

# THE MEANINGS OF POWER

Power has several different meanings; it is not always negative and not just about control and domination. At the most basic level, power is about the ability to do something or get something done; whether directly (doing it oneself) or indirectly (by influencing other persons). There are different types of power and many ways of exercising it.

- ▶ **Power-over:** This refers to the ability of those with more control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources to affect the lives, actions and thoughts of those with less access to and control over such resources. Power-over is the most commonly recognized form of power, and is associated with hierarchy, repression, force, coercion, discrimination, corruption, and abuse. Social hierarchies are about power-over, based on social divisions linked to gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity/race, nationality, and sexuality and reinforced by the law, the economy, the family, religion, education, and the media. At its most basic, power-over operates to privilege certain people (e.g. men) while marginalizing others (e.g. women); it means the power that one person or group uses to control another person or group.
- ▶ **Power-over and patriarchal masculinities:** In patriarchal societies, men are granted power over women and girls and gender inequalities are the result of this gendered power-over system. Patriarchal masculinities are about power-over, being those norms and practices of masculinity that enforce women's subordinate status relative to men, and the marginalization of gender and sexual minorities.
- ▶ **Power-within:** This potential for power is linked with gaining the sense of self-identity, confidence and awareness that is a precondition for action; gaining a greater sense of power within. Power-within has to do with a person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge, and the capacity to imagine and have hope about exercising their rights to dignity and agency in their lives. Gender equality work is often focused on strengthening women's and girls' sense of power-within. The willingness and ability of men and boys to get involved in work challenging patriarchal masculinities often depends on their own sense of power-within, not least when it comes to challenging the norms in which they have been raised.
- ▶ **Power-to:** This is a very different understanding of power, as the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world. Education, training and leadership development for social justice are based on the belief that each individual has the power to make a difference; which can be multiplied by new skills, knowledge, awareness and confidence. Power-to is the capacity to act and to realise the potential of rights, citizenship or voice. Much of the focus of work on women's empowerment has been to strengthen women's and girls' power-to capacity.
- ▶ **Power-with:** This refers to the collective power which can emerge through partnerships and collaboration with others, or through processes of collective action and alliance building. Power-with has to do with finding common ground to strengthen collective action, based on mutual support, solidarity, and collaboration. Working with men to foster their power-with collaborations with women is critical for addressing gender inequalities.