

JASS BIG IDEAS: POWER



Sibongile Chibwe Singile, Malawi

Start where a woman is

[Watch on YouTube](#)

“Women were living in a lot of oppression so when they realised the **power within** themselves they wanted to act on it to make sure that they are free. They also saw the need to use the **power with** their friends so they act in a collective and use the **power to** make sure that things are really transforming for everyone.”

[Sibongile Chibwe Singile, JASS Malawi](#)

IN BRIEF

We strive to resist and challenge coercive **power over** by building and mobilizing **transformative power**. This is not a simple or linear process but, over time, we can collectively build power to make change happen.

Power is:

dynamic and relational

Unequal relations of power and the beliefs that sustain them are always contested and shifting.

neither good nor bad

It depends on how it is used and for what purpose – **power over** is often oppressive, unequal, and violent, but **transforming power** can make deep changes for the better.

systemic and structural

Unequal power relations are embedded in and perpetuated by institutions of our society, not only in interactions between people.

nuanced

It impacts us in obvious ways – discrimination, exclusion, repression – but also in invisible ways – the ideas and beliefs we internalize.

at work inside us

We are often unaware of the norms, values, and conditioned behaviors that we internalize from birth and through the narratives and misinformation promoted by powerful interests.

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sustained through violence

A mix of coercion, threats, and violence sustains inequitable power, while resistance and efforts for change are met with backlash.

operating in all spaces

Feminism teaches us that the personal is political, and that power operates fluidly in public, private, and intimate spaces.

intersectional

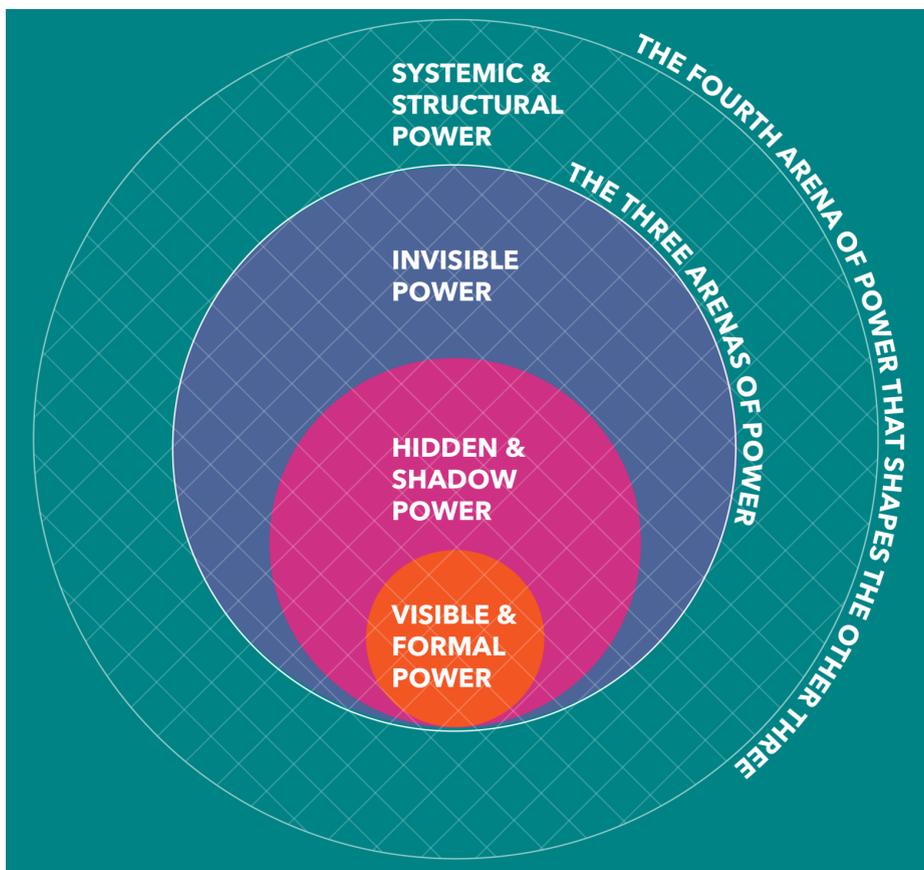
Unequal power relations are shaped by gender, race, ethnicity, class, location, ability and other factors, and thus building movements demands an intersectional approach.

