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Forms of power

Power is an integral dynamic of politics, yet it turns out to be one of the more uncomfortable and difficult topics to address. People often see power as sinister and unchanging. Such a one-dimensional perspective can paralyse 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.

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 recognised form of power, power over, has many negative associations for people, such as repression, wealth, force, coercion, discrimination, corruption, and abuse. 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 the absence of alternative models and relationships, people repeat the power over pattern in their personal relationships, communities, and institutions. New forms of leadership and decision making 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.

- **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 can help build bridges across different interests to transform or reduce social conflict and promote equitable relations.
- **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.

- **Power within** has to do with a person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge. It includes an ability to recognise 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.

Advocacy most commonly uses these alternative sources of power to navigate and change the dynamics of power over. However, what makes power over difficult to analyse and confront is the fact that it does not always operate in visible ways (Box 1). In Table 1, 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.

Box 1 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 inheritance 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, the 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 erode their control over their communities. These authorities were 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 Supreme 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.

Table 1 Power, political participation, and social change

Mechanisms and strategies	Invisible power: shaping meaning	Hidden power: setting the political agenda	Visible power: observable decision making
	Problems and issues are not only kept from the decision-making table, but also from the minds and consciousness of the different players involved.	Influence by controlling who gets to the decision-making table and what gets on the agenda.	The visible and definable aspects of political power – the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions, and procedures of decision making.
<p>Mechanisms: different expressions and forms of power</p> <p>Participation in public decision making seems relatively straight forward on the surface. It appears to be determined by the political context, clout, resources, and expertise of different political actors. Yet invisible and hidden mechanisms of power shape the effectiveness of citizen participation. These mechanisms can lead to powerlessness, conflict, marginalisation, and resistance.</p> <p>Different strategies are required to counter these mechanisms so that political participation can be more inclusive and so people can exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens. (See below.)</p>	<p><i>Socialisation and control of information:</i> Processes, practices, cultural norms, and customs shape people's understanding of their needs, roles, possibilities, and actions in ways that deter effective action for change.</p> <p>Among marginal groups, socialisation internalises feelings of subordination, apathy, self-blame, powerlessness, unworthiness, hostility, anger, etc.</p> <p>Crucial information is concealed or inaccessible.</p>	<p><i>Exclusion and delegitimation:</i> Certain groups (and their issues) are excluded from decision making by society's and politic's unwritten rules, practices, and institutions. The media does not often consider these groups' issues to be mainstream or newsworthy.</p> <p>They and their grievances are made invisible by intimidation, misinformation, and cooption. Leaders are labelled trouble-makers or unrepresentative; issues such as domestic violence are relegated to the private realm of the family and therefore not subject to public action.</p>	<p><i>Formal institutions, officials and instruments:</i> Visible mechanisms of power shape the formal ground rules of society.</p> <p>Formal institutions and officials: President, Prime Minister, legislature, courts, ministries, police, military, etc. United Nations, IMF, World Bank; Private sector: industry, multinational corporations, chamber of commerce.</p> <p>Instruments: Policies, laws, constitutions, budgets, regulations, conventions, implementing mechanisms, etc.</p> <p>Forms of discrimination: biased laws/policies (for example health care policies that do not address women's reproductive needs); closed and unrepresentative decision making structures (parliaments, courts, etc.)</p>
<p>Strategies: principal advocacy strategies to counter powerlessness and exclusion</p> <p>Social justice advocacy requires comprehensive action strategies that address the different forms of visible, hidden, and invisible power by tapping alternative sources of power (power with, within and to).</p> <p>(The arrows reflect the interactive relationships between the different forms of power and the different types of strategies.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education for confidence, citizenship, collaboration, political awareness, political analysis, and using alternative media • Sharing stories, speaking out and connecting with others, affirming resistance, linking concrete daily problems with rights • Investigation, action research and dissemination of concealed information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building active constituencies around common concerns • Strengthening organisations, coalitions, movements, and accountable leaders • Mobilising around shared agendas: demonstrating clout through direct action • Participatory research and dissemination of information that legitimise the issues of the excluded groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying and monitoring • Negotiation and litigation • Public education and media • Policy research, proposals • Shadow reports • Marches and demonstrations • Voting and running for office • Modelling innovations • Collaboration • Etc.

Empowerment

Gender theory adds another perspective for understanding different levels and expressions of power which are applicable to women as well as men. 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, 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.

As the previous article on the experience in Indonesia shows, empowerment is a very complex and multi-layered

process. Social justice advocates want their strategies to empower people so they can 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.

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.

