



HANDOUT

PAGE 2/2

FORMAT:

GROUP
EXERCISE

Power Session

'For feminists, the issue of power is mostly perceived in a negative way. It's a taboo word. It is acceptable to speak of resisting power, renouncing power – but not of having power, or using it correctly, or sharing it.'

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Power is central to our activism. Our work is grounded in resisting and challenging the abuse of power, in all its manifestations – discrimination, violence, homophobia, poverty, patriarchy, machismo, capitalism, racism . . . the list is endless.

That is one aspect of power – what some people would call 'power-over'.

Essentially, this is using power to get someone else to do what you want them to do. This is power as domination: it is about unjust or oppressive power relations, controlling or coercing others to submit to your will. Many feminists would argue that this form of power is grounded in an aggressive worldview that sees life as a win-lose situation – where you are either on top and powerful (wielding 'power over') or oppressed ('power under').

Sometimes, we talk also about shared power – 'power with' – which is about reciprocal, balanced,

equal relationships. Really, that is our goal as activists – creating a world where we celebrate our common bonds and our differences – and where we truly, honestly share. Where we recognise and equally value what we bring to each other, without judgement.

That is the gold standard – the aspiration.

But the reality is that we are all human beings – and we all struggle with our relationship with power. How we feel about our *own* power. How we use power in relation to the people and the communities we say we represent. Or the people who support us in our activism – who may help us to care for our offices, our children, our homes.

And understanding how we use power with each other, among activists. Sometimes, to support, encourage and heal. Sometimes to remain silent, ignore or exclude. Sometimes to wound, betray and isolate.

How power dynamics flow through all of the layers we believe define us – the colour of our skin, the years in our bodies, who we love, how we move in this world, how we make a living – and stand as silent barriers between us as individual activists, between our organisations, in our movements.

All of these aspects of power are painful and complicated. They are grounded in messages we

absorbed into our bodies from day one, how we have been treated, how we learned to treat others, who and what we learned to fear and to value. The ways we have swallowed – and sometimes spit out – oppression, discrimination and violence.

Power is. We all have it. We all use it. All the time. Used with deliberate intent to harm or carelessly, it is a destructive force. Employed consciously with honesty, compassion and passion, it is a tremendous, transformative resource.

So, here is the big question: how do we get to a place where we, as activists, see ourselves as powerful in a good way? Where we share and celebrate that power with each other, with the people who support us, with the people we support?

We start by asking ourselves the hard questions about power in our relationships – with ourselves, and with each other.