“Power is the capacity of individuals or groups to determine who *gets* what, who *does* what, who *decides* what, and who *sets the agenda*.”

Srilatha Batliwala, quoting and expanding on the definition by Aruna Rao and David Kelleher

IN JASS

Power is fundamental to every aspect of JASS’ movement-building work – understanding, building, confronting, and transforming power.



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INTERLINKED SYSTEMS OF POWER

VISIBLE POWER

State and formal power exercised through laws, rules, courts, institutions, policies, decision-making and the enforcement of rules.

HIDDEN POWER

Organized private interests – including corporations, extractive industries, fundamentalist groups, and narco-traffickers – that work behind the scenes to influence and control resources, media, policing and the state.

INVISIBLE POWER

Internalized beliefs, social norms, culture, and conditioned behavior that shape people’s worldview and sense of what is ‘right’ or ‘normal’, and the manipulation of these beliefs through narratives to legitimize political ideas, action, and violence.

SYSTEMIC POWER

Over-arching systems and structures of power that underlie and enforce the other three.

IN ACTION



Zeph Repollo, Philippines

That power conversation

[Watch on YouTube](#)



Lisa Veneklasen, USA

Violence through the lens of power

[Watch on YouTube](#)

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IN DEPTH

Power over ...

- refers to the negative, oppressive forms of power we often associate with power
- exploits or controls people by setting the rules, defining access to resources, and shaping what is considered 'normal'
- relies on maintaining compliance through various forms of reward and punishment, domination, and coercion. Violence – or the threat of violence – prevents change

There is a continual contestation between those with power and those who seek change.

Transformative power ...

- is the individual and collective power we mobilize to build movements
- derives from building collective knowledge, vision and strength
- fuels people and movements to resist, confront, engage, and ultimately change oppressive forms of power
- advances our vision of care and repair for people and the planet

Power over and ***transformative power*** are not two distinct arenas; they are present everywhere. Just as *power over* can be present in our own organizations and leadership, *transformative power* is possible in the cracks and opportunities for change that we find in the dominant structures of power.

As movement-builders and strengtheners, JASS continuously seeks to deepen thinking and practice around power in relation to:

- Systemic power
- Strategy
- Envisioning and practicing transformative change
- Narratives
- Violence and safety
- Movement cultures of mutual care, joy and vibrancy

Transformative Power

Power within: a person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge. Grounded in a belief in inherent human dignity, *power within* is the capacity to value oneself, think independently, challenge assumptions, and seek fulfilment. Effective grassroots organizing efforts help people affirm personal worth, tap into their dreams and hope, and discover their *power to* and *power with* ([MCH3: 6](#)).

Power to: the unique potential of every person to speak, take action, shape her life and world. Leadership development for social justice provides new skills, knowledge, and awareness, and opens up the possibilities of joint action. Nurturing people's *power to* is a critical antidote to resignation and political withdrawal.

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Power with: the collective strength that comes with finding common ground and community with others. Power with – expressed in collaboration, alliances, and solidarity – multiplies individual talents, knowledge and resources for a larger impact.

Power for: the combined vision, values and demands that orient our work and inspire strategies and alternatives – the world we seek to create.

Systemic Power

This arena of power in JASS' framework refers to mega-systems of capitalism, white supremacy/structural racism, patriarchy, and colonialism/imperialism. These systems:

- connect all of our histories and countries
- define the logic that undergirds all other arenas and institutions of power
- determine economic, political, social and other relationships
- justify human exploitation and subordination
- shape dominant–subordinate hierarchies in families, relationships, and societies
- 'explain' the extraction and destruction of nature for profit as development and 'progress'

As the DNA of power in the world, systemic power is the most challenging to surface, question and alter.