The Chaz! (Aha!) framework

The Chaz framework 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.¹ While developed from the experience of women's organising, it offers important insights for advocacy with any marginalised group. The chart was generated in response to the question: *What is political consciousness and how do you promote it?*

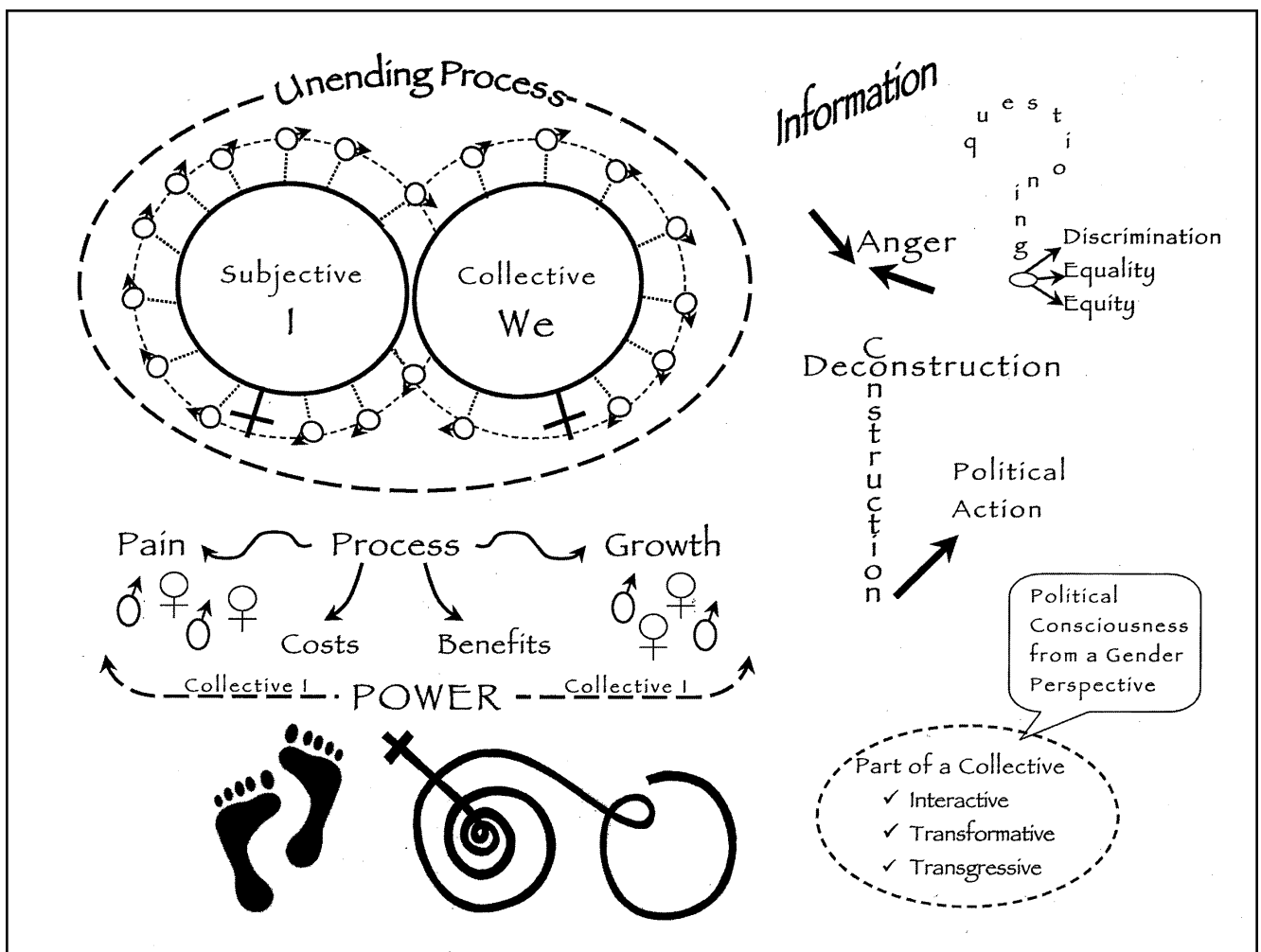
The framework begins in the upper left with the **Unending Process** of change and empowerment. The

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 'conscientisation'. It begins with **information** that stimulates **questions** and anger as a woman recognises 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 legitimise her desire for change.

Source: Adapted from VeneKlasen, L. with Miller, V. (2002) *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, World Neighbors, Oklahoma City, OK: Ch.3.

Figure 1 The Chaz framework



¹ GWIP/Cenzontle Advocacy TOT workshop held in Nicaragua in June 1998.