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IDENTITY, INTERSECTIONALITY AND POWER





There is no such thing as single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.

- Audre Lorde¹

We can't talk about power – especially from a decolonial feminist standpoint – without talking about how power intersects with identity, including the ways that:

Dominant forms of systemic power embed inequity and structural violence in all aspects of life according to gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and other factors of difference.

Invisible power – norms and beliefs – normalise prejudice and discrimination.

Elite and powerful groups are able to retain influence, legitimacy and decision-making power, and divide communities by mobilising prejudice and 'othering'.

Questions of identity are essential to understanding, challenging, building, and transforming power. This chapter tracks the intersections of power with social identity, structures and systems. This understanding can help unleash the potential for liberation, solidarity and transformation.

Every one of us has multiple and complex identities related to our gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, education, age, sexual orientation, ability, and other factors of difference. Intersectionality is one way of describing how these identities interact – within larger systems and structures – to shape different experiences of power, privilege, and oppression.

While our experiences of power vary greatly, we can find points of unity and common action if we take the time to understand each other's experiences and work together for greater equity and justice. We can learn from one another, work together on solutions, and stand with each other.

The concept of intersectionality provides a helpful way for people to name their distinct experiences, claim their whole interconnected identity, and seek common ground with others. The idea is not new, but Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American legal scholar, coined the term in the 1980s, recognising that "intersectionality was a lived reality before it became a term"². She originally used the word to convey the dual reality of black women experiencing both gender and race discrimination.

Others who felt invisible within ‘women’s’ movements took up the term to bring to light the invisibility of many constituents within groups that claim them as members, but often fail to fully represent them. People of colour within LGBTQI+ movements; girls of colour in the fight against the school-to-prison pipeline; women within immigration movements; trans women within feminist movements; and people with disabilities fighting police abuse — all face vulnerabilities that reflect the intersections of racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism and more”³

In whatever way we choose to name our diverse and interconnected identities, it is our lived experience that matters. “It is important to name how various forms of violence interact and compound to affect different people in specific ways. For most, class, race, and gender are simultaneous forces...it is not ‘race + class + gender but ‘race X class X gender’.”⁴



Activist and writer Charlene Carruthers paraphrases the famous Combahee River Collective statement to explain why intersectional work is transformative: “[Because] if Black women were free, it would require the dismantling of so many systems of oppression that everybody else would be free as a result.”⁵



Intersectionality is the basis for collective liberation. And if we do not build that commitment to intersectional identity and struggle, we risk fighting for change that still preserves the conditions of someone else’s oppression.

- Alexa Bradley, Global Programme Director JASS

This chapter explores three key themes and builds on the introduction to interconnected identities and power in Chapter 3. The historical timeline from Chapter 2 will be useful too.

Theme 1: Identity, Power, and Privilege

Who are we and how do we name and experience our different identities in our lives and in relation to other identities? Various identities – and their intersections – translate into widely differing degrees of power and privilege depending on context, history, and existing social structures and norms.

Theme 2: The Personal is Political

How do aspects of identity converge to compound and complicate power relationships? Links between identities and power can either aid or thwart the work for justice. For example, in certain contexts those with specific identities are targeted, stigmatised, and exposed to hostility and violence.

Theme 3: Identity, Power, and Transformation

Our identities link with the ways we can recover our power in different forms: power within – strength in re/claiming our whole self as valuable; power with – finding common ground with others who see us and share our issues and concerns; and power for and to – defining and working toward a vision of inclusive liberation where no part of us is left behind.

Together, the activities in these three sections deepen our understanding of power and identity – how they are experienced day-to-day in our families, relationships, organisations, work, community, and politics. We examine the ways in which risk and vulnerability are shaped by our social identities in different contexts, and the meanings they are assigned by the systems and structures of our society. And importantly, because power analysis aims to enable more powerful collaborative work for change, we show that by affirming and connecting our identities – with an intersectional lens – we can include our whole selves in ways that energise our communities and organisations, across apparent differences, in our strategies for liberation, justice, and safety.

Theme 1: Identity, Power, and Privilege

How we think about and experience our identities – and their intersections – is both a personal question and one that is shaped by societal norms and structures. Depending on our context, the identities we inhabit translate into differing levels of power, access, and privilege in relationship to other people.

Understanding these inequities and the ways they affect not only our own lives, but also our organisations and work for social change, can unleash more transformative strategies.

The various aspects of our identity intersect, and so we experience power differently, resulting at times in relative privilege and, at other points, in oppression, subordination, and exclusion. Understanding identity and power can move us toward more freeing and equitable ways of being and working.