Expose and resist **HIDDEN POWER**

To shift and challenge the influence of actors who operate behind the scenes, legally and illegally (shadow power), we:

1. Resist and expose who's really calling the shots and reveal their interests.

Strategies include boycotts, "name and shame" campaigns, law suits, protests and other "outside" strategies to undermine the often corrupting power and impunity of private institutions like corporations and politically motivated religious institutions on visible power and narratives. Targeting and exposing can provoke others to distance themselves.

2. Strengthen the political leadership and legitimacy of less powerful groups.

Strategies build **power to** through leadership development, organizing, coalition-building, research, and public education efforts.

Contest **SYSTEMS OF POWER**

We expose historically embedded codes and logics that underpin political, economic, and social systems.

Strategies fostering radical imagination; creating decolonizing systems, practices, and models; practicing direct democracy and just relationships; activating regenerative economies and ecological sustainability.

Influence and engage **VISIBLE POWER**

We seek to change the 'who, how, and what' of policy-making – the decision-makers, the transparency and inclusiveness of the process, and the outcomes – so that decision-making is more democratic and accountable, and people's needs and rights are addressed.

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Strategies include advocacy, policy development, demands for accountability, legal action, reforming institutions, securing and enforcing rights, and impact on elections at the local, national, and global levels. The UN and World Bank can be as influential in our contexts as national governments.

Disrupt and redefine INVISIBLE POWER

We work to transform the way people perceive themselves and those around them, and how they envision future possibilities and alternatives.

Strategies include fostering individual and collective critical consciousness, questioning dominant ideologies and norms, healing internalized stigma and fear, cultivating vibrant visions of self and society, challenging negative political narratives to reveal the interests that underlie them, offering contrasting narratives and values to shift public sentiment and debate; investing in new forward-looking agendas and propositions.

Strategy

When we understand the different arenas of **power over**, we can strategize more effectively. Read more in the [JASS Power Matrix](#).

“Part of the strength of JASS is to be able to convene unlikely people to be in one space. So we have people defending land that is affected by extractives and mining. We have unionists, we have LGBTI people. We have sex workers. We have women who sell their farm products in markets. We have HIV positive people. We have possibly every struggle in our context present in the room and using the power framework to actually be able to see how power operates, and where energies are invested in challenging that power – which might not necessarily be good strategic places to invest energies – and to be in conversation about those issues with people in a comradely fashion.”

[Phumi Mtetwa](#), South Africa

Movement-building demands a level of coordination between different groups in order to:

- Create pressure and offer alternatives on the outside of structures of power
- Leveraging allies and tensions on the inside

The [matrix](#) shows some strategies and tactics to engage distinct forms of power.

Narratives

For JASS, political narratives serve the interests of dominant power or, conversely, can be transformative.

Narratives tap into invisible power – the ‘normalized’ ways of thinking about the world, including prejudices and social anxieties – to advance a particular agenda and to delegitimize other ideas and those who dissent. Through the manipulation of fear and use of misinformation, powerful interests seek to confuse and polarize us, silence our demands for justice, and marginalize activists from society. Both these forms of invisible power – internalized and manipulated – operate deep in people’s consciousness, anchored in emotion as well as beliefs, and so they cannot simply be

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challenged at a rational level. The good news is that we too can develop narratives, based on other, shared values such as the desire for belonging and community vs. stark individualism and othering.

Our narrative strategies can be embodied or ‘performed’ or communicated through images and words to expose abuses of power and propose alternatives.

- In 2020 protests, Thai activists drew on popular culture (the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games*) and big rubber ducks to expose the absurdity and tyranny of military rule.
- Hundreds of Chilean women joined in performative flashmobs to critique the complicity of the state in rape and violence against women, and these were shared and replicated across the world.

