3 Power and Empowerment

"…many leaders understand power negatively, as being control and domination; something that cannot be shared without shaking its centre, rather than seeing it in a positive light as something that enables …"

Zimbabwean 1999[1]

"Martin Luther King, Jr. defined power as the ability to achieve a purpose. Whether or not it is good or bad depends on the purpose."

Grassroots Policy Project, 2001[2]

Power is an integral dynamic of politics. Defining, analyzing, and building power is a vital and continual part of citizen-centered advocacy. Yet, power turns out to be one of the more uncomfortable and difficult topics to address in our work.

Power can seem especially monolithic and impenetrable for people who have lived under regimes that deny or repress citizen participation. Our experience has shown that people engaging in politics for the first time, and even more seasoned activists, often see power as sinister and unchanging. Such a one dimensional perspective can paralyze effective analysis and action. In reality, power is both dynamic and multidimensional, changing according to context, circumstance and interest. Its expressions and forms can range from domination and resistance to collaboration and transformation. This is good news for advocates whose strategies depend upon new opportunities and openings in the practice and structures of power.

However, programs promoting advocacy and democracy too rarely incorporate an understanding of underlying power relationships and interests despite the importance that analysts place on these dynamics. The failure to deal with the complexities of power can lead to missed opportunities and poor strategic choices. Worse, it can be risky and counterproductive not only for advocates, but also for donors and others promoting development and democracy. (See box on next page.) Experts and practitioners in the fields of conflict resolution and democracy-building increasingly stress the importance of incorporating power into their analysis and actions. (See *Power, Advocacy, and Conflict* on page 46.)

In this chapter, we attempt to demystify and reveal the many faces of power. We look at power as an individual, collective, and political force that can either undermine or empower citizens and their organizations. It is a force that alternatively can facilitate, hasten, or halt the process of change promoted through advocacy. For this discussion we draw on practical experience and theory, particularly related to poverty and women's rights where power has been analyzed from the vantage point of subordination and discrimination.

While this chapter focuses on defining power, in Part Two we offer a variety of tools and frameworks for mapping and analyzing power and interests.

Facilitator's Note

Understanding power involves both personal and political analysis of institutions and values. Since values reflect strongly held beliefs, analyzing them requires sensitivity. For this reason, exercises that deal with these issues are best conducted in an environment where participants feel comfortable and secure with each other.

The Missing Link of Power

In examining US democracy initiatives abroad, Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace emphasizes what he calls "the missing link of power" as one key factor undermining change efforts. Giving short shrift to structures of power and interests, he points out, has led to program failures in many cases, from efforts of judicial reform to campaigns for legislative change.

> "… aid providers responding to the lack of formal justice in a country assess the judicial system, for example, and conclude that it falls short because cases move too slowly, judges are poorly trained and lack up-to-date legal materials, the infrastructure is woefully inadequate, and so on. The aid providers then prescribe remedies on this basis: reform of court administration, training and legal materials for judges, equipment for courtrooms, and the like. What they tend not to ask is why the judiciary is in a lamentable state, whose interests its weakness serves, and whose interests would be threatened or bolstered by reforms. The assistance may temporarily alleviate some of the symptoms, but the underlying systemic pathologies remain."

To address this problem, Carothers poses one of the major challenges we attempt to address in this Guide -- how to incorporate an analysis of interests and power relationships into our strategies.

> "Some democracy promoters cling to what one critic calls the 'Walt Disney view of democratization' in which the endings are always happy and no one ever gets hurt. They have trouble moving toward a grittier world view, one that does not assume entrenched concentration of political power will melt away. . .
>
> ". . . many projects reflect little hard thinking on these points, and rely on simplistic ideas about institutional modeling – teaching judges and politicians that corruption is bad will substantially cut bribe taking, teaching citizens about the importance of voting will overcome their political apathy, and on and on.
>
> "As democracy aid providers pay more heed to the interests and power relationships . . . they should not expect to find cut-and-dried answers. . . Factoring in the relevant interests and power relationships requires, above all, close, thoughtful analysis of the local scene . . . A focus on interests and power inevitably pushes aid providers to think more about process than endpoint, about how to stimulate and help along processes of sociopolitical change rather than merely to reproduce [institutional] forms . . . Truly grappling with the local context shows providers that aid efforts are likely to be much slower, difficult, and risky."

Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999.

Looking at Power

Getting to understand power may begin as a personal process where the simple act of talking about it openly can help people grapple with the controversy and discomfort surrounding the topic. The following two exercises help to initiate reflection about power by focusing on personal assumptions and encounters with power. They encourage people to identify their own sources of power as a way to challenge narrow views of power and powerlessness. These exercises can be followed by the *Power Flower* exercise in Chapter 6 which looks at identity and public power more deeply.

Basic Concepts of Power

"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. Power is dynamic and relational, rather than absolute — it is exercised in the social, economic and political relations between individuals and groups. It is also unequally distributed – some individuals and groups having greater control over the sources of power and others having little or no control. The extent of power of an individual or group is correlated to how many different kinds of resources they can access and control.

