

all about  
**POWER**

**UNDERSTANDING  
SOCIAL POWER &  
POWER STRUCTURES**



**crea**

Srilatha Batliwala



Primer 1 in CREA's Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation series

When activists try  
to change people's  
lives, or tackle the  
injustices they face,  
we are actually  
trying to change  
**power equations**

# Contents

## ALL ABOUT POWER

Introduction 4

What is it? 12

Where does it operate? 22

Where does it come from? 32

What does it look like? 42

How is it expressed? 52

How does it work? 68

# UNDERSTANDING POWER

4

ALL ABOUT POWER

**Understanding power** in terms of both power structures and power relations is very important for anyone who is an activist working for social change.

5

INTRODUCTION

It is even more important for anyone working on women's rights, gender equality, or the rights of anyone who is marginalized, discriminated or excluded by society because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, nationality, dis/ability, occupation (eg sex workers), location (eg rural, urban) or any other factor.

But 'power' is a very abstract idea, a big and complicated concept. Each of us understand it in our own way, within the context of the issues we work on, the people we work with, what we have read about it, or based on our own experience of power.

The purpose of this primer is to sort out the confusion and help us move to a shared understanding of power, so that all of us who are committed to social and gender justice can build our strategies from a more comprehensive, shared definition and analysis of power as it operates in society, regardless of our specific issues or socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts.

**As an activist and later a scholar, I found myself constantly working with many concepts and social phenomena that were abstract and hard to pin down. Power, democracy, rights, empowerment, equality, discrimination etc. These are all big ideas that mean different things to different people. You can't find it on a bookshelf or in a shop and say, "There it is! That's exactly what democracy (or equality or rights or power or empowerment or discrimination) looks like!" In fact, many of these ideas are easier to identify when they are absent or violated. We know what inequality looks like, what powerlessness feels like, and what a violation of our rights is. So I came up with five core questions that help us to reduce the confusion, the 'cloudiness' of these ideas.**

## 1 WHAT IS IT?

How do we define power? What is social power or power in the context of societies and human relationships? This question helps us arrive at a clearer definition of the concept, idea or phenomenon that we want to understand.

## 2 WHERE IS IT?

Where is social power located and in which locations does it concern us the most? This doesn't mean simply a geographic or political location like a country, city, village or a particular physical place. It could mean the social locations in which it operates (like in the family or community), or the sector or populations we are concerned with (workers, rural women, or in the health, education, or agricultural sector). This question also helps us set some spatial, demographic, or social boundaries to the space within which we wish to understand the concept.

## 3 WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

What are the different faces or forms of power? This helps us describe and analyze the key features and characteristics of the phenomenon that appear within the location we have placed it in.



## 4 WHAT ARE ITS CAUSES OR SOURCES?

What gives rise to power? What are the root causes or factors that create power structures in our societies? What are the mechanisms used to sustain or hold these power structures in place? Answering this is critical to get to the roots of the phenomenon we are trying to understand.

## 5 HOW DOES IT WORK?

How does power operate in society, in shaping how much power different individuals and groups have? How does power determine our place in the social or economic hierarchy? How does power shape us socially, the way we relate to each other or treat each other? How does power shape us psychologically, the way we feel about ourselves and about other people? It is by answering these questions that we can best describe, analyze and understand the dynamic caused by the phenomenon we are grappling with. It helps us identify who is affected by it, in what ways, who gains or loses, how it is operating in society or within the boundaries we have set.

## WHY DOES UNDERSTANDING POWER MORE CLEARLY MATTER?

As activists, we are concerned about the injustice, inequality, marginalization, exclusion, discrimination, stigma, and violence that we see around us. But do we always recognize that power is at the heart of each of these, and at the heart of every social problem? Do we realize that injustice and inequality of every kind is actually an **expression** of power or a **symptom** of power structures? The fact is that power lies at the heart of human relationships and of how societies are organized. So when activists try to change people's lives, or tackle the injustices they face, we are actually trying to change **power equations**.

Most of us recognize and understand power to some extent. But often, we recognize power in its most visible or direct form, but not in other, or more complex forms that it takes. For example, we see that women's lack of economic resources is a cause of their lack of voice in their families, or that social attitudes cause son preference and discrimination against girls. So we launch income generation or micro-credit programs for women, or awareness campaigns on the rights of girls. Then we find that while these have helped to some extent, the basic social attitudes are still in place. Women are earning more but their husbands are controlling their income.

This is because our strategies addressed the **symptoms**, not the **root causes**, of these problems. If we want to change power equations effectively, we have to have a much deeper and clearer understanding of power. This must begin with a greater awareness of the different locations in which power operates, its different faces or forms, and how power structures are constructed and survive. Understanding power in all its dimensions is especially important for women's rights and gender equality activists because the **invisible and ideological dimensions of power** are as important as access to resources in maintaining gender discrimination.

**Answering these questions helps us to find the best ways to influence or change the way power is working in the specific communities or areas or issues where we work. For instance, we can figure out how to change the dynamics of power in a particular context or location, or how to advance and protect the rights of a specific set of people.**

# 1

## WHAT IS POWER?

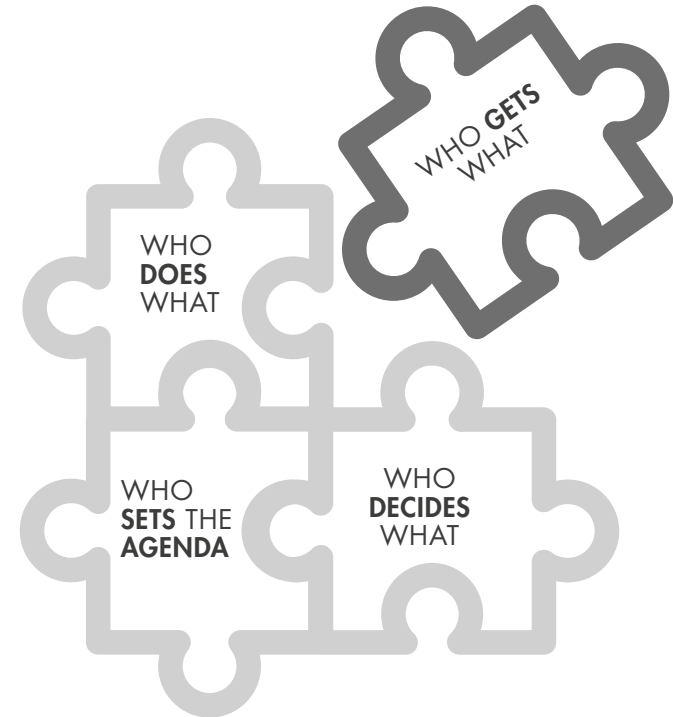
**Social power** is the capacity of different individuals or groups to determine who gets what, who does what, who decides what, and who sets the agenda.



Throughout history, many philosophers, political thinkers and activists in different parts of the world have tried to define and analyze power in society. Some of these definitions were quite simple, and others very complex. Feminist scholars and activists took a big step forward when they realized that social power is not acting only in the larger world, but within our households and in our most intimate, personal relationships.

When we look at all these definitions it becomes clear that for a long time, power was defined mainly as a one-way force, and as a form of control over other people. It was about some individuals or groups in society who had the capacity to control the actions and opportunities of others. Power was also thought to arise primarily from control over **resources**. Those who owned the land, or had more money, for example, had more power than those who were poor or landless. But over time, we have come to understand that power is more complicated than that. In fact, as societies have evolved and changed, so has social power. We realize today that power is about not only **control** but **capacities**, and that while a power structure is based partly on the control of resources, resources don't entirely explain why power differences continue even when we redistribute resources.

A really good way to define power<sup>1</sup> in today's reality is that **POWER** is the capacity of individuals or groups to decide or influence:



<sup>1</sup> With grateful thanks to Aruna Rao and David Kelleher, 2002

## WHO GETS WHAT

This is not only about resources, but about how opportunities, rights, and privileges are distributed in a society. It is easy to identify the gender or social power structure in a society by looking at who owns land, who goes to school, whose illnesses get treated first, or who is allowed the most leisure.

