



# Power Flower: Our Intersecting Identities

**Overview:** Every one of us has multiple, nuanced identities that help form our lives. Just as our own identities are complex so too are those of the women we work with. Gender, race, ethnicity, age, education, among others intersect and interact to shape who we are and what challenges and contradictions we confront. As an introduction to a broader analysis of power, the Power Flower promotes a fuller understanding of intersectionality that helps us become more integrated and sensitive human beings and more effective leaders and activists.

**Purpose:** The Power Flower explores our intersecting identities and the ways that they contribute to both oppression and privilege, illustrating how power is relational and always dynamic. Intersectionality shapes our potential for both exercising authority and becoming compelling, collaborative and transformative organizers and leaders. By reflecting on how these forces operate in people's lives, we deepen our understanding of how identity, power, subordination, and exclusion affect our organizations, ourselves as individuals, and our social change strategies. We realize that to solve the injustices of our time, we need to join forces across our identities to build interconnected movements and action strategies.

*Note: The Power Flower can be used after and in conjunction with the Identity Flower which introduces the concept of intersectionality at a basic level. You will need to make adjustments in the step by step process for this exercise, depending on whether you combine these two activities. The Power Flower, itself, can be used to analyze different layers of our identity from the very personal and social to the organizational and political. Depending on time, you may just want to focus on the social dimension and only mention the organizational and political aspects briefly.*

**Time:** 1 hour and 45 minutes

**Materials and Space Necessary:**

- Sheets of paper in a variety of colors with flower outline (see below)
- Markers and/or crayons



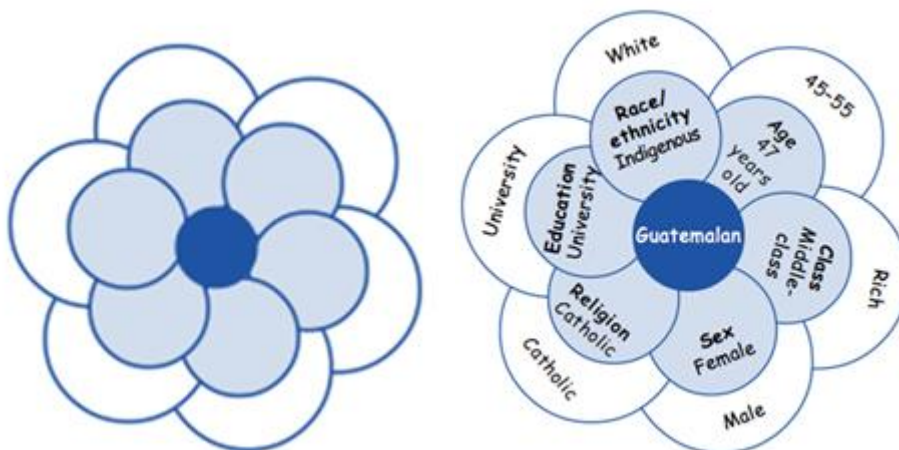
- Tape or glue
- Flip chart
- Newsprint
- Handouts and readings
- Empty wall

**Credit:** Adapted by Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, originally designed by Bev Burke, Barb Thomas, et. al.

**Process:**

**Prior to exercise:**

- Before the exercise, draw the power flower on a large piece of paper and place it on the wall. Label each petal to represent a different category, which can include: sex, race, ethnic group, class, language, religion, family type of arrangements (single, extended, etc.), age group, education, marital status (married, divorced, single), ability/disability, location (urban/suburban/rural), geographic region (origin), geographic region (current), etc. The central part of the flower represents a person's nationality. The inner petals indicate the individual's specific identity e.g. gender: *female*; religion: *Muslim*, etc. The outer ones represent the specific identity of those in power, e.g. gender: *male*; religion: *Catholic*. In creating the flower, choose 6 - 7 categories of identity that you think most relevant to your context and write them on the respective petals. In the exercise, each person will fill out their own characteristics. See below for sample of the social dimension of identity.





**In plenary:**

- Introduce purpose of exercise – highlighting that this is a way to reflect on who we are in relationship to those in power and what characteristics we draw on in our leadership and movement-building. If the group has not done the identity flower, you might mention that we draw on multiple layers of identities in our lives and work. Explain that we will be using the symbol of a flower to map a few key elements of our identities and their relationship to power.

*Note: To further introduce the process you might consider the following as an explanation or use it in the wrap up.*

*We are members of more than one community at the same time and so can experience oppression and privilege simultaneously. As some academics say, we possess multiple identities, multiple social characteristics. We have, for example, professional identities and identities as wife or mother. How does this work? A doctor is respected in her profession but may suffer domestic violence at home in her private life. She experiences both privilege and domination at the same time. Intersectionality is an analytical tool for studying, understanding, and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other social characteristics or identities and contributes to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Just as gender-blind programming is likely to fail, so are blunt instruments that slot people into simple categories like “poor”, “young”, “rural”, etc. By reflecting on how these multiple aspects operate in our own lives, we can gain a better sense of ourselves and our relationship to power and understand how these factors influence others. Since everyone is made up of different characteristics, we need to find points of connection and action with people across these differences so that we can tackle the multiple forms of discrimination we face whether they be due to class, race, gender, age etc.*

- Describe the flower: Each petal represents one category of identity, point out the specific categories that you have chosen for the purpose of the exercise, and mention some of the others as well so they get the concept. The central part of the flower represents a person’s nationality. The inner petals indicate the individual’s specific identity e.g. sex: *female*; religion: *Muslim*, etc. The outer ones represent the specific identity of those in power, e.g. sex: *male*; religion: *Catholic*.
- Discuss each category and the characteristics of those who have most power in the society. Using the drawing on the wall, fill in these dominant characteristics for that category in the outside circle of each petal. (For example, which sex or which ethnic group has the most power.)



