences among men as

potential mates. Given the positive association between male status and reproductive success across non-industrial societies, greater reproductive skew increases the potential strength of selection on status-linked male traits (von Rueden & Jaeggi, 2016).

Brooks, Blake, and Fromhage (2022) model the competitive consequences of female hypergyny, operationalised as a preference for partners of equal or greater wealth. Under this preference, poorer men have lower pairing success than wealthier men, and greater wealth inequality amplifies the disadvantage experienced by lower-status male competitors. The predicted connection between male economic position and pair formation also has empirical support. Labour-market shocks that reduced young men's relative earnings in the United States produced corresponding reductions in marriage and fertility (Autor et al., 2019). Female preference for male resources therefore makes relative resource position consequential to male mating success, creating stronger competitive incentives to acquire the resources on which that preference operates.

Ellis (2001) proposed that female preference for males competent at resource provisioning favoured males who strive for high social status and advertise the status they achieve. He further hypothesised that this female preference generated selection for male status striving. Ellis (2011) extended the same mechanism to sex-differentiated behaviour, arguing that female preference for dependable resource provisioners favoured the evolution of male behavioural tendencies responsive to that preference.

Snyder (2025) proposes that female preference for male status selected for greater territoriality, competitiveness, and resource extraction through both heritable variation and cultural norms. His agent-based model formalises how female preference for status can increase competitive male resource acquisition across generations. Snyder applies this mechanism to the evolution of wealth seeking and unsustainable economic growth. Applied to masculine normativity, the same mechanism predicts the cultural stabilisation of male behaviours that repeatedly increased status and its reproductive returns.

The observed reproductive return to male status and models of hypergynous mating competition support the proposed link between female preference, male status competition, and differential reproductive success (Brooks et al., 2022; von Rueden & Jaeggi, 2016). Repeated reproductive advantages to higher-status men favour behavioural tendencies that increase status, as Ellis (2001, 2011) and Snyder (2025) propose.

From selected strategies to masculine obligations

Sexual selection favours traits through differential reproductive success. The emergence of an explicit norm additionally requires cultural transmission. When status-producing traits repeatedly predict male mating and reproductive success, they become observable characteristics of successful men (von Rueden & Jaeggi, 2016). Mahalik et al. (2003) describe masculine norms as learned standards transmitted through observed male behaviour and messages about acceptable conduct. Repeated transmission converts status-linked male strategies into prescriptive standards of masculinity, stabilising behaviours whose reproductive returns have already become sex-differentiated.

Mahalik et al. (2003) show that most CMNI norms differentiated male from female participants and that conformity is socially evaluated. Traits that repeatedly increased male status and mating success became standards of male adequacy, preserving the direction of the earlier selection gradient by converting recurrently successful male strategies into obligations attached specifically to men.

Female preference for successful providers reinforces the cultural transmission of status-oriented male behaviour. Men who achieve greater status receive greater mating returns and become more salient examples of successful masculinity. Their behaviour thereby acquires normative force beyond the men who obtain the corresponding rewards, allowing masculine standards to regulate the broader male population even when reproductive benefits remain concentrated among relatively successful men.

Halpern and Perry-Jenkins (2016) found that mothers' and fathers' gendered behaviour both predicted aspects of children's later gender-role attitudes. Established masculine standards are therefore transmitted by both sexes even though their original reproductive source lies in female evaluation. As masculine standards become established, men themselves acquire incentives to reproduce and enforce them because conformity affects their standing within the existing system. A norm can be reproduced by men while imposing costs on men. Men have incentives to enforce a competitive standard because their own status depends partly on the value of the status game and because successful men benefit from the hierarchy. Lower-status men may also enforce it because abandoning the norm can further reduce their mating and peer value.

For instance, avoidance of danger is individually protective, yet cowardice has historically carried a specifically masculine stigma. Medieval chivalric culture made male worth contingent on costly demonstrations of courage and service, including the protection of women (Kaeuper, 2001, 2016). Marian devotion simultaneously accorded the Virgin Mary exceptional symbolic elevation within medieval Christianity, including her representation as Queen of Heaven. This elevation is doctrinally stronger in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, where Mary occupies the highest rank among human saints, placed in Catholic teaching after Christ and above all angels and human beings, and described in Orthodox teaching as the most exalted among God's creatures (Orthodox Church in America, n.d.; Second Vatican Council, 1964, para. 66). A woman therefore occupies the highest human axiological rank available to a saint in both traditions, while formal ecclesiastical authority remained overwhelmingly male (Leith, 2021; Macy, 2008). Formal authority and axiological rank were therefore distributed differently between the sexes. This pattern is consistent with a system in which men disproportionately occupied positions of temporal authority while a woman occupied the highest rank among human saints and male worth remained conditional on costly standards whose reproductive value was shaped by female evaluation.