ACTIVITY 1:

Identity and the Power Flower

Every one of us has multiple, nuanced identities. Gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and age, among others, intersect and interact to shape who we are, how we are treated, and what challenges and contradictions we confront.

Set the tone for a safe open discussion. People may experience shame, anger, grief, or guilt when they talk about aspects of their identity. Make it clear that the purpose here is to deepen our understanding together so that we can work more effectively toward justice and mutual liberation.

Materials: Poster-size version of the Power Flower; Handout: Identity and the *Power Flower*; personal notebooks or sheets of paper for each person; markers.

Step 1. Who am I?

Plenary: Introduce the theme and activity. This is the first step in exploring who we are through our various identities, illuminating the ways they shape our lives.

Individually: Each person writes or draws their responses to the questions.

- What were you taught about difference and people different from you?
- What were you taught about your 'place' in social hierarchies?
- How has that affected your life?
- How might what you learned shape your work for social change?
- People can choose to share or not. Either way, their thoughts will inform the activity.

Step 2. How identity has shaped our lives

Plenary: Post a poster-sized copy of the multi-petaled Power Flower on the wall. Invite people to name different categories of identity. These can include: gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, religion, ability/disability, age, education, marital status, and/or location (urban/ suburban/rural). Write labels on most of the petals but leave a few blank so that people can add other categories.

Most of these categories are not binary but instead encompass multiple options (such as male, female, trans, intersex, non-binary) and dimensions (such as gender non-conforming) that add layers of complexity to gender. Everyone navigates multiple forms of identity – some remaining the same, others changing over the course of their life. Emphasise that no identity has more intrinsic worth or value than any other.



Individually: Each person identifies six or seven of their own personal characteristics/ identities in relation to the categories decided by the group and fills in the petals on their handout (or draws their own and Power Flower).

Next, each person writes three words or draws three sketches on a sheet of paper to show:

- A part of your identity that makes you feel strong, safe, or proud.
- A part of your identity that has made you feel less valued, vulnerable, or powerless at times in your life.
- A part of your identity that has in some way shaped your life's purpose.
- These may be three different parts of your identity or the same.

Plenary: Form a circle. Invite each person in turn to hold up their sheet of paper and explain the three parts of their identity, without questions or discussion.

In pairs: Each person finds someone with one matching element. Pairs have ten minutes to share. People may form mixed pairs instead and discuss what they might have in common.

Plenary: Share any reflections or ‘aha!’ moments. Talking about identity is not an everyday conversation. Ask:

- What was it like to talk about your identities with others? Did you feel any discomfort? What if anything helped you have this conversation?
- What did you learn about identity and difference and how society values or devalues certain identities? How does the experience of identity change in different circumstances?
- Did you gain any insights about your identities and how they shape your experience in specific ways?

Identity is complex. It is not fixed. We are assigned some aspects at birth or by family, other aspects are fixed, changed, or are imposed on us, and some we choose or claim. Depending on the context, identity shapes our experience, access, opportunities, and safety.



Identity is relational. In one context you may have more privilege than other people, but in another you may have less. Identity does not automatically convey value, privilege, and power – value is assigned to different identities through systems of power.

We tend to think of identity as individual. But the social meaning of any specific identity and the power and privileges it bestows – or denies – are systemic and structural. Identity-related benefits accrue whether or not the group or individuals actively seek them. Privilege seems obvious in many ways, but those who have it can be blind to it. Those excluded from forms of privilege and power tend to be highly aware of these inequities and may share outrage with others with similar experience, but they may not feel they can risk speaking about it in mixed groups.

In both cases – privilege and exclusion – we end up divided and disconnected when we do not talk about our experience for fear of feeling shame, pain, anger or guilt, or being exposed to judgement or backlash. As a result, we leave privilege, and its flipside – inequity, oppression, marginalisation, exclusion – intact and unchallenged.

We must cultivate awareness and open conversations in safe spaces to build trust and solidarity for collaboration and equitable relationships.



ACTIVITY 2:

The continuum of identity, power, and privilege

Materials: One large copy of the Power and Privilege Wheel to display on the wall. One small copy per person.

Step 1: Identity and privilege

Build on the Power Flower by adding another layer. Show how identities intersect with forms of systemic power and are thus afforded differing levels of privilege. This in turn translates into access, voice, choices, resources and power.

Plenary: Read out these two sentences to open a discussion.

- “Our society assigns value and gives greater privilege and power to certain identities than it does to others.”
- “Privilege is, simply put, a set of unearned benefits given to people who fit into a specific social group.”⁶

Brainstorm examples of forms of privilege in your context, defined as “benefits given to people because they are from specific social groups”.

