



# Spider Web: Forces that Trap Us

**Overview:** Examining the story of a woman who is caught in a web of interconnected forces and power dynamics that keep her oppressed, helps participants name the ways that different forms of power affect their lives and community participation. This realization provides a basis for developing strategies that get at root causes and promote both solidarity and a readiness to act in the face of these dynamics.

**Purpose:** This exercise allows participants to identify different forces that hold them down and deepen their analysis of the interlocking web of patriarchy and other forms of power. As a result, they can be better prepared to understand the complex nature of these dynamics and the comprehensive nature of the strategies needed to address them. JASS South East Asia (SEA) has used the spider web with both women and men, sometimes having village and government leaders do it as a way to make them aware of the many forces that pull women down and limit their participation and well-being. Depending on how this exercise is debriefed, it can substitute or complement the version of the Master's House process that focuses on patriarchy. It also can complement power analysis and the discussion of strategy.

**Time:** 1 hour +

**Materials:**

- Ball of string
- Stickies or colored paper and tape
- Scissors
- Flip chart
- Newsprint
- Markers
- Handouts: Stories of Mena, Grace or a story you have chosen

**Credit:** adapted by Nani Zulminarni, JASS SEA and PEKKA for power analysis





# WE RISE



## Process:

### In Plenary:

- Explain the purpose and what will happen in the two parts of the process

### First round: Analysis of Different Forces of Power

- As facilitator, you tell a story of a woman that illustrates the web of power trapping women in general, based on discrimination due to: class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, education levels, location, religion, etc., also due to beliefs, social norms, cultural traditions, government officials, military, laws, policies, conflicts or wars etc. (You could use a newspaper story, for example, a rape, or a case study of a particular woman facing difficult problems and oppression. In JASS SEA, they use the story of Mena – a marginalized and poor woman who ends up dying because of domestic abuse. They frame the questions around *why did Mena die?* In JASS SNA they use *Why did Grace Die* – a story about a woman who does not want to have more children – see attached.)
- Ask for a volunteer to represent the woman; she sits in the middle of circle and holds a ball of string that has been tied and wound around her waist several times; the rest of the group sits in a circle around her at a distance of about 10-15 ft.
- Ask group – *why did this happen to this woman? Why did Mena die?* Repeat question until enough ideas have been suggested to entrap woman hopeless in the mesh of string.
  - One person may say lack of education or poor health care, another may add poverty or belief that husband is supreme in the household, etc. etc.
- As a person answers, the woman in the middle throws the ball to her, she wraps the string around her hand and throws it back; the facilitator then writes the reason in one or two words on a sticky and sticks it to that set of strings. Process continues until woman in center is thoroughly held in place by the web and everyone has had a chance to contribute.
- Ask people holding strings to pull them; Woman can't move of her own accord, strings get tighter. [Can also ask group to pull one way and then the other, moving her according to their whims.]
- Ask woman in center – *how do you feel? How does the tightening of the strings make you feel?* (In SEA, women say things like: *I can't move and if I do, the strings will get tighter, I can't do anything, no space, feel powerless, paralyzed.*)



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# WE RISE



- *Let's help her – let's cut some of the strings to see what happens. (Cuts several scattered around circle; identify what string is being cut). Ask – can you escape the web now? Why not?*
- Ask for a volunteer to cut some more strings; she won't be able to fully move until all strings cut and finally free.
- Suggested questions:
  - *What happened? What did you see?*
  - *Have you or friends experienced similar situations? What happened? How did you/they feel?*
  - *What enabled her to get free?*
  - *What lessons can we draw from this exercise? What might they mean for our own lives and ability to break free?*
- Answers are recorded on flip chart
- Synthesis: Summarize points and emphasize the interconnectedness of the forces that hold us down and the need to work on all the strings of power to fully free ourselves.

## Second round: Review of potential strategies

### *In buzz groups of 2-3:*

- Referring back to the original story or case, ask *if you were organizing women like Mena, what would you need to do to help free the women from these different forces* (You will probably want to divide into buzz groups to ensure more thoughtful answers).
  - *If we just work with one force and manage to cut that string, what happens?*
  - *What do we need to do? What strategies?*

### **In plenary:**

- Record answers on flip chart
- Synthesis: Summarize ideas and stress need to engage with all forces and develop comprehensive approaches otherwise no real change will happen – engage with government on laws and policies; religious and indigenous leaders on gaining legitimacy with them; with women themselves to organize and to gain awareness of how beliefs can shame and silence etc. etc.