Powerful, positive slogans invite people to question, resist and change:

- **Caution: Women Crossing the Line** (JASS’ provocative slogan)
- **Black Lives Matter** (anti-racist movement)
- **Choose Love** (successful Irish campaign to repeal a ban on abortion)
- **Love Makes a Family** (LGBT campaigns for equality and inclusion)

Violence / Safety

Those in power use **violence and the threat of violence** to maintain their hold on power and to preserve the inequities that serve their interests. This is just as true in intimate and family relationships as it is economic, social, and political structures where violence and intersectional discrimination (based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality/identity) prevent change.

Unequal power is always contested. And, when we advance in our personal and political work, we can expect a reaction and some form of conflict and backlash. Understanding this helps us to put safety and wellbeing more firmly at the center of our movement-building work and strategies.

Activists unconsciously replicate dominating forms of power in our own organisations, and so we seek to build **transformative power** in the ways we organize and lead – guided by principles of equity, inclusion, solidarity, and liberation. The most critical form of transformative power is **power for** because it defines the values and articulates the inclusive, just world we are seeking.

For more on JASS’ foundational ideas about power, read:

- [A New Weave of People, Power and Politics](#)
- [Making Change Happen 3: Power](#)

For more on safety and protection, read:

- [Power and Protection](#)
- [Our Rights, Our Safety](#)

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IN MANY VOICES

“We need the kind of power that extends to our organisations and movements so that together we are stronger and able to resist. Indeed, our movements are born out of resistance to the forces and forms of power that dominate, subordinate, and oppress and it is this kind of power we equip ourselves to challenge and transform, when we nurture and nourish our organisations and movements through self-care and well-being.”

[Hope Chigudu](#), *Rudo Chigudu: Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul*

“As someone working on human rights of LGBT persons in Uganda, what we usually look at are the visible forces that we see opposing us every day: the old laws and the new laws, the media, the things that we see. And we look of course at the churches and the pastors, but then we forget the invisible forces, the norms, the culture, the issues that inform the everyday person, these invisible forces that hold the power.”

Frank Mugisha, Sexual Minorities Uganda

“The systemic inscription of people in relationships of power and privilege necessitates deep work on the part of movements, to disrupt, dismantle, and heal the resulting social realities, but also to decolonize our minds, imaginations, sense of self, and sense of possibility. This political commitment and work are both part of and are necessary to our liberation.”

[Shereen Essof](#), *JASS*

“Most of us, particularly people like me who come from a legal tradition, see power as a negative construct. And I think it’s important to see power as a more fluid term: it’s about the contestation of power, but it’s also about power being used to create societies that are more sustainable, that are more equitable, that are more just.”

Mandeep Tiwana, Civicus

“Building leadership is a step-by-step process. When we [[PEKKA](#)] start out working with the women they have never seen themselves as decision makers. So we build decision-making in from the beginning. For example, at our first meeting of the new collective, they have to name their group together. This is their first decision outside their family.”

[Nani Zulminarni](#), *PEKKA and JASS*

“Women-only spaces make us strong. We come together and become friends. We understand the problems in our lives. We see how power works, those with power over us and the power within ourselves. We see together that we have the collective power to make change in our lives.”

Linnah, JASS Malawi

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“In the women's sector, in 2005, we concluded that we have five disputed territories: body, land, nature, memory and history. In a 2014 meeting with indigenous peoples, the compañeras added another: worldview. Today I say that there is another disputed territory – the state. If we do not contend for it, they'll continue to make decisions against the common good. I hold that the struggle, the confrontation is our power against theirs, collective power against individual power, power that seeks to build against power that seeks to destroy – that's the dispute. So I assert that there are actually seven contested territories: body, land, nature, memory, history, worldview and the state. We have a lot to do!”

Sandra Moran, Former Deputy in the Guatemalan Congress, feminist, lesbian, drummer, movement builder

“Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, or economic changes. In this sense, power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice.”

