

Women and Power: a RSWR Community Dialogue Guide

Right Sharing of World Resources (RSWR) offers this discussion guide as a resource for communities who want to explore women’s lives, gender equity, and the material conditions that shape power and possibility.

While this guide can be especially meaningful during Women’s History Month (March) or around International Women’s Day (March 8), it is designed for use at any time of year. Conversations about dignity, equity, and shared decision-making are always timely.

This guide is organized into two one-hour sessions.

- **Part 1** explores how different societies have organized gender roles and power.
- **Part 2** examines the material and economic conditions that shape gender inequality—and how change becomes possible.

Instructions for smaller groups are marked with Δ and for larger groups with ○.

“There is nothing of greater importance to the well-being of society at large – of man as well as woman—than the true and proper position of woman.”

[Discourse on Women, a speech by Lucretia Mott](#)

Part 1: The myth “That the present is the original state designed for woman”

“While man assumes, that the present is the original state designed for woman, that the existing ‘differences are not arbitrary nor the result of accident,’ but grounded in nature...”

[Lucretia Mott](#)

What comes to mind when you think about the phrase “women’s history”?

Δ Each person shares their response.

○ Share through worship sharing.

~15 minutes

Read the text below about two different societies. ~5 minutes

Republic of the Congo, the Mbendjele (from [Ekila: blood, bodies, and egalitarian societies by Jerome Lewis](#))

“For Mbendjele, success in crucial life activities should be straightforward because the forest is perceived as abundant in resources and generous in dispensing them.”

“An Mbendjele woman, or man, does not depend on anyone else for direct and unrestricted access to food, or for many other personal requirements should he or she wish to break away from others. As Woodburn (1982) made clear, such an absence of dependency is the necessary prerequisite for egalitarian gender relations. A person in authority can exert power over others only if he or she can withhold basic requirements such as food, access to resources, or marriage partners. This is not possible between Mbendjele.”

“Women’s fear of attack [from wild animals] encourages them to do daily activities in noisy groups. They gather in groups, fish, and collect nuts, yams, and fruit together, and rarely spend time alone. This communalism in daily life establishes strong solidarity between them that has important implications for women’s status. It is often used effectively to influence camp decisions. If women refuse a proposition made by men, men can only persuade them, never coerce them. Women quickly support each other in situations of conflict with men, especially in situations of serious domestic violence. During such episodes women often ganged up to beat a violent husband with long sticks.”

China, the Mosuo (from [‘Kingdom of Daughters’ in China Draws Tourists to Its Matrilineal Society by Amy Qin](#))

“The Mosuo [are] a minority ethnic group said to be the country’s [China’s] last matrilineal society, where children take their mothers’ surnames and daughters are preferred to sons.

In traditional Mosuo culture, family life is structured around the basic social unit, known as the “grand household,” in which children are raised by their mother and her side of the family. And while children typically know their biological fathers, maternal uncles are responsible for taking on the paternal role, helping to raise and provide for their sisters’ children.

Men stay with their mothers, and the several generations live in the grand household together.

According to Chuan-Kang Shih, an expert on the Mosuo and an anthropology professor at the University of Florida, the system is underpinned by a fundamental belief that women are more capable than men, mentally and even physically. The Mosuo also believe that everything people value in the world came from a woman, not a man. All male deities are secondary to their patron goddess.”



Separate into small groups of 3-4 people to reflect upon the questions below.

~15 minutes

- What is similar to what you see in your own relationships? What is different?
- What feelings come up around this?

Come back to the whole group and reflect together on the questions below.

~15 minutes

- What was that like?
- Was there anything difficult about this?
- What might have led different societies to develop in such diverse ways?

What is rising up for you?

△ Each person shares their response.

○ Share through worship sharing.

~10 minutes

Part 2: How did we get here and where do we go?

What is something you've thought about since the last session?

△ Each person shares their response.

○ Share through worship sharing.

~15 minutes

Roots of Power. Below are passages from the “What is Politics?” program exploring the roots of gendered hierarchies (which inspired this discussion guide), along with an example from modern China. Read this aloud or share copies and everyone can read silently. **~10 minutes**

“Politics is about who gets to make decisions. And our society is made up of various hierarchies where some people have more decision making power than others, based on political institutions, and differences in economic wealth, and cultural status.”¹

Examining differences in power, such as in the examples we looked at in our own society, “has everything to do with the relative bargaining power of the various actors in these societies... bargaining power is itself a result of the practical realities created by the different types of economies that each type of society practices.” The “material and practical realities shape culture, social structure and ideology.”¹ “In a more broad sense, environment and material practical conditions determine culture, but culture ends up becoming part of the practical conditions in a sort of feedback loop.”²

What conditions allow men to dominate women? One condition to examine is the relationship to power and decision-making: patrilocal post-marital residence.

“Patrilocality, where men stay with their birth families, and women leave theirs to go live with their husband’s family, is one solution which almost always results in male domination and patriarchy. Why? And why do most cultures choose patrilocality instead of one of the other options?”