- How are specific identities offered or excluded from power and privilege?
- How do these differences in privilege show up in your context?
- What impact do the differences have on people, communities and organisations?

You may need to clarify the ways in which the benefits of privilege differ from efforts to address past and present inequity such as gender-specific safe spaces or proactive opportunities such as quotas for historically marginalised groups. If these topics are new or unfamiliar, you may want to collectively define the ways that these terms connect identity with power inequities:

- White/light skin privilege
- Male privilege
- Heterosexual privilege
- Class privilege

Step 2: The Power and Privilege Wheel

Plenary: Introduce the activity and hand out the Power and Privilege Wheel. Check that everyone understands what the wheel shows. Identities closer to the centre of the wheel are afforded more privilege and value by society than those further out. These may vary according to context but hold true overall.

Post a large graphic of the flower or wheel on the wall and invite everyone to come up and write on it. With bigger groups, brainstorm collectively with a few people writing suggestions on the wheel.

On each petal – for example, gender or ‘race’ – write the socially dominant identity close to the centre, for example male or white. Write the less dominant identities on the outside edge of the petal. There may be various non dominant identities on any petal, such as female, trans, non-conforming on the gender petal.

Individually: On their handout, each person notes for each petal where they identify and how that sits in relationship to the relative degrees of power.

Small groups: In groups of three, discuss these questions, sharing only what feels comfortable.

- Have you ever been aware that aspects of your identity afforded you more or less access, safety, and/ or power in a situation? Have you been excluded, targeted, or discriminated against because of some part of your identity?
- Have any aspects of your identity changed over time? How does your sense of power or privilege change depending on where you are, who you are with, or what you are doing?
- Have you ever felt like you had to hide or leave some part of your identity out? Do you ever change the way you reveal or express your identities depending on the context, and if so, why? (Examples could be your accent, vocabulary, dress code, or openness about your sexuality.)

Plenary: Share any ‘aha!’ moments.

- What was the most important realisation for you?
- What did this add to your understanding of identity and its meaning in your context?
- How did this activity connect your experience of identity with broader systems and structures that shape power and privilege – determining who is valued, who has a voice, who benefits?
- Was there anything that surprised you? Anything that felt uncomfortable? Anything that felt validating?

Going deeper: You may decide that your group would benefit from exploring this further. For instance, a lack of clarity and forthright discussion – about race, ethnicity, class, gender or another aspect – may be blocking the group’s ability to work in politically aligned and coherent ways. If so, you could use or adapt one of the many tools designed to surface deeper awareness about specific types of privilege. Address particular ‘blind spots’ or areas of tension around the privileges afforded to some identities over others, in order to build a shared commitment to dismantling systems of inequity.



Theme 2: The Personal is Political

In this section, we analyse how aspects of identity can converge to complicate power relationships in ways that either aid or thwart the work for justice and liberation. We also explore the links between identities and forms of violence, building on Chapter 3: Making Sense of Power, Activities 7 and 8.

ACTIVITY 3:

The Master's House

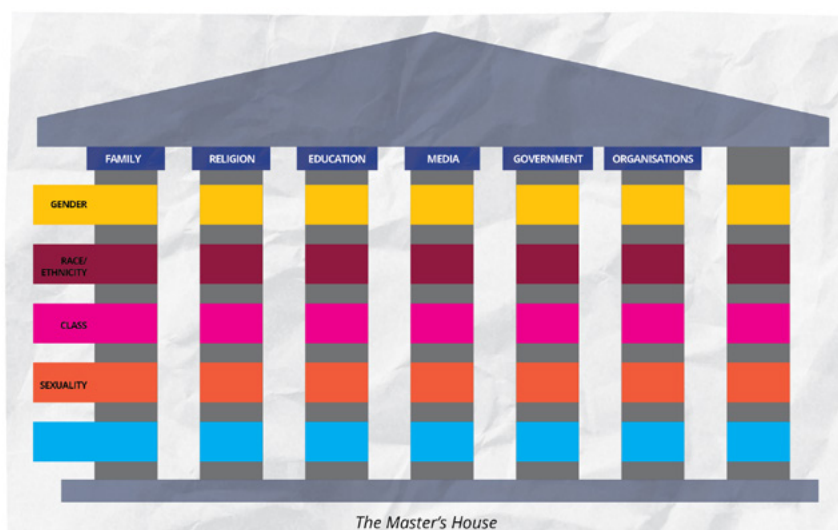
In this activity, we analyse systems of dominance. Step 1 focuses on gender and patriarchy. Step 2 expands into an intersectional analysis of oppression. Together, the two parts encourage discussion about what patriarchy is, how it works, and how it intersects with other systems of domination and discrimination.¹

The Master's House explores how complex power dynamics of patriarchy play out and function in institutions (such as in the family, formal education, the media, and government). The analysis covers relations of domination and discrimination between men and women, and across class, race, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity. Over the course of the activity, people draw on their diverse experiences and knowledge to collectively build a 'house of multiple oppressions'.