Different degrees of power are sustained and perpetuated through social divisions such as gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, north-south; and through institutions such as the family, religion, education, media, the law, etc. Our understanding of power would be incomplete, unless we recognise its partner, ideology. Ideology is a complex structure of beliefs, values, attitudes, and ways of perceiving and analyzing social reality. Ideologies are widely disseminated and enforced through social, economic, political and religious institutions and structures such as the family, education system, religion, the media, the economy, and the state, with its administrative, legislative and military wings. The economic, political, legal and judicial institutions and structures set up and mediated by the state tend to reinforce the dominant ideology and the power of the dominant groups within it, even though their stated objectives and policies may be superficially egalitarian. While ideology does a far more effective job of sustaining an unequal power structure than crude, overt coercion and domination, we should not forget that it is always being reinforced by the threat of force, should anyone seek to rebel against the dominant system.

But neither power, ideology, nor the state are static or monolithic. There is a continuous process of resistance and challenge by the less powerful and marginalised sections of society, resulting in various degrees of change in the structure of power. When these challenges become strong and extensive enough, they can result in the total transformation of a power structure."

From the Asia Pacific Bureau of Adult Education's (ASPBAE) 1993 study undertaken with FAO's Freedom from Hunger campaign as quoted in *Women's Empowerment in South Asia – Concepts and Practices*, Srilatha Batliwala, ASPBAE/FAO (Draft), 1993.

3 Exercise: Identifying the Sources and Uses of Power

Purpose

To introduce the concept of power and to encourage people to recognize their own power and potential. This is a quick way to begin to explore participants' views of power. If you have more time, the next exercise allows for more in-depth analysis.

Process

(Time: 30 minutes to 1½ hours)

1. Hand out copies of the illustrations on the next page with the following questions:
   - Identify and describe the kind of power depicted in each of the four drawings.
   - Expain the impact of this kind of power on citizen participation.

2. A brainstorming discussion is guided by two questions. Responses are recorded on flipchart paper.
   - What are the main sources of power?
   - What are your potential sources of power as a citizen?

> "To effectively influence the power structures of government or corporate interest, one needs other sources of power. In the context of public advocacy, six major sources are:
> - The power of people and citizens' mobilization
> - The power of information and knowledge
> - The power of constitutional guarantees
> - The power of direct grassroots experience and networking
> - The power of solidarity
> - The power of moral convictions"
>
> *John Samuel, National Centre for Advocacy Studies, India*

Follow-up

This exercise focuses on the visible aspects of power. The next exercise, *Feeling Power and Powerlessness*, looks at the more invisible psychological, emotional, and social aspects of power.

Common Responses for "Sources of Power"
- control
- money and wealth
- position
- knowledge and information
- might and force
- abuse
- capacity to inspire fear

Common Responses for "Alternative Sources"
- persistence
- information
- being just
- organization and planning
- our own knowledge
- our own experience
- commitment
- righteousness
- numbers*
- solidarity
- humor

This list combines the responses of activists from 10 different countries.

* The *power of numbers* is, potentially, a huge source of power, but it is often not used effectively. For example, in most countries, women are the majority of voters, but are under-represented in decisionmaking and have less access to public resources. Mobilizing alternative sources of power requires ways of challenging an ingrained sense of powerlessness.

3 Exercise: Feeling Power and Powerlessness

Purpose

To explore personal experiences with power and powerlessness and what they tell us about alternative sources of political power.

Process

(Time: 2 hours)

1. Give each participant a large sheet of paper and markers.

2. Ask them to draw a line down the middle. On one side they draw a situation that has made them feel powerful. On the other side they draw a situation that has made them feel powerless.

3. Ask each person to explain their drawing.

Many people do not feel confident about drawing. They may ask if they can just write the answer using words. Explain that drawing is often a more effective way of reflecting about and expressing emotions. Having to think creatively about how to express yourself often makes you think about experiences vividly with fresh eyes. Encourage the most resistent people to use symbols and stick figures. The quality of the artwork is not important.

4. After all of the drawings have been explained, copy your notes onto newsprint. Point out that the words people use to describe experiences with power illustrate their discomfort. For example, associations with control, violence, abuse, force, and money often make people feel ashamed. Highlight the individual stories that demonstrate that people are not completely powerless. For example, they have power through organizing, working together, problem-solving, getting information, or doing what is ethical.

Personal experiences of feeling powerful or powerless can encourage participants to use empowering methodologies. Advocates often believe that they must speak for the communities with whom they work and solve their problems. Through this exercise, they can see that it is more helpful to offer skills and information, and so enable communities to solve their own problems.

Listen for the feelings and actions that embody the emotional, spiritual, and psychological elements of power or powerlessness. Jot these down on a piece of paper. Here are examples from workshops.

Common Responses for "Situations that make you feel Powerful"

- overcoming fear or a feeling of ignorance by pushing myself to take action
- recognition by others of what I did
- finding a creative way to solve a problem that seemed unsolvable
- being able to handle a difficult assignment
- succeeding as a leader
- caring for and helping others
- joining a group with other people who have the same problem
- capacity to inspire fear

Common Responses for "Situations that make you feel Powerless"

- disrespect and putdowns
- being ignored
- being stereotyped and denied opportunities to prove oneself
- lack of control
- loss
- ignorance
- shame
- isolation

The list combines responses from several countries.

Expressions of Power

To get a handle on the diverse sources and expressions of power – both positive and negative – the following distinctions about power can be useful.

