JASS (JUST ASSOCIATES) is an international feminist organization grounded and driven by the partners and initiatives of its regional networks in Mesoamerica, Southern Africa, and Southeast Asia. JASS is dedicated to strengthening and mobilizing women’s voice, visibility and collective organizing power to change the norms, institutions and policies that perpetuate inequality and violence, and to create a just, sustainable world for all.

Founded as a learning community by a group of activists, popular educators and scholars from 13 countries in 2002, JASS generates knowledge from experience with the hope of improving the theory and practice of women's rights, development and democracy.

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Making Change Happen: Power
We will dedicate two editions of Making Change Happen (No. 3 and 4) to an examination of the complexities and opportunities for understanding, constructing and transforming power. This edition looks at concepts and current dilemmas for social justice activists & groups. Building on these concepts and analysis, a second companion piece will focus on empowerment and action strategies for movement building.
Over the last 15 years, people and organizations concerned about social justice, equality and development have increasingly turned to policy advocacy and campaigning to promote change. Despite the promise of these approaches for advancing people- and planet-centered agendas in public policy, many activists find themselves holding the line against further rollbacks of important economic, environmental, racial justice and gender equality gains, and searching for more effective ways to engage and transform power. This search is leading to deeper inquiries about the nature of change and power, inquiries that revisit past history and approaches, while tapping new energy, ideas and opportunities for revitalizing social movements and change strategies.

In this quest, we find people asking themselves hard questions:

- Despite previous advocacy successes, why do many strategies and approaches seem inadequate in the struggle to overcome poverty and injustice? What are sources of inspiration, experience and wisdom that we can draw upon to strengthen our efforts?

- How does the current globalized context affect our work and what does it mean for developing innovative and bold strategies capable of revitalizing movements?

- Why do most people – even those most affected by injustices – seem disconnected and disengaged? How do we reach and engage people more effectively in collective agendas for peace and justice?

- How do we understand the complexities of power and empowerment, and how do we best respond to them in ways that use, build and transform power?

As these concerns deepen, new sources of inspiration and inquiry emerge. For example, in September 2006 a group of diverse women leaders from Mexico and Central America came together to examine some of these questions in light of their experiences as feminists and human rights activists. The contradictions and unfulfilled promises of the region’s revolutionary struggles gave their inquiry both an uncommon depth of analysis and sense of perspective and hope. Many of the ideas and questions presented in this edition of Making Change Happen were sharpened by these rich discussions and draw from the work carried out by JASS’ members over several years, some of which is distilled in the book, *A New Weave of Power, People, and Politics: The Action Guide to Advocacy and Citizen Participation* (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002).
Over the years, many of us involved in JASS have revisited and refined our understanding of power and strategies drawing lessons from our experiences in different contexts around the world. In the 1970s–80s, popular education and grassroots organizing experiences provided useful analyses and methodologies for confronting oppression and building people’s collective power. Popular education’s emphasis on social transformation, consciousness, and organization made it a compelling, yet incomplete approach, since it focused exclusively on class and overlooked other forms of subordination and resistance. During that same time, revolutionary struggles provided us with both inspiration and painful lessons about power and change.

As popular education became increasingly depoliticized and many of us got deeply involved in work on women’s empowerment and rights, we adapted our strategies to respond to multiple forms of oppression. Influenced by feminist thinking and others, we re-emphasized power’s transformational vision of change. These approaches were again adapted to respond to the promise of democratization in the ‘90s, where we engaged in strategies to claim rights and redefine citizen participation through ‘people-centered advocacy’. In recent years, the power of neoliberalism and fundamentalisms, coupled with the depoliticization of advocacy by some powerful NGOs eager for quick technical answers and concerned with branding, has led us back to the questions of organization, consciousness, and the issue of movement-building.

When democratic politics can no longer shape the discussion about how we should organize our common life, when it is limited to securing the necessary conditions for the smooth functioning of the market; in these circumstances the conditions are ripe for talented demagogues to articulate popular frustration. We should realize that to a great extent the success of right wing populists... is due to the fact that they provide people with some form of hope, with the belief that things can be different. Of course this is an illusory hope, founded on false premises and on unacceptable mechanisms of exclusion in which xenophobia usually plays a central role. But when these parties are the only ones offering an outlet for political passions their claim to offer an alternative can be seductive. (Chantal Mouffe 2002)

Let us teach both ourselves and others that politics does not have to be the art of the possible... but that it also can be the art of the impossible, that is, the art of making both ourselves and the world better.