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## Sample Stories to Use

### Why did Mena die?

SEA staff

Mena was a 15 year old girl living in a rural community on an Indonesian island in South East Asia. The village had limited public services, people had to travel far distances for basic health care and education. Because her family was poor, she couldn't go to school after 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Their local school didn't offer any other grades and the cost of transportation to another school was prohibitive.

In the community, families lived together under one roof in very cramped spaces – women and men, boys and girls. Mena's mother worried about her since Mena was very pretty and she knew pretty girls could get in trouble. In her ethnic community, usually parents married their girls off at a very young age. So when a young man from the community became interested in Mena, her mother asked him to marry her. Her mother was afraid of people talking badly about Mena and what the religious leaders might say. Besides, she also wanted Mena to have someone to protect her.

The young couple had to live in similarly cramped quarters. Mena's husband didn't have any regular job which forced Mena to find work. Since Mena had only basic education, she didn't have the skills to get anything but a menial job. She worked in the market helping shopkeepers. Mena then got pregnant. During her pregnancy, she was not able to see the doctor or the nurse for any checkups. There simply was not the money nor the time to see the doctor. Her husband had lost interest in her and didn't help.

One day Mena felt some stomach discomfort. She consulted her mother about her condition, but her mother said such discomfort was common during pregnancies and she should be patient since it is a womanhood thing. Mena tried to reach her husband to ask him to take her to the hospital, but she didn't not know where her husband was. Then she felt a rush of blood come from between her legs. She didn't understand what was happening. She could not stop the bleeding. Her mother then took her to the nearby hospital on a tricycle taxi, but, unfortunately Mena died before she could get there. Why did Mena die?





## Sample Stories to Use

### Why did Grace die?

by Everjoice Win

Grace is a 33 year old Malawian woman. She is married to Joe. They have three daughters aged 6 years, 4 years and 2 years. Joe works in a hotel in Johannesburg, because he could not find any jobs in Malawi. He comes home only three or four times a year, because coming more often is expensive and also he does not get a lot of time off from his job. Grace lives in the village, some 300 kilometers away from the nearest town. Here, she and Joe have built a small house, and it is right next door to Joe's parents. She works in their small field, growing maize, groundnuts and also vegetables in their smaller garden. Grace is always struggling for money as Joe does not really earn a lot of money.

A month after Joe's last visit, Grace discovered she was pregnant. Grace and Joe did not use any protection or any family planning method. They are members of the Roman Catholic Church which strongly discourages use of family planning between married couples. In addition, Joe said he did not see why Grace must use any family planning since he is away most of the time. The last time when Grace delivered the youngest child, she begged the Doctor to remove her uterus to make sure she would not ever have another baby again. The Doctor told her that at age 33 the law did not allow her to have her uterus removed. He also told her that if she wanted to have her tubes tied she had to bring her husband so he could sign the permission.

The nurses who had been standing around listening to Grace talking to the Doctor later came to her bed and shouted at her. "What is wrong with you? You now want to be a prostitute since your husband is away in South Africa? Why do you not want to keep your uterus? What kind of woman are you going to be with no uterus?" One of the nurses brought her a newspaper article with a story of a woman killed by her husband for removing her uterus without his knowledge. The man had been sentenced to only 6 months of community service, and the judge in the matter said; "Any normal Malawian understands why you killed your wife. Let this be a lesson to all women to always follow our culture and not these foreign ways of doing things". The Paramount Chief from the area where the dead woman came from also said, "Women must be careful not to take their rights too far". Many people wrote letters to the Editor agreeing with the Chief and the Judge. So did many religious leaders and Members of Parliament interviewed by the newspaper.



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Grace tried to talk to her husband about stopping having more children. But he was very angry. He said, "My dear, if you are tired of being married to me, you can go back to your family and return my lobola (bride price)!" When Grace spoke to both her Aunt, her mother and Joe's sister and Aunt all the women were absolutely shocked! How could she even think of stopping to produce children when she had not yet given Joe a son?

Grace got very very, sick when the pregnancy was 5 months along. She had sores on her vagina and a yellow discharge. Soon she started bleeding. She did not know who to tell. The nearest clinic was in the town, a whole day's trip away. When she asked her mother in law if she could go to the clinic, mother in law told her she must ask permission from her husband in Johannesburg. Grace sent a text message but Joe did not respond. By the time Grace was finally taken to the clinic a week after collapsing, she was too sick to even speak. The clinic took two days to find transport for Grace to be taken to the big hospital, another 350 kilometers away. Grace was pronounced dead on arrival at the big hospital. The tests showed the baby was already dead and the infection had spread all over her body.

Why did Grace die?

