

## What Are We Teaching Children About Power?

This piece offers some background information on the  
**Power Series of Lesson Plans for Nonviolent Action: A Force for Change**

By Lucy Holbrook



### Introduction:

My interest in what we are teaching children about power was first stimulated by the BBC programme 'No More Boys and Girls – Can Our Schools Go Gender Free?' (first screened in 2017). At that point my own awareness of the issue of gender inequality was through personal experience as well from supporting women with complex needs for 10 years in a previous work role. However, it was not until watching that programme that I really registered the massive role that education can play in bringing about greater gender equality in society. The programme motivated me to get more active and I spent a couple of years pulling together a conference on Gender Equality through Education which came into being in November 2019 thanks to the support of the Philip Barker Centre for Creative Learning and Warrington Campus of Chester University.

Doing this opened my eyes as to the extent of impacts of gender inequality on men, as well as women, albeit in different ways and I now see gender equality is first and foremost a human issue. (The posters below highlight some of the main impacts of gender inequality on men and children as well as the better well known impacts on women which may be familiar from the feminist movement).

### About Power:

Whilst the root causes of gender inequality are multiple and complex, patriarchy, privilege and power play a huge part. Power is so significant in our lives in so many ways yet we don't learn about it at school or talk about it much as a society. When I search for books or resources on the Internet about power for children all that comes up relates to energy and electricity! I think we often either take its presence for granted, don't notice it, or feel powerless to try and do anything about it. Indeed, it is partly my own sense of powerlessness to change anything that has fuelled my interest. Part of the reason for this lack of information or conversation is because power is complex, multi-layered and often intangible. This is illustrated clearly by John Gaventa\* in his description of power as a highly contested concept with multiple meanings outlined below:

- Some see power as held by actors (powerful and powerless).
- Some see power as zero-sum (winners-losers).
- Some see power as 'negative' as in 'control'.
- Some see power as structural.
- Others see it as more pervasive and embodied in all relationships and discourses.
- Others see it as more fluid and accumulative.
- Others see it as more 'positive' as necessary for agency and positive action.
- Others see it more on identities and relationships.

\* from The Participation, Power and Social Change team at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Certainly, by far the majority of what I see and hear about power tends to be about one aspect of power – the familiar notion of power 'over' others in some way as a means of control or coercion.

### Power and Education:

Obviously, power is evident in many ways in education with perhaps the most obvious one being the teacher/pupil relationship. So if you are a teacher, I wonder what you think about this? Do you think about the power you have? Are you comfortable with it? Do you think of your power as 'power over', 'power with' or 'empowering'?



## NVAFC Power Lesson 1 RS72: Rationale for power lessons

Since starting to wonder about what we are teaching children about power I have been doing lots of reading and researching and finding all sorts of interesting ideas and ways of engaging with power, both mentally and conceptually as well as physically with and in our bodies; all of which is expanding my own thinking.

One example of this is the word 'empower'. It is a word that has become quite commonplace, often in the context of well-being, resilience and fulfilling our potential, and I believe is largely viewed as something to aspire to. Empower contains the word 'power' so what do we actually mean when we talk about empowering children? How do they learn what 'empowered' really is? What are we telling them about what 'empowered' might look like, sound like and feel like on the inside?

My thinking has been further expanded by John Wenger's article, 'Why You Can't Empower Someone' (link below), where he focuses on the dictionary definition for the verb 'to empower':

1. *Give (someone) the authority or power to do something.*
2. *Make (someone) stronger and more confident, especially in controlling their life and claiming their rights; to enable or permit.*

He picks up on the two key words 'give' and 'make' both of which suggest that the one who empowers has the power to begin with and, in the first definition, grants it to the other; and in the second definition, makes someone do something different so they feel better.

An altogether different example of the multi-faceted nature of power comes from Paul Linden who is a specialist in body and movement awareness education. He holds a sixth-degree black belt in Aikido as well as a first-degree black belt in Karate so knows a thing or two about power and the body! Part of his work includes teaching children Embodied Peacemaking through body awareness, self-regulation and conflict resolution. In his book *Embodied Peacemaking* (1<sup>st</sup> Ed 2007) he writes:

*'Conflict has many sources and root causes, and work with any of the sources or causes can be an avenue for reducing or resolving conflict. However, there is one element in conflict that is always present and usually ignored: the body.'*

*It is very common to believe that conflict and peace are fundamentally mental, emotional, spiritual, political, and cultural in nature. However, in addition to seeing conflict and peace from these perspectives, it is important to understand the crucial role the body plays.*

*Conflict evokes in us physiological fight-or-flight arousal, and that physiological state constrains us to think and behave in ways which perpetuate and escalate conflict. However peaceful a person may wish to be, their capacity to think, talk and act peacefully will be undermined if their body is not in a state of peace. All too often, conflict resolution and peacemaking processes focus on how to think and talk. Though this level of intervention is crucial, for greatest efficiency and effectiveness, verbal conflict resolution and peacemaking processes must rest on explicit techniques for placing and holding the body in a state of inner and outer peacefulness.'*

Having done a four-year BodyMind therapy training myself, I certainly resonate with Paul Linden's perspective here. The heart of my work is about conversations, relationships and engagement. It is rooted in the fact that feeling safe physically, psychologically and physiologically is essential for sustainable change. This is because it is only when we feel safe across all three aspects that our brain is able to focus our attention, take in new information or process and assess what is going on. It is only when we feel safe that we can fully be at our best. There is now a growing body of scientific research and evidence that explains the interconnection between our mind and body - brain and autonomic nervous system - and I believe that making better use of this knowledge can



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only help us individually and collectively to bring about non-violent social change that benefits us all.