Vaclav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, 1990

CHANGING MOMENTS AND STRATEGIES

BIBLIOGRAPHY


CONCEPT: A SOCIAL FABRIC IN NEED OF REPAIR

People are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

The Earth Summit’s Agenda for Change, Rio de Janeiro, 1992

The global context shaping current possibilities for change presents a challenging panorama. Advances of corporate globalization, neo-conservative politics and fundamentalisms are tearing apart the social fabric of societies around the world, dislocating communities and ravaging notions of the common good and human solidarity.

These forces have eroded the role of the state as upholder and protector of human rights and undermined the idea of the public good in both the Global North and the Global South. Reinforced by the US administration’s vision of power and morality, emphasis on national security has bred new forms of militarism, eating up public budgets and intensifying divisions between nations and peoples. For women, this has meant dramatic reductions in basic freedoms in addition to trident attacks on their reproductive rights.

We are struggling for the heart and soul of community – community built on a commitment to the common good and cooperation … upheld by solid bonds of human relationships that respect diversity and human rights, a weave of justice woven with multiple threads of power and people…
Our physics lessons failed us – we forgot the basics that for every action there is an equal or greater reaction.

Mexican feminist activist on the backlash against women’s rights

The Challenge of Power

While power is an integral dynamic of change, it turns out to be one of the most difficult and unsettling topics to address. Power can seem especially monolithic and impermeable for individuals who have lived under regimes that deny freedom or repress people’s voices and participation. Power is seen as a win-lose kind of relationship. Having power is a zero-sum game, involving taking it from someone else, and then, using it to prevent others from gaining it. Such a one-dimensional view can paralyze analysis and action. When people see power as static and unchanging, they are unable to recognize their own sources of power.

In reality, power is dynamic, relational and multidimensional, changing according to context, circumstance and interest. Its expressions and forms can range from domination and resistance to collaboration and transformation. This is good news for social justice promoters whose strategies depend upon new opportunities and poor power strategies. Weak, it can be risky and counterproductive.

Common approaches to citizen engagement such as the World Bank PRSP process and the plethora of “citizen summits” and “listening sessions” emphasize bringing everyone to the table as “stakeholders,” but fail to recognize that underlining power dynamics between conflicting interests have a huge impact on people’s capacity to participate and influence outcomes. All stakeholders are not equal, yet they are often treated as such, while agendas and parameters of discussion are defined in ways that leave out crucial issues (Routten and Irina 2005). Consequently, these processes usually produce neither new policy directions nor real changes in the way decisions are made and can reinforce people’s cynicism about the value of “participating.” In fact, they often reinforce, rather than alter, the profound power dynamics around race and ethnicity, class and gender that shape people’s expectations and behavior concerning whose agendas get heard and addressed.

Internationally, the 1990s were the heyday for civil society activists who utilized important UN conferences and international gatherings to achieve critical policy successes and shifts in discourse on a range of issues from the environment to women’s rights. Today, many realize that they did not fully anticipate the backlash or dissonant forms of power that got triggered by their victories. In recent years, advocacy experiences raise questions about the continued relevance of these types of policy openings for advancing social justice goals. Global activists believe that these are becoming "black holes,” diverting advocates and resources from national-level opportunities for change and more pressing political concerns. Many feel that the focus on policy and campaigning has contributed to the general depoliticization of social justice strategies and a growing disconnect between local, national and global work, and between advocates and social movements.

The current context presents considerable challenges for activists. New bold efforts are needed to reclaim the power and vision of movements for justice. Yet among busy and pragmatic organizers and activists, there is sometimes resistance to re-examining basic assumptions about power and change, or studying theory and history, which are considered impractical abstractions. There is often a sense that concepts are for researchers, not doers. This false dichotomy can have crippling effects on action since it denies activists the systematic analysis and knowledge of past experience.

Having a conversation, in a deliberate and collaborative way, about how power and change operate in light of real-life politics and history, which are considered impractical abstractions. There is often a sense that concepts are for researchers, not doers. This false dichotomy can have crippling effects on action since it denies activists the systematic analysis and knowledge of past experience. A powerful tool for discussing the complex nature of power and change is the notion of a strategic opportunity or black hole. To discuss specific government anti-poverty policies and programs but disallow the discussion of other global policies that impact global work, and between advocates and social movements.

Did We Forget About Power?

Despite the dynamic nature of power, programs and strategies promoting human rights, equality and justice the world over have seemingly gotten stuck in superficial approaches to power, and an over-reliance on policy and technical solutions. The failure to deal with the complexities of power can lead to missed opportunities and poor power strategies. Weak, it can be risky and counterproductive.