Power Over

The most commonly recognized form of power, *power over,* has many negative associations for people, such as repression, force, coercion, discrimination, corruption, and abuse.[3] Power is seen as a win-lose kind of relationship. Having power involves taking it from someone else, and then using it to dominate and prevent others from gaining it. In politics, those who control resources and decisionmaking have *power over* those without. When people are denied access to important resources like land, healthcare, and jobs *power over* perpetuates inequality, injustice, and poverty.

In the absence of alternative models and relationships, people repeat the *power over* pattern in their personal relationships, communities, and institutions. This is also true of people who come from a marginalized or "powerless" group. When they gain power in leadership positions, they sometimes "imitate the oppressor." For this reason, advocates cannot expect that the experience of being excluded prepares people to become democratic leaders. New forms of leadership and decisionmaking must be explicitly defined, taught, and rewarded in order to promote more democratic forms of power.

Practitioners and academics have searched for more collaborative ways of exercising and using power. Three alternatives – *power with, power to,* and *power within* – offer positive ways of expressing power that create the possibility of forming more equitable relationships. By affirming people's capacity to act creatively, they provide some basic principles for constructing empowering strategies.

Power With

Power with has to do with finding common ground among different interests and building collective strength. Based on mutual support, solidarity, and collaboration, *power with* multiplies individual talents and knowledge. *Power with* can help build bridges across different interests to transform or reduce social conflict and promote equitable relations. Advocacy groups seek allies and build coalitions drawing on the notion of *power with.*

Power To

Power to refers to the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world. When based on mutual support, it opens up the possibilities of joint action, or *power with*. Citizen education and leadership development for advocacy are based on the belief that each individual has the *power to* make a difference.

Power Within

Power within has to do with a person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge; it includes an ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others. *Power within* is the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the common human search for dignity and fulfillment. Many grassroots efforts use individual story telling and reflection to help people affirm personal worth and recognize their *power to* and *power with*. Both these forms of power are referred to as *agency* – the ability to act and change the world – by scholars writing about development and social change.

3 Power, Advocacy, and Conflict

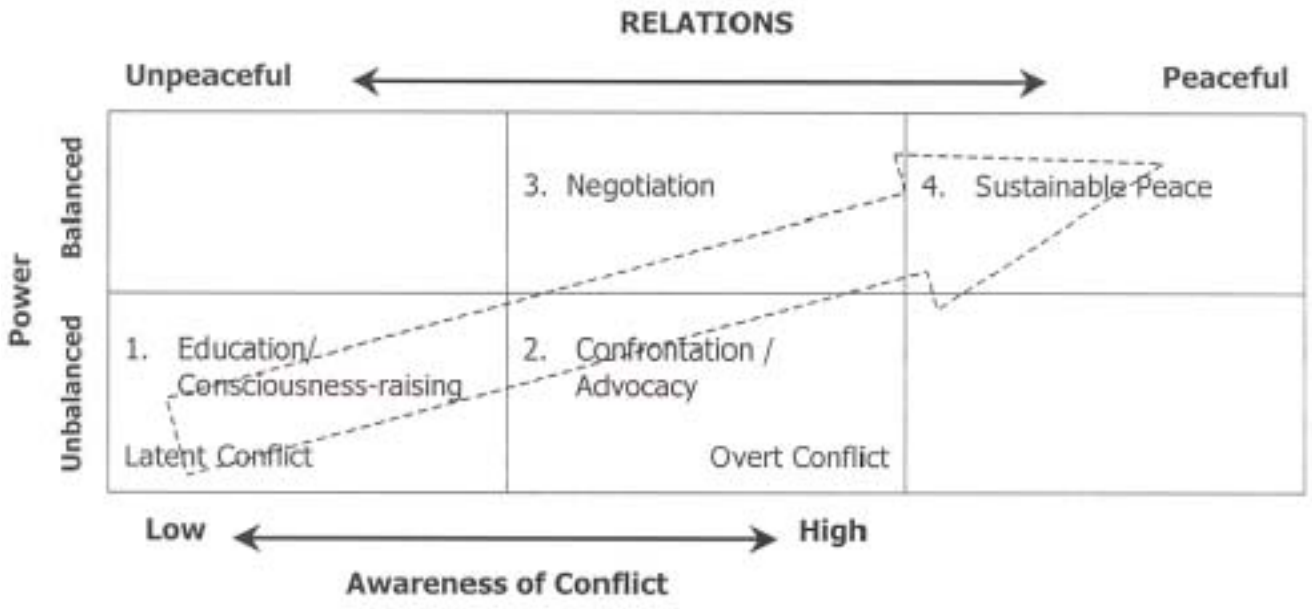
"Power is integral to all conflict . . . practitioners must become aware of their own power, their assumptions about power and the values and goals they bring to conflict situations. They must also explicitly assess how power is operating in the conflictive relationships, evaluate their own role, and seek the appropriate process in conflicts of significant power imbalance.

"In each conflict situation, it is important to ask questions such as: What are the sources of power for those in conflict? Is there a significant power imbalance? Is power being misused or abused? How can the less powerful become more empowered? What intervention is most appropriate?"

Carolyn Shronk-Shenk[4]

Adam Curle, one of the pioneers in conflict resolution, highlights the problems of power in peace-making and emphasizes consciousness-raising, advocacy, and negotiation as critical moments in the process. The following matrix provides a synopsis of his ideas (see also John Paul Lederach). He traces the movement from unpeaceful to peaceful relationships by comparing levels of power with levels of awareness and moments in the process. When a conflict is hidden or latent, education and consciousness-raising help make people aware of the problem and the power imbalances inherent in the situation. (See Chapter 4.)

