

Episode 1 : Power (Transcript)

Lisa VeneKlasen

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Srilatha Batliwala

Welcome to Think Feminist by CREA, podcasts on feminist ideas to help deepen your feminist way of thinking. I'm Srilatha Batliwala, a feminist activist, scholar, trainer, and your host.

In each episode, I will take you through a different concept, ranging from power, and patriarchy, to feminist movements, and leadership. We begin today by exploring power.

Since power is at the heart of feminist analysis, and social change. Power. It's one of those big and complicated ideas that we usually feel rather than define. And that's why we begin this podcast series with power.

Because power is at the heart of feminist analysis and social change work. In CREA's primer, all about power, we have explored the Many Faces and dynamics of power,

And how power lies at the heart of human relationships and of how societies are organized. As feminist activists, we are trying to tackle the injustice exclusion, stigmas and violence that we see all around us.

But do we always recognize that these are actually expressions of power, or symptoms of power structures? Do we realize that we are actually trying to change power with patience?

Today, you will hear from our guests why we must begin by sharpening our own understanding of power if we want to build a more just equal, inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable world.

Let's listen to our first guest, Lisa VeneKlasen who talks about how power operates in society.

Lisa VeneKlasen

I mean, I think the simplest way of thinking about power is the possibility of making a difference of change. Everyone uses the famous quote from Martin Luther King, where power is neither good nor evil.

It all depends on how it's used, its purpose. And power comes from many different things and is used in many, many different ways. It is held by individuals, it's held by groups, it's institutionalized, it's systemic.

We often think of power negatively. But as we can see in our work, that we can build power, we can empower, we can change power.

Srilatha Batliwala

So that was Lisa VeneKlasen, who is an American activist, educator, strategist, and founder of the International Organization, Just Associates or JASS.

Lisa has over 30 years of experience in social justice and women's rights organizations and in movement building. Her work talks about how power operates in three key forms, which she has recently expanded to four.

Lisa VeneKlasen

The first phase of power is visible power. And those are the formal structures of power. So those are laws, legal systems, legislatures, the UN.

The second phase of power is called Hidden Power and, and those are the forces and actors and interests that operate under the table of formal decision making.

Hidden Power is essentially about controlling the agenda, controlling policy and controlling territory increasingly so. We're living in a time where corporations have the religious right, a lot of forces that are not part of the formal structures of power are controlling policymaking?

Invisible power. The third phase of power is about belief systems and narratives. So invisible power is really the ability to shape beliefs about who and what matters in the world. And those beliefs are internalized.

Well, over the last year, I've had some time to really reflect on the framework of the three phases of power. And so today, we have four phases of power. We've added the fourth phase of power, which refers to systemic power, and I call it setting the codes.

This is like the DNA of how power works, it's even more invisible than the internalized belief systems of oppression that are shaped so much by identity and structures of discrimination.

So this is capitalism, structural racism, patriarchy, colonialism, imperialism. So these are their interlocked systems of essentially individualism, commodification, consumerism, that are baked into the structures of power.

Srilatha Batliwala

These forms of power are embedded everywhere, in our public, private, and intimate spaces. Our work often focuses on power that visibly operates in public, such as when we advocate to change unjust laws.

But remember, feminism never stops at the door of the house, so that we can't let our understanding of power exist only in the public space. Challenging the hidden power that Lisa speaks of, is the only way to dismantle the structures that uphold unjust power.

If the four phases of power are like buildings all around us, then there are three pillars that any power structure relies on, to get us to accept it, and participate in it. The most important pillar of all is ideology, which is simply put, a story that is created to justify the existing power structure.

One good example of this is caste ideology, the story that you are where you are in the caste hierarchy, because of the sins of your past life. And the only way to improve your position in your next life is to do your duty in your present cost location.

The second pillar is social norms, which are beliefs and practices that we act out every day, that support the existing power structure, like the caste is a social norm, that so called upper caste people should not share food, or eat meals, alongside so called lower caste people,

or the norm that a good woman has to dress, walk and speak in a particular way. And the third pillar is social institutions that teach us these rules and norms and then force them in different ways.