## WHO DOES WHAT

This is about the distribution of labor and work that are essential for societies to survive. Here, it is important to note that power derives not only from the distribution of labor in *productive* work (growing food, working in a factory) that creates goods and services and from which income is earned, but also from what is called *reproductive* work (housework, child care, cooking, fetching water and cooking fuel). Anyone reading this would realize, almost immediately, that both productive and reproductive work are divided on the basis of gender in most societies.

## WHO DECIDES WHAT

This is about the distribution of *decision-making* power in the different spaces in which we live our lives, and in the institutions that govern our societies. Power is at least partly about who has the greatest decision-making power over different aspects of life of *an individual* (who or when to marry, who goes to school), or *household* (what crops to plant, where to live, what to spend on rent, what kind of income-earning work to do), or *village or town* (what to spend the village/town budget on, who can use which well for drinking water, which roads should be repaired, where the toilets or hospital should be located) or *community or caste or ethnic group* (what norms and customs will be enforced, how to solve a conflict) or *country* (national laws, policies, budget allocations).

## WHO SETS THE AGENDA

In today's world, this has become almost the most important aspect of social power. It is about the power to decide what is important and what is not, what can and cannot be discussed, what matters and what does not. Agenda-setting power is reflected, for instance, in how the media decides what is on the front page, and what is on the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> page. Agenda-setting power operates in both private spaces like the family and public spaces like international policy bodies, national governments, and the media; often it operates in hidden or invisible ways.

## WHOSE DECISION-MAKING POWER MATTERS?

Sometimes, the decision-making power of these different institutions and spaces are in conflict or counteract one another. National lawmakers may decide, for instance, that all children must go to school regardless of gender. But the community or caste or tribal or religious council may decide that it is against their customs and culture for girls to go to school after adolescence, or even the head of the family (usually a man or powerful older woman) may decide this. In these contexts, it is the latter's decision-making power that usually prevails, since the girls concerned have to live their daily lives in the household and community. The decision-making power of a national parliament becomes distant and meaningless for the girls affected by these decisions.

## INVISIBLE AGENDA-SETTING POWER

Everyday, newspapers or TV channels report on the 'important' news of the day. We assume that the headlines and news stories we see on the front page or in the news program on TV are the most important events of the previous 24 hours, that these are the issues of national importance. And we also assume that the events reported on page 4 or 5 of the newspaper are less significant. So for example, the Prime Minister's visit to China or the USA or a big sports event is front page news, while the suicides of impoverished farmers, or an attack on a minority or indigenous group is reported on page 5. But this, in fact, is part of the media's agenda-setting power. Why isn't the suicide by farmers or violence against a particular community on the front page? Why is it less important than a politician's foreign visit or a sports event? Someone is shaping our thinking, setting the agenda, and we are barely aware of it.

## INTERNATIONAL

### AGENDA-SETTING POWER

Until 10 or 15 years ago, the main challenge in global development debates was how to eradicate poverty. And then, a shift began to occur. We began to be told that climate change was the most important issue affecting the world. While the poor are certainly affected by climate change, it is not they who are contributing to or aggravating it in any way. But the focus of world leaders and major multilateral institutions and development banks on climate change, and the emphasis on it in the media, has made the huge issue of poverty almost invisible. We hear very little today about the fact that 1.4 billion people in the world live in poverty (on less than \$1.25 a day), and that the vast majority of these people are women and children. The point is not that climate change doesn't matter. It does. But poverty is equally if not more important. The point is that those who have agenda-setting power are able to shape our world view, to influence what we think is important, to set priorities in ways that are often invisible.

## AGENDA-SETTING

### IN THE FAMILY

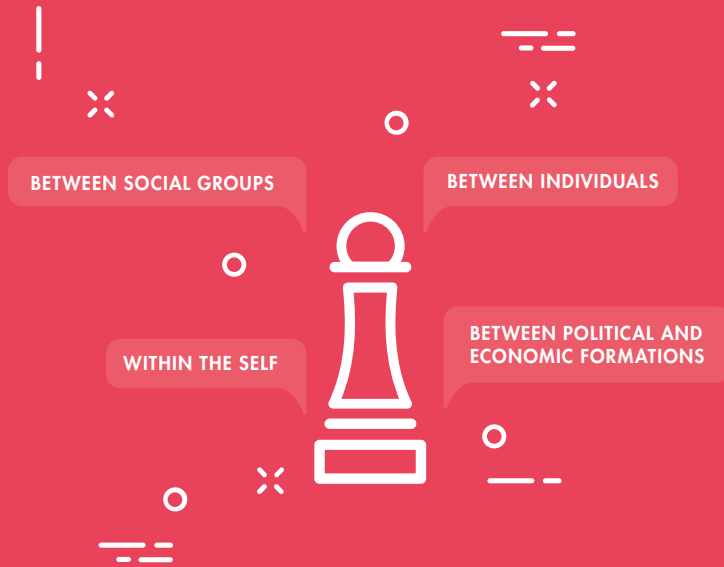
Within the family too, agenda-setting power impacts people's lives. Mala is 16 years old and a very good student. She really wants to finish school and go to medical college. But her parents believe a girl's main goal is marriage and children; in her community, early marriage, arranged by the parents, is the custom. Her parents are worried that if they don't find a suitable husband for her by the time she finishes school, she may not be able to marry at all. Every time Mala brings up the subject of her going to medical school, her mother scolds her. Every conversation concerning Mala is about her marriage, not her further education. Mala is not able to put her own wishes on the family agenda. She has no agenda-setting power.



**WHERE DOES**  
**POWER**  
**OPERATE?**

Social power operates in all the spaces in which people live their lives.

# HOW POWER OPERATES



As social change activists, we are particularly concerned with understanding how power operates in three distinct sets of relationships.

## BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS

Power operates between people, between friends, between co-workers in a workplace, within intimate relationships like marriage and private spaces like the family. We care about power within interpersonal relationships because this is where a great deal of the violence and discrimination that women, or all those who identify as women, experience.

## BETWEEN SOCIAL GROUPS

Power operates between and across groups of people who share an identity of some sort. We see social power operate, for instance, between people of different groups based on gender identities (men, women, transgender people), races, castes, classes, religious beliefs, abilities/disabilities, sexual expressions, locations (villagers, city dwellers), and occupations. We care about power between social groups because this is what creates the systems of social hierarchy, of stigma, exclusion, discrimination, conflict and violence that allow some groups of people to be exploited and others to dominate. These are the social power structures that allocate power, privilege, and rights to some and deny them to others.

## BETWEEN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FORMATIONS

Power operates within different regions of a country, between countries, or groups of countries - between 'developed' and 'developing' countries, between the 'North' and 'South', and in the rise of new alignments such as the 'BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) that have become economically and politically powerful. This includes the emergence of powerful corporate actors who are often beyond the control of any national government, and are able to influence not only national policies in their own favor, but also violate laws meant for the protection of citizens. In political and economic formations we must, in today's world, include terror networks and fundamentalist groups, as well as those who traffic in drugs, people, and weapons. All these have gained great power, including over governments and elected representatives, and over the lives of ordinary people.

## WITHIN THE SELF

We also know that power is located within ourselves. There is no other explanation for why, throughout history, we have seen individuals and groups rise up against injustice and oppression even when the forces confronting them were far more powerful and could easily crush them. We have seen, even within our own families, individual women who tap into some deep source of strength and courage and defy all the traditions and social rules to walk their own path - women who refused to marry, who fought for their right to education, challenged unfair customs (like widow-burning, dowry demands, caste stigmas, silence about sexual violence) and discrimination against them because of their appearance, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, disability etc. No one 'gave' these women the power to do these things; they drew it from within themselves! Each of us has power within, though we may not recognize it or use it.

## THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF POWER

### Hoda's story

It was a Friday morning. Hoda had woken up at 5 am, washed her hands and her polio-twisted feet and kneeled down to say her morning prayers. She then went into the kitchen to light the cooking fire and begin preparing the morning meal for the family. Her mother-in-law came into the kitchen a few minutes later and seeing that Hoda's cooking was half done, she accused her of skipping the morning prayer. She slapped and kicked her, and told her she would go straight to hell. Hoda said nothing and went on with her work.