As people become conscious of a conflict and their own interests, many move to action and confront the problem through advocacy and activism. If successful, the process increases the balance of power and legitimizes their efforts for change. Once inequities have been addressed, and only then, do negotiation and sustainable peace become possible.



Adam Curle's *Framework for Moving to Peaceful Relations in Making Peace,* Tavistock, 1972.
John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures,* Syracuse UP, 1995.

Many Levels of Political Power

What makes political power even more difficult to analyze and confront is the fact that it does not always operate in visible ways. To help activists and advocates navigate power more effectively, we describe three interactive dimensions of *power over* that shape the parameters of political participation and advocacy. These range from the more obvious and visible to those that operate largely unnoticed behind the scenes. We also discuss some of the strategies used to influence and engage these different expressions of power. The less visible dimensions are, of course, more difficult to engage since power tends to be concealed and diffuse, embedded in cultural and social norms and practices.[5]

> "Social norms and institutions are the key obstacles faced by poor women and men as they attempt to eke out a livelihood against the odds. Poor people's experience demonstrates again and again that the informal rules or social norms are deeply embedded in society, and that 'rules in use' override formal rules . . . It is precisely because of the embeddedness of social norms that change in one part of a bureaucratic social system cannot bring about systemic changes . . ."
>
> Deepa Narayan, *Can Anyone Hear Us?*[6]

1. Visible Power: Observable Decision-making[7]

This level includes the visible and definable aspects of political power – the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions, and procedures of decisionmaking. Examples include elections, political parties, laws, legislatures, budgets, corporate policy, by-laws, etc. There are two main ways that visible power discriminates against certain interests and people:

- biased laws and policies that may seem "neutral" but clearly serve one group of people at the expense of others, such as health policies that do not adequately address women's specific needs, or the more obvious form of exclusion, like age and gender requirements for employment;
- closed, corrupt, or unrepresentative decision-making structures that do not adequately involve the voices or interests of the people they are intended to serve.

Citizens and donors naturally place considerable importance on influencing and responding to visible expressions of power, such as electing more women and minorities to office, or reforming discriminatory laws. These are important strategies but are not sufficient to overcome society's unwritten rules and power dynamics that often override the system's formal rules.

Despite the existence of fair laws and decisionmaking structures, politics never occurs on an even playing field. Behind-the-scenes, political, economic, social, and cultural forces operate to shape who gets to sit at the decisionmaking table and whose issues get addressed. The example in the box on the next page, *Visible and Invisible Agendas in Action* illustrates these hidden and invisible dimensions of power.

2. Hidden Power: Setting the Political Agenda

This level of *power over* is less obvious and, hence, more difficult to engage. Certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence by controlling who gets to the decisionmaking table and what gets on the agenda. These dynamics exclude and devalue the concerns and representation of other less powerful groups, such as women and the poor. Excluded groups often point out that they and their issues, such as toxics, land rights, and domestic violence, are both invisible to the society at large and absent from the political agenda. Difficulties in gaining media coverage can further inhibit visibility and legitimacy since media outlets often do not see these groups' issues as "mainstream" or newsworthy.

Visible and Invisible Agendas in Action

The advocacy experience of Zimbabwean women's groups demonstrates the complexities of visible and invisible power dynamics. The groups were concerned about women's inheritence and property rights, as growing numbers of women and children were left destitute when their husbands died due to a social phenomenon commonly called "property grabbing." Immediately after a death, the wife's in-laws would quickly take over and remove the property of the couple, leaving the widow with nothing. In the early 1990s, groups launched an advocacy campaign to reform property laws to give widows basic legal protection against such injustices. They believed that broad public support coupled with the facts about the problem would compel legislators to reform the laws. Unfortunately, the advocates did not fully account for the power of tradition, custom, or society's unwritten laws. They underestimated both the opposition by vested interests and the political sensitivity around the cultural dimensions of the issue.

The traditional authorities were firmly against the reform. They felt that, by challenging customary law, the new law would further erode their control over their communities. These authorities were also the President's main source of political support in rural areas and had considerable influence. Many other politicians opposed the reforms as a western feminist import that would destroy the African family. The reform never had a chance.

The advocates took their battle to the High Court. They hoped they could win the case on the grounds that customary practice contradicted the constitution. But they lost there too. While the activists navigated the formal procedures of public politics with skill, the invisible power of culture and vested interests defeated them.

In some contexts, powerful political and economic interests attempt to discredit disadvantaged groups, making it impossible for citizens without resources or affiliation to get their voices heard, even if they represent a substantial population. In some cases, leaders are vilified or even killed. By preventing important voices and issues from getting a fair public hearing, policymaking can be skewed to benefit a few at the expense of the majority.

Advocacy groups challenge this level of *power over* by creating broad-based constituencies for policy and institutional reform that reduce systemic discrimination. In building strong and accountable organizations they tap their *power with* others to get to the table. They produce and disseminate analysis and alternative perspectives about their issues and politics. They also attempt to develop ties with powerful allies to increase their political voice and presence. These strategies have been pursued effectively by environmental, AIDS, women's and rights groups, among others.

