

1. POWER

Leadership is first and foremost about power – it is about holding power, exercising power, and changing the distribution and relations of power, in multiple forms and settings. Feminist leadership means functioning with a greater consciousness not only of others' but one's own power, but intentionally moving away from how leadership and power have intersected in mainstream organizations and structures, and from feminists' ambivalent historical relationship with power. The DAWN Ontario framework on feminist leadership analyzes the challenge thus:

Within feminist organizations, leaders work from a vision of shared power, providing opportunities for all members to develop and use their leadership skills. This idea may feel unfamiliar at first, as we often think of leaders in the traditional sense: a handful of people with high-ranking positions who have claimed the most power within their organization. Power is not shared in these structures, because being successful means always competing to be “number one.”

It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of feminist leadership development programs prioritize power analysis in their curricula, enabling participants to deconstruct and examine the different forms and ways in which power operates in the social context. Unfortunately, most of the other leadership development programs aimed at social change activists – including women activists – tend to take a more instrumental and managerial approach, giving greater emphasis to mechanical management and resource mobilization skills, but barely touching upon the fundamental concepts and dynamics of power. But even feminist leadership programs rarely address the internal power dynamics of women's organizations and movements. These are serious omissions, since the most overriding goal of feminist leadership is not creating well-managed organizations that maintain the social status quo, but working to transform the relations of power in society, and to create alternate models of power within their own structures. Consequently, it is useful to focus this section on strengthening our own understanding of power and the different ways it operates within and between individuals, groups, and systems.

Dimensions of Power in Leadership:

Veneklasen and Miller – two practitioner-scholars who have greatly advanced our understanding of power from a feminist perspective – provide an enormously helpful starting point by identifying the three realms in which power operates⁴¹: **the public** (where it is visible, such as the power of the government, military, police, judiciary, corporations, etc.), **the private** (within institutions like the family, clan, ethnic group, or in marriage, friendships, and other relationships), and **the intimate** (the power – or powerlessness – that we feel within ourselves, expressed usually in terms of self-confidence, self-esteem, control over our bodies, etc.). This takes the first feminist step of acknowledging, naming, and analyzing two important spheres of power that affect women’s lives deeply: the private and the intimate. Even more importantly, this framework helps us recognize the vital issue of the power within us, so drawing upon feminist notions of the *agency* that even the most seemingly powerless and marginalized women have. Recognizing the intimate realm of power means we are not empty vessels tossed around by the forces of power operating *upon* us, but that we possess power too, though we often don’t recognize this, or use it negatively or reactively, to resist or subvert the forces acting on us. This is an important idea to hang on to as we begin to tackle the dimension of power in feminist leadership.

Veneklasen and Miller also talk about the “three faces of power”, which they identify as **visible**, **hidden** and **invisible**⁴² - these closely intersect with other power frameworks that identify **direct**, **indirect**, and **agenda-setting power**^{43, 44, 45}. Since these forms of power play a critical role in sustaining patriarchal privilege and subordinating women, it is vital to unpack and understand them clearly:⁴⁶

41 Co-editors, Debbie Budlender and Cindy Clark, 2002, *A New Weave of Power and Politics – An Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, Oklahoma City, World Neighbors, P.51

42 Veneklasen with Miller, 2002, *op.cit.*, P.46 - 48

43 Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, London, MacMillan, 1974, and second edition, Palgrave, 2005

44 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality; Part I*, London, Allen Lane.

45 John Gaventa and Andrea Cornwall (2001) ‘Power and Knowledge’, in Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001) (Eds), Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (Eds) *Handbook of Action Research – Participative Inquiry and Practice*, London, California and New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2001 above, pp.70-80.

46 I would like to thank the Governance and Participation Unit, Institute for

Visible power is the one we are most familiar with, and have all experienced. It determines who participates – and who is excluded from – decision making in the public realm. Decisions, for instance, about what a country's development priorities should be, or how the village council's budget will be spent. Visible power is held by political leaders (elected or not!), police, military, and the judiciary; it is also held by the heads of multinational corporations, of clans and tribes, of social movement organizations like trade unions, or in the leadership of NGOs and women's organizations. **Direct power** is similar, though it operates in both the private and public realms, and determines how power, privilege and opportunity are allocated, and who is given authority to control resources, other people, or access to knowledge and information. A good example of this for women is the direct power held by male heads of households, and the gender division of labor and decision-making power, which dictates that women will perform certain household and production tasks that are critical for household survival, but they will not have the right to equal wages, control over their income, inheritance rights, or even control over their bodies in terms of their mobility, relationships, sexual expression, or reproduction. Visible or direct power also explains phenomena like son-preference, or how the interests of powerful economic and social groups (by virtue of their assets / wealth, position, gender, race, class, ethnicity, or caste, for instance) are able to dominate political systems at the cost of poorer people.