Materials: Sticky note paper of at least four colours (alternately you can use pieces of paper and tape); white and different coloured notecards; flip charts; different coloured markers; scissors; white and other coloured posterboard; posterboard strips, or strips of white paper; masking tape; a big wall!

Before the session, draw or cut sheets of paper to create the shape of the Master's House on a wide wall. Allow space for people to 'build' the House's inner walls and pillars, each pillar having three rows of blocks.

The activity can take four to six hours or a whole day. Conversations are essential to the process, so allow sufficient time in small groups and plenary.



Step 1. Gender

Plenary: Explain the overall purpose of the exercise: building a house to reflect the forces that affect women's lives and place in the world. Avoid terms such as 'patriarchy' at the start. Once the group gets the concept, then use the term that describes it.

Ask:

- Where do we learn about what we should or should not do as a woman/female person, or as a man/male person?
- Where do we get these messages? (You may need to give examples e.g. school, church, home.)
- Write responses on the flip chart.

From the institutions that people mention, choose six or seven to build the pillars of the House. Important pillars include the family/home, religion, government, educational institutions, the media, and organisations in which we participate.

Write the name of each pillar down on a strip of poster board and stick the pillars under the roof inside the house. Allow for three rows of 'blocks' to build each pillar. Assign a different colour for each pillar.

Small groups: Each small group 'builds' a different 'pillar' or institution (for example the family or the church). Ask each group to discuss:

- What does this institution say (directly or indirectly) about how women or men should act? How is this message communicated?
- Who is welcome or unwelcome in certain social spaces? Who is valued for what and when?
- What are the gender 'rules' or lines we are not supposed to cross? What happens when someone does cross them?
- How are these 'rules' enforced?
- How do these norms and rules affect those who challenge gender norms or who are gender fluid or transgender?

Groups summarise their key points on individual sticky notes – a different colour per pillar. These rules and norms are the building 'blocks' of the pillars of inequity, discrimination and oppression.

Plenary: To report back, groups take turns to describe their key points as they tape their 'bricks' in columns inside the outline of the house. In this way, they build The Master's House. Invite people to ask clarifying questions.

Once all groups have posted, ask people what they notice. Any 'aha!' moments? What is the same and what is different across the institutions?

Step 2. The House of Multiple Oppressions

In each of several rounds, a new dimension of power emerges in relationship to identity. People add to The Master's House, laying a new row of 'bricks' for each new factor such as race/ethnicity, class, or sexuality.

Round 2: Race/ethnicity

Small groups: Each small group again chooses a social institution – family/home, religion, government, educational institutions, the media, or community organisations. This time, the group focuses on the institution they have chosen in terms of race/ethnicity,

- What does this institution say (directly or indirectly) about different groups in terms of race/ethnicity (for example, indigenous, black, white, or whatever the relevant categories are for your context)? Who is valued? Who matters? How are these messages communicated?
- What are the rules about how certain groups should behave/not behave? Who is welcome or unwelcome in certain social spaces? How is this enforced?
- What lines are we not supposed to cross and what happens when we do? What happens to those who challenge or resist?

Groups write their key responses on a different colour of sticky notepaper from the colour used for gender. They add these to the wall, laying down a second row of blocks across institutional pillars of the house under construction.

Plenary: Groups report back in turn, taping their bricks in columns inside the outline as they present their key points, building more of The Master's House. Invite clarifying questions from the whole group. Once all groups have posted, invite people to share their observations: what is different and what is similar across the various institutions?

After that discussion, ask:

- What do you see and hear about the intersections of race/ethnicity with gender?
- How do you feel about what has been shared? How does it resonate with your own experience of identities, intersectionality, and racism?

Round 3: Class and caste

Small groups: Following the same steps as in rounds 1 and 2, each group reflects on class (and caste, if relevant) in relation to the same institution, noting their responses on paper of a third colour.

- What does this institution say about how people obtain their wealth, status and privilege?
- How does it explain why some people have very low incomes or live in poverty? How are these people seen and treated differently?
- How does this institution view different classes and castes, and how are those messages communicated?
- How are the 'rules' of class and caste enforced? What happens when people challenge them?