The cooking done, Hoda sat down to begin her embroidery work. Everyday, Hoda embroidered scarves and shawls and jackets for a local merchant, to supplement the meager earnings of her husband who worked in a local tea shop. But the work was becoming harder. The merchant said the market was slow, and Hoda had to work for many more hours a day, in addition to her housework, to earn the same amount she used to earn 5 years ago. In the evening, after the children returned from school and she gave them some food, Hoda set out with her day's work. She veiled her face and body as was the custom of her community.

When she arrived at the merchant's shop, she was met with the usual taunts. "Ah there she is, the woman in a black sack! The deaf and dumb cripple who neither speaks nor listens. The one with the useless third-rate embroidery that I can barely find a customer for! Show me what pitiful work you have done today!" Hoda silently handed over the dozen scarves she had embroidered the past few days, bent over the work for almost 10 hours a day, her neck and shoulders aching, her fingers growing numb.

The merchant gave the work a cursory glance and then grudgingly handed over even less money than he had paid last week for the same amount of work. "But sir..." Hoda began to protest. "What? What?" shouted the merchant. "Don't like the money? Then take your wretched work and get out!" Hoda knew she was beaten. She was poor, a woman, illiterate, physically disabled, and from a minority community. She was up against not one, but many different power structures working together to keep her down.





## POWER WITHIN

### Shamim's story

The incredible story of Shamim Akhtar tells us a lot about what we can achieve when we use our power within. Shamim is an ordinary woman from a poor family in Islamabad, Pakistan. Shamim is not a social activist, nor did any activist or organization “empower” her. But against all odds, she succeeded in becoming a truck driver, like her late husband.

When Shamim decided to become a truck driver to help support her family, she did not worry about the social stigma, what people would say, harassment by men, or risks to her security. She refused to take no for an answer from the local driving school and they finally had no choice but to admit her and teach her to drive a truck.

Today, she is a truck driver, much respected and honored by the other drivers, who all treat her as an equal, or as a mother or sister. What explanation is there for Shamim's courage and self-confidence except that she carries this sense of her own power – of her power within? Of course we cannot all do such daringly different things like Shamim, but we can all learn to recognize this power within us.



You can listen to Shamim tell her own story at

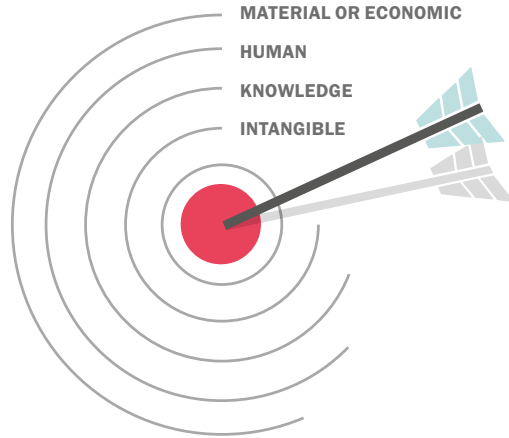
<https://youthkiawaaz.com/2016/10/pakistan-first-woman-truck-driver/>



**WHERE  
DOES POWER  
COME FROM?**

The resources that give rise to social power are not just economic resources.

**Social power arises initially from access and control over resources. For various reasons, some individuals or groups acquire greater command over resources and they become more powerful. But these are not just economic resources. There are in fact at least four kinds of resources that create social power in today's world.**



## MATERIAL OR ECONOMIC RESOURCES

Most of us know what are material or economic resources – land, fixed assets like a house, jewelry, and money. The belief that economic resources are at the root of all social power is quite strong. But it is also quite wrong. Yes, economic resources are a big source of power. But there are less visible resources that are increasingly important sources of power.

## HUMAN RESOURCES

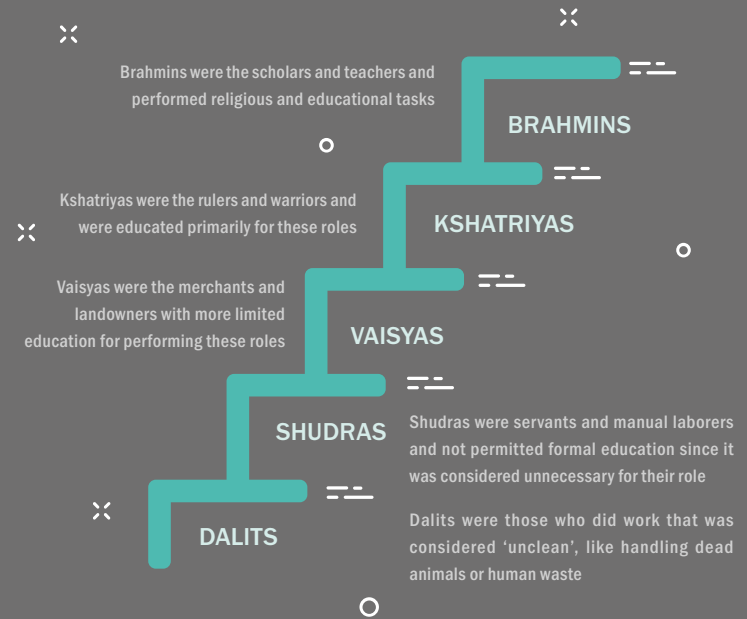
Control over people's bodies and their labor is a major source of social power. This is easy to understand for women; the control of our bodies, including our sexuality and reproductive capacity, often lies in other people's hands. Women cannot make decisions about sex (even saying no to their husbands) or about whether they want to have children or how many children they want. Where our bodies can go, how they look, where they can be, is controlled by others. We do not have the right to move freely or be alone in certain places, we often cannot choose how we dress, and we are generally discouraged from being in places that are dominated by men. Harassment on the streets or in public transport, not going out after dark, not wearing 'revealing' clothes or not covering our faces or bodies appropriately are all considered perfectly normal constraints on women. But these are all in fact forms of control of our bodies and the freedoms those bodies should have.

Similarly, the ability to control the work that we do – our labor - is also an expression of the control of human resources, and a source of power. Individuals and groups with greater power control the labor of others – and this power could be based on gender (men have power over the labor and bodies of women), class, caste, race, ethnicity, nationality etc. The entire caste system in India, for instance, was based on a rigid control over who did what kinds of work, with some forms of work (intellectual work or business) being valued more highly than work that dealt with cleaning or human waste (barbers, washermen, sweepers, leather workers). Those who performed these 'lowly' occupations were treated as 'untouchable', even though the work they did was essential to society.

## Controlling knowledge power to build social power the caste system

The rise and consolidation of the caste system in India is a very clear example of how knowledge power was used to increase social power. The caste system was not based only on occupation, but on determining who could access what kind of knowledge and information, since the two are highly connected. This last group was not even permitted to approach a place of learning (like a school or monastery) or cast their shadow on a book! Shudras and Dalits, even though they formed the majority of the population, were thus dominated by the so-called 'upper' castes by denying them access to any kind of formal learning.

It gets more interesting when it comes to women. While women of the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes were permitted some education, in terms of literacy and learning of religious scripture, this was strictly controlled and limited. And even they were not allowed to touch any holy book or enter a place of learning or worship when they were considered 'unclean' during menstruation and after childbirth. And there was no question, of course, of women of the so-called 'lower' castes – especially Shudra or Dalit women – being allowed to become literate or access formal education of any kind.



There were many uprisings against caste oppression throughout the past thousand years of India's history. One symbolic act of rebellion was people of the oppressed castes forcibly entering schools, temples, and touching religious texts. But till today, despite outlawing caste discrimination and guaranteeing universal education, there are countless atrocities against 'lower caste' Dalit people, or systemic discrimination that persists, like Dalit children being made to sit outside the classroom during lessons.

## KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES

There is an old saying that 'Knowledge is Power'. Knowledge and information have become even greater sources of power in today's world, and are closely related to economic resources. People with education or professional or technical skills, even if they do not come from economically well-to-do backgrounds, can become quite influential and powerful. Even at the grassroots level, a poor person who is literate and can write, has more social power than those who are not – they can get access to information, for instance, about the budget of the village council, about a new scheme being launched by the government, or a new loan program offered by the bank. Access to knowledge can be converted into access to new assets or productive resources, and also a source of higher social standing and influence in the community. Conversely, those with more economic resources have greater access to knowledge and information.

