4.5 Feminist Perspectives on Religion and Patriarchy

AQA 7192 · about 65 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Where a question asks for a short answer write in full sentences for clarity. Use sociological terms and name studies where asked.

1 Item B: Short extract summarising Woodhead's threefold distinction. Woodhead suggests some religions are 'patriarchal spaces' where institutions and doctrines maintain male dominance; others function as 'personal empowerment' spaces where individual women use belief to gain confidence and resources; a third type are 'gender-critical' spaces where religious ideas are contested and contested interpretations compete. This extract is an invented summary for classroom use only.

(a) Analyse one reason using Item B and your knowledge. **(5)**

(b) Analyse a second reason using Item B and your knowledge. **(5)**

(Total for Question 1 is 10 marks)

2 Compare briefly Woodhead's idea of 'gender-critical' religious spaces with the idea that religion is uniformly patriarchal, naming one implication of Woodhead's view for sociological study.

(Total for Question 2 is 4 marks)

3 Explain two short reasons why some women may support traditional gender roles within their religion, despite feminist critiques.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

4 Item B: Use the short Woodhead extract given in Q1. Applying Item B and your wider sociological knowledge of feminist analyses such as El Saadawi and Holm, evaluate feminist views of the relationship between religion and patriarchy in contemporary societies.

Apply Item B and your knowledge to evaluate the extent to which feminist views successfully explain the relationship between religion and patriarchy.

(Total for Question 4 is 12 marks)

5 Define briefly what sociologists mean by 'patriarchy' when discussing religion in contemporary societies.

(Total for Question 5 is 2 marks)

6 Identify and explain one example of exclusion of women from formal religious leadership roles, giving a religious context in your answer.

(Total for Question 6 is 4 marks)

7 Identify and explain two ways that symbolic religious practices can subordinate women, giving examples of symbolism or practice.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 State one finding from El Saadawi's work on religion and patriarchy that is often cited by feminist sociologists.

(Total for Question 8 is 2 marks)

9 Item A: A small survey of 200 worshippers in a mixed urban congregation found 62% of women said they rarely held formal leadership positions, while 45% of men said the same. 38% of women reported engaging in organised religious feminism groups at the local level, compared with 8% of men. Context: a hypothetical mixed-faith urban sample created for this exercise.

(a) Compare the supplied findings for women and men about rarely holding formal leadership positions, then explain what the difference might suggest about respondents in this hypothetical congregation. **(2)**

(b) Identify a second finding from Item A and explain what it might suggest about women using religion as a source of activism or community in this hypothetical congregation. **(2)**

(Total for Question 9 is 4 marks)

10 Identify and explain two criticisms that sociologists make of blanket feminist accounts that present all religions as equally patriarchal.

(Total for Question 10 is 4 marks)

Mark scheme · 4.5 Feminist Perspectives on Religion and Patriarchy

Question 1

(a) identifies a reason, e.g. institutional structures and doctrines can embed male authority and restrict women	**B1**
(a) develops using Item B, e.g. Woodhead's 'patriarchal spaces' show how institutions maintain male dominance	**B1**
(a) further development with evidence, e.g. examples such as male-only priesthoods or ritual exclusions	**B1**
(a) links analysis to the idea that institutional power shapes women's roles rather than individual choice alone	**B1**
(a) AO1 credit for naming a relevant study or author, e.g. El Saadawi or Holm used to support the point	**B1**

(a) Answer: Reason example: institutional structures and doctrines can embed male authority, as Woodhead's 'patriarchal spaces' suggest; this is supported by El Saadawi and Holm who describe male-only leadership and ritual exclusions which limit women's institutional roles.

(b) identifies a reason, e.g. religion can provide personal resources, identity and networks that empower women	**B1**
(b) develops using Item B, e.g. Woodhead's 'personal empowerment' spaces where women gain confidence and social capital	**B1**
(b) further development with evidence, e.g. women-led religious groups, community leadership, or social services run by women	**B1**
(b) links to how this counters simplistic views of religion purely as oppression	**B1**
(b) AO1 credit for naming a supporting example or study, e.g. research showing women as active organisers in local faith groups	**B1**

(b) Answer: Reason example: religion can grant women personal resources, identity and networks that empower them, as Woodhead's 'personal empowerment' spaces suggest; evidence includes women-led groups and community roles where women gain status and social capital.

Question 2

identifies how 'gender-critical' spaces differ, e.g. they are areas where religious gender norms are actively contested	**B1**
identifies how the uniform patriarchy view differs, e.g. it treats religion as consistently male-dominated across contexts	**B1**
gives one implication of Woodhead's view, e.g. researchers must investigate variations and contestation within faiths	**B1**
brief development of the implication, e.g. use of mixed methods to capture conflict and change	**B1**

Answer: Woodhead's 'gender-critical' spaces are where gender norms are contested, unlike a uniform patriarchy view that treats religion as always male-dominated; this implies researchers should investigate variation and contestation within faiths, for example using mixed methods to capture conflict and change.

Question 3

identifies one reason, e.g. some women find identity and meaning in traditional roles	**B1**
development, e.g. religion can provide moral certainty, social status within the community or stability	**B1**
identifies a second reason, e.g. social pressure and community expectation can encourage conformity	**B1**
development, e.g. fear of social sanction or loss of support can make change costly	**B1**

Answer: One reason is that some women find identity, status and moral meaning in traditional roles and so support them. Another is social pressure and community expectations, where fear of sanction or loss of support makes change costly.

