

## **“We challenge the narrative of power”**

*Excerpts from a personal letter to JASS founder, Lisa Veneklasen, from a JASS sister in Indonesia.*

I want to share my insights about being part of JASS, a living innovation that you have helped build.

I joined JASS one year after I finished my graduate studies. JASS, and later FMM Indonesia, have accompanied me on the path to loving myself. I learned that my self-hatred came from the rage, guilt, disappointment, fear, anger, deep sadness, self-blame, pain, and heart-ache spinning around inside me. I was a living tornado; a living volcano that could explode any time, hurting anyone near me.

I used to hurt boys in elementary and middle school. I slapped, kicked, and scratched boys if they ever wanted to get close to me in elementary or middle school. I tried to protect my body, because in those early years I had learned that my body is vulnerable to attack and harassment.

In college, I was tired of being angry at men and my own body without knowing why. I joined a Koran learning group as I looked for an alternative way to explain my rage but I gained very little. My teacher said I should be careful with feminism; you can learn it but should not be owned by it. Yeah, sure.

I started wearing hijab in my second semester because I thought it was an alternative way to gain respect and protect my body. It didn't completely work – I still got harassed on public transport. “What else must I do to protect my body from violence?” I still believed that it was my body that needed to be ‘caged’ in order to be safe.

Then JASS came to Indonesia. Leadership training, capacity building, organizing, young women – these were the words that Nani and Dina threw at me during the interview. Dina made sure I was involved in PESADA field work, discussions, seminars, and evaluations – that was the only way I would learn about community organizing. At that time, it didn't feel like work – more like training.

I joined the 2007 JASS movement-building workshop and there it was: power, as a concept. In Indonesia, there are two words to translate it: kekuasaan and kekuatan. The first word has negative and gender biased meaning, and the second one is more positive, because it also means strength. “Kekuasaan” has the taste of domination and ‘power over’. It was challenging to translate power as “kekuasaan”. But that is what we do; we challenge the narrative of power.

After the 2008 AWID Forum, I reconnected with a friend from a previous workplace. This became a long-distance relationship. I felt safe. It was revelation to know that an equal and healthy relationship can be safe and a learning space. I didn't fear this man. He has different masculinity values (it's possible!) – I can negotiate with him about my concept of marriage, I can argue with him, I was not afraid to initiate sex with him, I asked him to marry me and he accepted, and we even talked about possibility of having a ‘healthy divorce,’ if the marriage doesn't work.

The process from hating men and fearing intimate relationships and marriage, to being able challenge my own values still amazes me. Without a good understanding and the ability to internalize the concept of power, I would not have been able to go this far. I would probably still be busy with my rage, blaming myself, blaming others, and not taking any action, no matter how small.

I wrote this as a thank you note for making the whole transformation process possible. Also, last month is the 10th anniversary of my healthy relationship with a man.

I am sorry for the long letter, but I can express my feelings better this way. And yes, I sent this to my personal email because I need to receive this letter too.