## INTANGIBLE RESOURCES

South Asian feminist economist Naila Kabeer gave us this wonderful concept, pointing out that social power also comes from resources that are often invisible – that we cannot necessarily see or touch, but are very real nonetheless – who you know, social support networks, membership of social movements or unions, and other such 'relational' resources that are very real, but not as visible or concrete as resources like money, land, or labor. The socially powerful use intangible resources to keep others out, but they are also constantly used by marginalized people to gain access to spaces or opportunities that are otherwise denied to them. For example, intangible resources are used to support each other through hard times, to get a job, admission to a school or college, or to meet an important official or politician who would otherwise not admit you to his or her office.

## THE POWER WITHIN

It is essential to repeat here the point made in the earlier section – that **the self is also a source of power**. People are often made to believe they are powerless or inferior because of their location in a social power structure – because of their class, caste, race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, occupation, or other factors. Power within is also an intangible resource, something hard to explain but also impossible for anyone to capture or take away. ‘Empowerment’ is the process through which we try to get in touch with this essential power that we all carry within us. When we connect this inner power with the power that lies within others, we can build change processes that can dismantle and transform seemingly unchangeable power structures!



## Sheela's story

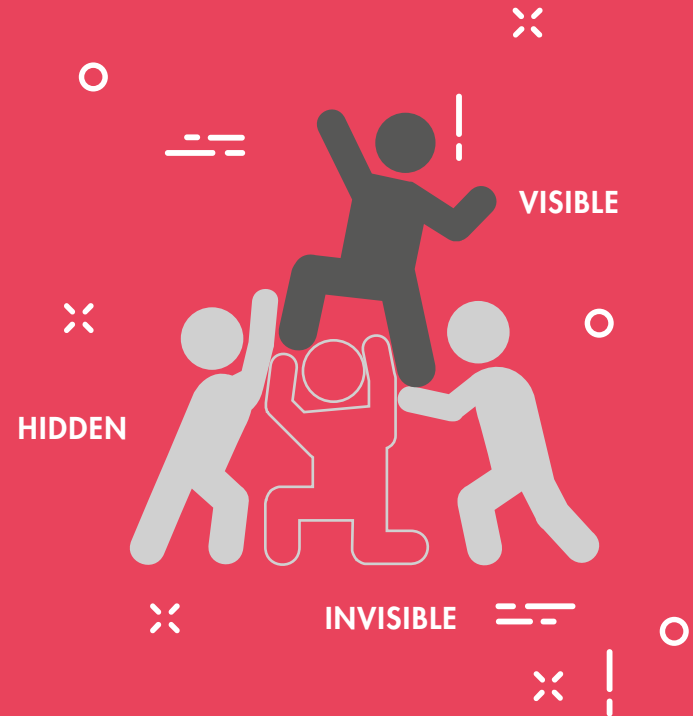
**Sheela was a precocious little girl, intelligent and quite rebellious. She always asked WHY? when she was told that as a girl, she should or shouldn't do something.** Everyone in the family was fed up with this question, except her grandmother. “Let the girl ask – let us hear a sensible answer! Just because women like me have let others keep us down, why should she accept this?” she would say. “Ask,” she told Sheela. “Keep asking. And if you are not satisfied with the answer, don't listen! Do what you think is right!” Grandma told Sheela she must study, become a lawyer or a doctor, get a job and earn her own money. “Keep your own bank account,” she advised Sheela. “Don't give your money to your husband! God did not give you all this intelligence to sit at home cooking and doing donkey work just because you are a girl. Make something of yourself – don't be like me.”

Thanks to her grandmother, Sheela grew up feeling very powerful inside, even when she was in roles with no formal authority, or situations where no one else considered her powerful. Even when someone else was the class representative, the other students would always ask her advice. Even her older cousins would ask her opinion about things they wanted to do. So as a result, when she grew up and started working in different development organizations, her voice was always heard, her opinions always sought, even though she wasn't ‘the boss’, because she radiated a sense of power from within.

# 4

## WHAT DOES POWER LOOK LIKE?

We have all seen power and can usually recognize it when we see it acting on ourselves or others. But these experiences, when power is so easy to see, is only one form - or face - of power. In fact, power has three faces: visible, hidden, and invisible. It is important for us to recognize all the three faces of power if we want to advance social justice.



## THE THREE FACES OF POWER<sup>2</sup>

**Visible or direct power is the form of power that we are most familiar with, and have all experienced, and we see it operate almost every day in both public and private spaces.**

### IN PUBLIC SPACES

Visible power is the capacity to control people's choices, access to resources, voice in decision-making, and frame the rules that regulate societies and govern countries. It is the kind of power that we see in the hands of political leaders, police, military, and the judiciary. It is also held by religious leaders like priests, by the heads of multinational corporations, of clans and tribes, of social movement organizations like trade unions, or the leadership of NGOs and women's organizations. Visible power determines who participates - and who is excluded from - decision-making in the public realm. Decisions such as how much of the national budget will be divided between education, health, and defense; or what percent of the village council's budget will go towards building a road vs repairing the school. This is why the interests of powerful economic and social groups (by virtue of their assets or wealth, position, gender, race, class, ethnicity, or caste, for instance) are able to dominate political systems at the cost of poorer people, even if they are larger in number.

### IN PRIVATE SPACES

In the family, household, or in a marriage, visible or direct power operates in similar ways. But it arises here from social norms and customs that determine who has control over whom, rather than because of any formal authority such as what a government, the police, army, or courts might have. Visible power in the private sphere is deeply gendered and creates hierarchies based on age, marital status, control of private assets, and so forth. A good example of this is the direct power held by male heads of households or older married women (the mother-in-law), the gender division of labor in both housework and caretaking, as well as economically productive work, and decision-making power within the household or family. This visible power dictates, for instance, that women will perform certain household and production tasks that are critical for daily survival, but they will not have the right to equal wages, control over their income, inheritance rights, or even control over their bodies in terms of their mobility, relationships, sexual expression, or reproduction. Visible or direct power also explains phenomena like son preference.

<sup>2</sup> With grateful thanks to Lisa Veneklasen and Valerie Miller, A New Weave of People, Power and Politics. Just Associates (JASS), 2002



## Hidden or indirect power, sometimes called agenda-setting power, is about who influences decisions or sets the agenda behind the scenes, whose voices are heard or who is consulted on a particular issue.

It is the capacity to influence people's opportunities, access to resources and rights indirectly, without giving direct orders or having any formal right to do so, and without being visible. Again, hidden or agenda-setting power operates in both the private and public realms.

### IN THE PUBLIC REALM

We see hidden power operate in the nexus between political leaders and religious leaders, private corporations or drugs or arms traders with whom they have close, but hidden, links. So these actors are able to influence political decisions and policies without any visible power or right to do so. This was the case with Berta Carceras' assassination by private militias in Honduras in collusion with both government and private corporate interests. Donors and foundations similarly exercise hidden power when they decide what are the best routes to social change, or what social change should look like, and therefore indirectly control what social change organizations prioritize and work on – and what they cannot! Hidden power is also evident in how money is allocated in

national budgets, in not only what laws are made but what laws are missing. Until quite recently, domestic violence was considered a 'private matter', and not punishable under any law; there were no laws to punish those guilty of sexual harassment in the workplace. Laws on sexual violence like rape required the victim to prove the crime, not the accused to prove their innocence.

### IN THE PRIVATE REALM

We see hidden power operate in how gender discrimination and other biases are reproduced and enforced within families and clans even if national laws prohibit these in different ways. At home, for instance, women teach their sons and daughters gendered social norms – how a 'good girl' should behave, pushing boys to be tough and brave, strictly controlling the movements and dress of daughters while sons can roam freely, giving sons more and better food and health care etc. This is the hidden power of social norms. It is also evident in how women who have protected the power and privileges of the men of the household enjoy more behind-the-scenes influence and power in family decisions, without the need for formal authority. Any popular local-language serial on television provides us clear glimpses of this kind of indirect power in families.

