

Intimate, private, and public realms of power

Because of the ways oppression operates, distinct aspects of our identity can create contradictions and conflicts in the different realms of our lives. We may behave or be treated one way in our public life, but another way in our private or intimate lives. Leadership and organising strategies need to take this into account to support deeper transformation. As the well-known feminist adage says: “the personal is political.”

The **intimate realm of power**: my sense of self, personal confidence, psychological well-being, and safety and my relationship to (and control over) my body and health

The **private realm of power**: my relationships and roles in the family, among friends, in sexual partnerships and marriage, and so on

The **public realm of power**: how I am seen and treated in my public life, such as in my organisation, employment and community, including my legal and civil rights

For an individual, the experience of power and powerlessness differs based on gender, sexuality, race, class, or age, and may even be contradictory in different realms of life. For example, a woman politician who appears confident in public may accept a subordinate 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 and yet be primarily or solely responsible for the maintenance of the home and children. Similar conflicts and contradictions can be true of, for example, a Black man, a gender non-conforming person, or someone differently abled: they face a dominant culture that is discriminatory that they must find ways to navigate but have a very different experience in their private or intimate life.

It is helpful to acknowledge these layers and contradictions in order to understand the tensions that are generated by our political organising and change work, particularly for those who experience sexism, racism, classism, or ageism more directly. Political change and advocacy strategies that focus solely on the public realm may overlook challenges such as those faced by women leaders, activists, and public officials when they return to their homes and families.