

## Dimensions of Power

Have you ever been in a meeting and said something that almost nobody noticed, yet a few minutes later, someone else said exactly the same thing and everyone in the group paid attention, perhaps even praised the “brilliant” idea she/he had? In thinking about this, you may have thought that the person who repeated your idea had a great deal of leverage (or power) in the group.

“All our lives we have been told to shut up and sit down. People from town treat us as if we haven't got brains”

Conversely, you could be in a group where the ideas that you have are taken seriously, and you have some leverage. Your power is *relative*. Many women (VeneKlasen & Miller 2002), especially in traditional societies, for instance, share great ideas when there is an all-women meeting. When the same women are in another gathering where men are present, they shy away from sharing their ideas for fear of not been taken seriously. In another example, villagers may generate great ideas among themselves, but when they meet with “well-educated” people, they may tend to undermine their innovation and deep life experience. There are numerous examples of this perception of one’s own power. Again, power is *relative*.

Taking the dimension of power into account is crucial to our advocacy work. Many groups, especially those who are disadvantaged, fragmented, or marginalized, may feel that they are totally powerless. When you ask why they have not taken any actions to address an injustice in their community, they may answer by saying, that a company is too powerful, or has too many connections, or too many people in the area work for them, etc. In other words, they see themselves as powerless and the other party as powerful.

As advocacy practitioners, we need to address the issue of their *perception* of their own power versus the other people’s power. We need to help them analyze their power from different angles and help them identify their own sources of power (Cohen, et al; 2001). The following tools help us analyze the dimensions of power.

Power is expressed in a different ways (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002<sup>1)</sup>)

**Power Over** is likely the most common way of power expression that comes to mind when the word “power” is mentioned. Power over is when someone has the power to enforce or coerce. A vivid example of this is dictatorships around the world. Although this form of power has a mostly negative connotation, it can also be positive based on intent. A parent, for example, has the power to discipline their child if the child does not behave well. A judge has the power to pass sentencing on a criminal. It is the negative utilization of this expression of power that advocacy

and social justice practitioners, need to change. The way to change the negative aspect of *Power Over* is to help people find alternative positive expressions of power. Following are alternative expressions of power that people can use to counterbalance the negative prevailing *power over* expression.

### ***Alternative Sources of Power***

To counterbalance the destructive *power over*, we need to help people recognize other forms of power they already have.

**Power To** is the abilities, skills and talents that individuals and groups have that help them achieve success. This *power to* may be traditional crafts, special skills learned in school, specialized education, or merely the unique life experiences of individuals and groups. It is important for advocacy practitioners to help surface this unique potential to help shape a more just world.

**Power With** is about the collective voice. "*Power with*", VeneKlasen & Miller (2002) *multiplies individual talents and knowledge.* Many disadvantaged communities and groups are fragmented and are often challenged by working together. *Power with* helps the group to see common issues, and get organized to take action.

**Power Within** is believing in one's own worth and abilities. It is overcoming the sense of powerlessness, and shifting it into a confident, yet realistic, frame of reference. This expression of power recognizes that a good part of one's powerlessness is actually the perception of being powerless. Helping disadvantaged individuals and groups realize their worth and power, while respecting and appreciating the worth of others, is likely the biggest step toward addressing the state of powerlessness and turning it to powerfulness.

*Power within* is one of the most difficult changes to achieve especially with groups that have traditionally been disadvantaged and marginalized groups such as indigenous groups, women, illiterate rural communities, and very poor communities. Over a long time of oppression and structural marginalization, many of these groups adopt the belief that they are inferior to others. Battered women, for instance, often believe that they deserve it by being disobedient to their husbands, or male members of their families. Illiterate people would defer the decision to the *better educated* people even if they come from outside of their communities.

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