



# Master's House: The House of Oppression

**Overview:** This is an entry level activity designed to help participants to start thinking about, and understanding patriarchy and the various systems of oppression by visually constructing them in a 'Master's House'.

**Purpose:** This two-part exercise helps participants reflect on where they learn about being "women" and "men" and map out the gender rules so that participants start to understand patriarchy as a system (the "Master's House") and not simply something that is happening to them personally. Further, it challenges participants to think about how they, in big and small ways, serve to build and maintain patriarchy. There are several ways to apply this exercise – one, having people generate ideas from an overall brainstorming or two, using a concrete story of a woman's life to elicit discussion. For some groups, it may be more effective to start with a story that illustrates how patriarchal institutions and beliefs affect one woman's particular life. Being less abstract, it allows for more immediate connections and analysis.

**Time:** 3 hours

## Materials and Space Needed:

- Sheets of paper ("bricks") in 5-6 different colours, flipchart paper to make the roof and walls, scissors, strips of white paper for the mechanisms, one colour card for every participant.
- Large blank space on the wall where the house can be constructed and all participants can see it.
- Optional Handout on Audre Lorde's Master's House

**Credit:** Created by Koni Benson, Shereen Essof, and Anna Davies-van Es; inspired by Audre Lorde's conceptualization of the "master's house".





**Facilitator Notes:** As facilitator you will need to set up for the activity by making a “roof and walls” for the house – in other words, creating the outline of the house with strips of paper. It needs to be big enough to accommodate the pieces of paper that will serve as bricks for constructing the actual walls of the house. The bricks come from each group and get placed inside the outline to ‘build’ a picture of what patriarchy looks like. Avoid using unfamiliar words like ‘patriarchy’ and ‘institution’ at the start of this activity.

## Understanding Patriarchy: Master’s House Part 1 (2 hours)

### Process:

#### *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.

Ask the group: where do we learn the things we know about the world? Where do we learn about what we should and should not do as women and men? Where do we get our messages about these things? (*Facilitator Note: You may need to give examples e.g. school, church, home.*) Record all responses on flipchart and then indicate which ones we will focus on – choose the key institutions of patriarchy i.e. family, community, religion, education, culture/tradition, the state, our organisations, and media. Each of these institutions will become a pillar of the house, so create a card naming each one and add them as a row under the roof line.

#### *In small groups:*

Divide into small groups. Each group is assigned a different institution and gets a corresponding set of colour “bricks” (pieces of paper). They then identify the “rules” that the institution promotes (directly or indirectly) about women and men and how they should and shouldn’t act. They summarize each key points on a colour ‘brick’ / piece of paper.

#### *In plenary:*

1. Groups report back, taping their particular bricks in columns inside the outline as they present their key points, and as they do so, the master’s house of “rules” is built.
2. Ask key questions as each group reports back: What do these institutions say about women and men: about how we should behave? What we can and can’t do? What mechanisms are used to enforce this behaviour? What happens when you step outside these walls?

**Facilitator Note:** Women’s experiences are not the same, but vary with race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, religion, etc., even as many of the patterns are the same. As



*facilitator, you need to help make this broader analysis central; for example ask: How do class, race, ethnicity and religion show up in master's house? Where do these intersections come into play? (You can go deeper on these interconnections with **The House of Multiple Oppressions** -see *Feminisms pack* and *Feminist Analysis pack* in the *We Rise Toolkit*)*

3. Co-facilitators write up the mechanisms used to enforce the behaviour on the walls of the house e.g. violence, fear, using white strips of paper, as they come up in the discussion.
4. As the group looks at the house, now fully constructed, ask for initial reflections: What do you see? What are the linkages between the institutions? How do they support each other? What does the house mean to your lives?
5. Break

## Understanding Patriarchy: Master's House Part 2 (1 hour)

### **Individually:**

6. Explain that this next part will be anonymous and used later in the process to reflect at a deeper level. Ask participants to think about these questions: how do I live in the master's house and how does living in this house affect me? How do I contribute to building and maintaining the house? Write answers on a piece of card (anonymously)
7. Place cards in a box in the centre of the room. These will be reviewed anonymously at the beginning of the next day or at some other point in the process.

### **In plenary:**

8. Wrap up: Ask the group: what does it mean to do the work of breaking down the Master's house? What are some of the ways we can get rid of those walls? Following their input, summarize, emphasizing the importance of collective power and solidarity across "difference".

**Credit:** Initially developed by Koni Benson, Shereen Essof and Anna Davies-van Es in their work supporting women activists in South Africa but has been adapted over time.



## HANDOUT:

### Audre Lorde and The Master's House

The image of the Master's House comes from a piece written by the African American feminist and poet, Audre Lorde, who used the term to describe the interlocking beliefs, systems, and structures of oppression that threaten and silence women's voices and actions – in other words, patriarchy. Her choice of the term Master is especially significant given the brutal history of slave masters in the US and her experience as an African American woman. She reveals how the Master uses difference – the differences between people based on class, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity and race among others – as a way to promote fear and division and undermine solidarity and community. Audre, on the other hand, celebrates difference as a force for personal power and social transformation

*Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged... As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences.*

Difference must be... seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.... Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate ... the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

If we are to free ourselves and forge new practices of power, Audre stresses that we need to be creative and nurturing, rejecting the tools and practices of the Master – be they the tools of marginalization, division, exclusion, fear, alienation, or subordination.

*For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is ...redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world...*

*Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is ... learning how to stand alone, ... – sometimes reviled -- and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*

She emphasizes the need to join with others who are marginalized and develop alternative approaches to bridging these divides. *The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.*