

HANDOUT:

What and where is power?

Power is ...

- ⋮ Everywhere – within groups, individuals, and nature.
- ⋮ Part of our everyday lives and interactions.
- ⋮ Neither good nor bad – that depends on who is using it, how, and for what ends.
- ⋮ Relational, dynamic, and messy.
- ⋮ Experienced differently in the public, private, and intimate arenas of our lives.
- ⋮ Structural, systemic, and institutionalised.
- ⋮ Entrenched but not static; when unequal, it is always in dispute and contradictory.
- ⋮ Intersectional, impacting us differently depending on gender, race, ethnicity, caste, class, sexuality, ability, location, and more.
- ⋮ Fluid and changing depending on the context and moment.
- ⋮ Held in our bodies, hearts, and minds – internalised and often unconscious.

Power, if unequal, is always in dispute

Power works at all levels of our lives – personal, social, cultural, political, economic, systemic – in both good and bad ways. Power shapes what we do, what is done to us, and how we think and act. When power is unequal, there is always a push and pull, and conflict over:

- ⋮ Who ‘we’ are
- ⋮ Who decides and makes the rules
- ⋮ Who and what matters most
- ⋮ Who gets what
- ⋮ Who does what
- ⋮ What is ‘normal’
- ⋮ Which ideas and beliefs ‘count’

Power over is extractive, exploitative, and oppressive.

Power over operates in a zero-sum universe where some have it and others don’t, an ‘us’ vs ‘them’ competitive approach to power where those with more power resist change. Power over is embedded in all structures and maintained through social conditioning, the control of rules, access to resources, coercion, narratives, fear, and violence. It can be resisted, challenged, subverted, and transformed.

Transformative power is liberating and generative, seeking to change the inequities and injustice of the status quo.

Shaped by a consciousness of abundance, a commitment to liberation and justice and a belief in the possibility of deep change and a vibrant future for all, it is built over time by inclusive visions expressed through strategies for change. This enables us to foster community and belonging, and to push back and contest *power over*. Transformative power takes many forms:

- : *Power within* (dignity, confidence, and self-esteem)
- : *Power with* (solidarity and collective action)
- : *Power to* (capacity to act)
- : *Power for* (vision and values – the purpose for which we build other forms of power)

Power is not static

Even where power over is dominant and entrenched, contradictions exist, and resistance is present. These are the cracks where the light comes in, that offer opportunities for change, however small or gradual. Transformative power is a continuous struggle against the deeply internalised and systemic patterns of power over that permeate our lives. Therefore, it involves conflict as we challenge the status quo – personal, professional, and political – and demands that we cultivate relationships of trust and solidarity, practices of safety and care, self-awareness, thoughtful analysis, and strategic action.