

ALQUIMIA: JASS Mesoamerica
Feminist Leadership Development and
Knowledge Generation



A Magic Mix

Alquimia, JASS Mesoamerica's learning and education initiative, integrates leadership training and knowledge generation to create a dynamic fusion of key program elements designed to strengthen feminist movement building in the region. Part of *Alquimia's* magic and dynamism --*alchemy in English*-- lies in its nature and origins. The initiative emerges from an international web of personal and political relationships based on solidarity, common values and analysis, and a long history of creative collaborations. This mix of feminist popular educators, scholars, and activists has evolved into the JASS Mesoamerica team – women with vast experience in social movements and struggles to overcome inequality and discrimination. Building on the team's knowledge and practice of feminist popular education, JASS is dedicated to supporting collective processes of learning, critical thinking, organizing and action that seek to challenge and transform aspects of power that marginalize, demean and threaten the lives of women and their communities.

In a Time of Harm and Hope

Alquimia has been developed in response to systems of exclusion, discrimination, subordination and violence that are increasingly dismantling the world's social fabric and causing untold harm to women and families. Destructive ideologies and practices fuel inequalities, brutality, fear and environmental degradation -- from the power of patriarchy, neoliberalism and religious fundamentalism to racism, corporate greed, organized crime and drug running. Gains won by women over the years are facing unprecedented backlash. Men continue to dominate major spheres of decision making. The economic crisis and its accompanying market ideology undermine state capacity to ensure women's rights and devastate their lives and opportunities for fair employment, education and health care. At the same time, despite citizen education efforts, fragmentation and political demobilization of civil society and prevalence of authoritarian leadership styles persist and present further obstacles to advancing their rights. Too many NGOs and social movements focus on short-term technical fixes such as policy advocacy to the detriment of long-term political and social change approaches that integrate organizing, leadership, power analysis, advocacy and consciousness-raising. Similarly groups face serious limitations in their understanding and application of feminist popular education and related social change approaches, including how to deal with conflict and difference and how to create more holistic processes that integrate the power and intelligence of mind, body and spirit. In the wake of such challenges, women are coming together in new ways, tapping their long history of struggle. They are building alliances across the region that focus on their roles as human rights defenders and activists, linking with international women's organizations such as JASS, the Nobel Women's Initiative, AWID and others to strengthen their collective voice and power, and using new technologies to expand their impact and deepen their connections, awareness, knowledge, and action strategies.

Promoting Learning and Knowledge and Joy and Justice

Inspired by feminist ethics and popular education, *Alquimia* seeks to promote activist leadership training and generate new knowledge and learning that can strengthen organizations and social movements and encourage equality, justice, joy, solidarity, and respect for nature. *Alquimia*, also known in Mesoamerica as *School of Feminist Alchemy*, recognizes that feminist knowledge and wisdom is political, collective, holistic, and visionary. It is shaped by different contexts, people, and places and by a mix of values and ethical principles. These range from social justice, love, generosity, self-awareness and sisterhood to happiness, wonder, patience, hope, critical thinking, diversity, and a rejection of dichotomies that justify inequality and subordination.

Supporting Women's Wisdom, Organization and Action

Working with the rich diversity of Mesoamerican women across ethnicities, generations, borders and other differences, we build and expand on our shared wisdom and experience. To that end, *Alquimia* provides training, learning and reflection opportunities to activists, popular educators, organizers, human rights defenders, academics, feminist movement and NGO leaders and other women in leadership positions at the community, national, regional and international levels. Based on open and flexible processes of learning and mutual inquiry, our approaches and methodologies are participatory and problem-posing. They incorporate a spirit of exploration and fun with an integration of the wisdom gained from our multiple sources of intelligence and passion -- our minds, emotions, and bodies. *Alquimia* both values and reclaims women's knowledge across all fields of human endeavor that contribute to transforming the status quo.

Drawing on an Analysis of Power and Patriarchy

Certain concepts guide our learning and education processes – power and patriarchy being foremost among these. We draw on a feminist analysis of how power operates dynamically and dialectically to shape our lives, our societies, and our very notion of what is considered truth. Our work is grounded in a systemic, historic and holistic analysis of reality that incorporates reflections on the multidimensional and ever changing nature of power in relation to shifting contexts, circumstances and interests. We start with a personal exploration of women's experiences that affirms their creative and courageous qualities and histories while at the same time challenges the societal forces that marginalize them. The entry point for our analysis is a critique of patriarchy and other forms of power that subjugate, exclude and harm women and girls and, ultimately, destroy the social fabric of our communities. To counter these dynamics, we tap life-affirming forms of power within ourselves and with others in order to strengthen our individual and collective actions and forge ever more compelling movements for change. Building on a framework that incorporates these different aspects of power – from the visible, hidden and invisible forms that marginalize women to the life-affirming forms that empower women, we connect analysis to strategy, clarifying the crucial importance of multiple approaches from policy advocacy and organizing to leadership training and consciousness raising.

Building movements: *Alquimia* in Action

The integral approach and vision of *Alquimia* can be seen in its two interactive and mutually reinforcing programs to support movement building: 1) Leadership Training for Organization and Action and 2) Production of Knowledge and Learning. Collaborating both virtually and face-to-face, specific study themes and ideas for activities emerge from our interactions with colleagues and are prioritized with them. Types of activities include among others: workshops, courses, exchanges, forums, debates, distance learning, seminars, internships, coaching, support groups, cross-regional dialogs as well as processes of participatory and academic research, documentation, systemic reflections, and life-histories. *Alquimia* learns from and contributes to other Mesoamerican training and education experiences as well as those developed by JASS colleagues in Africa and Asia. To make *Alquimia* happen, JASS taps the talents and strengths of its permanent Mesoamerican team in conjunction with occasional outside colleagues who have particular expertise in a needed area.

Currently, *Alquimia* is promoting a variety of initiatives including: workshops for and with indigenous women; facilitator/organizer training of trainers; feminist virtual debates and dialogs on issues such as self-care; a feminist dictionary of key terms and concepts; training guides for facilitators on topics such as conflict; methodological guides for systematic reflection, documentation and research; and a collaborative effort with other organizations to support training for *Las Defensoras*, a human rights defenders network of women throughout Mesoamerica.