



The House of Multiple Oppressions

An intersectional analysis of systems of dominance

Overview: The House of Multiple Oppressions is an advanced and more in-depth version of The Master's House activity. It encourages analysis and dialogue among participants regarding what patriarchy is and how it works, and how it intersects with other systems of domination and discrimination.

Purpose: Participants will achieve a better understanding of how patriarchy functions - through institutions, power relationship and other dynamics - and how it intersects with other systems of oppression.

The exercise deals with how complex power dynamics of patriarchy play out and function in institutions (such as in the family, formal education, the media, government, etc.), and covers various relations of domination and discrimination such as those among men and women, and across class, race, ethnicity, etc. The activity adds layers of analysis about power and the multiple identities that *intersect*, interweave, and define us (gender, class, ethnic, age, territorial, etc.) and how they shape our experience, who we are and how we relate to one another. Over the course of the activity, participants collectively build the "House of Multiple Oppressions" drawing on the diverse experiences and knowledge that participants possess.

Time: 6 - 8 hours, depending on group size and depth of discussion. We generally allow a whole day of a workshop or break it up over two days.



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Credit: Adapted by Malena de Montis (from “The Master House,” by Koni Benson, Shereen Essof, and Anna Davies-van Es) for use in JASS’ Alquimia’s Leadership Course for Mesoamerican Indigenous and Rural Women. Patricia Ardón suggested the title “House of Multiple Oppressions”

Materials:

- sticky notepaper of at least 4 colors (alternately you can use pieces of paper and tape)
- white and different colored notecards
- flip-charts
- different colored markers
- scissors
- white and other colored posterboard
- posterboard strips, or strips from white paper
- masking tape
- a big wall!

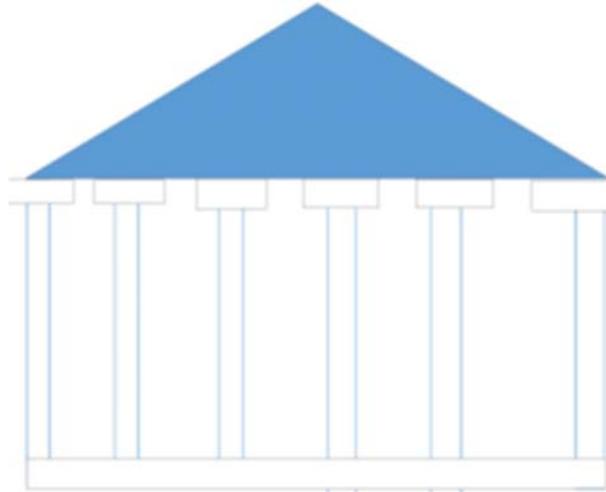
Process:

Preparation Before Starting:

Before beginning, create the structure of the house, drawing or using cut out paper to make the roof and the external walls of the House on one of the meeting room’s wide walls (Figure 1). Participants will build the House’s inner walls and pillars, each pillar having three rows of blocks. These pillars represent key institutions where people learn to dominate and discriminate using “power over” based on gender, ethnicity/race, class. It is best to avoid language that could be unfamiliar such as “patriarchy” at this early stage. It will be discussed near the end of the activity.

Note: The conversations people have throughout this activity are a very important part of this activity so make sure you allow sufficient time both in small groups and in plenary discussion. Plan breaks within the activity as makes sense for your group.

Figure 1



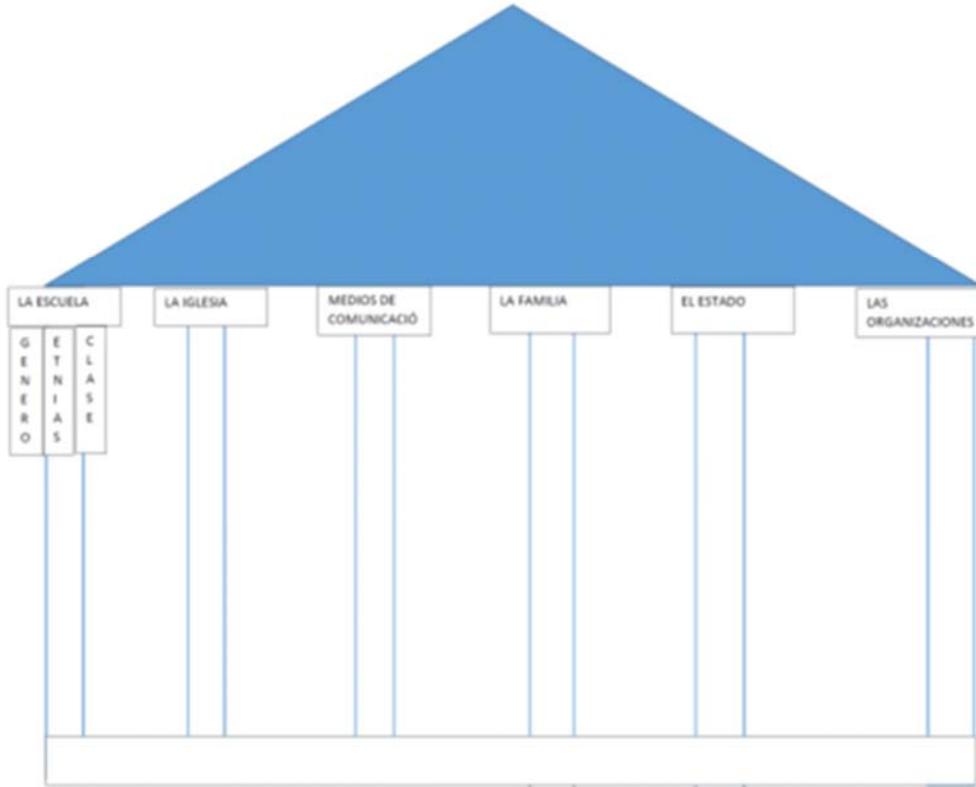
First stage (gender and ethnic relationships):