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Basic Concepts of Power

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the US civil rights leader who challenged racism and economic injustice during the mid 20th century, defined power as “the ability to achieve a purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change.” Whether power advances justice and transforms inequities depends precisely on its purpose, the values guiding it, and the way it is used. Power is categorized in many ways, often as economic, political, social, or cultural. Women’s rights advocates and feminists have developed other categories that classify the diverse sources and expressions of power – both positive and negative. These include the most common controlling forms of power – power over – and more life-affirming and transformational forms – power with, power to, and power within. Naming such dynamics can be liberating and mind-expanding. By using these types of analytical categories, people can better understand how forces of subordination and domination operate in their own lives and envision alternative strategies and visions of power through which they can challenge injustice.

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Sources and Expressions of Power

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ENDNOTES

1 Conceived by Just Associates (JASS-Asociadas por lo Justo) with support from Hinós and the Global Fund for Women, this 4-day workshop in Panama was entitled “Reimagining and Rebuilding Feminist Movements.” It is the first in a series of regional movement-building institutes to be carried out over the next three years in response to demands from activists to re-tool and re-build.


3 The development of Poverty Reduction Strategies brings together representatives from government, private sector and civil society to discuss specific government anti-poverty policies and programs but disallow the discussion of other global policies that impact governments and their ability to respond to poverty and inequality.


5 Interview with Maria Suarez (2006); See also Las Negociaciones Nuestras de Cada Dia, Clara Coria.

6 This section is adapted from A New Wave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide to Advocacy and Citizen Participation, ibid. Our thinking about power has been shaped significantly by Steven Lukes and John Gaventa’s writing, including his more recent writing on the Power Cube which shows how power operates in different policy spaces and geographic levels. Also see Making Change Happen 2.

7 Adapted from New Wave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide to Advocacy and Citizen Participation, ibid.

8 One of the significant global trade battles has pitted small-scale farmers and landless movements against the likes of agribusiness giants like Monsanto for the creation of the “killer seed,” a genetically modified seed that is sterile and cannot be harvested for planting.

9 See, for example, My Net, Your Work: Pitches and Lessons Learned from Experiences with Coalitions, Alliance and Networks, Just Associates (2005).

10 From participants in the workshop, “Reimagining and Rebuilding Feminist Movements,” the JASS Mexican and Central American Movement Building Institute, Panama (2006).

THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN TAKING POWER INTO ACCOUNT FOR STRATEGIES AND ACTION

1. Analysis and concepts are necessary ingredients for effective action. Researchers and academics can help challenge people to think more deeply, but activists and communities involved in change need to do the analysis and reflection themselves. This helps ground strategies, and develops critical thinking and political analysis skills.

2. All forms of power usually operate simultaneously. At a given moment, we may choose to focus on the policy (the visible dynamics), but it’s important not to overlook the others. Policy change is a necessary but insufficient avenue to achieve justice.

3. Most groups do not have the full range of resources and skills to undertake all of the necessary activities to maneuver and engage power dynamics effectively. Effective change strategies require both a division of labor among organizations and effective linkages between efforts forged by a shared political vision and commitment to synergy between diverse actions.

4. To achieve this level of coordination and political agility, groups (and their donors) need to give more time and energy to the face-to-face structured conversations required to get on the same page about the political context and strategies, negotiate differences, and coordinate action.

5. Inequality is not solved by widgets. Widgets (like seeds, technology, vaccines, etc.) are a welcome and essential part of addressing the poverty and disease that inequality produces, but they will fail to achieve their potential if complex political realities of human interaction and social structures are not addressed in some way.

6. Technical information is vital to effective political work but will not motivate people to act. A song or a poem might.

7. Persuasive, bold messages will capture public attention and help to build support for new alternatives. But the world can’t be re-framed by a slogan. People are willing to hear more and participate in that conversation with their own views, especially if we tap their hopes and dreams.

8. Affirming and inspiring the human search for meaning and dignity is a critical aspect of movement-building.

In the subsequent edition of Making Change Happen, we apply these ideas and concepts about power to strategies, action, and movement-building.

Justice and power must be brought together, so that whatever is just may be powerful, and whatever is powerful may be just.

Blaise Pascal

Power can be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exercised by different sections of society. The control of these resources becomes a source of individual and social power …

The extent of power of an individual or group is correlated to how many different kinds of resources they can access and control. Different degrees of power are sustained and perpetuated through social divisions such as gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, north-south; and through institutions such as the family, religion, education, media, the law, etc. …

There is a continuous process of resistance and challenge by the less powerful and marginalized sections of society, resulting in various degrees of change in the structures of power. When these challenges become strong and extensive enough, they can result in the total transformation of a power structure.

(Srihala Batliwala 1995)

Power Over

The most commonly recognized form of power, power over, has many negative associations for people, such as repression, force, coercion, discrimination, corruption, and abuse. At its most basic, it operates to privilege certain people while marginalizing others. In politics, those who control resources and decision-making have power over those without and exclude others from access and participation. When people are denied access to important resources like land, healthcare, and jobs, power over perpetuates inequality, injustice and poverty.

