

# Introductory Exercise 3

“The barriers between castes have broken. Now we are friends. Earlier we used to discriminate a lot. As we started coming together, all hesitations have washed out. To hell with the caste system. All humans are alike, their blood is the same. So why should we discriminate against others?”

young woman, India

“We have established new friendships with girls from different [caste] groups. It doesn't matter. We encourage each other to pursue our dreams.”

young woman, India

## Rebuilding the World

### Introduction

This exercise explores notions of power and social status. By giving participants the ‘power’ to assign value to different members of society, this exercise is meant to cause some discomfort among participants; it should not be an easy task to decide who gets to live and who must die!

### Objectives

- To challenge participants’ thinking around power, social status, and discrimination
- To expose ways in which social status and power play into our attitudes and expectations about certain people or groups of people

**Timeframe:** 1 – 1 ½ hours

**Materials needed:** paper and pens, prepared flipchart page with list of 10 people

**Ideal workspace:** enough space for people to have small group discussions

**Number of participants:** 10-25; preferably similar numbers of men and women, and preferably people of diverse social status



Sarah Kambou/ICRW

## STEP 1

Divide participants into groups of 4-5 people, and explain the following scenario.

Within a few moments a powerful bomb will explode. There is room for only six people to be saved in an atomic shelter before the bomb goes off, but there are ten people who want to come inside. Your task is to choose the six who – in your opinion – should be allowed in. These six people will be responsible for rebuilding the world after the bomb.

Groups should carefully study the characteristics of the ten candidates, then choose the six that they think should be allowed into the shelter and explain why.

1. Police officer with a gun
2. 16-year-old mentally disabled girl
3. Olympic athlete, 19 years old, homosexual
4. Female pop singer, 21 years old, very beautiful
5. 50-year-old black woman, religious leader
6. Peasant woman, pregnant for the first time
7. Philosopher, 70-year-old grandfather
8. Biochemist (male) 35 years old, in a wheelchair
9. Communist (male), specialist in medical sciences
10. 'Retired' prostitute, 40 years old

After each group has chosen six people, bring everyone back to the large group and discuss the different lists. Did the small groups choose the same people or different people? Were their reasons for choosing a particular person similar or different?



Doris Bartel/CARE

“When talking about exclusion – gender and caste – we now know it’s an active exclusion. We used to assume that it was passive exclusion, blaming the beneficiaries because they are ‘lazy.’ ”

CARE staff member

“The discussions about sexual marginalization have really forced us to think. These interactions have been very relevant to our work with high risk behavior groups. I really liked challenging our thoughts, and it helped me a lot.”

CARE staff member

“Before the training, I was ashamed of my work with sex workers. Now I realize how important this work is.”

NGO partner, India

“In the beginning, I felt so uncomfortable talking to the sex workers during participatory exercises. I couldn’t bear to hear their language. I made it through each day, but I couldn’t sleep at night. I had nightmares until I realized that they were like me: they were mothers with children to feed. They had the same concerns that I had about earning enough. We were not very different from each other. After that I felt much better, and my nightmares went away.”

CARE staff member, India

## STEP 2: Discussion

Initiate a discussion with the group using some or all of these questions as a starting point; ask additional probing questions as appropriate. Encourage debate within the group, and be ready to spend some time discussing the issues that arise.

- What does this exercise reveal about status? Discrimination? Stereotypes? The relative value to society of certain people? Power? Privilege?
- How did considerations about reproduction (fertility, suitability for reproduction, etc.) affect choices?
- Do we have enough information to make assumptions and judgments about the ten candidates?
- What are some qualities of women that give some women more status or power over other women? What are some qualities of men that give some men more status or power over other men?
- If the retired sex worker could choose the six people, who do you think she would choose?
- Which forms of power do we manipulate in our own lives?
- How did it feel to have the power to decide who was important enough to survive and who should die?
- How are social status and power connected? Is low status a result of little power, or is little power a result of low status? Where does social power come from?
- Why do groups of lower social status often remain ‘invisible’?
- How does power affect your relationships? Do men and women share equal power in sexual relationships? How does power affect the way men and women search for a life partner? The way men and women communicate?
- How do you negotiate power in your relationships? Is it something you are conscious of?
- In general, men have greater decision-making power and control in sexual interactions. How does this translate in terms of attitudes and behavior? What does this mean for safer sex? Sexual violence? Sexual pleasure?

## STEP 3: Closing

Congratulate participants on their honesty and hard work. Encourage them to be more aware of the dynamics of social status and power in their daily lives.

Ask participants: How can we incorporate notions of social status and power in our work? To what extent can we question and challenge stereotypes that undermine certain groups of people, and ultimately change mindsets?

## Notes to the Facilitator

In our communities, people are in different positions of power. Often, society dictates how we behave in certain circumstances. For example, individually we may decide not to discriminate against a certain group of people, but we discriminate anyway because of the culture we live in.

Patriarchy, for instance, plays out in all our lives. The position of a daughter, wife, or mother is determined in relation to the man in the family. Unequal power balance in gender relations that favors men translates into unequal power balance in interactions between men and women. Power is fundamental to both sexuality and gender.

We assume that power is something outside of us, that someone else controls us. But the fact is that we all have power at different moments in our lives. Thus, power is shifting, and is relative to those around us. We may have more power in our families, but less power in our workplaces, or less political power.

We need to ask ourselves when and how power balances change, and who changes them. Some forms of power will be used in very empowering ways, some in disempowering ways.

Some sources of personal power:

- formal positioning (caste, culture, religion, family)
- charisma (personal charm and personality)
- influence (who you know and how you can use your relationships)
- knowledge or intellectual credentials
- skills, experience or applied knowledge
- persuasion or leadership qualities
- victim status ('poor me')
- gender (male vs female)

Groups that are marginalized in some way (such as the disabled, the elderly, homosexuals, etc.) tend to be feared and de-valued; they are not taken seriously. Often they feel powerless. When this happens, they lose some of their humanity; they are denied their individuality and their sexuality.

When inequities are identified, it is common to try to assign blame. However, more is gained by working together than by taking sides. When we recognize injustice, we have a responsibility to do something to change it.

“Sub-groups such as HIV-positive people have different challenges than other groups. Understanding access to resources and power among the beneficiary groups... helps me to design better interventions.”

Vietnam



Nicky Lewin/CARE