3. Invisible Power: Shaping Meaning

Probably the most insidious of the three dimensions of power, this third level operates in ways that render competing interests and problems invisible. Significant problems and issues are not only kept from the decision-making table, but also from the minds and consciousness of the different players involved, even those directly affected by the problem. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power shapes people's beliefs, sense of self, and acceptance of their own superiority or inferiority. In many societies, for example, men and women have been taught to accept their respective roles and relationships as natural. Socialized consent prevents people from questioning or envisioning any possibilities for changing these relationships or addressing injustices.

Processes of socialization, culture, and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequality by

defining what is normal, acceptable, and safe. Schools, the media, corporate interests, and religious and political leaders, among other influential forces, shape values and norms that prevent change. In many countries values and prejudices regarding women and racial minorities are evident in and reinforced by stories and images that appear in school books, ads, and the press. They perpetuate negative stereotypes that limit the roles and aspirations of these groups. In turn, women and minorities often internalize such views and blame themselves for their predicament.

Paradoxically this kind of *power over* can also foster resistance and action in people when they come together around common issues. People can gain a sense of the *power within* themselves and *with* others to change the conditions that hurt and limit them. For example, women's consciousness-raising and education efforts have fueled advocacy to change school curriculum and sensitize the media (see Chapter 13, page 246). These collaborative strategies have engaged NGOs, governments and the private sector in reforms aimed at portraying girls and women more positively and ensuring more diverse ethnic representation.

This third level of *power over* also works to make problems invisible by controlling access to information. If people are unaware of a problem, they are unable to make informed choices or participate in public decisions that can contribute to its solution. For example, numerous communities around the world have suffered serious illness or death due to toxic waste. When confronted, those responsible for the pollution have often denied that the substances are dangerous. Yet lawsuits have later revealed that they knew about the potential health impacts but chose to keep them a secret.

For marginalized communities, being denied information can reinforce feelings of powerlessness, ignorance, and self-blame, but it also can spur people to action. In many countries, issue-focused advocacy efforts have sometimes evolved into Right to Know campaigns when governments and other bodies have refused to provide information. To address this dimension of power, NGOs and community groups frequently join with academic institutions or investigative journalists to uncover the nature and scope of a problem.

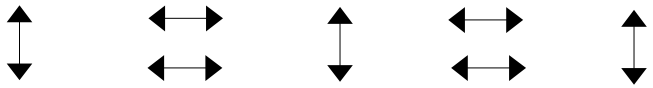
In the Annex, more information and exercises on the dynamics of *power over* are provided for those who want to explore these issues in more detail. We include an analysis of dominant and subordinate behaviors and factors of exclusion and discrimination.

Whatever the context, this level of power can be the most difficult and contentious to deal with. Social values and beliefs are extremely sensitive and personal. In politics, ideology, more than other arenas of conflict, seems to be a battleground with limited compromises. We discuss this in detail in Chapter 15.

The chart on the next page examines the mechanisms of visible, hidden, and invisible power and the kinds of advocacy strategies that can be used to counter them.

Facilitator's Note

Throughout the Guide we present a variety of frameworks. We offer them with certain reservations. Frameworks help condense and synthesize complex information and thus provide people with a quick overview of ideas and relationships. Yet, they also can lead to oversimplification and lose the dynamism and complexities they are trying to represent. In grappling with the questions they raise, you may want to restructure them so they better reflect your circumstances.



More Thoughts on the Public and Private Angles of Political Power

Gender theory adds another perspective for understanding different levels and expressions of power which are applicable to women as well as men. It critiques the focus on *visible* power as the place where all politics takes shape. Practitioners and scholars familiar with the challenges of women's empowerment explain that political power takes shape in three interacting levels of a woman's life. Change will not occur, they argue, unless political strategies look at and address power in the public, private, and intimate realms.

The **public realm of power** refers to the *visible* face of power as it affects women and men in their jobs, employment, public life, legal rights, etc.

The **private realm of power** refers to relationships and roles in families, among friends, sexual partnerships, marriage, etc.

The **intimate realm of power** has to do with one's sense of self, personal confidence, psychology, and relationship to body and health.

For an individual woman, the experience of power and powerlessness will be different, based on race, class, or age, and may even be contradictory in different realms of her life. For example, a woman politician who appears confident in public may accept a subordinate

When Women Exercise Power

"Experience shows that, generally, whenever and wherever women have entered politics and political institutions, one of two things happened:

- they either get co-opted and/or corrupted by the dominant political culture (which also often means distancing themselves from the needs and issues of the mass of women); or,
- if they are unwilling to play by the rules of the game, they are rendered ineffective and marginalized.

"Either way, neither was the cause of women advanced, nor was the nature of politics itself challenged or altered in any meaningful way. There are three main reasons for this, in my view.

- Lack of a critical mass of women in political institutions.
- Lack of linkages between women in politics and women's movements.
- Women's experience of power in the private and public sphere.

"Since women have been denied power in the public domain for millennia, their only experience in the exercise of power is, by and large, in the familial or private sphere. Even in the private domain, however, most women have had to exercise power indirectly, through their influence on the key men of the household. Thus women have been conditioned to uphold male power, and to seek power through their influence on men. They have little experience of joining together with men — much less with other women — in the pursuit of wider social projects, or of using power for a different end.