In the absence of alternative models and relationships, people repeat the power over pattern in their personal interaction, values, communities, and institutions. For example, to maintain emotional relationships with men that are crucial to their family stability and economic survival, women often feel they must give up much of their own power or use it in a manipulative way. When women or people from marginalized or “powerless” groups gain power in leadership positions, they sometimes “imitate the oppressor.” For this reason, activists cannot expect that the experience of being excluded prepares people to become democratic leaders. New forms of leadership and decision-making must be explicitly defined, taught, and rewarded in order to promote democratic forms of power. As part of this process, values need to be challenged, reclaiming those that support justice, equity and compassion.

INVITED OR CLAIMED?

The tendency of policy in delivering the kinds of real change that activists are seeking has led to a closer, more nuanced analysis of policy spaces to assess their degree of strategic relevance. The following distinctions can be helpful in determining how much to engage or not, and when to disengage. A closed space is one where decisions are made by an elite group, such as government officials, behind closed doors without a pretense of public participation. Civil society often works to challenge and open up these kinds of closed spaces to create claimed spaces where there is enough room to negotiate their own agendas. Participatory budget work in Porto Alegre, Brazil is a well-known example. Civil society groups also create autonomous spaces, like the World Social Forum. They provide groups a chance to develop agendas, knowledge and solidarity, without interference from actors with other agendas. With growing pressure from civil society over the last decade, powerful policy institutions have established invited spaces where a select group of civil society actors, usually from large NGOs, are invited to participate and bring their knowledge and expertise to the table. While invited spaces can offer possibilities for influence and networking, they can also produce long-term results on vital justice issues. The most pressing danger, however, is that they can serve to legitimate the status quo and divert civil society energies and resources (see endnote 4).

Blind Drift

Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are.

Berthold Brecht

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(Srihala Batliwala 1995)
...forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?

Practitioners and academics have searched for more collaborative ways of exercising and using power. Drawing on their own positive and negative experiences with power, feminists use the notion of vital or life-affirming power. They see this form of power as a way to focus on building alternatives that emphasize the affirmation and development of life, based on the responsibilities involved in caring for life in all its forms. The parameters and ethics for using such power come from a focus on both rights and responsibilities and an emphasis on the renewal and regeneration of life with all its energies, forces, creativity and chaos. It envisions multiple forms and hubs of leadership emerging from different places according to needs, events, moments and language. This quest for alternatives is ongoing and offers new insights on how we can express and use power as seen in the three visions presented below.

These alternatives offer positive ways of expressing power that create the possibility of forming more equitable relationships and structures and transforming power over. By affirming people’s capacity to act creatively and collectively, they provide some basic principles for constructing empowering strategies.

**Vision 1: Power With**

Power with has to do with finding common ground among different interests in order to build collective strength. Based on mutual support, solidarity, collaboration and recognition and respect for differences, power with multiples individual talents, knowledge and resources to make a larger impact. Power with can help build bridges across differences by openly acknowledging conflicts and seeking to transform or reduce them for a larger aim. Power with can generate a larger impact but can also provide a grounding sense of community and spiritual connection. At this moment when social justice efforts feel over-institutionalized and fragmented power, they can lead to more effective strategies to construct and promote power with will be vital, including alliances and movement-building. All of these require processes to acknowledge diversity and disagreement while seeking common ground around values and visions.

**Vision 2: Power To**

Power to refers to the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world. Education, training and leadership development for social justice are based on the belief that each individual has the power to make a difference, which can be multiplied by new skills, knowledge, awareness and confidence. When based on mutual support, it opens up the possibilities of joint action, or power with others. For organizing and advocacy efforts to succeed, they must tap into and nurture people’s power to potential. This is especially critical coming on the heels of an era that emphasizes top-down expertise and technical solutions. These have tended to undermine people’s sense of power to – withdrawing from public life and producing a sense of resignation.

**Vision 3: Power Within**

Power within has to do with a person’s sense of self-worth and self-knowledge. It is grounded in an ethical value base that fosters a vision of human rights and responsibilities and an ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others. Power within is the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the shared human search for dignity and fulfillment and is strengthened by an understanding of power and the common good, and a constant practice of questioning and challenging assumptions. Spirituality, story telling, music, dancing and critical reflection can affirm people’s power within, which can serve as a nourishing force, energizing the tireless efforts of social justice actors. Seemingly simple, these positive ways of thinking about people’s potential. This is especially critical coming on the heels of an era that emphasizes top-down expertise and technical solutions.

In addition to multiple dimensions of power, fast-paced globalization has changed the territorial or spatial relations of power (Gaventa 2006). As such, key powerful actors are often geographically distant from the local injustices they produce and believe their power comes from factories or oil companies whose shareholders and corporate decisionmakers are far from the environmental destruction or labor violations they are responsible for.