Question 4

Level 1 Limited evaluation with brief or undeveloped use of Item B and few relevant sociological ideas, mainly assertion with little evidence. **1-3**

Level 2 Some evaluation using Item B and one or two sociological ideas. Arguments are partially developed, with limited evidence or examples, and an emerging judgement. **4-6**

Level 3 Clear evaluation using Item B and several sociological ideas. Arguments include relevant examples and studies, with balanced discussion of strengths and weaknesses and a reasoned conclusion. **7-9**

Level 4 Sustained, well-evidenced evaluation applying Item B and wider knowledge. Arguments show detailed use of studies such as El Saadawi and Holm, Woodhead's distinctions, counter-evidence of women's agency and religious feminism, and reach a supported, balanced judgement. **10-12**

Indicative content:

- AO1 material: Feminist claims that religion can be patriarchal, with El Saadawi and Holm arguing that texts, rituals and institutional roles often subordinate women; examples include male-only priesthoods, exclusion from ritual or purity taboos.
- Use Item B: Woodhead's distinctions provide analytic nuance, showing religions may operate as patriarchal spaces, personal-empowerment spaces, or gender-critical spaces. Apply this to avoid overgeneralisation.
- Strengths of feminist views: explain how doctrine and institutional structures can reproduce male dominance, supported by historical and ethnographic evidence; show how symbolic practices and leadership exclusions maintain gendered power.
- Limitations and counter-evidence: feminist accounts can overgeneralise across different faiths and contexts, ignoring variation; evidence that women use religion for empowerment, leadership at local levels, and form women-centred movements undermines a simple oppressive model.
- Evaluation should balance structure and agency, noting that patriarchy may be embedded institutionally while women still negotiate, resist and use religious resources for status and community.
- Methodological points: differences between macro institutional analysis and micro studies of lived religion; value of mixed methods. Consider cross-cultural variation and the danger of imposing a single feminist template on diverse practices.
- Conclusion: reach a balanced judgement on the extent feminist views explain the relationship, for example that feminist perspectives are powerful for revealing structural inequalities but must be combined with nuanced, contextual analysis such as Woodhead's to fully explain contemporary patterns.

Question 5

identifies patriarchy as a social system where men hold primary power in public and private institutions (oe) **B1**

development, e.g. in religion this can mean male control of leadership, interpretation and ritual roles **B1**

Answer: Patriarchy is a social system where men hold primary power in public and private institutions; in religion this can mean male control of leadership, interpretation and ritual roles.

Question 6

identifies an example of exclusion, e.g. the male-only priesthood in Roman Catholicism or the relative absence of female imams in many Muslim communities **B1**

development explaining how this exclusion limits women's institutional power in that religion **B1**

further development linking exclusion to wider patriarchy, e.g. control over doctrine, rituals and public representation **B1**

clear contextual example named within the explanation **B1**

Answer: Example: Roman Catholicism restricts priesthood to men; this limits women from institutional authority over doctrine and ritual, reinforcing male control and wider patriarchy within that religious institution.

Question 7

identifies one way, e.g. religious dress codes or veiling that mark women as modest or separate from men **B1**

explains how this can subordinate women by policing female behaviour and visibility **B1**

identifies a second way, e.g. purity and menstruation taboos that restrict women's participation in rituals **B1**

explains how such taboos can symbolically mark women as impure and limit their ritual status **B1**

Answer: One way is dress codes or veiling that mark women as modest or separate, policing behaviour and visibility. Another is purity and menstruation taboos which can restrict women from ritual participation and symbolically mark them as impure, reducing ritual status.

Question 8

identifies a genuine Saadawi point, e.g. that religious texts and interpretations in some contexts have been used to justify male dominance over women **B1**

brief development or example **B1**

Answer: El Saadawi argued that in some contexts religious texts and their interpretations have been used to justify male dominance over women, for example by endorsing male control of family and social roles.

Question 9

(a) identifies findings for both groups, e.g. 62% of women and 45% of men said they rarely held formal leadership positions **B1**

(a) explains that the higher proportion of women respondents reporting this may suggest women experience less access to formal leadership in this hypothetical congregation **B1**

(a) Answer: Finding: 62% of women respondents said they rarely held formal leadership positions, compared with 45% of men respondents. The higher proportion of women may suggest women experience less access to formal leadership in this hypothetical congregation.

(b) identifies the finding, e.g. 38% of women engage in organised religious feminism groups compared with 8% of men **B1**

(b) explains that the higher reported participation among women may suggest some women respondents use religion to organise or build community in this hypothetical congregation **B1**

(b) Answer: Finding: 38% of women respondents reported engaging in organised religious feminism groups, compared with 8% of men respondents. This may suggest that some women respondents use religion as a space for activism or community in this hypothetical congregation.

Question 10

identifies one criticism, e.g. they overgeneralise across very different faiths and cultural contexts **B1**

explains how this weakens the argument, e.g. it ignores diversity between denominations and local practices **B1**

identifies a second criticism, e.g. they underplay evidence that women use religion for empowerment, status and community **B1**

explains how this limits the account, e.g. it misses the role of religious feminism and women-led movements **B1**

Answer: One criticism is overgeneralisation across different faiths and contexts, which ignores variation between denominations and local practices. A second is underplaying evidence that women use religion for empowerment and community, which misses religious feminism and women-led roles.