## Invisible power is in many ways the most problematic of all the faces of power – precisely because it is invisible – until we know how to look for it and where to find it!

And because of this, it is often the most difficult form of power to challenge and confront. Invisible power is the power to shape the way people think and feel about themselves (people's self-image, self-esteem). It is the force that creates social attitudes and biases, and the way our desires and needs are influenced.

**Ideology** is probably the most potent and universal form of invisible power – because ideology means the set of beliefs, ideas, and norms that frame what we believe is right and wrong, 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'natural' and 'unnatural'. Ideology is the invisible power through which we are taught to accept, participate in, support, and perpetuate unjust social systems, and even in our own disempowerment. A good example of this is the ideology of male superiority (or *patriarchal* ideology). This system, and the ideology supporting it, survives not so much because men enforce it, but because *women* are brought up from their earliest childhood to *accept* – not *challenge* – it, even though they are the ones who suffer the discrimination and inequality it creates. In fact, it is women who become loyal soldiers of patriarchy, upholding it so strongly that men don't have to. The ideologies of race (that fair people are superior to dark-skinned people), heteronormativity (that only attraction to the opposite sex is 'normal' or 'natural'), and caste (that some castes are superior to others) are also examples of invisible power because of the way they shape people's sense of self, attitudes, and biases. **Most of the time, though, we don't see ideology operating in any visible way – and that is its invisible power!**

**The media**, marketing and advertising industries are also good examples of invisible power. The news media constantly exercises invisible power by making choices about what issues to highlight and what to ignore, telling us what are the most important issues of the day. What they ignore and don't cover is also important. But by making some issues invisible and others more visible, they are shaping our sense of social, economic and political priorities, and constantly influencing our sense of what is important and not as important, without our being aware of it. The advertising industry works in a similar way. The colorful ads, catchy tunes and images advertising various products subtly shape our desires and create new norms about what is good, glamorous, bad or negative. Without being aware of it, we are manipulated every day to want to be thinner, have fairer skin, look like that model, wear that dress, or buy those shoes, that cream, that phone, that gadget. TV serials work in the same way – they are shaping our sense of what is normal, our values, our language, dress and behavior, without our ever realizing it. And that is invisible power!

**Why is it important to understand the different faces of power?** Because in social change or women's rights work, we often focus on visible power – changing a law, getting women into political office, prosecuting someone who has committed violence. But we look less at the hidden or invisible powers that are operating in the situation, often with greater impact. If we want to create permanent change in power structures – or dismantle them completely – we can succeed only by revealing and bringing down the hidden and invisible forces that are holding them up.



**HOW IS  
POWER  
EXPRESSED?**

We think power is something that has to be changed outside, in the larger society or community – not within ourselves.

## 5 Expressions of Power



POWER OVER  
 POWER TO  
 POWER WITHIN  
 POWER WITH  
 POWER UNDER

**POWER OVER** is the practice of power that we are most familiar with and easily recognize. It is often exercised by people and institutions that have visible power: fathers, mothers, religious and political leaders. It is about who decides what and is expressed in terms of direct or indirect control over other people, deciding their opportunities, choices and actions. Power over is usually about domination. Here are some examples. Mbutu decided he would send his son, not his daughter, to high school, since he could only afford to send one of his two children. The priest instructed his followers not to celebrate the harvest festival because it was not in their holy book. Jana told her daughter to wash clothes instead of playing with her friends. The President of the United States decided to invade Iraq; another President decided not to allow citizens from certain countries to enter the USA.



Record here your own experience of **Power Over**

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~~~~

**POWER TO** is about our capacity to act for ourselves or for others towards any kind of personal, collective or political goal. It is the power to do things – what is sometimes called agency – without seeking someone else’s permission or approval. Here are some examples. Nagamma, a Dalit landless laborer, decided she would no longer follow the custom of bowing to the landowner when he passed by; she hoped other Dalit women would soon do the same. Nsipho decided to set up a stall outside the high school and sell ice cream and trinkets to earn money to attend college.



Record here your own experience of **Power To**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**POWER WITHIN** has already been described in an earlier chapter. It is useful to note, though, that power within can also be connected to the concept of intangible resources. Knowledge, access to information, contacts, social networks can all contribute to increasing our power within.



Record here your own experience of **Power Within**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**POWER WITH** is about collective power. It is the power to confront and challenge injustice by finding, mobilizing and joining hands with others who face the same injustice, or care about the same cause. Power with is actually the most potent expression of power, and has successfully ended some of the world's greatest injustices – like slavery – and toppled even powerful dictatorships and regimes. Here are some examples. The uprising by hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens brought down unpopular leaders and governments in countries like Egypt, Nepal, Brazil, and many others. A few older women in Manipur decided to strip naked and hold a silent protest in front of the security forces that had raped and mutilated one of the women from their community. When environmental activist Berta Carceras was murdered because of her protest against mining operations in Honduras, women's groups organized protests from the village to the UN level, forcing the mining company to withdraw from the area. Every February, millions of women march and dance as part of One Billion Rising, to raise awareness of violence against women.

**It is important to remember, though, that power with has also been used to keep people down. This is the power that we see in action when private corporations and politicians work together to change government policies in order to increase private profits and line the pockets of politicians. This is collective power of another kind that is not interested in greater justice or equality.**



Record here your own experience of **Power With**

Wavy lines indicating a writing area for recording personal experiences.

**POWER UNDER** is a very complex but widespread expression of power, especially by women and in women's organizations and movements. Power under explains why people who have experienced discrimination, abuse, oppression and trauma, often become abusive, authoritarian, and oppressive themselves when they gain power (especially power over).

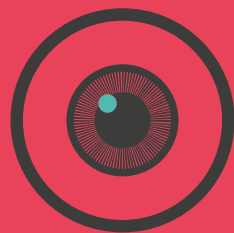


## What is power under?

The psychoanalyst Steven Wineman developed this concept after his work with people who had been traumatized by war, displacement, abuse and violence. He says that power under emerges from 'powerless rage' – the anger and helplessness that remains unhealed even after escaping the situation that created it. Internally, survivors of trauma and violence find it difficult to get out of the habit of feeling they are victims. This continues even when they get out of an oppressive situation, and even after they acquire power themselves (such as when they become organizational leaders or heads of households). They constantly fear they will become victims again, and believe that the only way to avoid this is by being dominant and oppressive to others. They also continue to use behavior patterns that helped them survive earlier: sabotage, subversion, false flattery, gossip etc. People who have not recognized and healed from their traumas or sense of victimhood are unable to hold and exercise power in healthy ways that don't put down or manipulate other people. **They only know two ways to practice power: power over or power under.**

The impact of power under practices in the social change context is even more serious. Many people who are trapped in power under are also trying to build organizations and movements to confront and overcome the injustice they themselves suffered. But without some actual process to recognize and deal with their powerless rage, they unconsciously continue to practice power under. Since the majority of women have faced a lot of discrimination throughout their lives, and a significant number of them have also had to deal with severe abuse and violence, it is not surprising to find that power under is fairly common in the way women express power. So when women create organizations and movements to deal with gendered oppression, they end up producing a lot of power under practices and violating the goals of their mission in the way they use and abuse their own power.





## The Zanzibar Experience

### A story of unhealed powerless rage

An excellent example of the destructiveness of power under is what many older African feminists call the The Zanzibar Experience: a promising meeting that turned into a nightmare of pain, anger, jealousy, and recriminations. In 2003, a group of feminists met in Zanzibar to plan the African Feminist Congress. 35 of them met on a Monday, and soon discovered that assumptions each woman had made about the others' unarticulated individual and organizational politics weren't holding up. In other words, there was a lot of powerless rage playing out in the process. By Thursday, back-biting, hostility, tears, bitterness and chaos reigned. The Congress didn't happen, and the participants learned the difficult lesson that theory and practice don't always go together.

On the positive side, the Zanzibar experience led African feminist leaders to realize that one of the first steps to effective feminist leadership is to acknowledge that we come into the movement with different histories and experiences. Consequently, we need to create basic rules of engagement to govern how we treat each other and how to handle our own destructive tendencies. The African Feminist Charter, the first such code of conduct in the feminist world, was the powerful gift of the Zanzibar debacle.