Mary is already betrothed to Joseph when she accepts divine maternity (Luke 1:26–38, Matthew 1:18–25). Joseph remains her husband, yet the conception is attributed to the Holy Spirit. Conway (2008) argues that the Gospel of John presents Jesus as ranking above all others and embodying an ideal of Greco-Roman masculinity, thereby linking supreme rank with an exceptionally elevated masculine ideal.

This narrative configuration permits a psychological reading in terms of hypergynous valuation. Mary enters the episode without a comparable status distinction, yet reproductive significance is attached to the highest conceivable rank on the masculine side. Joseph retains the position of husband and social father without being the source of conception. The comparison concerns evaluative structure only; the episode does not depict literal mate choice or male-male contest. It nevertheless reproduces an asymmetry consistent with the present hypothesis, in which reproductive significance on the female side is associated with the highest conceivable rank on the masculine side, whereas the woman herself requires no corresponding status distinction.

I use male to denote a sex category and manhood to denote an achieved social status that requires recognition and can be lost. Across cultures, manhood depends more heavily than womanhood on public proof, achievement, and continued performance (Bosson et al., 2021; Vandello et al., 2008). Female preference for exceptional males offers a direct explanation for this asymmetry. Repeated selection of males who exceeded others in status, competence, courage, provision, or formidability turned reproductive preference into an evaluative distinction within the male sex. Cultural transmission then transformed that distinction into the category of the man. A male acquires social worth by approximating an ideal that exceeds mere sex membership. Womanhood is less dependent on such attainment because female reproductive value has not historically required the same competitive ascent in status. The category of man therefore preserves a hierarchy within males themselves, separating ordinary males from the higher type that female choice recurrently rewarded.

The distinction between maleness and manhood extends beyond differences among males. Gilmore (1990) treats manhood cross-culturally as an achieved status, and some societies have permitted biological females to acquire recognisably male social standing. Albanian sworn virgins assumed male dress, authority, property rights, and public status while remaining female and renouncing marriage and childbearing (Young, 2000). Amadiume (1987) likewise documented Igbo institutions in which women could occupy social positions designated as male. These cases show manhood functioning as an achieved rank category superimposed on sex. This follows from the status structure of masculinity itself. Male sex makes achievement of the masculine ideal especially consequential and normatively expected, yet the ideal concerns successful approximation to a high-status human type. Exceptional women who acquire the corresponding status can therefore be assimilated to manhood without ceasing to be female.

Competing explanations

The principal rival explanations assign causal priority elsewhere. Male contest competition locates selection in competition among men, parental control in kin-mediated mate choice, male coercion in control of female reproduction, and social-role theory in pre-existing institutional divisions. Each explains part of the observed pattern without making female mate choice the primary source of the male status premium.

Contest-first

Puts (2010) argues that contest competition was probably the predominant mechanism of sexual selection on men, while allowing female mate choice an important role where males could not fully exclude competitors. He interprets much of male physical formidability and weapon use as adaptations for contest success, with traits such as lower-pitched voices and facial hair functioning primarily as signals of dominance. Archer (2009) likewise interprets the greater male propensity for physical aggression within a sexual-selection framework, and Glowacki and Wrangham (2015) show that successful male participation in intergroup competition can yield later reproductive advantages through acquired resources. Male contest competition therefore provides an independent route from competitive success to differential reproduction.

Male competition can itself generate inequalities in status and resources, after which female preference for successful men may reinforce an already established hierarchy. Contest competition therefore explains the formidability component of masculine status particularly well and may also contribute indirectly to resource-based status. Human status, however, also operates through prestige, where rank derives from the capacity to confer valued benefits rather than impose costs (von Rueden & Jaeggi, 2016). Buss et al. (2020) likewise find that male status depends on criteria extending beyond physical formidability. Female preference for male status supplies a common reproductive return across dominance and prestige, allowing status-enhancing traits to acquire reproductive value even where they provide no capacity to exclude rivals physically.