"Conversely, women's only model for the exercise of power in the public sphere is that created by the patriarchal dominant class and caste. The culture of power which they have witnessed has been that of power over, not power on behalf of or for a larger social good. The model of political power has come to mean amassing wealth and influence for self, community, and party, the dispensing of patronage, and the promotion of narrow interests."

Srilatha Batliwala, *Political Representation and the Women's Movement*, Lecture given in Hyderabad, India, May 1997, under the auspices of the Women and Society Forum of ASMITA.

role in her family; she may even survive abuse in her private relationships while keeping up with the demands and image of her public duties. Throughout the world, it is common for a woman to face the same work demands as her male partner, but be primarily or solely responsible for the maintenance of the home and children. The challenge of AIDS prevention further illustrates some of the contradictions that occur with regard to relations of power in the intimate realm. Many seemingly educated, empowered women and men around the world fail to take measures to protect themselves against the disease despite the knowledge and resources to do so.

Acknowledging these layers and contradictions can be helpful in understanding the tensions generated by empowerment for many women. Political change and advocacy strategies that focus solely on the public realm may overlook some critical challenges facing women who are leaders, active citizens, and public officials when they return to their homes and families. It is from this perspective that women activists argue that good citizenship for women and for men is not solely about public behavior.

The chart below[8] can be used to explore how the three different layers interact with factors of exclusion and discrimination (see the Annex, page 337) to determine the obstacles and opportunities for empowerment.

Analyzing and Navigating the Many Levels of Power

What does this way of classifying power mean for advocacy planning and action? Above all, it means that analysis has to explore many angles and strategies to incorporate activities that address all of the levels of power affecting change. A further challenge is that all levels or forms of power are usually operating simultaneously at any given moment. Frequently, advocacy efforts focus on the more visible aspects of power, but overlook others. This limits their long-term impact.

Most groups are not able to undertake all of the necessary activities to maneuver power dynamics. Different groups bring different strengths and resources to advocacy. Only by building their *power with* others can they create more holistic and effective strategies.

Parts Two and Three of this Guide focus in detail on strategies that deal with all levels of power. In Chapter 10, we discuss a framework for comprehensive advocacy planning that attempts to direct planning to all levels and realms of power. In the next chapter we discuss learning approaches geared to citizen empowerment that draw on the three views of power discussed earlier.

What Is Empowerment?

How can advocacy address the negative forms and results of *power over*? As the previous discussion emphasizes, policy change alone is insufficient for this many- leveled task.

Social justice advocates want their strategies to empower people to stand up for their rights, and help create just, healthy societies. In this way, empowerment is both a strategy and a goal of citizen-centered advocacy. However, like many concepts related to social change, empowerment is a debated topic. Despite the term's popularity, it has multiple and sometimes misleading meanings.

Most of the definitions come from experiences of working with women and poor communities to promote participatory development. These definitions have some common features that are useful for advocacy work. They combine the goals of building confidence with those of eliminating barriers that underpin exclusion and powerlessness.

Save the Children defines (the end result of) empowerment as, "people can make choices and take actions on their own behalf with self-confidence, from a position of economic, political and social strength."[9]

Alternatively, Srilatha Batliwala describes the process:

> "The term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations. For individuals and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognize the systemic forces that oppress them, but act to change existing power relationships. Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces that marginalize women and other disadvantaged sectors in a given context."[10]

Asian activists define women's empowerment as "the process and the result of the process" of:

- challenging the ideology of male domination and women's subordination;
- enabling women to gain equal access to and control over resources (material, human, intellectual, financial);

> "Institutional change is often easier than at the personal level . . . most people resist changes to their personal space even when it involves extending their horizons. It is not easy for people to reach . . . critical consciousness in their personal lives due to an intrinsic need to belong. In Africa or less developed countries, insurance from a sense of belonging takes over social welfare functions of the state, therefore imposing major barriers on people's consistency in political consciousness. Particularly for marginalised groups such as women, what one does within an institutional setting is often different from the compromises made in private lives in order to belong. This should not be labelled as inconsistency because the ability to recognise power and its uses and to act within one's context for self-preservation is actually 'strength'."
>
> *Hope Chigudu, Chair, Global Fund for Women, personal correspondence, 2001*

- transforming the systems, institutions (family, education, religion, media, etc.), and structures (legal, political, economic, social) through which the ideology and practice of subordination is reinforced and reproduced.[11]

On the following page, we present two empowerment frameworks that illustrate graphically the different stages and elements of the process. The *Political Empowerment Process* on the top of the page was developed for human rights activists. It looks at some of the dimensions and ingredients of empowerment that contribute to new forms of political power built through citizen action. Following the arrows upward, that chart shows that individuals develop a political and collective awareness by analyzing and reflecting on their own lives and working on problems with others.

Below it, the *Women's Empowerment Framework* was designed to assist development practitioners to understand and address the overlapping problems of poverty and gender inequality. In this framework, the upward movement goes from addressing basic needs to rights under the categories of participation and control. Both frameworks can be used to stimulate discussion about the meaning, process, and challenges of empowerment for citizen-centered advocacy.

The Conflicts and Risks of Empowerment

Empowerment is a process that involves individual discovery and change. Most discussions of empowerment speak about it as a gradual forward-moving process. However, it is far from linear, predictable, or easy. Empowerment is really more like a dance that takes two steps forward and three steps back before moving slowly in a spiral around the floor.