I mean, institutions like the family, the school, religious institutions, laws and law enforcement systems, the market, the bank, the office. So putting the three pillars together, we can see that everything can be a source of power.

Material resources, like land, money, and capital and human resources like people's labor, or our bodies as reproductive and sexual agents. But intangible sources of power are also really important to account for. Things like knowledge and data information, networks and influence.

Aruna Rao

Power really is everywhere right? And it comes from so many different sources. Power is in knowledge and power is in ideas, the ways in which we think and what is valued in disciplines, what we understand as normal behaviors and hierarchies. In all of those there is power operating right power, power Produces reality.

Srilatha Batliwala

That's our second guest. Aruna Rao, who co-founded the transnational organization, Gender At Work. Aruna's work focuses on analyzing how these intangible power structures operate in organizations.

I really like the way that Aruna and her colleagues define power on the basis of four simple questions, who gets what, who does what, who decides what and who frames the agenda.

Aruna Rao

So there are visible ways in which power is exercised through positional authority, power is exercised through the ability to control resources like money, time. Power is the ability to, to make policies to to implement accountability mechanisms.

But power is also invisible in that all of us as individuals within organizations, have capabilities, have agency, have commitments, have desires, have ideas, and all of that is our own individual power.

And we can exercise that in ways that are either coercive, or we can exercise it in ways that are empowering both to us and to others, we can work with others and in solidarity with others, we can draw on our on our ability to think to, to exercise agency through knowledge and the skills that we bring to any particular situation.

We can also exercise power through our insights and our ability to listen, our ability to be patient and still and watch for what is important.

Srilatha Batliwala

I like Aruna's reminder to us that some forms of power are liberating. They give us the capacity to make changes in our own lives. And as Lisa pointed out, even small acts of asserting our own individual power, can challenge larger power structures.

Lisa VeneKlasen

In JASS in the early years, we developed the slogan of, "Caution, women crossing the line!" And we developed that slogan, in response to what we were seeing, which is so many individual women and queer, lesbian, fam, those who didn't fit in, and who were being shamed and marginalized, of resisting, in day to day ways, in small ways in their families, just by demanding a certain kind of behavior or opening up certain kinds of conversation. We've all done it in our own lives.

When I became an activist, it was a huge break and struggle in my family when other members of my family came out as gay. These are ways that we live into who we are. And we are exercising resistance by discovering who we are, and claiming who we are, and helping others change.

Srilatha Batliwala

One of the ways that power stops us from making those acts of resistance is by creating fear of violence as a consequence, fear is used to make us to the line and violence is the tool that is resorted to when all the other mechanisms of control and acceptance and ideological brainwashing are being challenged and broken down. And the power structure is being shaken up by those it has oppressed.

Violence is being used in and practiced in an escalating way around the world. You see the organizing of farmers, and rural people and indigenous people fighting against big infrastructure projects, dams, giant agricultural projects, oil and gas exploration, that's displacing them. And they are not backing down.

And the threat of violence is so familiar to feminists who've worked so many years in gender based violence. But we're now seeing that our systems of jailing, and punishment are once again reinforcing these forms of violence.

So I think, in the moment, we are looking at how do we begin to build alternative systems and ways of being that break from violence as the ways of solving problems, and as central to the structures of power that are essentially about control and exclusion?

What Lisa is talking about is a strategy that feminists have used for decades, to use care work, and community building as resistance against violence.

Lisa VeneKlasen

I think it's really important to integrate safety and care into how we organize, and how we take care of each other. And that together, we build collective forms of, it's called protection in the human rights defenders world,

but it's really it's collective care, it's collective safety, that when we mobilize an action, when we speak out, when we move, we prepare, and assume that it will generate conflict in some form. So we prepare and care for each other in our planning.

Transforming power structures is difficult, slow, laborious work. Understanding how power operates, helps us to develop strategies that transform the networks of power around us. As Aruna points out,

Aruna Rao

it's helpful to think of power not as a monolith within any organization within any structure, there are always spaces and allies that you can find, to work with to bring about change, one very effective strategy has been for women's rights

And also, so for LGBTQI rights, has been to work within the kind of the spaces, the cracks within organizational structures and policy structures, and to create a safe space where a new idea can grow and to build coalitions around those ideas, to build strength in that way.