One of the problems we face as social justice or gender equality activists and advocates is that we think power is something that has to be changed outside, in the larger society or community – not within ourselves. We rarely reflect on our own use and abuse of power. Or we tend to think of ourselves as saints and saviors who are above the misuse of power. But to be real change makers in the world, we must begin with ourselves. We must remember Mahatma Gandhi's advice: "Be the change you seek in the world". We cannot ask others to think and act differently if we are not willing to do so ourselves. We cannot ask others to change their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior if we are not willing to change ourselves. Only by analyzing our own relationship to and with power can we unleash "... [the] power to become the [people] we have not yet been."<sup>3</sup> Meaning, people capable of living justly.

---

<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from a line in Rev. William J. Barber II & Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove' "Subverting Democracy is not Partisan. It is Immoral" in Sojourners <https://sojo.net/articles/subverting-democracy-not-partisan-it-immoral>



**So use this opportunity to begin reflecting on your own relationship with power and ways of using power. The following exercises will help you to:**

- Get in touch with your own earliest experiences of power and how these might have influenced your relationship with power today



- Analyze your own practice of power and what may need to change



You don't have to share the results of these reflections with anyone. But they should help you begin to tackle things you need to change within yourself.

## Analyzing my personal history with power How I relate to power

### STEP 1 THINK BACK!

- Try to remember the first time that you became aware of **power between people**, that some people have more power than others. The incident or experience could have occurred at home, in school, the playground, or elsewhere. It could have been an experience of **power over (direct power)**, or **indirect** or **hidden power**, or **invisible power (agenda-setting power)**. Try to recall what specifically made you aware that **power** was at play in the interaction.



- Now try to remember the first time you became aware of your own power. Was it power over, or hidden power, or even power under? Try to remember what specifically made you aware of your own power in the interaction.

## STEP 2

- Looking back, which of the following positions have you occupied in social power equations? (select as many as apply). Which position have you found yourself in **most often**?
  - **Subjected** or the subject of control (someone exercising power or authority over you). How did you FEEL?
  - **Equivalence**. When you are working together with others, exercising joint authority or control. How did you FEEL?
  - **Control**. When you (individually or with some others) are exercising power over others. How did you FEEL?
  - **Other**. A power equation other than the above. Please explain specifically where you are positioned in the equation, vis-à-vis others, and describe how you FELT.

- 
- From among these various power positions, which one are you **most comfortable in**? In which do you feel you best know what to do, what is expected of you, and how to manage the situation well?

## STEP 3

- How do you think these experiences have influenced the way you react to **the power of others**, those who occupy authority positions in your organization or personal life?
- How do you think these experiences have influenced **the way you use power** in your private life or in your organizational life?
- Ask yourself: **Do I carry powerless rage?** Do I practice 'power under' (pulling others down, always afraid that if I don't dominate, I will be dominated, always feeling angry and afraid of being controlled.)
- If you feel you need to change your own way of practicing power, what kind of support or guidance or process will you need to help you?





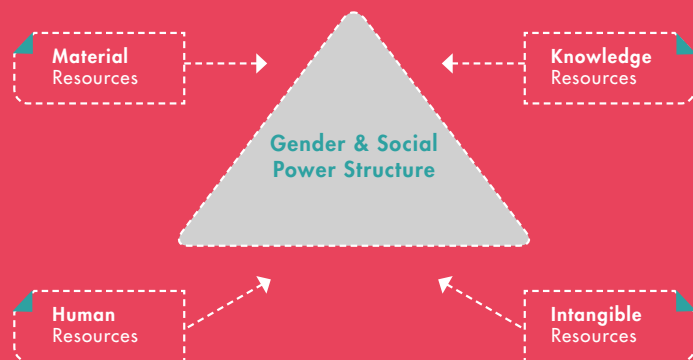
## HOW DOES POWER WORK?

In this final section, we are going to bring together a lot of the concepts we have learned so far into one unified framework that helps us understand how power structures get constructed, operate, and survive.

# How power structures arise

Some individuals/  
groups gain greater  
control over:

Some individuals/  
groups gain greater  
control over:

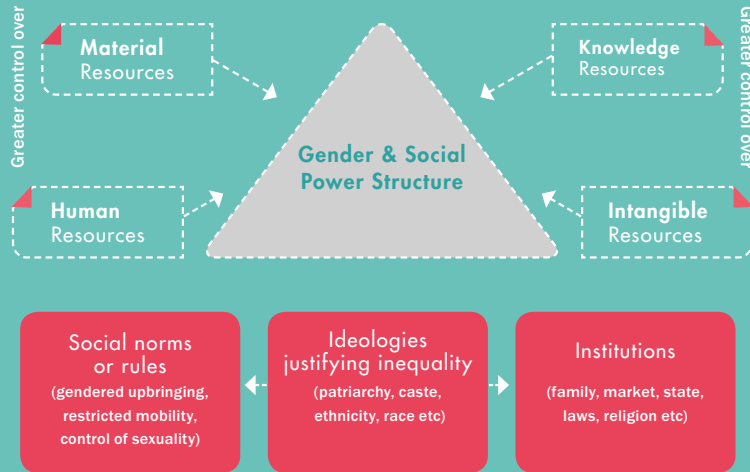


We will use a series of graphics that try to illustrate not only how power structures are built, but more importantly, the mechanisms through which they survive and sustain themselves, even when they are unfair and unequal. This will also help us understand why even those that are acutely oppressed, exploited and discriminated in that power structure accept it, participate in it, and sometimes, even support it.

Let us begin by understanding how power structures get constructed in the first place. As we saw earlier, power structures arise when some individuals or groups of people gain greater access to and control over resources of different kinds, but particularly material resources (land, money) and knowledge resources. This power is then used to control human resources, for example, the labor of people who must work for those in power to earn their livelihood because they do not own land or have financial resources of their own. In power structures based on gender (or what is called patriarchy), even poor men at the bottom of the power structure are more powerful than poor women, because they have control over women's bodies, women's sexuality and reproductive capacity, and women's labor. So not only wealthy men with land and money, but even landless and poor men are able to control one human resource: women's bodies and labor.

Over time, those who have control over material, knowledge and human resources build their own networks of influence and gain control over intangible resources. Intangible resources, however, are also created by those who are in a lower position in the power structure, in order to survive hard times or build their resilience, since they have few other resources to do so. The illustration shows how a power structure looks at this stage of its evolution.

# How power structures sustain themselves



## SUSTAINING AN UNFAIR POWER STRUCTURE

A power structure that has a few privileged elites at the top cannot hope to survive if the large mass of people that are marginalized rise up and overthrow it.

How to ensure that this doesn't happen? How to ensure that the people at the bottom also support – or at least accept - the power structure? Maintaining this power structure, this unequal control over people, knowledge, and material resources thus becomes a priority – especially keeping the less privileged in their place, and preventing them from challenging and overthrowing the structure. This has generally been achieved by developing a very clever and effective set of mechanisms to protect and sustain it! Let us see what they are.

## IDEOLOGY

The first and most important mechanism is **ideology**. This is about building a theory or set of ideas that justify the power structure, no matter how unfair or unequal it is. Over the centuries, we have seen many ideologies created to justify unequal and unjust power structures:

- The ideology of **patriarchy**, that says men are superior to women, that God has decided this (Adam came first, then Eve), or nature (men are bigger and stronger), or biological roles (women give birth to and have to look after children) or evolution have made it this way. In a patriarchal power structure, your job is to do your gendered duty and not question the overall structure or the injustices you face within it.
- The ideology of **race** that claimed white people's superior intelligence and capability and therefore right to dominate dark-skinned people; this ideology maintained that dark skinned races will benefit by submitting to white men's rule.
- The ideology of **caste** that claims your caste in this life is a result of the sins of your past lives, and that you can only move into a higher caste in the next life by quietly doing your caste duty and obeying all the caste rules in this life.