Plenary: Each group posts and explains their observations in the 'class and caste' row of each pillar. Invite people to describe what they have heard about class relations. Point out that class is the defining feature of the capitalist system, while caste is a religious hierarchy where status is determined by birth. In both systems, some people accrue privileges and wealth while others are excluded, exploited, and dominated. Ask:

- In what ways have you seen or experienced this? How is class and caste exploitation justified and explained?

Go on to discuss how class interweaves with other power relations, such as gender and race/ ethnicity. Invite further thinking on intersectionality, multiple identities, and power.

Round 4: Sexuality and sexual identity

Small groups: Repeat the process above but focus on sexuality and sexual identity – heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other identities.

- What does this institution say is ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ in terms of sexuality and sexual identity?
- How does it explain or view variations in sexuality and sexual identity?
- How does it enforce its ‘rules’ around sexuality and sexual identity, and what happens to those that challenge or do not comply with them?

Plenary: Invite a discussion of the intersection of these identities and oppressions. Ask:

- What commonalities and differences do you see across the different identities and how they are treated? Any ‘aha’ moments?
- How does this relate to your own experience?
- How do each of the institutions compel the conformity to rules of gender, race, and class?
- How are these enforced? Examples could be violence, fear, or exclusion.
- What can happen if you cross the line and disrupt those rules?

On thin strips of paper, note people’s responses describing how behaviour is compelled and enforced. Place them between pillars as ‘walls’.

Emphasise key points from an analysis of the House of Multiple Oppressions.

To conclude, ask people to examine the House they have built. All of us live in and maintain the House of Multiple Oppressions, often in ways we are not conscious of. Ask:

- How do I live in that House and what is its impact on me?
- What do I do that maintains parts of it?
- How do I reinforce or weaken patriarchy and other systems of oppression through my actions, words, relationships, and beliefs?
- How does my leadership reflect this?

Each person writes down their answers anonymously and folds the piece of paper.

Engage people in discussing how all of us live in the House of Multiple Oppressions – men and women, white, black, indigenous, rich and poor, rural people, workers, employers, the elderly, the young, from North, South – by design, all of us building and maintaining these systems.

By contrast, we can work towards solidarity based on a recognition of difference and equity, towards transformational/liberating leadership, and towards transformational power for systemic change.

Invite people to place their cards in a bowl in the centre, each one announcing something they hope to transform.



Gender, class, and ethnic relations intersect, and *power over* reinforces dominance and subordination.

The relationships between the different systems are complex and expressed in different ways. The power relationships of the house are sometimes visible (laws, policies, rules), or hidden (who has influence) or invisible (beliefs, values, social pressure).

Because these forms of oppression are often normalised, it is important to name them. For example, we can only fully understand patriarchy – the system of dominance based on gender – by seeing how it combines with other forms of power and dominance in specific contexts and lives. From there, we can develop specific strategies and actions to undermine, crack open, and demolish patriarchy and other systems of oppression.

ACTIVITY 4:

Intersections of Identity and Power

Identity is not merely a personal or interpersonal matter; it relates to larger power struggles. When we talk about difficult contexts, it is important to see how different groups experience them in different ways. This not only helps us to understand the political dynamics in our context better but also encourages us to build solidarity with others struggling in their own ways.

We tend to think of the most visible forms of risk and insecurity that protect those in power by silencing and suppressing any challenge: crackdowns on activism and outspoken community leaders, more restrictive laws undermining freedom of speech and assembly, surveillance and threats of violence. But risk and insecurity can take more everyday forms: discrimination, exclusion, marginalisation, subordination, silencing, harassment, economic exploitation, and domestic and sexual violence. These forms of violence maintain the social and political domination of people of non-dominant identities.

Materials: A computer and projector if possible; a handout of the introduction to this chapter.

Step 1: Intro to Intersectionality

Plenary: Review key points thus far: that identity is not singular and does not exist in a vacuum. Society assigns greater privilege and power to some identities than it does to others. Here, the concept of intersectionality is useful for locating our interconnected identities more clearly within social power dynamics.

To bring the concept alive, screen the video of [Awino Okech's intro](#) to Intersectionality. You may want to show more videos from [JASS' Big Ideas page on Intersectionality](#), in which people talk about their own intersecting identities. Alternatively, choose and read out quotes on the complexities of identity, for example from the [In Depth](#) section of JASS' Big Ideas page on Intersectionality (in which case, adapt the discussion questions).