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community” 1967

IN GROUPS

Power is an ever-present aspect in our lives and work, so we begin to make sense of it with our own lived experiences of power, not with abstract definitions and frameworks. Power can be an uncomfortable topic because we've all felt and even internalized oppressive forms of power. But using creative methods in a safe space, we can open up personal and collective insights that help us make sense of power.

To understand, build, confront, and transform power, JASS' feminist movement-building toolkit includes these and a variety of activities for groups and resources for further learning.

[Sources of Transforming Power](#)

[Understanding “Power Over”: An Introduction to Power Analysis](#)

[Power Analysis for Strategy](#)

[Mapping Power](#)

Check out more movement-building tools about Power on our [We Rise website](#).

This [Big Idea - POWER](#) - is online on the [JASS](#) (justassociates.org) site.
Created by and for JASS by Pemba Productions.

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JASS Power Matrix

MECHANISMS <i>How power over operates to exclude and privilege</i>	EXAMPLES <i>Power over</i>	RESPONSES AND STRATEGIES	
		<i>Challenge and Resist Power Over</i>	<i>Build and Create Our Own Transformative Power</i>
Visible: Making & Enforcing the Rules Presidents, legislatures, courts, ministries, police, military, United Nations, World Bank, chambers of commerce) Instruments: Policies, laws, constitutions, budgets, regulations, conventions, agreements, and enforcing mechanisms, etc.	Biased laws/policies Decision-making structures that favour the elite and powerful and exclude others Unrepresentative governance bodies Lack of transparency and accountability Laws not upheld/ gap between law and practice	Demand accountability to existing laws and agreements using advocacy, law suits, direct action, petitions, etc Challenge inequitable policies and practices Expose corruption and ties to hidden power Impact elections	Impact Decisions and Governance: Laws, Policy, Judicial and Spending Mobilize community power for accountability Leverage relationships with allies in key positions Engage in legal, political and judicial advocacy Reform institutions Shape policies and practices
Hidden / Shadow: Setting the agenda Political control over what and who is part of decision making Exclusion & delegitimization of others through “unwritten rules”, intimidation, misinformation & co-optation Examples: industry suppression of climate science	Activist leaders are discredited as trouble-makers or outsiders and their issues as elitist, impractical, anti-tradition, etc. (e.g.: LGBT rights / labor rights are ‘special’ interests) Media does not consider these groups’ issues newsworthy	Research and expose hidden power actors and their influence and interests Expose and discredit shadow actors Develop strategies to protect ourselves from threats and backlash	Build Our Own Movement Infrastructure Build collective power of communities Strengthen movement leadership and organization Build strategic alliances Participatory research to legitimize our issues Use alternative media and communications
Invisible: Shaping Meaning, Values & What’s ‘Normal’ Socialization: Cultural norms, values, practices, and customs shape people’s understanding of their needs, rights, roles, and normalize inequities and the status quo Control of information and political narrative to “manufacture consent” and silence dissent Dominant ideologies validate social realities	Socialization/oppression Belief systems (e.g. patriarchy) cause internalization of inferiority, powerlessness, shame, anger, resignation, etc. Dominant ideologies and narratives in popular culture, education and media reinforce bias and inequality, and stifle other ways of thinking. (e.g. Women blame themselves for abuse) Crucial information is misrepresented or withheld	Challenge and disrupt repressive social norms and traditions Question taboos and use of shame/guilt to control Name and expose underlying interests and values driving political narratives Draw attention to contradictions and impacts of invisible power Understand fear as a tool of control and its impact on our bodies	Create Consciousness and Our Own Narrative: Foster critical consciousness, self-esteem and solidarity Amplify non-dominant voices, ideas, views and beliefs Influence and inform public discourse, attitudes and behavior Creatively produce media and forms of cultural intervention Cultivate alternative ideas and practices

The two left-hand columns are adapted from the New Weave (VeneKlasen, Miller 2006) and the two right-hand columns are added by Alexa Bradley, 2018