Hidden power – sometimes called **agenda-setting power** – is about who influences or sets the agenda behind the scenes, and the barriers and biases which determine which issues can be addressed, whose voices are heard or who is consulted on a particular issue. Again, hidden or agenda-setting power operates in both the private and public realms. In the public realm, for instance, we see hidden power operate when violence against women in conflict is not considered as critical as the loss of territory or military losses. Hidden power is also evident in the nexus between political leaders and fundamentalist lobbies with whom they have close, but covert, links, so the latter are able to influence political decisions and policies without any visible

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power or legitimacy. Within families, we also see how “good women” – those dutifully carrying out the patriarchal agenda and protecting male privilege – often enjoy behind-the-scenes power to influence male decision-makers, without any formal authority.

Invisible power – or **indirect power** – is in many ways the most insidious and problematic of all to challenge and confront, because it is the capacity to shape people’s self-image, self-esteem, social attitudes and biases, without any apparent role in doing so. The media and marketing / advertising industries are classic purveyors of such invisible power. The media exercises invisible power by constantly making choices about what issues to highlight and what to ignore, and by constructing images and shaping meaning in lasting ways. Every day’s television news, for instance, is instilling in us a sense of what are the most important issues of the day – but what they ignore and don’t cover in the news is also important, but by making those issues invisible, they are shaping our sense of social, economic and political priorities in profound ways that we are barely aware of! To understand the power of the media, we have only to consider the widely held image of the man-hating, family-breaking, hard-as-nails, promiscuous feminist. Most people have never met this creature in real life because she doesn’t exist – she is a media creation, but one that has taken such powerful hold of people’s imaginations everywhere, that few women who believe in gender equality and women’s rights are willing to call themselves feminists! Similarly, the advertising industry exercises invisible power by shaping meaning and creating new norms about what is good, desirable, positive, or bad, regressive, negative – the almost universal desire for fairer skin and thin bodies among Southern women, for instance, which in turn affects their sense of self-worth, is testimony to the invisible power of these forces.

These facets of power remind us that while leadership is primarily associated with decision-making power, it is about much more than that. As Devaki Jain argued over a decade ago,

“Leadership as a concept is much stronger than and different from the concept of decision-making. Participation in decision-making does not necessarily include, or address, the power hierarchy. One could be part of a decision-making process and not be powerful enough to influence that decision. Leadership, on the other hand, has a hierarchical significance. The demand from everywhere, whether from women, the Platform for Action

in Beijing, or the “Human Development Report 1995”, is for participation, for fixed shares in decision-making. That is not enough. To make effective demands for change, there is a case for the feminist movement to claim leadership and claim it because of its ethics and not only its gender.”⁴⁷

At the highest level, therefore, the goal of feminist leadership is two-fold:

1. To challenge visible, hidden and invisible power wherever it operates, and especially where it constructs and reinforces women’s subordination in both gross and subtle ways, or furthers discrimination against women; and
2. To construct alternative models of power that amplify the visible form to the maximum extent possible, and gradually eliminate invisible and hidden power. In other words, ***feminist leadership will strive to make the practice of power visible, democratic, legitimate and accountable, at all levels, and in both private and public realms.***

Let us now look more closely at power within leadership roles. Here, it is useful to first make a distinction between the ***intrinsic*** and ***extrinsic*** power of leadership, mirroring feminism’s long-standing slogan of the personal is the political.

- ***Intrinsic power – or intimate power*** – is the force of the personality traits, charisma, talents, capabilities, knowledge, and experience that the individual leader has, that have been acquired through the circumstances of her life, and are hence unique to her. This could also be termed the role of the SELF, of our psychic structures, experiences, and attributes in a leadership role. Recognizing that we bring both negative and positive qualities, and a willingness to examine and address our negative traits, is a vital component in feminist leadership, since by tackling the personal effectively, we are also enabling ourselves to tackle the political goals of equality, human rights and justice.
- ***Extrinsic power*** – or the authority that comes to a feminist leader from outside herself, which includes :

⁴⁷ Devaki Jain, ‘Women and Ethical Leadership’, in Bella Abzug and Devaki Jain, *Women’s Leadership and the Ethics of Development*, Gender in Development Monograph Series #4, UNDP, August 1996, p.7

- a. the **assigned authority** she is given by others (e.g. a board of directors or trustees, the people who elected her the leader, etc.);
- b. the **positional authority** that her leadership role gives her (hiring, firing, managing people and finances, representing, raising resources, making strategic decisions, etc.);
- c. the **earned authority** that she gains by using her assigned and positional authority carefully and fairly, by sharing her power with others, by acting inclusively, and because of the personal attributes, experience, and skills – or **intrinsic power** – that she brings to her role. There is a lot of evidence that the best feminist leaders are those who convert their assigned authority into earned authority in a short space of time, so that their leadership is supported by all those engaged in the enterprise with them, and not just a set of external actors!

