

# Checking Your Privilege 101

## What is privilege?

Privilege is any right, immunity, or benefit enjoyed only by a person or group beyond the advantages of most. At TJLP, we think of privilege as an *unearned advantage* that a dominant group has over marginalized groups. For example, since transgender people are not included in the dominant group, non-transgender people often have many privileges – rights, benefits, immunities – that transgender people don't have including legal rights, social acceptance and understanding, gender-affirming medical treatment, bathroom access, family support, etc. A key aspect of privilege is that, due to its unearned nature, those who have privilege often do not realize they have it. In other words, they don't see the access and opportunity being a member of a dominant group affords them. This is why, as organizers and activists fighting for liberation, it is essential that we learn how to recognize our privileges and check how our unearned advantages play into the work we do.

## Who has privilege?

Most of us have some privileges that we may not realize. Being a citizen of the United States affords extreme global political and economic privilege, as well as privilege domestically (compared to undocumented and other types of immigrants to the United States). We call this **citizenship privilege**. At TJLP, we strive to actively engage with, be accountable for, and discuss many types of privilege as a part of our organizing work:

### Class Privilege

The privilege of being a person raised with financial stability and access to financial safety nets through family or other assets. Class privilege can also apply to someone who has accrued wealth over time. In our society, class privilege often dictates “opportunities,” “freedom,” access to “legal rights” and the power to influence political systems and the media. In our experience, class privilege has been one of the privileges most devastating to radical organizing when gone unchecked by those who have it.

### Race Privilege

TJLP strongly believes that the United States operates within a system of *institutionalized* racism. Unlike prejudice, which may include racist statements, slurs, or acts induced by personal dislike of members of other races, institutional racism is structured into our politics, our economic system, our geography, our educational systems, our social institutions, etc. We call institutional racism in the U.S. *white supremacy*, where the “norm” is whiteness and the society is structured to privilege white people.

### Educational Privilege

The privilege of a person who has been able to access higher education, which is sometimes, but not always, a result of other privileges such as race and class privilege. At TJLP we think of educational privilege as not only affording access to job opportunities, but also using language and communication that is alienating and fundamentally rooted in higher education learning institutions, which many clients have little or no access to.

### Gender Privilege

The privilege of being a masculine-appearing, male-identified person living in the United States, which both historically and currently functions in a system of patriarchy. Some women may not feel that sexism or discrimination based on their gender is still a constant reality. At TJLP we recognize *internalized oppression* and how it functions within a broader system of institutionalized oppression. For every woman who has hated her body, been on a diet to look thinner, has experienced gender-based sexual violence, or has simply felt scared being on the street alone – patriarchy persists.

### Gender Identity Privilege

The privilege of having a gender presentation that correlates with the dominant group's expected gender “norms.” This means being a person who is male-assigned at birth and identifies as a man, or female-assigned at birth and identifies as a woman. Privileges include having identification that reflects your gender, bathroom access, freedom from police targeting on the basis of gender non-conformity, gender-affirming medical care, etc.

### Age Privilege

This is the access afforded to people who are considered “adults” in our systems and institutions and conversely the disadvantage of being considered “youth.” We also recognize that elders are often stripped of meaningful participation in many systems and institutions as well due to age.

### **Body Size Privilege**

This is the privilege to be born with a body type that is celebrated and considered “beautiful” by the dominant group as reflected in the media, advertisements, social norms, etc. Oftentimes this body is thin for women and muscular for men, in addition to reflecting other dominant norms such as whiteness and able-bodiedness. We call the fear this privilege stems from *fat-phobia*.

### **Able-Bodied Privilege**

Much like other privileges, able-bodied privilege is the ability to physically participate in society because society was made to accommodate only the “dominant” group – people who are perceived to be able-bodied and not physically disabled. This effectively cuts disabled people out of society. In addition, this privilege invisibilizes and stigmatizes mental disability, which ostracizes and shames folks with mental disabilities and cuts support services from them. TJLP sees this *ableism* leading directly to the criminalization of mental disability as evidenced by an overwhelmingly disproportionate number of people incarcerated who have mental disabilities.

### **Life on the Outside Privilege**

Being incarcerated clearly leads to the loss of many privileges. Not only are you confined against your will, but often inmates are unable to read, write, go outside, wear the clothing of their choice, practice their religion, communicate with people on the outside, access the legal system, exercise, eat foods of their choice, have access to medical care, have autonomy over their sexuality, etc.

### **“Passing” Privilege**

The privilege to be able to “pass” as a more privileged group, such as a light-skinned person of color passing as white, a transperson passing as non-trans, a disabled person passing as able-bodied, etc. While passing may be a goal for some because of the privileges it brings, it can often be a disadvantage. All transpeople should have the same rights and privileges regardless of whether they are seen as transgender or not. All people with disabilities should have access regardless of whether their disability is visible to a non-disabled person. Our races should not be assumed to be white unless otherwise indicated.

### **Religious Privilege**

This is the privilege to be a member of the dominant religion in the United States – Christianity. Both traditionally and currently, other religions have been stigmatized, ostracized, and criminalized - most notably Judaism, Islamic religions, Buddhism, and Indigenous practices and beliefs.

### **Sexuality Privilege**

The privilege of being a heterosexual and/or of not being a labeled a sexual deviant. Traditionally sexual deviants often include non-straight people, people who have sex for pleasure outside of marriage, people who practice polyamory or have more than one sexual partner at a time, kinky people, etc.

## **Why do we feel privilege must be recognized in activist work?**

We feel that privilege must be recognized and checked as a commitment to our values and our process. We are working towards building a long-term movement and a movement that is in solidarity with groups that we are not a part of as a collective. We have seen closely the dangers of not checking privilege even as members of oppressed groups (women, transpeople, people of color, poor people, etc). Not checking privilege ultimately doesn't foster fundamental change but rather repeats dynamics that already exist in our oppressive society within organizing circles such as classism, racism, homophobia, ageism, etc. By constantly checking our privilege, we create a *process* for change that reflects how we want the world to be while fostering deep-rooted solidarity work and allyship to communities we are not a part of.

## **How do we check our privilege?**

Action steps to checking privilege! 1) Acknowledge that the privilege exists, 2) move away from immobilizing guilt, 3) understand that your privilege will not go away until the root systems that give you privilege are abolished, 4) be an ally to communities you are not a part of, 5) recognize how and why your privilege can destruct community empowerment, 6) use your privilege to benefit groups you are not a part of, 7) educate others with your privilege to check themselves, and 8) call people out and embrace being called out about privilege.