For both men and women, it involves questioning their roles and the world around them. This questioning can cause friends, family, and the larger community discomfort and even anger. It is these tensions that make women appear to have contradictory levels of empowerment in public and at home (see quote below), and may cause some people to withdraw from the process, even if it promises to benefit them in the long-term. This is a central challenge in developing new leadership, especially at the grassroots level. At another level, political change efforts, especially involving group rights and social beliefs, like women's organizing, can generate backlash and be dangerous to those involved. Sometimes a way to prevent backlash when working with women is to include men in the process so they do not feel threatened. We discuss other ways of dealing with conflicts caused by change in other chapters throughout the Guide and in more detail in Chapter 16.

The Political Empowerment Process

Dimensions	Ingredients
Political Power	← Ethical, accountable political leaders
	← Government and public recognition of citizens' rights and knowledge
	← Citizen involvement in monitoring change
	← Strong citizen organizations consulted regularly by government
	← Legal, policy, and state institutional reform
Empowerment	← Reflection on actions
	← Developing new leaders
	← Building citizens' groups
	← Lobbying
	← Planning and implementing strategies
	← Organizing and communicating information about rights, laws, and problems
	← Gaining skills
Collective Consciousness	
	← Analysis of common problems
	← Questioning why things are the way they are
	← Self-reflection
Individual Consciousness	← Dialogue with others

Adapted from Margaret Schuler, Empowerment and the Law: Strategies of Third World Women, OEF International, 1986.

The Women's Empowerment Framework

Levels of Empowerment	Description
Control	Women and men have equal control over production and the distribution of benefits
Participation	Women and men participate equally in decision-making in all programs and policies
Conscientization	Women and men believe that gender roles can be changed and equity is possible
Access	Women gain access to resources such as land, labor, credit, training, public services, legal rights on an equal basis with men
Welfare	Women's and men's material needs, such as food, income, and health care, are met

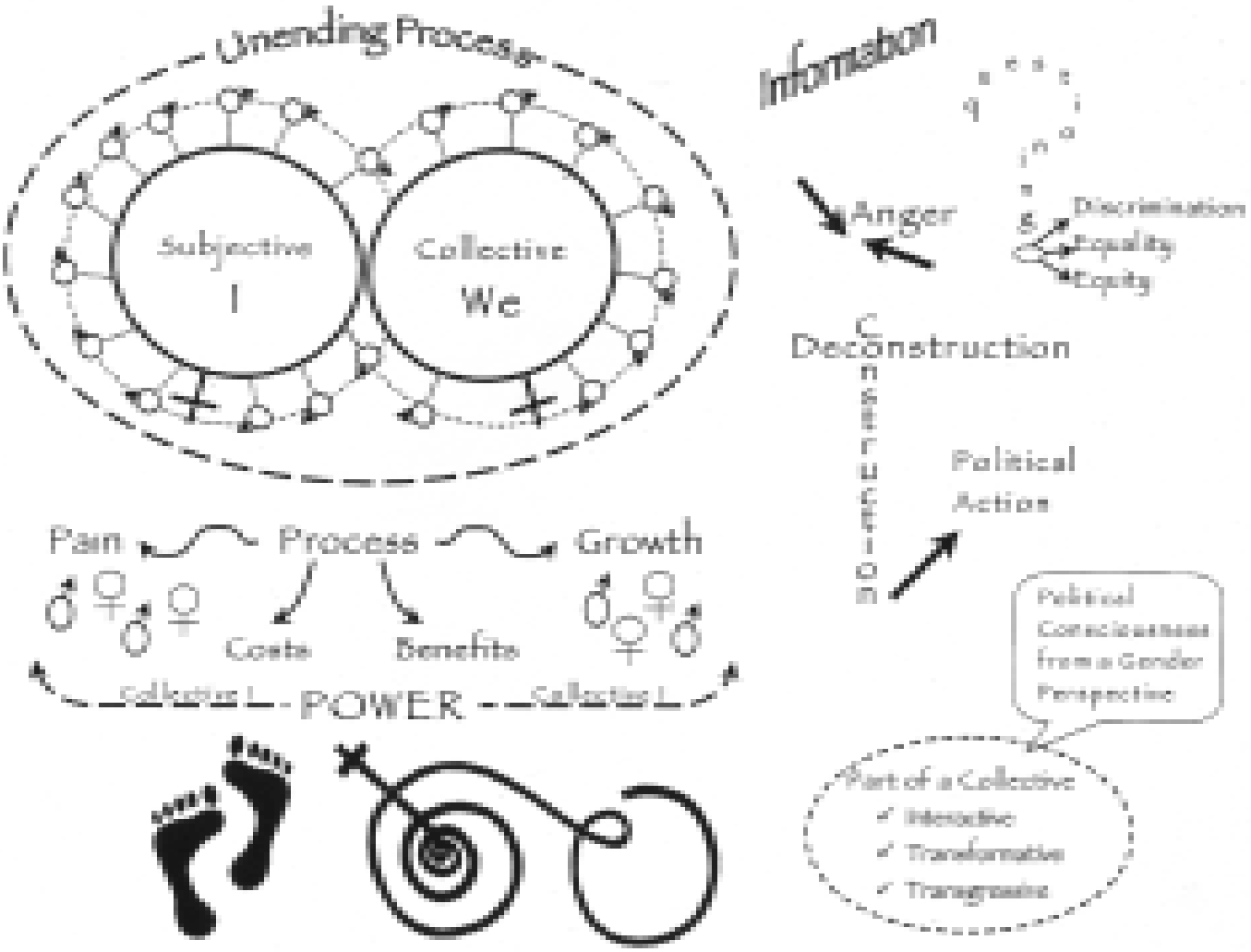
Developed by Sarah Hlupekile Longwe, Gender Specialist, Zambia.