Ask:

- Did you experience any 'aha' moments concerning intersectionality and why it matters? How did the video/s add to your understanding of identity?
- Did you relate to any particular video/s and if so why?
- What do these videos reveal about how different identities may intersect in a person's life and how this can relate to their experience of systems of power?
- What struck you in the women's accounts of reclaiming their whole identity and finding power and liberation that way?

You might want to direct people to this resource on [Power and Protection](#) for more on the targeting of activists in terms of gender and other aspects of their identities.

Step 2: Intersectionality Defined

Plenary: Share the introduction to this chapter as a handout or read out this shorter definition:

Intersectionality is a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. Every one of us has multiple and complex identities based on our gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, education, age, sexual orientation, ability, etc. Some parts of our identity may connect us to more dominant groups and the power that comes with that identity (for example white, male, middle or upper class, heterosexual). Other parts of our identity may mean we experience discrimination, less opportunity or security, and more risk and violence. Intersectionality describes how these identities interact and overlap to create different experiences of power, oppression, discrimination, and privilege. Intersectionality has become a way for people to name their distinct experiences and fight for visibility, justice, and inclusion.

In pairs: For a few minutes, discuss these questions.

- Can you think of instances where a lack of awareness about identity and privilege undermined trust and authentic collaboration or reinforced inequitable power dynamics
- And correspondingly, can you think of instances where awareness and a commitment to challenge such inequities have built solidarity and galvanized collective efforts?

Plenary: Invite people to share their insights from the activity. Open a discussion, drawing out key points. Note that, to understand and acknowledge openly the ways in which identity, privilege and power work:

- Is a critical step in social change.
- Enables us to see and address these power dynamics within ourselves and our organisations and movements.
- Gives us a better understanding of the workings of systemic power and how to challenge it.
- Provides a foundation on which to build a common commitment to liberation and the trust and solidarity that are needed.



Intersectional power dynamics connect to broader systems of domination and oppression: patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism. It is at this systemic level that the codes and logic of inequality are created and perpetuated. The root causes of inequity, discrimination, and subjugation go far beyond individual prejudice.



“

Well, for us identity is extremely important because it allows us to create communities, and communities are the main space in which we feel safe because it relies on mutual trust. It is a space where we can interact with individuals that have similar problems and the same ideals, and this allows us to create strategies for individual and collective protection, because individuality cannot be separated from the collective because we all form that community.

For me, however, it is important to learn about different experiences, not only because we are in a system that affects us all in similar manners. Each one of our identities depends on the space we live in and where we live, and this is where we see the particular differences. These differences, then, give us new resources to strengthen our work and continue saying that we are not alone, and continue increasing solidarity at the regional level so that together we can maintain communication and transform our current reality of oppression into a reality of liberty, real democracy, and exercised rights.”

- Dalila de Jesús Vázquez, Indigenous feminist leader, Guatemala

ACTIVITY 5:

Systemic logic

Materials: Handout: Four Arenas of Power (from Chapter 3: Making Sense of Power)

Step 1: Invisible and systemic power revisited

Briefly refresh people’s memory and understanding of invisible and systemic power (from Chapter 3: Making Sense of Power). Discuss the ways that these dimensions of power link with identity and oppression.

Invisible power: beliefs and norms; ways in which we are socialized, conditioned to carry and reproduce ideas and prejudices that are activated in narratives.

Systemic power: logic and ‘genetic code’ that shapes all relationships, ‘operating system’, deeply embedded systems of meaning.

Discuss how this logic is reinforced in the laws, policies, and biases of formal decision making (visible power), and in shaping what issues are addressed and who has a voice and influence and is included in important questions (hidden power).

Each of the systems in the House of Multiple Oppressions drives a logic that explains and

naturalises inequality and that in fact requires inequity. Each system proposes one set of characteristics or identities as superior and others as inferior. The interactions between them are dynamic.

Step 2: Where gender meets power

Plenary: Introduce the theme and activity.



Small groups: Draw two circles on large pieces of paper, then add the figure of a woman at the centre of each. For each woman, choose four to six aspects of her identity (such as indigenous, LBTQI+, young) – identities that exist within your context. One of the two women is also an activist. Write all those identities within the lines of her body.

Considering her different identities, list around each circle the various possible conditions that converge to shape and impact her life. These might include:

- Experiences of discrimination (based on racial, ethnic, class, caste, religious, linguistic or other hierarchies)
- Particular gender roles
- Access/lack of access to education
- Exclusion from/inclusion in specific spaces
- Heavy burdens of care
- Economic stability
- Being targeted as an activist
- Sexual violence
- Legacies of colonialism
- Lack of recognition of leadership

By contrast, her identities may also offer her positive experiences of power within and power with. For example, does she have a strong connection with others who share her identity and historical experiences? Does her identity give her a strong sense of who she is, a sense of purpose, and a feeling of belonging? What skills and capacities does she have from her lived experience?