Contest-first explanations predict that masculine norms should track traits whose reproductive value follows from rival exclusion or control of resources even when female valuation contributes little. The female-selection hypothesis predicts that masculine status norms should strengthen with the mating return produced by female evaluation, including where status is acquired through prestige. Physical formidability provides limited discrimination because both mechanisms predict its reproductive value. Prestige-based status provides the stronger test because its mating advantage can arise through female valuation without coercive exclusion of competitors. Evidence that female valuation predicts the reproductive return to such status after contest effects are controlled would favour female choice as the broader organising selection pressure.

Parental-first

Apostolou (2007) argues that parental and kin control constituted a major mechanism of human mate choice. Across 190 hunter-gatherer societies, parental arrangement was the most common primary marriage form, daughters were controlled more strongly than sons, and fathers usually exercised greater influence than mothers. His later cross-cultural work also found that parents preferentially selected sons-in-law with resource-provisioning qualities (Apostolou, 2010). Independent work confirms that parental preferences can diverge systematically from offspring preferences, with parents assigning greater importance to traits associated with investment and family compatibility (Buunk et al., 2008; Perilloux et al., 2011). Parental choice therefore supplies an independent selection pressure capable of favouring male resource acquisition even under restricted female autonomy.

A parental-first account challenges female causal priority directly. Van den Berg et al. (2013) show formally that parental and female preferences can evolve simultaneously and jointly determine realised mate choice, while conflict emerges because their reproductive interests differ. Apostolou (2007) also documents continuing scope for female choice despite parental control, including through divorce, extramarital relations, and elopement. Persistent female preference for male resources under conditions of substantially greater individual autonomy supports female evaluation as an independent source of the male status premium Buss, 1989; Jonason & Thomas, 2022; Walter et al., 2020). Evidence that ancestral kin preferences generated that premium before comparable female preferences operated would favour the parental-first account. Evidence that kin choice amplified an already female-generated preference would preserve female sexual selection as the primary mechanism. The available evidence establishes substantial ancestral parental influence without establishing parental choice as the original source of the male status premium.

Coercion-first

Smuts (1992, 1995) derives patriarchy from an evolutionary history of sexual conflict in which male control over female reproduction became unusually effective in humans. Her six-hypotheses model traces the evolution of this control through changes in social organisation that strengthened male coercive power and through additional factors including female reproductive strategies and gender ideology. This framework belongs to a broader literature on sexual coercion as a reproductive strategy. Clutton-Brock and Parker (1995) developed the general evolutionary theory of coercion, Wilson and Daly (1992, 1996) applied related reasoning to male sexual proprietariness in humans, and comparative work has shown that coercive aggression can increase male mating success and paternity in chimpanzees (Feldblum et al., 2014; Muller et al., 2007). Coercion therefore provides a genuine route from male power to reproductive success without requiring female preference to generate the initial advantage.

Smuts's fifth hypothesis, however, places female reproductive strategy inside the causal system itself. She argues that women's preference for resource-rich men reinforces male competition for resources and that women can support practices that preserve access to reproductively successful males (Smuts, 1995). Smuts locates the roots of patriarchy in male control over females and gives female reproductive strategies a contributing role in its evolution and perpetuation. By contrast, female valuation of male status enters earlier in the sequence, generating a reproductive premium that intensifies male competition before coercive institutions consolidate it. This ordering also covers status acquired through provision and prestige, where reproductive advantages arise without control of female sexuality. Evidence that status remains strongly rewarded by female choice under conditions of high female autonomy therefore bears directly on the relative explanatory reach of the two accounts.

Coercion and female choice confer mating advantages through different mechanisms. Coercion operates by restricting female choice. Female selection operates when women positively evaluate the trait itself. Sadalla et al. (1987) found that experimentally manipulated behavioural dominance increased men's sexual attractiveness and had no comparable effect on women. The effect was specific to dominance, with aggression and domineering behaviour failing to produce it. Burger and Cosby (1999)

qualified any broad preference for dominance. Women did not favour men described simply as dominant, although assertiveness and confidence were among the traits they selected for ideal partners. Snyder et al. (2008) found a preference for prestige and found dominance attractive when it was expressed through success in athletic competition, especially in short-term mating evaluations. Female evaluation is therefore sensitive to the form dominance takes. Prestige was preferred to dominance in Snyder et al. (2008), and dominance became attractive under specific competitive conditions. Aggressive or domineering behaviour did not receive the same reward. These findings identify a mate-choice route through which male status-bearing behaviour acquires mating value independently of coercive access.