Local-to-global advocacy is not new. For example, transnational women’s rights networks have worked for decades to fight violence against women, using and reforming international human rights law and mechanisms to gain recognition and push for national remedies for this very local violation affecting women worldwide. For decades, African activists have targeted bilateral and international organizations and other international institutions to bring about change in their own, relatively weak or unresponsive governments (Edwards and Gaventa 2001). Similarly, activists throughout the Global South have fought for more public resources for education, healthcare and development by collaborating with activists in wealthier countries to persuade their governments to cancel “odious” debt, forcing the fiscal accountability for supporting corrupt dictators of the past back on to the lending countries.

Nevertheless, corporate globalization has reshuffled power such that it is almost impossible to fight local issues without taking into account and targeting global power dynamics and actors. To some extent, governments and intergovernmental bodies have been weakened by neoliberal policies, making large private and non-profit corporations and global trade actors a critical target for social, economic and political justice agendas. The opportunities to link and expand the power of workers, communities, shareholders and even investors are growing, where coordinated groups use boycotts and other actions to get the attention of companies that violate labor rights or pollute the environment. The South-African Treatment Action Campaign working on HIV/AIDS, mobilized from local to global levels to successfully pressure “big Pharma” (the largest pharmaceutical transnational corporations) to reduce the price of anti-retrovirals (ARVs) and to enable countries like South Africa to produce these medicines. The South African Trade Action Campaign has had multiple victories. Today, the coalition for Imonkileko Workers, a coalition in support of immigrant farm labor in Florida (US), this campaign galvanized support from a wide range of transnational groups and led to multiple victories. Today, the coalition for Imonkileko Workers and their allies are taking their boycott higher up the food chain to McDonalds. Similarly, shareholders have been mobilized by unions, environmental and social justice activists to shift the investment pattern of pension funds away from companies and that violate labor rights and pollute.

While corporate accountability strategies have achieved important successes, the corporate sector is adept at making minor adjustments to deflect public criticism, and slipping back into business as usual when activists aren’t looking; thus, ensuring that governments and intergovernmental bodies have the capacity and clout to make and enforce laws that protect the rights of people and the health of the planet remains vital to achieving justice.

Global power also places new demands on activists for information gathering, communication across borders and cultures, and effective, empowering education and leadership strategies. Communities and social justice leaders need to know just as much as activists about the local-to-global dynamics in order to engage critically over the long-haul.

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**Indian Activist 2005**

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**Multiple Spaces of Power**

There is a profound disconnect between these large global campaigns and movements in the village. The distance between Delhi and New York is easy to overcome but the distance between Delhi and the Indian village keeps growing.

Chains. For example, the Taco Bell boycott targeted the global giant, Yum Brands, which owns Taco Bell, the global fast-food restaurant, as the major buyer of tomatoes from agribusinesses violating workers’ rights. Led by the Imonkileko Workers, a coalition in support of immigrant farm labor in Florida (US), this campaign galvanized support from a wide range of transnational groups and led to multiple victories. Today, the coalition for Imonkileko Workers and their allies are taking their boycott higher up the food chain to McDonalds. Similarly, shareholders have been mobilized by unions, environmental and social justice activists to shift the investment pattern of pension funds away from companies and that violate labor rights and pollute.

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T he NGO Industrial Complex. Not a very flattering term for the growing population of big civil society organizations working at national and global levels on a range of issues from economics, development to HIV/AIDS.

Since the mid-1980s, NGOs have proliferated around the world with a handful becoming large and influential. This is good news and bad news. Good, because well-functioning large institutions are needed to ensure the effective delivery of services to those who need it, and make an impact on the world’s worst problems. But, at a certain point, institutional interests may collide with social justice goals and opportunities. When an NGO’s budget reaches a multi-million dollar level, it’s not surprising that demands for fundraising and branding overwhelm the behind-the-scenes, long-term community work and potentially more risky social justice strategies, particularly at a difficult political moment. A flashy rock concert with appearances of movie stars is a terrible public media draw, and then, can be an easier investment to justify to board members who care more about “bang for the buck” than supporting elusive and more controversial strategies like women’s empowerment and land rights for small farmers.

While applauding the large scale NGO campaigns that draw public attention to poverty and war, many worry that over-institutionalization (NGO-ization) has created troublesome tensions and debates. These disconnects translate into the lack of effective linkages to constituencies in both the Global North and South – undermining the political clout of organizations’ messages and lobbying. NGO dominance has generated debates on different issues, levels (local-national-global), and strategies. These disconnects translate into the lack of effective linkages to constituencies in both the Global North and South – undermining the political clout of organizations’ messages and lobbying. NGO dominance has generated debates on different issues, levels (local-national-global), and strategies.