Read out the quote from Dalila on common ground and difference. Ask:

- What are the similarities and differences between the two women? What is different for the activist?
- How do different aspects of identity offer differing levels of privilege and power?
- Are there ways in which each is 'put or kept in her place', and by whom or what, and why?
- For each, where and how is she likely to experience violence? In what part of her life: relationships and the family, in public spaces, within organisations, at work, in religious or community institutions, in courts and law making?
- How do you think each of the women might feel powerful and joyful in her identity?

To close the session, reiterate that one identity is not 'better' or 'worse' than any other. The purpose is to strengthen our political consciousness about how systemic power works in our own and other people's lives, so that we are better able to work across differences and to disrupt the perpetuation of inequity.



Gender and violence

Gender-based violence is often taken to mean domestic violence, intimate partner violence, or sexual violence, and treated as distinct from political violence. But that misses the point. In reality, all forms of violence are interconnected and designed to control and subordinate one person or group by another.

Women and LGBTQI+ activists and political leaders experience multiple forms of violence all the time – in their homes, in the streets, in discriminatory policy and practices, in exclusion and discrimination, and in both systemic and incidental forms. Women and female-identified people face violence because they are female, because they are outspoken, because they dare to challenge the status quo, because they are seen as gender non-conforming, because they are smart, because they are poor or working class, because they are or are believed to be LGBTQI+, because they belong to a targeted racial, ethnic, or religious group, because they are seen to be sexually free or not available enough, because they organise and take leadership, because they achieve political power, and so on.

The policing of sexuality and gender is manifest in violence against anyone who is seen as violating the socially prescribed 'rules' and norms. This includes LGBTQI+ people, transgender people, intersex people and anyone whose gender expression, identity, or sexual activity does not conform to those rules and norms. All people in these groups, activists as well as others, face high levels of violence and discrimination in all parts of their lives.

ACTIVITY 6:

Analyse a case study

As an optional activity, analyse and explore intersectional identities in the Guardians of the River case study.

Small groups: Read or re-visit the case study and ask:

- How do gender, ethnicity, and class shape inequality and injustice in this story? How has the legacy of colonialism affected dynamics of identity, power, and privilege?
- How do powerful actors mobilise prejudice and systemic forms of oppressive and coercive power in the story?
- How do the activists, community, and/or movement in the story seek to disrupt systemic power dynamics of racism, sexism, and homophobia through their work? How do they build transformative power around a different vision and shared identity?

Each group prepares a three-minute scene, a body sculpture (still or moving, silent or with sound) or a drawing to illustrate the systemic oppressive power involved, and how the community built transformative power around a different vision and reclaimed identity.

Plenary: Groups present their scene, sculpture or drawing. Afterwards, ask:

- What did you see in these pieces? How did they shed light on the ways in which prejudice and systemic power are mobilised? How did they illustrate the ways in which communities are disrupting and shifting those dynamics?
- What can we learn from this about how systemic oppression is activated and reinforced as a powerful tool in our contexts? How are discrimination and prejudice embedded in structures?
- What strategies are activists and movements using to disrupt, challenge, or shift the power of systemic logics?
- What evidence of these systems do you see in your context? How do these logics show up in your own communities, organisations, and movements?

To conclude, draw out key points.



Summary

Our personal and interpersonal experiences of identity – and relative privilege or lack of it – are shaped by systemic power.

We call this fourth face of power 'systemic' because it is defined by pervasive and long-standing systems of domination: patriarchy, capitalism, structural racism/white supremacy and colonialism–imperialism.

The histories of these systems have driven a logic of domination, exploitation, and violence that permeates and shapes all our institutions and ways of thinking.

Our collective liberation depends on seeing how systemic power impacts our lives and how our work for transformation demands deeper levels of change.

Theme 3: Identity, Power, and Transformation



I will stand for you; will you stand for me? Everybody deserves to be free."

- Deva Mahal and Stephanie Brown with the Resistance Revival Choir

Intersectionality is linked to the recuperation of power within – the strength we can find in re/claiming our whole self as valuable; power with – finding others who are doing the same and who see us; and power for and power to – defining and working toward a vision of inclusive liberation where no part of us is left behind. This understanding can shift our analysis of what's wrong, what is needed and how we are going to get there together. Dealing with past legacies and present experiences of oppression can be difficult, but there is joy and celebration on the path as we affirm who we are and walk toward the world we want. We can all think of music, film, art, song, or poetry that has fed our spirit and nourished dreams in which we are all whole and all free.