Institution-first

Eagly and Wood (1999), developed further by Wood and Eagly (2012), place the sexual division of labour earlier in the causal sequence. Biological differences associated with reproduction and physical strength interact with ecological and economic conditions to channel women and men into different social roles. Where male roles provide greater access to resources and status, women gain from preferring partners capable of succeeding in those roles, while repeated divisions of labour generate corresponding gender expectations. Eagly and Wood's reanalysis of Buss's cross-cultural data found that greater gender equality was associated with smaller sex differences in partner-age preferences and in ranked preferences for good earning capacity. The corresponding rated measure of earning capacity did not show this relationship. Zentner and Mitura (2012) subsequently found broader attenuation of sex-differentiated mate preferences across more gender-equal nations. Female preference for male resources can therefore arise partly from institutional conditions rather than preceding them.

Evidence for this account is mixed. Moore et al. (2010) found that greater female financial independence eliminated the sex difference in prioritising physical attractiveness over financial prospects, yet sex differences in preferred partner age increased rather than decreased with resource control. Walter et al. (2020) found little robust evidence that national gender equality reduced women's greater preference for financial prospects, and Jonason and Thomas (2022) found larger romantic-attention returns to education and income for men across all countries examined. Institutions therefore modify mate preferences and their expression, but current cross-national evidence does not show that institutional inequality generates the asymmetric mating return to male resources.

Eastwick and Finkel (2008) and Clark and Cummins (2025) show that stated preference, romantic attention, attraction, pair formation, and reproductive success cannot be treated as interchangeable measures. The competing theories diverge most clearly when these outcomes are examined as institutions change. An institution-first account predicts systematic attenuation of the male resource premium as women acquire comparable economic opportunities and status. The female-selection account predicts persistence of a disproportionate mating return to male status as female choice becomes freer from economic dependence. Existing evidence supports institutional modulation, while the persistence of sex-differentiated resource preferences and online romantic-attention returns under

comparatively egalitarian conditions favours a durable female evaluative component over a wholly institution-generated account.

What the hypothesis predicts

Female mating returns to male status should covary with status-centred masculine normativity. Across populations, status-linked traits that produce larger gains in female romantic evaluation and partner choice should attract stronger prescriptive pressure on men, and failure on those dimensions should carry larger male-specific social and romantic penalties. Holding the non-mating advantages of status constant, male investment in status acquisition should increase with the mating and reproductive returns attached to it. This relationship should remain after accounting for male contest success, kin-mediated mate choice, coercive control, and institutional resource asymmetries. If male status predicts reproduction primarily because high-status men exclude rivals, are selected by kin, or control resources independently of female evaluation, those observations favour alternative causal pathways. The distinctive prediction is that female choice explains additional variation in male status returns and in the strength of masculine norms organised around them.

Because status criteria vary with physical and cultural ecology, ecological substitution alone cannot discriminate the present hypothesis from other status-based accounts (Buss et al., 2020). The stronger prediction is that changes in masculine prescriptions should track changes in the sex-specific mating return to locally relevant forms of male status. When a trait becomes a more effective route to male status and receives a larger reward in female choice, prescriptive masculinity should attach more strongly to it. When that mating return declines, the corresponding prescription should weaken even if status striving persists. Historical changes in masculine content therefore favour female-selection priority when they follow changes in female mating returns more closely than changes in contest effectiveness or institutional role allocation.

Recognition as a man should depend more heavily on socially valued achievement than recognition as a woman depends on comparable achievement. Loss of status should therefore threaten a male's recognised manhood more readily than equivalent failure threatens a female's recognised womanhood. Vandello et al. (2008) and Bosson et al. (2021) already document this greater contingency and precariousness of manhood. The traits determining whether males are recognised as men should covary across populations with the traits carrying the greatest female mating premium.

Sex and manhood should also partially dissociate. Women who attain exceptional status through locally masculine routes should receive greater masculine social recognition, whereas low-status males should be especially vulnerable to being denied full manhood. The strength of this asymmetry should increase where masculine value is more tightly organised around achieved status.

A decisive test would trace the same status-linked trait across the proposed causal sequence within the same population. Female evaluation, male social status, realised pairing, reproductive outcomes, male competitive investment, and masculine norm endorsement should be measured separately. This is

because stated preferences do not reliably reproduce sex differences in romantic evaluation of actual partners, and population-level pairing need not reproduce asymmetries observed in preferences or romantic attention (Clark & Cummins, 2025; Eastwick et al., 2014). The hypothesis predicts that stronger female valuation of a status-linked trait increases its mating return to men, that larger mating returns increase male investment in acquiring or signalling it, and that repeated sex-differentiated returns strengthen its prescriptive masculinisation. Masculine sanctions that track male peer competition while remaining unrelated to female mating penalties would instead strengthen contest-based or culturally autonomous status explanations.