Strict patrilocality is generally favoured when your village or your herd or territory is likely to be raided or attacked on short notice, particularly by neighbouring communities. Women can be effective fighters and hunters in some societies, but in general men are on average better or more reliable fighters, given that they’re 15% bigger than women, and they’re not likely to be out of fighting form for long periods due to being pregnant or having given birth recently. And if you have to fend off a lot of attacks, it makes sense to have many related males who grew up together and who know each-other well in your area, as they will tend to make a better snap fighting force than unrelated men who don’t know each-other well.”¹

“The positive consequence of patrilocality is better defence which benefits everyone. But it also comes with a big unintended negative consequence for women: male domination.

Why? Well, you have these villages of about 100–250 people, and almost all of the men are related to each-other and grew up together and they know each-other. Meanwhile all the adult women in the village come from a bunch of other villages, and they usually don’t know each-other very well. If there is a conflict between a man and his wife, the man is likely to get support from his relatives and friends, while the woman won’t. Her friends and family live far away and even her fellow village women don’t really know her that well. And since they’re also isolated they don’t want to rock the boat and piss off the majority of the village by defending the other outsider. This creates a situation where in any conflict between a man and a woman, the man normally has the advantage. In other words, patrilocality generates a situation where men have much more bargaining power than women do.”¹

While the practical conditions for why this institution came into being don’t exist anymore, a culture has built up around this practice which has become the new practical conditions (the feedback loop mentioned earlier). This bargaining power disadvantage leads to economic exploitation. Resulting cultural hierarchies (and accompanying discrimination) further solidify this ongoing exploitation.

What’s a modern example of practical conditions impacting cultural changes? We’ll look at female infanticide in China, reading [China's great gender crisis by Tania Branigan](#).

“Infanticide, the abandonment of girl babies and favourable treatment of boys in terms of food and health has long produced a surplus of men. In the past two decades, the gap at birth

has soared: the advent of ultrasound scans has allowed people to abort female fetuses, even though sex-selective abortion is illegal.”

“The roots of son-preference lie deep in Chinese culture. Traditionally, the bloodline passes through the male side. Women also “marry out”, joining their husband's families and looking after their in-laws, not their own parents. For a long time, a son was your pension. Having a girl was wasteful. “Even though son-preference is not rational from the viewpoint of society as a whole, it is a rational choice for an individual,” says Li.”

“When Chen's daughter was born, a little over 30 years ago, the consequences of the ultrasound had yet to be felt in Shengzhou. But by 1982, 124 boys were being born for every 100 girls. Five years later that figure had risen again, to 129.

Then something striking happened: the ratio dropped steeply. By 1996 it was 109.5. Soon after, according to statistics, it returned to the natural level.

You do not have to look far for part of the explanation. Shengzhou is, it boasts, International Necktie City of the 21st Century, making 350m ties a year – or 40% of the world's supply – as well as huge quantities of gas stoves and cone diaphragms for speakers.

Its factories offer plenty of jobs for daughters, allowing them to make a hefty economic contribution to the household. Across the country, manufacturers have frequently preferred female employees, regarding them as more careful and less troublesome.

Many rural families have less land than they used to; and machinery is available to work the soil, making brute strength less important. China is beginning to develop a welfare system. And development has brought other changes – couples who move into cities have more exposure to new ideas, and less pressure from extended families, say experts.”

We see female infanticide influenced by several factors, such as patrilocal post-marital residence (“a son was your pension”). This was disrupted by industrialization and urbanization, which changed post-marital residence patterns and also saw women gain economically as their waged labor became more valuable (women were regarded as “more careful and less troublesome,” recall that culture becomes a part of the practical conditions). A welfare system (such as social security) further shifts incentives, as less priority is placed on children’s financial support in old age.

Supporting Women. As a group, brainstorm issues impacting women that you care about for a few minutes, just naming issues without going into discussion about them. Separate into small groups of three or four people and have a discussion based on the prompt below. **~15 minutes (2-3 minutes to brainstorm, then 12-13 minutes in small groups)**



Pick one of the issues that came up in the brainstorming.

Discuss the environmental or economic conditions that generate this issue, and what kind of changes could help solve the issue, meeting those root material conditions.

Gather back in the whole group and reflect on the questions below. An example (i.e. shameless plug) is that Right Sharing of World Resources partners with groups of women, giving grants and supportive training to start and sustain microbusiness ventures to nurture economic independence and group solidarity which addresses a number of issues. **~10 minutes**

- What was that like? People can share what ideas came up in their groups if they'd like.
- Was there anything difficult about this?
- What is different about this approach?

Share one learning from this time together.

Δ Each person shares their response.

○ Share through worship sharing.

~10 minutes

¹The Origins of Social Hierarchy and Male Dominance: What David Graeber and Jordan Peterson Get Wrong ([Transcript](#)) ([Audio](#))

²Pink Pilled: Why You Can't Eliminate Sexism by Eliminating Sexism ([Transcript](#)) ([Audio](#))

For questions or comments, please contact us at 937-966-0314 or rswr@rswr.org