The Chaz! *(Aha!)* Framework

The Chaz! framework below illustrates the spiraling, contradictory process of empowerment. This Framework for Women's Empowerment and Political Consciousness was created by women leaders in a Central American workshop on advocacy. [12] While developed from the experience of women's organizing, it offers important insights for advocacy with any marginalized group. The chart was generated in response to the question: *What is political consciousness and how do you promote it?*

The framework begins in the upper left with the **Unending Process** of change and empowerment. The two circles represent the **self** (I) and **the collective** (we). As the two circles connect, both gain power. This is represented by the outward moving edges of the circle. The **male symbols** around the edges of the circles represent the boundaries of patriarchy that women's empowerment comes up against.

Moving clockwise, the next area of the framework describes the process of "conscientization." It begins with **information** that stimulates **questions** and anger as a woman recognizes injustice and powerlessness. As she interacts with others, she discovers common predicaments, and begins to doubt that she is to blame for her situation. Her questioning is deepened by exploring ideas like **discrimination, equality, equity,** and **rights**. These ideas help her label her constraints and legitimize her desire for change.



Moving to the bottom right, a woman **deconstructs** (breaks apart) and reconstructs her worldview and sense of self by questioning, labeling, and feeling anger. This is the starting point for **political action** to change the aspects of her life that limit her. Political consciousness is **interactive** (developed in relation with others), **transformative,** and **transgressive** (it pushes boundaries).

Finally, at the bottom left we see the conflicts of **empowerment**. The process involves **growth** and **pain**, **costs** and **benefits**. The **spiraling circle** with the **footprints** at the side illustrates the entire empowerment process. The questioning, analysis, and anger lead in a circling inward path until difficult decisions cause a woman to awaken to a new awareness (aha!) and **leap** forward to land on her feet ready to begin the process again. In some cases, the loss and pain can be soothed by links and solidarity with others. However, sometimes the conflict is so extreme as to cause a woman to retreat, and fear or oppose change.

Measuring Empowerment

Measuring empowerment is an important, if extremely difficult, element of monitoring and evaluating citizen-centered advocacy. It is one of those qualitative things that is hard to put your finger on, but you usually know it when you see it. Gender and development practitioners suggest the following indicators as possible measures:

- freedom of mobility
- involvement in major household decisions
- relative freedom from family control
- political and legal awareness
- involvement in community and political activities
- economic security
- awareness of choices
- awareness of own health
- participation in groups
- desire for information and new experiences

The meaning of empowerment varies according to context and who is doing the measuring. However, there is agreement that monitoring and evaluation processes that contribute to (rather than detract from) empowerment must be participatory. In a participatory research project on health, rural Mexican women, with the assistance of an outside facilitator, developed a set of empowerment indicators to assess their own personal change over time. The participatory process was, in itself, a learning and empowering activity for the women involved.[13]

The following chart includes a selection and summary of the indicators they developed. The numbers indicate a progression from least empowered (#1) to most empowered (highest number on the list).

In the next chapter, we deepen the discussion of empowerment in advocacy with a focus on political consciousness.

NOTES

[1] Quoted from “Harnessing the Creative Energies of Citizens”, by Ezra Mbogori and Hope Chigudu, in the African Regional Synthesis for the Civil Society in the New Millenium Project of the Commonwealth Foundation, London.
[2] The Grassroots Policy Project has developed a set of excellent materials that help groups understand and analyze power. See their website at www.grassrootspolicy.org.
[3] Common responses to the question “What is power?” from dozens of workshops with development workers, rights activists, professors and local government in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Russia.
[4] Carolyn Shronk-Shenk, *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual.* Akron, PA: Mennonite Conciliation Service, 2000.
[5] See John Gaventa (1980), Grassroots Policy Project (2001), Steven Lukes (1974), Naila Kabeer (1994).
[6] Deepa Narayan, *Can Anyone Hear Us?*, (Voices of the Poor series) World Bank, 2000
[7] Also see Grassroots Policy Project, ibid.
[8] Malena de Montis, Santa Fe Workshop, 1999
[9] From *Empowerment Through People, Programs and Institutions: A Report of the Facets Phase III Workshop.* Save the Children, 1998.
[10] Srilatha Batliwala, “The Meaning of Women’s Empowerment: New Concepts from Action” in *Population Policies Revisited,* Sen, Chen, Germain, Harvard University Press, 1994.
[11] Srilatha Batliwala, 1994, op.cit., Chapter 1.
[12] GWIP/Cenzontle Advocacy TOT workshop held in Nicaragua in June 1998.
[13] The chart was developed by Gloria Sayavedra and Mayela Garcia, Red de Mujeres Pro Derechos de Educación y Salud. It is the product of research funded by the MacArthur Foundation and was constructed based on the life stories of 40 women from 10 states of Mexico.