



JASS

*Strengthening and sustaining
women's organizing power*

Women's Movement Building in Malawi

JASS Southern Africa is building the leadership and organizing capacity of Malawian women to pressure local and national government to make development resources accessible and to deliver on laws that support women and HIV-positive people. By organizing the power of their numbers, women can make their voices heard in order to confront stigma, increase access to healthcare, and improve basic livelihoods.

Victoria, a teacher by profession, has been using the JASS training to 'disorganize' her church, demanding to talk about HIV and AIDS, thus ending the culture of silence and stigma. Asnat went to see the District Commissioner and demanded that seed coupons be given to HIV+ women. Lillian 'crossed the line' (her words) by fighting for mobile clinics to provide ARVs for adults and children on the same day to save women multiple journeys each week. Petite Doreen used her new leadership skills to lobby the seed company to supply women living with HIV/AIDS.

*Malawian women leaders,
nine months after their first JASS workshops*



Needs Assessment

JASS' first step was to travel through Malawi in 2008 to discuss the needs and problems of women, especially those living with HIV/AIDS. Women said that they need access to fertilizer, land, credit and good healthcare. They talked about the pain and shame of HIV/AIDS stigma and the violence they experience. They were frank about what they had to do to feed their families. The JASS team (Hope Chigudu, Azola Goqwana, Shamillah Wilson) consulted many organizations, including the Malawi Network of Religious Leaders Living with HIV/AIDS (MANERELA+), Coalition of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (COWLHA), Malawi Network of Positive People (MANET+), NAPHAM, Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR), ActionAid International (Malawi) and Oxfam GB.

Women know (for example) that the government funds micro-credit for women and youth. But to gain access to this money, women must agree to very difficult repayment conditions. Instead of helping women build sustainable small businesses, this system leads families into bad debt. The women in the workshop want to take up this agenda in their own organizations and then with local government leaders.



Workshops in Malawi's Three Regions

To reach as many local women leaders as possible, JASS held three-day workshops in February 2009 in each region of Malawi – Southern, Central and Northern – to help activists, new leaders and their groups to:

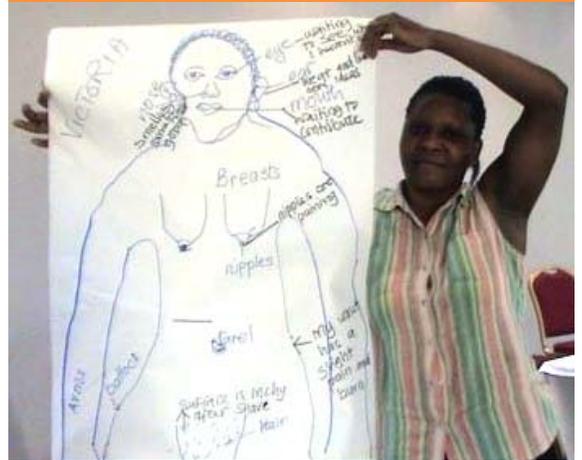
- organize other women to work together to solve real problems in their communities and, at the same time, change social attitudes;
- give themselves and others the confidence and information to demand rights and resources;
- question the prejudice and taboos that prevent healthy living and that stigmatize positive women.

About 20 women came to each workshop – 55 women altogether, most under 30 years old. Facilitators helped them to share and analyze their own experiences, using skits, pictures and personal experiences. Women identified the many ways they use and experience power in their own home, community, organisation, and country:

- the visible power of governments, budgets and laws;
- the hidden power of chiefs, companies selling health products. and others “under the table;”
- the invisible power of beliefs and attitudes that make injustice seem “normal” and make women feel powerless.

They discussed how they could use their abilities – the power within – to achieve their rights as women by standing together to challenge cultural norms. They looked critically at their work in communities: what is effective and what is not? They proposed strategic ways to solve problems and improve leadership. On one evening of each workshop, everyone relaxed on mats by candlelight to discuss self-care.

Facilitators Hope Chigudu and Sindi Blose used songs, walking meditation, and other creative methods to deepen the group's analysis and confidence, to deepen collective organizing, and to confront prejudices about sexuality and sex work. Participants created startling and beautiful body maps, adding words, symbols, and pictures relating to their health, history, points of personal power, and life goals. The stories told by their body maps provided the opportunity to discuss their health, and the need to organize and mobilize to form a bigger movement to demand their rights as citizens.



The women concluded by drawing up their own action plans going forward, to address the linked and critical issues of patriarchy, violence against women, denial of resources and service delivery, and the feminization of HIV and AIDS.

National Workshops

The first four-day follow-up workshop with local “grasstops” leaders was held in November 2009. (JASS does not believe in “drive-by” workshops!) Participants reported back with pride on their actions and analysis since the first gatherings in February. Terms such as “invisible power,” “patriarchy” and “crossing the line” helped women define and take action, and also to explain why.

Grasstops leaders have strong constituencies grounded in local organizing – they are the ones who can best amplify the process and build the power of numbers. But to be effective, the national and regional coordinators of their organizations must be on board too. So, coordinators were invited to join for one session, to learn about the JASS movement-building process and its goals.

Looking ahead, JASS will continue to strengthen grasstops women leaders to improve their conditions at the same time as they fight for justice. Women's organizations will learn to track budgets and rights: How much money has government promised for healthcare and micro-credit at community level? What rights are promised by law to women, to HIV-positive people and to all Malawians?