Some of these ideologies have actually been written down. The Brahmin scholar Manu wrote down the rules of caste and gender (among other things) in his *Manu Smriti* or *Manava Dharmasastra* as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. Adolf Hitler wrote his theories of racial superiority in *Mein Kampf*, which led to the mass killing of Jews, gypsies, and other racially 'inferior' people in Germany during the Second World War (1939-1945). Most of us learn ideology not from a book or any formal teaching, but from the rules and ideas that we hear and see practiced in our own families, homes, and communities. We learn to adopt a gender identity based on our sexual organs, our class and caste or ethnic or racial identity from family elders or teachers and others. We are being ideologically trained from our earliest childhood, from before we can question or challenge these ideas, and so we internalize them without conscious awareness.

Ideology is the most powerful tool created to protect a power structure, because it is the mechanism through which everyone is convinced to participate in that oppressive system, rather than toppling it – they are taught to accept their place in society. More importantly, ideological conditioning converts the people most oppressed in that power structure – women, or Dalits, or people of color, or the poor – into its protectors. Women not only teach the rules of gender to their sons and daughters, but police and discipline other women who are challenging those rules. And they are rewarded for doing this – they gain a little more voice and influence in their families because they have been 'good' women protecting male privilege and keeping other women in their place. Ideology is a potent weapon, most of all, because it is a form of invisible power – most of the time, we don't recognize that our acceptance of injustice lies in this deadly root: our ideological conditioning.

## CREATION OF SOCIAL NORMS AND RULES

The second pillar of a power structure is formed when the ideology justifying it is translated into **everyday practices** through the **creation of social norms and rules**. In the case of gender social norms, there are hundreds – about how women should dress, talk, walk, where they should be and shouldn't be, who they can and cannot interact with, how they should behave, what work they should do etc. These rules translate patriarchal ideology about women's place in society, their duties and responsibilities into rules of behavior, division of labor, mobility, appearance, and so forth. Let us take the example of social norms about women's 'modesty'. In many cultures, a 'good woman' is expected to dress in a particular way, avoid contact with men (especially men who are not related to her), not talk back to her husband or elders, and perform her allotted tasks without complaint.

These rules are actually an expression of patriarchal ideology that dictates that women should be subservient and avoid attracting attention from the opposite sex. But social norms are not the same in every culture or for all women – because of the intersecting nature of patriarchal power structures with other social power structures. So women of the working class are not subject to the same rules as middle class or wealthy women. Poor women who must work for the family's survival, and whose labor must be available to other classes (to sow or harvest crops, to do domestic work in well-to-do people's home, to work in garment factories), cannot be subject to the same social norms around mobility and restricted movement, for instance, as middle class women are.

Social norms around women's mobility are a really good context in which to understand the links between power structures, ideologies and norms. Patriarchal power structures control women's bodies partly through controlling their movements and their dress. Women are not supposed to move about alone or wear revealing clothes, especially at night, or go to public places on their own. If they do, they are considered 'fair game' for sexual molestation or rape. If they become victims of this, the public reaction is to blame (1) the women herself, because she shouldn't have gone there, at that time, alone, or dressed in those clothes; (2) the men of her family for failing to 'control' her; and (3) the mother or other women of the family for not 'teaching' her the rules and how to behave 'properly'.





**Think of a social norm that operates in your everyday life (norms are usually expressed as “women should not.....” or “boys should be ....”). See if you can identify the ideology behind this norm, and what power structure the norm is designed to protect.**

One social norm that operates in my life is:

~~~~~

~~~~~

The ideology behind this social norm is:

~~~~~

~~~~~

The power structures this norm helps to protect are:

~~~~~

~~~~~

In countries like India, there are strong social norms of mobility for both women and men of certain caste groups. They are not supposed to enter the temple, use certain wells or water taps ‘reserved’ for the ‘upper’ castes. As mentioned earlier, Dalit children are not supposed to sit inside the classroom with other caste children. All these norms are expressions of caste ideology, and are created to protect the caste power structure.

## SET OF INSTITUTIONS

The third pillar upholding gender and other social and economic power structures is the **set of institutions** that teach and reinforce the social norms and rules and the ideologies behind them.

If you think about it, you will realize that you first learned social rules in your family, probably from your mother. The family is therefore a powerful institution that plays a critical role in reinforcing prevailing social ideologies and norms, by teaching these in both open and subtle ways to children. It is in the family that we learn the rules of gender, caste, class, race, community etc. Religion is another institution that reinforces many power structures and expresses many of the ideologies that justify these through its own beliefs. Almost all religions, for example, reinforce ideas about male superiority and female subordination – that man was made by God to rule the world and conduct its affairs, and women were made to serve man and be his ‘helpmate’.

The market also reinforces patriarchal ideology. By market, we mean the whole set of economic institutions that govern the economic life of a country, including banks, public and private companies, trade and finance institutions, and even the local farmers market where goods are bought and sold! The market reinforces ideological rules in both open and subtle ways, especially patriarchal ideology. For example, in many parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East until just 20 years ago, a woman could not get a loan from a bank without her husband’s or father’s or brother’s approval. In Nepal, women could not start a business in their own name; it had to be registered in the husband’s or

father’s or brother’s name. Women could not get certain kinds of jobs – like being a taxi driver or plumber or mechanic – because these were ‘men’s’ jobs. No matter how competent, women were not given major leadership roles in private companies or public financial institutions.

Education institutions are another important place where we internalize ideological rules and learn to sustain existing power structures. Girls are not allowed to play certain kinds of ‘boys’ sports till today in many countries. Until quite recently, girls found it difficult to get admission to professional courses or technical and scientific learning institutions (medicine, engineering, computer science, scientific research). There are many studies from around the world that show that even when girls are better academically than boys, including in subjects like mathematics and the physical sciences, they begin to underperform after a certain age (usually after 12 or 13) because they subconsciously feel these are ‘male subjects’ or that they should not make the boys look weak. It is only in recent times that these trends are changing, but with some unexpected ideological resistance.

## Too many girls qualifying for medical college admission: What shall we do?

A famous private medical college in India had always encouraged women to apply for admission. They had a very tough, challenging entrance examination. So from a thousand students seeking admission, only around 300 would pass the exam, and the college would choose just 100 of these for admission. Around the year 2000, the percentage of girls doing the exam and qualifying for admission was around 40%. But soon after, as medicine became a very popular career option for girls who were strong in the sciences, many more young women began writing the entrance exam and qualifying for admission.

Suddenly, the college was faced with a 'dilemma': for the first time, more than 60% of those who passed the entrance exam were young women. The admission committee was thrown into confusion. How could they have an unbalanced sex ratio among their students? How could they have a student body with more girls than boys? So despite the statistics, they admitted only 50% girls and kept the other 50% of seats for male students. This was considered by the college authorities to be a 'fair' solution.

Isn't it interesting that for most of the nearly 70 years that the college existed, they had 100%, 90%, 80%, 70% young men in their student body, and this was not considered 'unbalanced'? Why was it a worry only when the percentage of women students threatened to exceed the percentage of men?

## THE STATE

Finally, the state – comprising the government, the judiciary, the law enforcement machinery and the administrative machinery – is a major institution through which dominant power structures are indirectly protected, and where the ideologies that protect those power structures are reproduced. But the state can also be an institution that attempts to *change* these power structures and ideologies as well. There are many examples of how the state and its agencies directly or indirectly support power structures, especially when it comes to gender rules.

For instance, gender and other social biases can be seen very clearly in the laws of the land. In most countries, for example, the rape victim, not the accused, has to prove the crime happened. The rules of evidence and procedure in cases involving sexual assault are not at all gender sensitive, conveying the message that if you are shameless enough to report something as dishonorable as rape, then you deserve to be treated ruthlessly. This reproduces patriarchal notions that a woman was sexually violated because she wasn't obeying prevailing rules of dress, movements, behavior, or 'her men' failed to protect her 'honor'. But even other laws and policies reflect how deeply gender biases are embedded. Whenever governments launch 'land for the landless' or 'land for the tiller' or other social or economic welfare schemes, it is inevitably the male 'head of household' in whose name land is given. This has happened even in the case of matrilineal communities where women were always landowners.