**Individually:**

- Hand out pieces of paper with pre-drawn flowers on them to each person.
- Ask everyone to work by themselves and write in the outer petals of their flowers those dominant characteristics that were agreed on by the group for each respective category.
- Have each person write their own identity for each petal/category on the flower's inner circle.
- When finished, ask them to think about the following questions and jot down some of their ideas:
  - How many of your personal characteristics are different from the dominant identity?
  - Which characteristics cannot be changed?
  - What does this say about your own power or potential for exercising power?
  - How might this influence your work as an organizer/facilitator?

**In plenary:**

- Hold a "garden or flower show" in which the flowers are affixed to the wall. Everyone takes a stroll around the show and stops before a flower where each participant gives some of her reflections regarding the questions above, especially the last two.

**In small groups:** Going deeper:

- What does the exercise reveal about us as a group? In particular: What are the differences and similarities in relation to the dominant power? How can that influence our work?
- What does this exercise tell us about identity and power more broadly?

**In plenary:**

- Present and discuss responses from small groups.
- Synthesize key ideas and deepen reflections, emphasizing, for example, that each of us has a complex identity made up of different aspects and that those using *power over* – in other words oppressive forms of power – use these differences to pit us against one another, or to discriminate against a whole set of people and ideas, etc. Here you could make reference to patriarchy and the Master's House as examples of how these dynamics come together and silence us.



### The Complexity of Individual Identity

This analysis helps reveal the relationships between women and the processes of subordination that affect their lives. Because each individual has many identities, individuals can be dominant in one relationship and subordinate in another. For example, being a woman or man is only one part of an individual's identity. Other aspects such as age, class, race, and ethnicity also affect that person's social relations and power. While each situation presents a unique configuration of power imbalances and dynamics, in most hierarchies of power, wealthy males are dominant. To be effective as activists, we need to take these things into consideration in our leadership, our strategies and within our organizations.

- Further analysis: If you feel it's useful, after you have concluded your discussion on aspects of social identity and intersectionality, you can go deeper by looking at organizational identity and/or political identity. The elements for organizational and political identity usually differ more than for social identity between cultures and contexts. Some possible dimensions are:

#### Organizational Identity:

- *Category of the organization:* e.g., government, NGO or type of NGO, private sector, community-based or peoples' organization, social movement, coalition, labor union, women's organization
- *Structure:* e.g., collective, hierarchical, voluntary, paid, professional, business
- *Position within the organization:* e.g., director, head of specific program, member, trainer, technical specialist, lobbyist, volunteer

#### Political Identity:

- It is difficult to prescribe a process for analyzing political identity. The categories – left, right, and center – are common in most contexts, but the shades of difference in political identity in different contexts cannot be universalized. This analysis can be broken down in terms of political tendency or political party affiliation.





**Handouts:** You can use these examples to discuss intersectionality. You may want to share various readings on Intersectionality as well.

### **Examples of Intersectionality:**

#### **Globally**

Traffickers target specific groups of women and girls – those who are vulnerable because of racial, sexual, class, and descent-based discrimination. They are often tricked into leaving their homes and countries by the promise of better work opportunities. Gender considerations alone cannot accurately describe or respond to the problem. Sex workers in the Netherlands have organized and won many rights of protection. However, these rights are mainly enjoyed by white, Native-Dutch sex workers but missing from the lives of darker-skinned, immigrant women.

#### **USA**

Women of color are subjected to racial discrimination in the USA. Additionally, their experiences will be shaped by class, ethnicity, education, sexual and gender identity and age which have their own social and political dynamics of privilege, power and oppression. Depending on the intersections of these identities, women will be treated differently in different contexts. A middle class African-American university professor, for example, while sharing some experiences with an African-American woman who works as a cleaner in a non-union hotel, will likely deal with different kinds of vulnerability, discrimination and power.

#### **India**

When a young girl is assaulted at a school bus stop in India, the first reaction is to demand better police security on the road. However, community consultations plus statistical and contextual analysis reveal that this is less of a police security issue per se. Rather, the assault reveals discrimination against Dalit girls and women who are part of the untouchable caste, usually poor, often dark-skinned, and whose families are without formal education. To respond to this kind of discrimination and aggression demands a different set of remedies and solutions beyond increased policing. The intersection of gender, race, class, education and social status needs to be factored into any response as well.

#### **Canada**

In Canada, experience shows that single, black women have a particularly hard time finding apartments – landlords buy into various stereotypes based on race, gender, and marital status and consider them unreliable. On the basis of sex or race alone, this discrimination would not be fully understood. Courts would fail to see that there is bias against those who are single, black and female. If they are poor or immigrants, class and other biases also enter the picture.