In Plenary:

Explain overall purpose of exercise and review the process: e.g. building a house to reflect and analyze the forces affecting women's lives and place in the world.

- a. Ask the group: where do we learn the things we know about the world? Where do we get our messages about these things? (Facilitator Note: You may need to give examples e.g. school, church, home).
- b. Write down participants' responses on the flip chart.
- c. From among the institutions mentioned, choose 6-7 key ones in analyzing patriarchy to build the pillars of the House. We suggest considering the following institutions: family, religion, government, educational institutions, the media and organizations in which we participate (6-7 pillars).
- d. Write each name of an institutional "pillar" down on a white strips of poster board (the length of three pieces of sticky notepaper) and place them under the roof inside the House. One strip per institution. The strips indicate the pillars that support the House will be built. (Figure 2).
- e. Each pillar is built with three rows of blocks. One row will make reference to gender relations, another to race/ethnic relations, and the third to class relation. If you want to add a row for another form of systemic domination (e.g. sexuality) you can. Sticky notepaper will simulate blocks and will have different colors for each form of domination so as to facilitate the analysis of *intersectionality*.

Figure 2



In small groups:

- Ask the participants to form 6-7 small groups, one for each different institution (pillar of the House). Once groups are formed, participants in each group move their chairs to different areas of the meeting room.
- The facilitator asks participants to discuss gender first: What does this institution say about how women and men should act? What are allowed and not allowed to do according to gender? What are the lines we are not supposed to cross? How and when are we valued, not valued?
- They should write their **key points** on individual sticky notes of a particular color, labeling them “male”/ “men” and “female”/ “women”.

In plenary:

- The groups each share what they’ve written, posting them under their column and in the row for gender.
- Once all groups have posted, invite observations they have about what they have heard - commonalities, differences, ah-ha’s, etc.



In the same small groups:

- f. Ask each group to use a similar process of analyzing their institution, but this time looking at **ethnicity and race**: identify what their institution says about and how it treats people of different racial and ethnic identities (e.g. indigenous, black, mestizo, white, etc.) – how we should act, how we are seen, how our lives and voices are/ are not valued, etc. – and write key responses on a different color of sticky notepaper from the color used for gender), labeling each sticky indigenous, mestizo, black or white (or whatever relevant categories are for your context).
- g. Once the groups have filled out their sticky notepaper, ask each to read what they have written. Ask for any observations and comments. Have a volunteer from the group to stick the papers on the wall, laying down a second row of blocks of the institutional pillar of the House under construction.
- h. When all sticky papers have been put in place, ask participants to approach the House being built and review what's been added to the House.
- i. Immediately after, ask how participants feel about what's been shared, encouraging discussion on the intersections and complex power relations reflected here and how this relates to their own experience of identities, intersectionality and racism.

Second Stage (class relations):

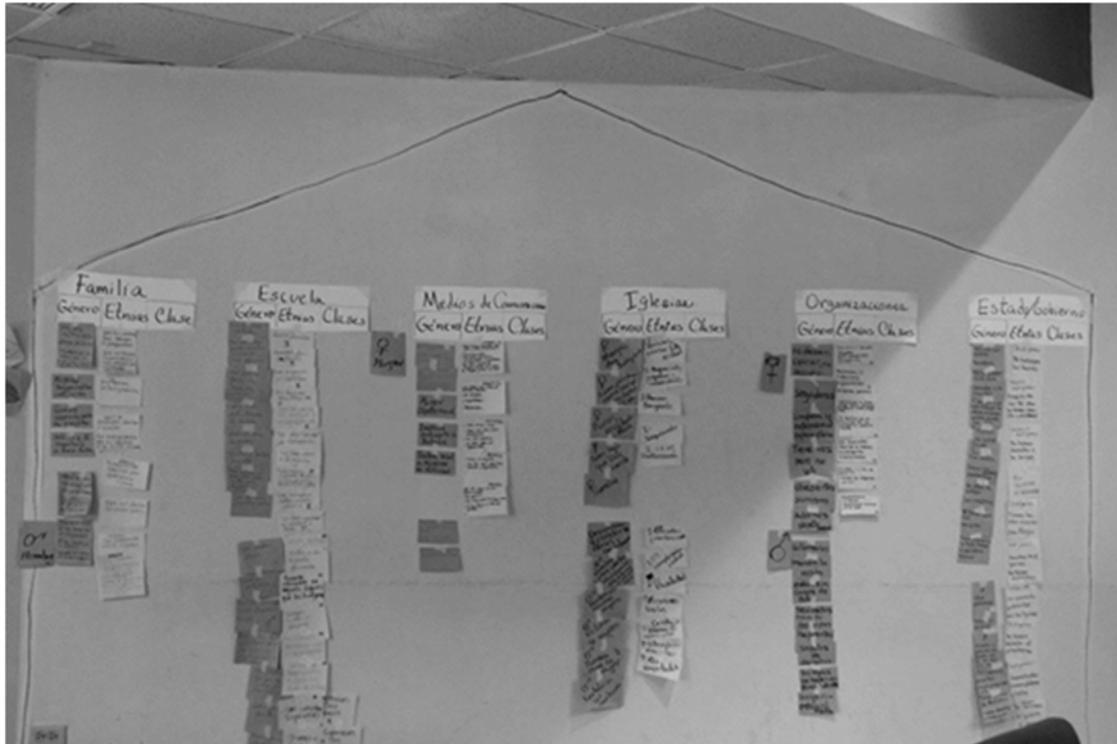
In small groups:

- a. Asks participants to sit with their groups. In an effort to enhance and further the analysis of intersectionality, have each group (institution) reflect on class using the following two questions to get started. They will write their responses on a third color of sticky notepaper for the row on class.
 - i. First: What does your institution say about how rich people obtain their wealth and why they are wealthy?
 - ii. Second: Why do some people have very low incomes or live in poverty?

In plenary:

- b. Once answers they have written their responses on the notepapers, have each group read their responses. After all are posted, have the participants reflect on what they have heard, one question at a time.
- c. Encourage dialogue regarding class relations and how this defining aspect of the capitalist system means some people are exploited, oppressed, and dominated. What are the ways you have seen this? How is this justified and explained?

Figure 3



- d. Someone from each group places the different-colored sticky notepaper under the pillar (institution) that they have worked on, laying down the third row of blocks of that pillar. Your “House of Multiple Oppressions” should look something like **Figure 3**.
- e. Discuss: How does class get interwoven with other power relations, such as those of gender and race/ ethnicity? Invite further reflection on intersectionality, multiple identities and positions and power.

Third Stage (mechanisms and global analysis):

In plenary:

- a. Explain we are going to talk about how the “rules” of gender, race, ethnicity and class are enforced.
- b. Ask: How do each of those institutions compel the conformity to rules of gender, race and class? How are those enforced (e.g. violence, fear, guilt, etc.)? What can happen when you cross the line and disrupt those rules?
- c. Write down their responses about the different ways in which behavior is compelled and enforced, using thin white strips of paper or poster board. Place them between pillars in order to simulate walls.



Analysis:

- d. Explain we want to analyze this House of Multiple Oppressions” that was just built. We have named how gender, class, and ethnic relations intersect and how the use of “power over” is used to reinforce dominance and subordination. As discussed the relationships among the different systems are complex and are expressed in different ways. The power relationships of the House are sometimes visible (laws, policies, rules) and other times invisible (e.g. beliefs, values, social pressure).
- e. Ask if they can point to examples from their own experience – what kind of power was exercised and by whom to enforce the “rules” of the House of Multiple Oppressions?
- f. Because these forms of oppression are often normalized it is important to name them. Introduce the concept of patriarchy – the system of dominance based on gender – drawing on their earlier answers. Patriarchy can only fully be understood by seeing how it combines with other forms of power and dominance in specific contexts and lives. We have to look at these complexities to develop specific strategies and actions to undermine, crack open and demolish patriarchy and other systems of oppression.

Fourth Stage (the intimate/personal):

- a. Ask participants to observe the House they built and remind everyone that all of us live in, support, and maintain the House of Multiple Oppressions, often in ways in which we are not conscious. Invite them to think to themselves about the following questions as they observe the House. Have them write their answers anonymously on cards.
 - How do I live in that House and what is its impact on me?
 - What do I do that maintains parts of it?
 - How do I reinforce or weaken patriarchy and other systems of oppression through my actions, words, relationships and the beliefs that I have?
 - How does my leadership reflect this?
- b. The facilitator encourages dialogue on what it means how all of us live in the House of Multiple Oppressions, and how all of us, men and women, white, black, indigenous, rich and poor, rural people, workers, employers, the elderly, the young, from North, South, etc., contribute to building and maintaining patriarchy.
- c. The facilitator winds up the topic by indicating how important it is to work towards expressing transformational/liberating power; towards an exercise of transformational/ liberating leadership, taking note of the importance of solidarity that is based on a recognition and value differences.
- d. Participants are asked to place their cards in bowl or large pot in the center, while each one says one or two things she would like to transform personally and express transformational leadership as she places her cards in the pot.



Final Note for the Facilitator: You may want to provide reading or video material as a follow up. Within WeRise there are a number of written and visual materials on power, patriarchy and intersectionality.