



# Defining Power and its Sources

**Overview:** This activity is designed to introduce the concept of power by exploring people's existing ideas of power, generating a common definition and beginning to think about different kinds and sources of power. This is a quick way to begin to explore participants' views of power.

**Purpose:** Power is crucial to movement building and social change yet we often find talking about it uncomfortable, confusing or have a negative feeling about power given our experiences. In order to create change, we need to develop the ability to think clearly about power, how it affects us in different ways and begin exploring how we also have power. It is a good way to begin to get existing ideas and fears about power out on the table and to generate common language and a basic understanding of power.

**Time:** 60 – 75 minutes

**Materials:**

- 5-6 different colours of paper cut in half or cards (a few for each participant)
- Flip chart
- Markers
- Masking tape

**Credit:** Developed by JASS over many years

**Process:**

## Part 1- Defining Power

***In plenary:***

- Hand out small pieces of colored paper to the participants (two or three per person).
- Ask: *When you hear the word "power," what is the first word or expression that comes to mind?*
- Have everyone write one or two words that come to their mind when they think of "power".





- Find a space to put all the words on the floor so everyone can see them and invite participants to stand in a circle around the words if space allows. With the help of the group, cluster the words (similar ones together).
- Facilitate a discussion about what emerges from the clustering (e.g. We have a lot of negative associations with power which reflects how we often experience oppressive power or *power over* in our lives). Notice how some are also positive as they speak to power as ability and possibility.
- Have someone read the Martin Luther King quote (below) and have it written up on a flip chart.
- Invite reflections about this very basic definition of power - whether power is oppressive or transformative depends on its purpose and how we use it. Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. Part of our challenge is to learn how to use our own power in new and transformative ways.
- Have volunteers read the other definitions of power (also below) and ask for comments. What do these add to our understanding of power?
- Summarize, emphasizing that power can be used to oppress or to transform injustices.

## Part 2 – Identifying Sources of Power

What are various sources of power? Pass out the cartoon drawings attached (or use your own).

**In pairs:** Have participants discuss:

- What kinds of power are depicted in each drawing?
- What other kinds of power can you think of?
- How does each kind of power impact communities?

**In plenary:**

- What are the main sources of power?
- What are potential sources of power for you as a community activist and your community?

**Facilitator Note:** Common responses to “Sources of Power”: violence, money, abuse, threats and fear, position, knowledge and information, influence, control of decisions. Common responses to “Alternative Sources”: persistence, information, numbers and standing together, our own knowledge and experiences, commitment, courage, organization, etc.

**Closing:** Affirm that none of us are powerless, and that we need to understand our own power, as well as that used against us, to make change.



## Definitions of Power

“**Power** properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change.” - Martin Luther King; US Civil Rights leader

“A really good way to define power in today’s reality is that **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 with Gender at Work

“**Power** can be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exercised by different sections of society. The control of these resources becomes a source of individual and social power...The extent of power of an individual or group is correlated to how many different kinds of resources they can access and control. Different degrees of power are sustained and perpetuated through social divisions such as gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, north-south; and through institutions such as the family, religion, education, media, law, etc. There is a continuous process of resistance and challenge by less powerful and marginalised sections of society, resulting in various degrees of change in the structures of power. When these challenges become strong and extensive enough, they can result in the total transformation of a power structure.” - Srilatha Batliwala (from JASS’s Making Change Happen 3)

“*Power* is a **RELATIONSHIP** between persons, social classes, genders, ethnic groups, generations, territories, states, and institutions, often one in which some are dominate and others are subordinate; it is also a relationship in which resistance, confrontation, transgression and negotiation arise. These relationships can give rise to upheavals and breakdowns as people seek to change the relationships of power toward relationships of equality and a world without discrimination or subordination - A transformative relationship.” – Malena deMontis, JASS Meso

“[P]ower is relational, dynamic and multidimensional, changing according to context, circumstance and interest. Its expressions and forms can range from domination and resistance to collaboration and transformation.” - Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, JASS

Handout: Cartoons