The POWER of NUMBERS and MOVEMENTS

There is probably no more compelling form of power than the force of large numbers of different people united in a collective cause for justice. Current challenges with fragmentation and disconnection have generated debates over the organizational strategies that the personal and political and public dynamics of power. Instead, programs that only emphasize condoms and abstinence fail to take into account that women, particularly married women, are often unable culturally to negotiate safe sex with their partner. Practitioners and scholars familiar with the challenges of women’s empowerment explain that power takes shape in three interacting levels – the public arenas as well as the private and intimate realms. The public realm of power affects women and men at work and in their community. The private realm of power refers to relationships and roles in families, among friends, sexual partnerships, marriage, etc. The intimate realm of power has to do with one’s sense of self, confidence, psychology and relationship to body and health. For an individual woman or man, the experience of power and powerlessness differs not only because of identity (race, class, age and sexual orientation, etc.). It may also be contradictory in different realms of her/his life. For example, a woman politician who appears confident in public may accept a subordinate role in her family, she may even suffer abuse from her partner while keeping up with the demands and image of her public duties. It is common worldwide for a woman to face the same work demands as her male partner, but be primarily or solely responsible for cooking, cleaning, and the care of children and parents. Despite gender equality advances in other arenas, this debilitating workload changes little. What seems to be a contradictory level of acceptance for a woman who appears “empowered” is often a complex negotiation of the personal costs and benefits of her empowerment. Because the power dynamics reflected in these roles are so deeply normalized, women who challenge these, can face isolation, criticism, ridicule or even violence from their partners, families or communities. Acknowledging the layers of people’s experience with power and powerlessness can be helpful in understanding the tensions and contradictions women face when they get involved in social justice efforts. Change strategies that focus solely on the public realm may overlook the complex demands on women’s time and energy and thus, fail to engage them effectively.

And the Personal is Political

Re-focusing on power bring us back to this well-known feminist adage. One would think that the HIV/AIDS crisis – a disease transmitted through sexual contact – would have helped to refocus change efforts on the intersections between the personal and political and public dynamics of power. Instead, programs that only emphasize condoms and abstinence fail to take into account that women, particularly married women, are often unable culturally to negotiate safe sex with their partner. Practitioners and scholars familiar with the challenges of women’s empowerment explain that power takes shape in three interacting levels – the public arenas as well as the private and intimate realms. The public realm of power affects women and men at work and in their community. The private realm of power refers to relationships and roles in families, among friends, sexual partnerships, marriage, etc. The intimate realm of power has to do with one’s sense of self, confidence, psychology and relationship to body and health. For an individual woman or man, the experience of power and powerlessness differs not only because of identity (race, class, age and sexual orientation, etc.). It may also be contradictory in different realms of her/his life. For example, a woman politician who appears confident in public may accept a subordinate role in her family, she may even suffer abuse from her partner while keeping up with the demands and image of her public duties. It is common worldwide for a woman to face the same work demands as her male partner, but be primarily or solely responsible for cooking, cleaning, and the care of children and parents. Despite gender equality advances in other arenas, this debilitating workload changes little. What seems to be a contradictory level of acceptance for a woman who appears “empowered” is often a complex negotiation of the personal costs and benefits of her empowerment. Because the power dynamics reflected in these roles are so deeply normalized, women who challenge these, can face isolation, criticism, ridicule or even violence from their partners, families or communities. Acknowledging the layers of people’s experience with power and powerlessness can be helpful in understanding the tensions and contradictions women face when they get involved in social justice efforts. Change strategies that focus solely on the public realm may overlook the complex demands on women’s time and energy and thus, fail to engage them effectively.

One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites, polar opposites, so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. … power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

ONE OF THE WAYS DISCRIMINATION WORKS

Discrimination is embedded in all societies in a variety of ways so that resources and benefits are distributed unequally according to race and ethnicity, gender, class, religion and location primarily. Discrimination and exclusion depends on who has access and who has control of these.

Access the opportunity to make use of something for a larger gain

Control: the ability to use and impose what others have

Resources can include:

| economic or productive resources such as land, equipment, tools, cash, employment | political resources such as representative organizations, leadership, organizational information, experience in the public sphere, self-confidence and credibility |

Benefits address basic needs – these benefits include food, clothing and shelter, income – and provide less tangible benefits that improve a person’s position – such as education, asset ownership, political power, prestige, connections and opportunities to pursue new interests.

Equity of opportunity – a common policy to facilitate access – usually fails to rectify discrimination.