At the organizational or movement building level, feminist leadership must also wrestle with five key **expressions of power** that are attendant in such processes^{48, 49}:

Power to – refers to the agency and capacity to act that leadership must leverage, within itself and in others, to create change; it is about the strategic skills, experience, insight, etc., that can be marshaled and mobilized towards the transformative agenda that has been adopted; *power to* is the recognition of what we, the change makers, bring to the table – the intrinsic power described above;

Power over – derives from direct power and positional / assigned authority, the control (direct or indirect) over the human and other resources within the process, and the way such control can very quickly slip into domination; also control over the use and deployment of resources, decision-making, etc.;

Power with – the effective empowerment and enabling of all those engaged in the transformative process to create solidarity, mutual support systems, safety nets, etc. [This is the power that tests whether leaders are acting as individual heroes / heroines

48 Jo Rowlands, 1997: *Questioning Empowerment – Working with Women in Honduras*, Oxford, Oxfam.

49 Veneklasen with Miller, 2002, *op.cit.*

with followers, or as initiators and sustainers of collective processes of change with a number of fellow-travellers!];

Power within – this is often the source of the sustainability of feminist organizations and movements, since this relates to the intrinsic power mentioned earlier, but also to the capacity to regenerate oneself and one's strategies in response to the challenges and reversals that feminist change processes inevitably unleash. The power within also includes, in Naila Kabeer's classic term, those "intangible resources"⁵⁰ – such as knowledge, access to information, influence, contacts, etc. - that can be leveraged for the cause or organization, and make up a distinct characteristic of leadership; and

Power under – in many ways this is the most complex but pervasive expression of power in women's organizations, and helps us understand why people who have experienced abuse, oppression and trauma, when they gain power (especially power to and power over), often become abusive, authoritarian, and oppressive themselves. Steven Wineman, who has developed this concept through his work on survivors of conflict, trauma and violence, posits that *power under* emerges from *powerless rage*, which unleashes both the destructive power of sabotage and subversion that is often unconsciously deployed by those who have experienced severe oppression or trauma, as well as the constructive power for building movements to confront and overcome injustice⁵¹. Internally, survivors of trauma and violence find it difficult to transit from being objects / victims of oppression to subjects and agents of change; they are unable to hold and exercise power non-oppressively. Since feminist organizations are often created, led, and staffed by women, many of whom are survivors of various traumatic or oppressive experiences, the *politics of powerlessness* creates behavioral patterns that affect organizational functioning in profound and disturbing ways:

We have known for a long time that tendencies toward domination and top-down practices don't just exist in mainstream society, but also within progressive... movements and organizations – that we internalize these tendencies and

50 Naila Kabeer, 1994, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, London, Verso Press

51 Steven Wineman, 2003, *Power-Under: Trauma and Nonviolent Social Change*, Cambridge, MA., downloadable from www.TraumaandNonviolence.com , P.47 - 118

*carry them with us, no matter how honestly and deeply we believe in egalitarian principles and values. As products of a society organized around domination, the struggle to create equal power relations is always internal as well as external. I am suggesting that the same is true regarding powerlessness, and that we need to pay the same kind of scrupulous attention to power-under within social change movements that is needed to struggle against tendencies toward power-over. In fact domination and powerlessness are two sides of the same coin, and are interrelated not only between individuals but also within individuals in ways that are critical to examine and understand.*⁵²

An excellent example of the destructive and constructive capacity of *power under* is what many seasoned African feminists call the “The Zanzibar Experience” - a promising meeting that turned into a nightmare of pain, anger, and recriminations. In 2003, a group of feminists met in Zanzibar to plan the African Feminist Congress. Thirty-five of them met on a Monday, and soon discovered that assumptions each woman had made about the others’ unarticulated individual and organizational politics weren’t holding up – in other words, there was a lot of *powerless rage* playing itself out in the process. By Thursday, back-biting, hostility, tears, bitterness and chaos reigned. The Congress didn’t happen, and the participants learned the difficult lesson that theory and practice don’t always go together. On the positive side, the Zanzibar experience led African feminist leaders to realize that one of the first steps to effective feminist leadership is to acknowledge that we come into the movement with different histories and experiences, and consequently, we need to create basic rules of engagement to govern how we treat each other, and how to handle our own destructive tendencies. The African Feminist Charter⁵³, the first such code of conduct in the feminist world, was the powerful gift of the Zanzibar debacle.

Power in organizations:

Leadership is practiced, for the most part, in organizational settings. Having unpacked a whole range of concepts about power, it is now necessary to understand the dynamic of power

⁵² Steven Wineman, 2003, *ibid.*, P.48

⁵³ Downloadable from www.africanfeministforum.org/Charter