### **Power and Courage:**

If we are teaching children and young people about non-violent action, I think it behoves us to also help them understand what this might look like, sound like and feel like from the inside as well as introducing them to the mental, emotional, spiritual, political and cultural aspects on the outside. Not least because I think any action to bring about change requires courage – we are standing up and standing out and in that moment refusing to ‘fit in’ whilst knowing that as a result, we may no longer ‘belong’ either. I am reminded here how Brene Brown describes courage as a heart word: The root of the word courage is cor - the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant: ‘To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.’

Over time, this definition has changed, and today, we typically associate courage with heroic and brave deeds. However, Brown says, this definition fails to recognise the inner strength and level of commitment required for us to actually speak honestly and openly about who we are and about our experiences - good and bad. I think this definition of courage underpins non-violent action – we want to speak from our hearts as well as be listening from our hearts in trying to understand another’s perspective and find a mutually respectful accommodation of our differences.

### **My Wish:**

So my own journey of exploration into power continues. Writing these lesson plans has been a challenge for me - I am not a teacher, so do not have the familiarity of planning lessons. I feel I am introducing some big ideas with wide ranging implications into the very small space of a one-hour lesson. With my BodyMind background I am also incorporating a somatic or body-based aspect to the lessons where possible.

My wish is to offer both you as a teacher as well as children and young people a comprehensive Power Toolkit that includes an understanding of how to use your internal body resources to support that external process of non-violent social change. I certainly wish I had been introduced to some of these things when I was at school!

My hope is that I have done a good enough job with these lesson plans to raise awareness and stimulate your interest and that of the children and young people you teach to want to find out more about power in all its forms and manifestations as part of the wider process of social change.

I have included some links below to several resources I have found inspiring and thought provoking along with some ‘posters’ that summarise the impacts and costs of Gender Inequality.

I would love to know how you get on using these lesson plans and resources and what develops out of that so please don’t hesitate to contact me either if you have any questions or would like to share other ideas you have to improve them, or to extend them. You can contact me via my website [www.innerlearning.co.uk](http://www.innerlearning.co.uk).

### **Some Useful Links:**

#### **TED Talk**

[https://www.ted.com/talks/kiran\\_sethi\\_kids\\_take\\_charge#t-521397](https://www.ted.com/talks/kiran_sethi_kids_take_charge#t-521397)

#### **Article:**

‘Masculinity Is Killing Men’ by Kali Holloway

<http://www.rolereboot.org/culture-and-politics/details/2015-06-masculinity-is-killing-men/index.html>

‘Why You Can’t Empower Someone’ by John Wenger

<https://medium.com/@johnqshift/why-you-cant-empower-someone-1053ddb765c>



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### **Websites:**

'Powercube.net' is the online resource for understanding power relations in efforts to bring about social change created by John Gaventa and his team at The Participation, Power and Social Change team at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex <https://www.powercube.net/>


### **E-Book:**


'Teaching Children Embodied Peacemaking: Body Awareness, Self-Regulation and Conflict Resolution' by Paul Linden

<https://www.being-in-movement.com/resources/books/teaching-children-embodied-peacemaking-body-awareness-self-regulation-and-conflict>

**See below for the posters that highlight some of the main impacts of gender inequality on women, men and children, as well as the economic costs.**