The rights people are in the same position to be able to take advantage of the opportunities due to historical disadvantages. Socialization plays a big role in keeping things this way by normalizing inequality as both “natural” and having to do with individual ability, including traits people are born with.
INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

In the face of deeply ingrained social structures and norms that reinforce discrimination and oppression, people experience power dynamics differently according to the social characteristics or identities that make up who they are. Everyone of us has multiple, often nuanced identities — based on gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, education, age, sexual orientation, ability, etc. Because of this, we can experience privilege and subordination simultaneously. For example, anywhere in the world, a medical doctor or an NGO leader who is respected in her profession may suffer domestic abuse at home. In one setting, a person may be more powerful while in another setting, face discrimination. For example, in the United States, a powerful African American professional may find himself unable to hail a taxi successfully because he’s stereotyped as dangerous by the media and popular culture.

Understanding these interactions of power and identity can help untangle the contradictory dynamics that confuse and confound people as they work for social justice and equality. By naming differences and commonalities, this intersection of personal characteristics, called intersectionality, allows us to find points of unity and common action. Intersectionality is an analytical tool that helps us understand and respond to the ways in which each person’s social characteristics or identities interconnect and contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality helps to move beyond overly simplified conceptions of identity — “women” or “working class” or “indigenous” — to surface the complexities of privilege and subordination that are sometimes ignored or glossed over. Disparities in power and privilege within a group cannot be addressed unless they are first surfaced and acknowledged. Feminist interpretations of women’s experience over the years offer rich insights into the dynamics of power and oppression. While class remains a powerful determinant of inequality and people’s sense of power or powerlessness, gender and race are often equally potent given the strong biases of socialization that “keep people in their place.”

Some well-intended efforts to develop new consciousness and affirm people’s sense of self-worth and pride in their identity have inadvertently isolated people and led to a political dead end. This kind of identity politics fails to affirm people’s multiple identities, common problems, and basic sense of responsibility to one another. In this way, it hinders the growth of thoughtful and inclusive alliances where people engage as active agents and citizens, rather than victims. An over-simplification of identity as the basis for political action has contributed to the fragmentation of social movements, including women’s movements and the demobilization of potentially vibrant constituencies.

The challenge of identity and intersectionality lies in recognizing and addressing differences and inequalities, but not allowing them to become unbridgeable chasms that prevent people from identifying common ground and building relationships of solidarity. Potentially powerful alliances for social justice — from North-South coalitions to linkages between grassroots constituencies and global policy advocates — confront important questions connected to privilege and control. In some cases, unresolved tensions stymie progress while other alliances manage to recognize differences within their ranks. For example, the emerging food sovereignty movement is piecing together common ground among diverse groups, tapping into the needs and concerns of small-scale farmers, anti-hunger activists, peasant federations and middle-class consumers worried about health and food quality.

White privilege is an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious.

(Peggy McIntosh 1988)

KNOWLEDGE + NOISE = POLICY and POLITICAL CHANGE

Reflection on experience Popular education New ideas, Concepts, Theory Research Analysis of power/context

Engaged constituencies Effective community leaders Alternatives, hopeful inspiration Organization-Facts Alliances and movements Strategies/tactics

Positions Arguments/Demands Alternatives Messages Media and public education Popular education processes

(VeneKlasen 2003)

“noise.” Creating “noise” is a matter of building people power through popular education, leadership and organization to carry out a range of strategies that prod (with numbers, persistence, credibility, creativity and media) from the inside and engage strategically on the inside (with legitimate connection to the “outside”). For all of these strategies and more, all kinds of NGOs, grassroots organizations and social movements use generate facts and analysis to strategize, build alliances and develop their positions, demands and alternatives.

Those who profess to favour freedom and yet deprecate agitation are people who want crops without ploughing the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning, they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters ...

Power concedes nothing without a demand, it never has and it never will.

Frederick Douglass
CORRECTING STRATEGIC POWER IMBALANCES
Economics is politics in technical drag.
British feminist economist, 2003

In the current political context, it is nearly impossible to make policy headway on issues such as health, education, housing or water without challenging the multiple dimensions of power at work—for example, the neoliberal worldview which narrows budget and policy options, downplays the notion of rights and leaves fulfillment of basic human needs to the vagaries of the private sector. These battles cannot be fought without re-claiming the concept of the common good and re-focusing attention on the long-term strategic importance of government as a guarantor of basic rights, especially economic and cultural rights.