The traditional sexual double standard provides a further prediction of the same mechanism. The same number of previous sexual partners carries different information for women and men because mate choice is asymmetrically structured. Women place greater weight on male status than men place on female status, and high-status men are comparatively scarce. A woman with many previous partners therefore faces a greater probability of having accepted at least some relatively low-status men, so the status of her previous male partners should affect the reputational penalty attached to her sexual history. Women with many demonstrably high-status partners should be judged less negatively than otherwise comparable women whose previous partners were low status if this inference contributes to their devaluation. The corresponding male case is different. Because men place less weight on female status, numerous female partners do not generate the same inference that a man repeatedly selected low-status partners. More importantly, female selectivity makes repeated male sexual success informative in itself. A man chosen by many women has repeatedly passed female evaluation, making repeated male sexual success comparatively scarce and allowing it to function as evidence of underlying desirability and as a status signal. This accords with evidence that short-term mating success contributes more strongly to male than female status, whereas chastity and low promiscuity contribute more strongly to female status (Buss et al., 2020). The hypothesis therefore predicts that the reputational asymmetry should depend on the status of women's previous male partners and on the selectivity and desirability of the women who previously chose a man. If those manipulations fail to alter evaluations, the proposed female-choice mechanism would be weakened relative to accounts based on male sexual exclusivity or female intrasexual competition.

Temporal ordering provides another test. Changes in the female mating value of a male status dimension should precede corresponding changes in male competitive investment and, over a longer interval, changes in masculine prescriptions. Institution-first theories place changes in economic and social roles earlier in the sequence, while contest-first and coercion-first accounts give causal priority to competitive or coercive capacity. Quasi-experimental changes in male economic position are informative without uniquely identifying the mechanism. Autor et al. (2019), for example, found that adverse shocks to young men's relative earnings reduced marriage and fertility, a result also compatible with household-specialisation accounts. Stronger tests would combine exogenous changes in status-relevant conditions with direct measures of female evaluation, male mating outcomes, and subsequent normative change.

Female mate-choice autonomy provides a particularly discriminating setting. Greater autonomy should make women's preferences more predictive of realised pairing. The strength of the underlying preference for male status remains a separate empirical question. Institution-first theory predicts attenuation of sex-differentiated mate preferences as gender equality increases, a pattern reported by Zentner and Mitura (2012), whereas Walter et al. (2020) found little robust moderation of the major sex differences beyond partner age. Jonason and Thomas (2022) found that education and income produced almost 2.5 times the increase in incoming romantic attention for men as for women across 24 countries, although their study does not establish that female autonomy enlarges this sex difference. Longitudinal increases in autonomy should therefore test whether female status preferences become more predictive of male pair formation and whether status-centred masculine norms subsequently track that change. Repeated findings that female evaluation contributes little to male status-linked mating and reproductive outcomes under high female autonomy, while masculine normativity continues to track contest intensity, kin control, coercive capacity, or institutional inequality, would count strongly against female sexual selection as the principal organising explanation.

Patriarchy reconsidered

Patriarchy is commonly defined in terms of male dominance over women. Hartmann (1979) located its material basis in men's control over women's labour and sexuality, sustained through relations among men despite inequalities within the male hierarchy. Lerner (1986) traced its historical development through the institutionalisation of male control over women's sexual and reproductive capacities. Walby (1989, 1990) shifted the analysis from individual men to social structures and practices that reproduce women's subordination. Connell (1995) incorporated hierarchy among men more explicitly. Hegemonic masculinity occupies an exalted position, while subordinated and marginalised masculinities receive lower social recognition and men differ in their access to the patriarchal dividend.

This account changes the causal interpretation of this male-skewed hierarchy. Male predominance in positions of authority arises from stronger male competition for status when female choice gives both status and traits predictive of its acquisition and retention a greater reproductive value to men. The privileges attached to high-status positions are real, but their concentration among men does not identify the source of the pressure that made status acquisition consequential for males. Patriarchal authority therefore develops as an institutional consequence of sex-differentiated competition for status.