In many contexts, even where very progressive laws have been made to protect women's rights or advance gender equality, the people in charge of *implementing these laws* have very patriarchal attitudes, or insert their personal beliefs and biases in ways that contradict the values behind the law. Women taking legal action to get divorce or fight domestic violence or wife beating or prosecute offenders who committed sexual assault, face the ideological anger of those who are supposed to defend them. Police officers and judges are often the first people to scold the woman for 'shaming' her husband or family by making use of such laws.

In a lot of ways, these institutions are not operating separately, but in collusion with each other, to perpetuate patriarchal, feudal or racial ideological beliefs and norms. The government and private companies, for instance, sometimes work together to dispossess indigenous people of their land in order to promote high-profit mining operations or set up expensive power plants. In many countries, the state and religious leaders are acting in collusion to promote laws and policies that violate the rights of women, religious minorities, or sexual minorities. So we need to see the pillar called 'institutions' as one cohesive force operating to support an existing power structure, although there are always individuals and elements within these institutions that try to change their direction and make them align with social and gender justice goals.



# The Role of Fear and Violence



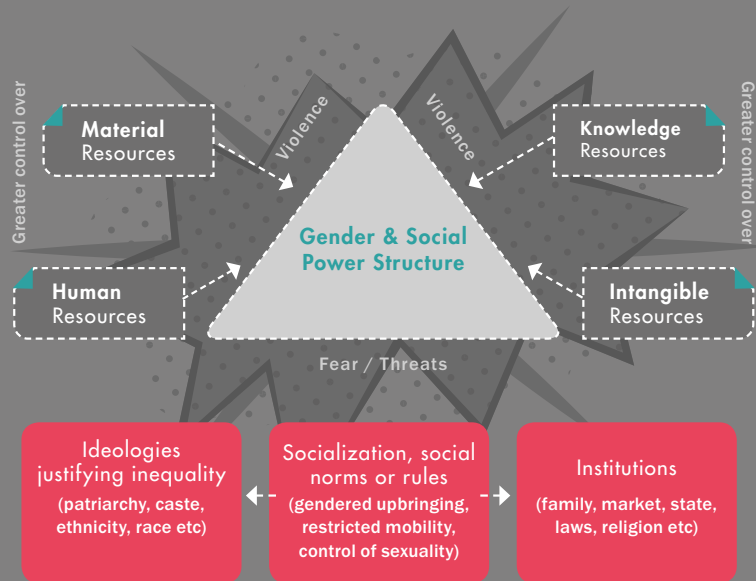
It is interesting that most of us who work on women's rights or gender equality believe that fear and violence – especially violence – is one of the primary weapons used to preserve male privilege and power, and to keep women down.

But now that we have seen the role of ideology, we know it is a far more powerful tool for protecting patriarchal and other social and economic power structures. In fact, it is a far more *efficient* tool than violence, which is messy and requires constant assertion.

On the other hand, we know that any oppressive power structure is always going to be challenged and resisted, at least by some people. There are always going to be those who refuse to accept their position in society, or refuse to obey the social norms and rules created to keep them in their place. Throughout history, women have resisted patriarchal rules. Throughout history, oppressed races, classes, castes, ethnic groups have resisted the structures that marginalized them. And today, we see more and more groups like LGBT, disabled people, or sex workers fighting back against the stigma, discrimination and exclusion they face. When this resistance begins to threaten the dominant power structures and the elites that control them, and the weapons of ideology and social rules have failed to control this resistance, then violence is used to push back the threat. In the case of women, in fact, it is often simply *fear* or *the threat of violence*, rather than actual violence itself, that keeps us from breaking social rules – the fear of being ostracized if we challenge things too much, the fear of violence or harassment if we dress the wrong way, or go to certain places alone, or at night.

So it is important to realize that violence is *the last resort* of a power structure, not its primary weapon of control. Control of resources, ideology, social norms, and institutions that protect its interests are far more widespread and effective means of control. Which is why it is important for our strategies to address these much more important mechanisms of control, and not focus solely on violence.

# How power structures arise and structures sustain themselves



Yet we all know that violence – not only against women, but other gender identities and sexual orientations that are discriminated against (transgender people, gay and lesbian people) – is on the rise almost everywhere in the world. There is street harassment, rape, domestic violence, acid attacks, online violence and abuse, and much more. But we need to understand this increased violence as a reaction to the huge gains women and other gender minorities have made in the past 50 to 100 years. We have gained equal rights in law, education, employment, political participation. We have fought back against many customs and traditions that violated our bodies and limited our freedoms (against FGM, child marriage, forced marriage, widow persecution, rape and domestic violence). Women have entered the workforce in huge numbers, are becoming economically independent, and resisting discrimination, abuse and violence in all its forms. Most of all, we have challenged notions of masculinity and what a ‘real man’ is, criticizing and challenging the culture of machismo in its myriad expressions. These are all huge threats to male power and privilege (patriarchal power). The rising violence against women and gender minorities has many causes, but is at least partly because of this.

To summarize, power structures arise initially because some people gain greater control over material, human, and other resources. Initially, they may use violence to assert their control, but they soon create the far more efficient mechanism of ideologies that justify this unequal distribution of resources and the inequalities that result. These ideologies are translated into social rules that are taught to everyone from childhood in institutions like the family, school, or religion, so that even the oppressed and discriminated accept the power structure. These social norms are

also reinforced by other institutions like the market, the state and its arms (the legal system, police, administration etc). Fear also keeps most people in their place. But when, despite these mechanisms, some individuals or groups break the rules or challenge the power structure in some direct or indirect way, violence is again used to push back the resistance.

So when we speak of transforming power structures, we have to create strategies that understand and respond to these complex mechanisms that sustain an existing power structure. This means tackling not just visible power, but hidden and invisible power. It means not just working for getting people access and control of resources, but helping them recognize the role of ideology, and their own internalization and acceptance of that ideology and the social norms through which it is expressed. It means challenging the way all the major institutions of society – the family, religion, market, state – reproduce those norms and sustain the power of dominant groups.

This sounds like a lot, like an almost impossible task – but not only can it be done, IT HAS BEEN DONE. Over and over again, all over the world, there have been and are powerful, strong movements, especially women's movements, that have shaken power structures, especially patriarchal power, and made huge gains for women. If they hadn't, you wouldn't be reading this booklet or thinking about how to empower those who are marginalized or voiceless. If you look around you, in your own community, province, or country, there will be many such inspiring stories of movements that created deep change.



Women have always challenged power. Find their stories and hold them close, because in them lies **YOUR** power!

## SRILATHA BATLIWALA

Srilatha Batliwala is Director, Knowledge Building and Feminist Leadership at CREA (Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action), a feminist human rights organization based in New Delhi, India. Her current work focuses on capacity building and mentoring of young women activists in the Global South, and on building new knowledge from the practice and insights of activists working with the most marginalized people.

Prior to CREA, Srilatha worked as Scholar Associate at AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development), as Civil Society Research Fellow at the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations in Harvard University, and as the Civil Society Program Officer at the Ford Foundation. Srilatha has a history of grassroots work in India, where she was involved in building large-scale women's movements that mobilized and empowered thousands of rural and urban women from the poorest communities in Mumbai and in the backward districts of Karnataka state in South India.

Srilatha has published extensively on a range of women's issues, and is best known for her work on women's empowerment. Her most recent publication is a collection of her writings, *Engaging with Empowerment – An Intellectual and Experiential Journey* (Women Unlimited, 2014). She has also served on the governing boards of a number of international and Indian human rights, women's rights and development organizations.

Srilatha lives and works from twin bases in Bangalore and Coonor in the Nilgiri Hills of south India. She prides herself on being an active feminist grandmother to her four grandchildren! She is also trying to model new ways of being an older feminist leader: being a 'grandmother' in the feminist movement and supporting, mentoring, and learning from younger feminist leaders and new movements. When she's not working, she bakes, sews, and watches Netflix.



## CREA

Founded in 2000, CREA is **a feminist human rights organization** based in New Delhi, India. It is one of the few international women's rights organizations based in the global South and led by Southern feminists, which works at the grassroots, national, regional and international levels.

CREA envisions **a more just and peaceful world**, where everyone lives with dignity, respect and equality. CREA builds feminist leadership, advances women's human rights, and expands sexual and reproductive freedoms for all people.