From a pragmatic standpoint, many organizers and activists are re-focusing their efforts on invisible and hidden power because the current potential for real gains with formal institutions and structures is sharply limited (Bradley 2005). Rather than an obstacle, this closing off of opportunities in the visible realm of power presents big possibilities for re-energizing education and organizing strategies that nurture new leaders and voices. By challenging dominant ideologies and worldviews, people not only deepen their understanding of power dynamics and themselves, they can begin seeing the potential of solidarity and the common good. Organizing around worldview involves the creation of new spaces for inclusive, empowering community reflection and dialogue about what’s going on and why. These processes can build movements of active, informed citizens with the power to act in disregard for the many other power dynamics shaping the playing field—where logic, factual information and the power of persuasion and persistence are vital to winning compromises. Much current advocacy and campaigning focus on these visible faces and arenas such as public policies, legislatures, government agencies, court systems, political parties and elections, corporate by-laws or non-profit policies. Strategies such as lobbying, media, litigation, research and analysis are crucial.

To help navigate power more effectively, we present three interactive dimensions of power over that shape the parameters of political action and change, marginalizing some people while privileging others. These range from the more obvious and visible to the hidden and invisible that operate behind the scenes. While they are all interconnected, in practice they interact and reinforce one another and need to be viewed holistically, as do strategies for challenging their webs of discrimination and subordination.

Visible Power: Observable Decision-making
A conventional understanding of power assumes that contests over interests are visibly negotiated in public spaces with established rules. These public spaces are often viewed as an even playing field—where logic, factual information and the power of persuasion and persistence are vital to winning compromises. Much current advocacy and campaigning focus on these visible faces and arenas such as public policies, legislatures, government agencies, court systems, political parties and elections, corporate by-laws or non-profit policies. Strategies such as lobbying, media, litigation, research and analysis are crucial.

In alternative policy arenas, there are two main ways that visible power discriminates against certain interests and people:

- Based laws and policies that may seem ‘neutral’ but clearly serve one group of people at the expense of others, such as health policies that do not adequately address women’s specific needs, or age and gender requirements for employment;
- Closed, corrupt or unrepresentative decision-making structures that do not adequately involve the voices or interests of the people they are intended to serve.

Advocacy strategies that target this dimension of power often try to change the “who, how, and what” of policy-making—the decision-makers, the transparency and inclusiveness of the process, and the policies—and so that decision-making is more democratic and accountable, and people’s needs and rights are addressed. However, challenging and focusing on one dimension of power is never enough to promote or sustain change over the long run.

Hidden Power: Setting the Political Agenda
Certain powerful actors who may not be formal decision-makers (elected, appointed or otherwise) nevertheless maintain their influence by controlling who gets to do the decision-making table and what gets on the agenda. Hidden power works to exclude and devalue the concerns and representation of other less powerful groups, like women, racial minorities, small farmers and the urban poor. Difficulties in gaining positive and fair media coverage can further inhibit viability and legitimacy, and leave ordinary people confused and misinformed. As the mainstream media is increasingly controlled by a small set of corporations, the potential for getting a balanced view or any coverage at all shrinks. Media analysts and critics show how limited, negative coverage of women, workers, immigrants, racial minorities and their issues reinforces stereotypes and biases.

How issues are framed and presented illustrates the way this type of power operates behind the scenes to exclude issues. For example, feminism is deemed elitist or a western import that destroys families. Framing the situation in this manner deflects attention from the economic realities that break families apart. Similarly, environmentalism is presented as an impractical, academic exercise that can destroy good jobs; many political leaders frame policy decisions as security interests, manipulating fear and anxiety to justify war and reduce civil liberties while obscuring the economic interests.

In addition to controlling the public agenda and public debate, public and private institutions are often structured to systematically exclude and discriminate against certain types of people and ideas. By preventing important voices and issues from getting a fair public hearing, policymaking can be skewed to benefit a few at the expense of the majority. To strengthen and gain legitimacy for marginalized groups and their issues, strategies aimed at challenging hidden power dynamics often stress leadership development, organizing, coalition-building, research, media and public education efforts. By combining actions that build and utilize the power of numbers, solidarity, and information with “name and shame” tactics, these types of initiatives can expose who’s under the table calling the shots and reveal their real interests.
WHAT IS OUR VISION OF POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS?  
A way of seeing and making sense of the world, afforded in a belief in fairness, tolerance, and compassion. Shaped by a continuous awareness of power, privilege and inequality in both the private and public spheres, a person with a political consciousness struggles to respect and understand difference, while seeking common ground among people. (Adapted from A New Weave of Power, People and Politics, p. 62)

The following page is a matrix about power that can be applied as a tool for joint analysis, planning, and assessment. On the following page is a matrix about power that can be applied as a tool for joint analysis, planning, and assessment. On the following page is a matrix about power that can be applied as a tool for joint analysis, planning, and assessment. On the following page is a matrix about power that can be applied as a tool for joint analysis, planning, and assessment.

The matrix presents how different dimensions of power interact to shape the problem and the possibility of citizen participation and action. The distinctions among the different dimensions are not neat or clear. The arrows are intended to indicate the interactive nature of these various manifestations of power.