Theories of patriarchy already assign women an active role in its reproduction. Kandiyoti (1988) described strategies through which women pursue security and advantage within patriarchal arrangements, while Glick and Fiske (2001) showed that women can endorse benevolent sexism when it promises protection and provision. Smuts (1995) argued that female reproductive strategies can reinforce male resource control. Hrdy (1997) proposed that preferences for wealthy husbands may develop as adaptive responses to patrilineal systems in which men already monopolise resources. These accounts generally place female preferences within an established structure of male control.

Female evaluation instead has causal priority in creating the reproductive value attached to male status before that value becomes embedded in durable institutions.

Protective and provisioning norms further complicate an interpretation of patriarchy centred on collective male advantage. Gul and Kupfer (2019) found that women preferred benevolently sexist men partly because such men were perceived as more willing to invest through protection, material provision, and relationship commitment. Lever et al. (2015) likewise found continuing female support for male financial responsibility in courtship. The same behaviours therefore impose obligations on men while increasing their desirability to women. Patriarchal authority coexists with a masculine standard that makes costly provision and protection conditions of recognised manhood.

The distinction between male and man also changes what male rule denotes. Formal authority is sometimes inherited or institutionally assigned to males, but its normative legitimacy is attached to recognised manhood and the status-bearing performance associated with it. Patriarchy therefore contains a hierarchy within the male sex itself, with recognised manhood marking successful approximation to a culturally valued male type. Female evaluation gave reproductive value to male traits signalling the capacity to acquire and retain status, supplying the selective basis of the ideal by which males came to be recognised as men.

Patriarchy, on this account, is the institutional expression of an earlier sex difference in the reproductive value of status. Its governing ideal is achieved manhood, ordinarily embodied by males and conceptually separable from male sex. Male coalitions, coercion, inheritance, and resource control can deepen and preserve the resulting hierarchy, as Smuts (1995) describes. The crucial revision concerns origin. Female preferences created the reproductive premium attached to male status, placing women in the formative causal history of patriarchy itself. Male dominance then describes the later distribution of authority within a system whose underlying reproductive incentives originated in female choice, were amplified by male competition, and were stabilised through cultural transmission.

Major theories of patriarchy already allow substantial hierarchy among men and unequal access to patriarchal advantage (Connell, 1995; Hartmann, 1979; Walby, 1990). Manhood is publicly conferred and vulnerable to loss, whereas womanhood is treated far more strongly as an ascribed status (Bosson et al., 2021; Vandello et al., 2008). Schippers (2007) argues that women can embody and practise characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity, even though such characteristics may be recoded and sanctioned as feminine when enacted by women. These findings support treating manhood as an axiological type rather than as the male population itself.

Patriarchy is misnamed on this account because the category that legitimates rule is manhood rather than male sex. Formal authority can be inherited or institutionally assigned, but its legitimacy is judged against an achieved ideal expressed through status-producing and status-signalling performance. Female mate choice supplies the principal source of that normativity because women recurrently assigned greater reproductive value to males who possessed status or displayed traits predictive of its acquisition and retention. I therefore describe the resulting system as a female-selected status

aristocracy in which achieved manhood determines the normative value attached to authority and female choice supplies the principal selective pressure giving status-producing traits their reproductive value.

Conclusion

Traditional masculinity is best understood as a status-oriented male trait complex whose principal selective source was female mate choice. Female preference for male status gave status acquisition a greater reproductive return for males, strengthening competition over the traits and behaviours that produced, signalled, defended, or converted status into reproductive success. Cultural transmission then transformed recurrently successful strategies into obligations attached specifically to men. This sequence explains why masculine norms cluster around achievement, competition, provision, formidability, self-command, and sexual success, and why recognised manhood remains more contingent on performance than mere male sex.

Male competition, coercion, kin influence, and institutions remain causally important, but they need not be the original source of the male status premium. They can amplify, redirect, and stabilise incentives whose reproductive value arose earlier through female evaluation. The same distinction changes the interpretation of patriarchy. Male predominance in formal authority does not by itself identify the origin of the standards that made status disproportionately consequential to males. If female choice supplied the principal reproductive premium attached to male status, then women belong to the formative causal history of the hierarchy later institutionalised as patriarchy. I therefore describe that system as a female-selected status aristocracy, organised around achieved manhood as an axiological rank rather than around biological maleness alone. The decisive empirical question is whether female evaluation predicts variation in male status returns and masculine normativity beyond the effects of contest competition, coercion, kin control, and institutional inequality.

Declarations

Data availability: No new data were generated or analysed for this theoretical article.

Competing interests:

No competing interest to declare.

Author Contribution

I. C. conceived the article, developed the theoretical framework, reviewed the relevant literature, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

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