And then to take that force and then address policy or advocate for policy or advocate for change. And often, these kinds of strategies have used, inside or outside of strategies where you have people within any power structure,

who could be seen as allies, who find it strategic at a particular moment to push a particular agenda, and working with those on the outside who have the commitment, the force, the, the new ideas of bringing about change,

Srilatha Batliwala

When we are strategizing around power. Another way to analyze disempowerment that I find useful is the barriers model, looking at each barrier that prevents someone from accessing the rights that they are entitled to.

The first barrier is awareness of their rights. Many women do not know they have rights. They are only aware of their duties and responsibilities.

The second barrier is getting permission from the family, the community to assert their rights. The third barrier is resources. They may not have the money for the bus fare for legal fees for doctor's fees.

The fourth barrier is whether there are appropriate services and laws that can enable women to claim their rights. For example, are there laws guaranteeing minimum wages, the right to education, or penalties for violence against women.

And even if the laws are there, are there affordable service providers within easy reach of the women who need them. And finally, the fifth barrier is the toughest of all.

And that is the attitude and behavior of service providers, which is often very contrary to the spirit of the laws and the policies that were meant to advance women's rights. So power needs to be built to take on and bring down each of these barriers.

Lisa VeneKlasen

There are four types of power building strategies that are very interconnected. The first is strategies that engage. These are about engaging the formal structures of power, the formal decision making frameworks, the rules, and the enforcement of the rules.

And those we see that everywhere with policy work and leave for work. The second is the resist and expose strategies. These are resistance movements that expose abuses of power that work outside the formal structures of power, and call out and resist against violence and injustice.

The third is the reimagining and creating strategies. These are the core of our vision, the creation of our long term visions, values that shape our demands that shape our practice, and how we organize.

And then the fourth type of strategy is organizing and developing shared leadership, critical consciousness networks coming together in those quiet spaces, to build relationships of trust, and shared agendas that hold us together over time.

Srilatha Batliwala

So the good news is that unjust oppressive power structures are always resisted. Every power structure, no matter how strong, it may seem, has always been challenged by individuals, sometimes by groups, and sometimes by the entire mass of people that it has kept down.

Aruna Rao

The question now we need to ask ourselves is, our organizations, the way we understand them, the way we see them, the way we interact with them are those the best ways now of achieving the kinds of goals that we need to address ourselves to.

And they may not be, we may need to be thinking about different ways of organizing ourselves to achieve these goals, just as feminism cracked open that door between, the public, and the private divide, which was a fundamental, which is a fundamental divide.

We also now need to crack open this door of, what is the best way in which we can work and live together that enable us to address the kinds of incredible crises that we're facing now and not be complacent to work within the structures that we have now, many of which no longer serve the purposes for which they were built.

And, sometimes, it's not possible to work in symbiosis with structures of power. Sometimes you simply have to break these structures, you have to smash them in order for something new to build.

Srilatha Batliwala

However, the power of collective protest is used to resist oppressive power structures too. Sometimes the power structure becomes so overwhelmingly oppressive, that the vast majority of people joined together to overthrow it,

As the case of the feudal monarchy in Nepal, or the overthrow of Pakistan's rule, and the birth of Bangladesh and the protests and resistance we are seeing all over the world against unjust, oppressive governments.

Even at an individual level, people can make extraordinarily powerful gestures of resistance. Malala Yousafzai, for instance, resisted the orders of a religious fundamentalist group, the Taliban, and fought for the right of girls to go to school.

She was shot, survived, and became a Nobel Prize winner and Ambassador for girls education rights. These are just a couple of the many examples that come to mind when I think about feminist resistance to unjust power.

I'm sure you can remember many more. I hope this deep dive into power gives you something to think about more deeply. I'm sure by now you can see by understanding power more clearly, it's many forms and phases, the ways in which power structures arise and maintain their control and how power structures are challenged in your system. This is critical for anyone involved in social change work.

Srilatha Batliwala

Thanks for listening to Think Feminist. We'll be back with more episodes. For more about CREA. Check out creaworld.org or follow us on Twitter and Instagram @think.crea.

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