Every time we try to imagine a world without prisons, a world without oppression, a world without war, without borders, that is science fiction, because we've never seen that world. But we need imaginative spaces because we can't build what we can't imagine. Without the ability to imagine something different, we are trapped within the parameters that the system has set for us."

- Walidah Imarisha⁸



I think hard times are coming when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now and can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being... We will need writers who can remember freedom – poets, visionaries – realists of a larger reality.... We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. But then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.

- Ursula K. Le Guin⁹

ACTIVITY 7:

Liberation, solidarity, and transformative power

Materials: If you created a timeline earlier, use it for reference here. If not, the group generates examples from their own knowledge.

Step 1. Identity, solidarity, and history – the timeline

Plenary: Ask each person to think about a moment in history when people – especially unlikely allies – came together in solidarity across identities and across movements to build collective power to create change. It could be something local or from another part of the world. Brainstorm some examples and record them on sticky notes or a flip chart.

Choose a few examples that seem to have the most resonance and break into small groups, each with an example.

Small groups: Discuss:

- What was the significance of this instance of solidarity and collaboration?
- On what grounds did the different groups come together and what activated their collaboration?
- Did the two groups have a prior connection and if so, what was it? If not, what enabled them to come together in this instance?
- What made the collaboration and solidarity work?
- What tensions did the groups need to manage in order to collaborate?

Plenary: Groups take turns to share insights.

- In these examples, what difference did it make to work with unlikely allies?
- What do you take away about working across difference and what makes it possible?

Step 2: Dreams of intersectional liberation

Plenary: To create the future we want, we need to imagine it. Every time we describe the world we want, someone or something tells us that this dream is impossible. But everything is impossible until we make it happen. Imagine those who organised for liberation over history – against chattel slavery, against colonial powers, for gender equity, for human rights, for our lands and planet, for the vote, for self-determination, for the right to love who we love. Surely these struggles seemed (and in many cases, can still seem) impossible. But we know that every gain for social justice has been achieved in the face of that impossibility.

Read out the quotes by Walidah Imarisha and Ursula K. Le Guin. Discuss:

- What do these quotes convey about imagining our way into a new future?
- How are we constrained by the ‘possible’?
- What is something you long for that is currently deemed ‘impossible’?

What might the future lead to? Screen and discuss a future-inspired video or film clip such as [M4BL: Black Futures](#): An Ode to Freedom Summer.

Small groups: Imagine a story of transformation 50 years from now when people came

together to create change. How are things in that future? How and why did people come together? What did they do? Why did it work?

Find a creative and inspiring way to share that story with those here in the present in under five minutes, perhaps a skit, set of drawings, or Wikipedia entry from the future

Plenary: Groups tell or present their stories. After each one, discuss:

- What moved you?
- What door in your mind, heart, or body opened at the prospect of that future?
- What inspired you?

Summarise the activity. Focus on:

- The importance of radical – and intersectional – imagination in connecting us across the divisions, beyond the sense of scarcity that keeps us fearful and toward our boldest vision for the future.
- The importance of telling these stories, carrying these narratives into what we say and do, and how we work.
- The connections between intersectional politics, radical imagining, transformative power, and collective action.



As much as these ‘categorisations’ of people in terms of identities linked to gender, race, or class and so on are used by people with resources and power as the basis for oppressing and violating those people, these identities are also a strong basis for groups of people organising to oppose and resist the inequality and marginalisation that they experience.

1 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider, Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley : Crossing Press 2007

2 K. Crenshaw, the Washington Post, Sept 24, 2015 “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait”.

3 K. Crenshaw, the Washington Post, Sept 24, 2015 “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait”.

4 Ayesha Imam, UNFPA; Women in Nigeria; African Feminist Forum .

5 Charlene Carruthers, *Unapologetic*, Beacon Press, 2018.

6 From Everyday Feminism website article

7 Step 1 of the Master’s House was developed by Koni Benson, Shereen Essof, and Anna Daviesvan Es. Step 2 was adapted by Malena de Montis for use in JASS Mesoamerica’s Alquimia’s Leadership Course for Indigenous and Rural Women.

8 Interviewed in the Anti-Racism Daily, February 23, 2023. Walidah is a writer, poet, activist, and academic in Portland, Oregon.

9 Ursula K. Le Guin, acceptance speech as Medallist for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. The Guardian.