<h1>Impact of Gender Inequality on Women</h1> 	
<p><b>Domestic Abuse:</b> 83% of high frequency victims are women. In 2017 the 92% of defendants in domestic abuse-related prosecutions were men and the 65% of victims were recorded as female.</p>	<p><b>Politics &amp; Influence:</b> In 2023 still only 34% of our politicians and 29% of peers in Lords are female; only 10% of top executives in biggest 100 companies are women; only 6% in next 250 biggest companies.</p>
<p><b>Violence Against Women &amp; Girls (VAWG):</b> Ranges from everyday sexism (see Laura Bates), sexual harassment to abuse to sexual exploitation;                      Globally 35% of women experience physical/sexual violence in their lifetime.                      An incident of gender-based violence and abuse is reported to the police every minute, largely perpetrated by men against women.                      7 women are killed every month by partners or ex-partners.</p>	<p><b>Healthcare:</b> British Heart Foundation study found women three times more likely to die from a heart attack within the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the study compared to men and didn't get the same recommended treatment as men, partly due to incorrect assessment of their symptoms.                      Research shows that women regularly suffer from chronic pain for far longer and more likely to be incorrectly treated with antidepressants and sedatives rather than with adequate pain relief medication.</p>
<p><b>FGM &amp; Honour Based Violence:</b> Approx. 2887 cases recorded by police in 2015, but only 5% resulted in prosecution with only 2% convictions.</p>	<p><b>Employment:</b> Gender gap in the EU is 'wide and persistent', full-time equivalent employment rate of 68% for women and 79% for men.</p>
<p><b>Income:</b> On average women still earn 19% less than men; they face a significant risk of poverty in old age due to economic inactivity, part-time work, unpaid work, lower wages and an average of five years' shorter working life than men. 24% of women (vs 15% of men) are paid less than the living wage. Women bear brunt of welfare benefit cuts +70%.</p>	<p><b>Education:</b> Women make up 74% Headteachers in Primary, but only 40% in Secondary – Primary Education not seen as equally important. Women are still under-represented in fields STEM and Technology subjects and over representation in fields of education (78%), health and welfare (71%), and humanities and the arts (65%).</p>

<h1>Impact of Gender Inequality on Men</h1> 	
<p><b>Mental Health:</b> Male suicide rate for men is 3 times the rate for women; 84 men every week take their own lives; each suicide costs approx. £1.5m</p>	<p><b>Imprisonment:</b> 95% of prisoners in England and Wales are men (population 85K); tend to receive longer sentences for same crimes.</p>
<p><b>Forced Circumcision:</b> Whilst FGM is illegal in most western countries and U.S., there are currently no states that unequivocally ban infant male circumcision for non-therapeutic reasons. Forced conscription can also be considered gender-based violence against men - it is still predominantly men that fight in wars/conflicts globally, for which they may die.</p>	<p><b>Victims of Violence:</b> Men are twice as likely to be victim of violent crime: 75% murder victims male; 73% robbery victims; domestic abuse and sexual violence by women against men is often 'trivialized'; In UK 2016 estimated about 50% of the acts of violence by men against women were reported; but only about 10% of male victims of female violence due to taboos and fears of misunderstanding created by a culture of masculine expectations.</p>
<p><b>Sexual Violence:</b> In armed conflict, sexual violence is committed by men against men as psychological warfare in order to demoralize the enemy. International Criminal Law does not consider gender-based sexual violence against men a separate type of offense and treats it as 'war crimes or torture'.</p>	<p><b>Education:</b> England: 26% teachers male (15% primary and 37% secondary); 9% teaching assistants, 18% support staff; however 63% Headteachers are male.</p>
<p><b>Mass Killings:</b> In situations of structural violence that include war and genocide, men and boys are frequently singled out and killed.</p>	<p><b>Fatherhood:</b> Low and limited paternity pay still precludes many fathers who want to play a greater role in their children's lives from doing so.</p>
<p><b>Homelessness:</b> 86% rough sleepers in England are male; 84% hidden homeless are male.</p>	<p><b>Healthcare:</b> Men are 20% less likely to seek help from their GP.</p>



## Impact of Gender Inequality on C&YP



The impacts of gender inequality in relation to women and men combine to create the circumstances that children grow up in. This, in turn, impacts the opportunities and outcomes for Children and Young People.

### **One poll of nearly 2,000 young people aged 7-21 found that**

- 55% of girls did not feel they could speak freely because of their gender.
- 57% said this affected what they wore, and nearly one in two said it made an impact on how much they participated at school.
- 26% of girls aged seven to 21 thought PE was more for boys than for them. PE teacher told pupils to do 'a girl press-up'.
- Playing video games seen as a boy thing.
- Girls believed certain subjects, such as science and maths, were more suitable for boys.
- 42% of girls aged 7-10 thought boys were better than girls at 'being strong'.
- 95% of girls aged 11-21 want the advertising industry should make sure adverts show more positive, diverse representations of their sex.



## The Economic Costs of Gender Inequality

While on the surface it is easy to imagine and think we have gender equality in UK, now gender inequality is a complex issue which involves multiple threads which all interlink and intersect to create wide-ranging and deep-seated systemic problems in our society and culture.

### World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Ranking of Countries

The UK has gone **backwards** in the last 16 years having fallen from number 9<sup>th</sup> in 2006 to number 22 in 2022 out of 149 countries - on a par with Serbia and Burundi.

#### The UK is ranked

24<sup>th</sup> on Political Empowerment  
33<sup>rd</sup> on Educational Attainment  
44<sup>th</sup> on Economic Participation and Opportunity  
105<sup>th</sup> on Health and Survival

### The Global Gender Gap Report suggests that economic gender parity could add an additional

£190 billion to GDP of UK – this equates to approx. 25% of total UK Gov spend for 2018

£1,330 billion to GDP of USA  
£243 billion to GDP of France  
£235 billion to GDP of Germany

However, it will take 132 years to reach full gender parity.

