

Feminist Popular Education & Movement-building

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Developing a critical political consciousness is at the core of JASS' feminist movement building strategies. Popular education, or more specifically, *feminist* popular education, has long served as a conceptual and methodological foundation for JASS' activist training, learning, organizing, and action. Perhaps one of the most defining characteristics of JASS' approach, reinforced by our framework for understand and engaging power¹, feminist popular education provides a road map and tools for going beyond tactics to prioritize approaches and strategies that change hearts and minds, and thereby transform the norms and beliefs that disempower women and perpetuate inequality and violence.

This draft working paper is intended to provide a brief introduction to popular education and the ways in which feminists, and JASS in particular, have adapted and refined it in order to explicitly acknowledge how gender ---along with class, race, sexuality and other factors -- shape an intersectional approach to oppression and conversely, empowerment or “liberation.” We invite your reactions, comments, and additions so that this paper ultimately reflects the depth and breadth of JASS’ collective experience and knowledge. A final version will be included in JASS’ forthcoming Feminist Movement-building Toolkit.

Please email comments to JASSDiscussions@community.eldis.org. If you haven’t already joined the JASS’ virtual community space where you can view all comments and discussions, send a request by clicking [here](#).

1. What is popular education?

Starting from Paolo Freire’s *pedagogy of the oppressed*

Paolo Freire was not the first or the last educator to declare that no education is neutral. *How we learn* is linked to *what we learn* and the *purpose of the education*, not to mention *who* is teaching or facilitating the process. In other words, all education is implicitly, if not explicitly, political. Most formal education molds people to conform to their social roles and the status quo. But education can catalyze critical thinking and even resistance to the way things are. A learning process that affirms what people know from experience and enables them to question preconceived notions about how the world operates and think more deeply about why inequality exists can empower them – individually and collectively -- to understand and work together to change the structural causes of injustice.

Brazilian activist and writer Paulo Freire² is probably the best known for translating these principles and politics into practice, developing the ideas and methods of popular education as a strategy for building people’s movements and catalyzing revolutionary change in Latin America. Conceived of as a political education and action process, it was aimed at organizing peasants to unite in a common strategy to resist and overcome poverty and injustice in a context of brutal dictatorship. Using a Marxist analysis, Freire identified class as the major structural source of people’s exclusion. He was struck by the ways that peasants were socialized to feel inferior and powerless, and to believe they were to blame for their own deprivation. This sense of shame and inadequacy contributed to a “culture of silence” in the face of blatant and systemic injustice so that peasants seemed complacent, and even complicit in their own injustice. In fact, he commented on the ways that individual peasants tend to use power, perpetuating the same sorts of abusive dominance which he called “imitating the oppressor.” Freire recognized how knowledge can be used to

¹ See *Making Change Happen 3: Revisioning Power for Justice, Equality and Peace*, Just Associates, 2006.

² Freire’s methodologies are contained in his books, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Pedagogy of Hope* and *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation*. A 1964 military dictatorship forced Freire into exile in Europe where he continued his work at the World Council of Churches. Drawing on elements of liberation theology, he and his team eventually inspired critical educational processes and social movements from Latin America to Africa, Asia, North America and Europe.

reinforce people's sense of powerlessness, and dependence on outsiders or "experts" for solutions – even when they have the knowledge at their finger-tips. He saw how traditional formal education made people conform to hierarchies, rather than challenge, the status quo. To overcome these dynamics and activate peasant movements against injustice, Freire facilitated dialogues among peasant groups to reflect on and question the driving forces behind their exclusion and to develop concrete strategies for resistance and demand. This approach, called "*conscientization*" or broadly, "liberation education", builds on people's understanding of their world and the problems they face, their sense of self and connection to others, and their desire for and ability to affect change.

Feminist critiques and alternatives

Feminist activists and scholars have been at the forefront of the creative critique and adaption of Freire's work for many years. During the 1960s and a resurgence of women's movements alongside other social justice and revolutionary movement, feminists and women in labor movements began developing consciousness-raising and organizing processes that would become the foundation of feminist popular education. Formed at times independently of Freire's influence and shaped by the feminist principle "the personal is political," the process usually began with groups of women sharing personal stories that would be validated by the collective experiences of other women. Feminist and women activists in different movements quickly went on to analyze the forces shaping inequality in their personal and public lives, and in doing so, reached a deeper understanding of the institutions, norms and behavior shaping women's second class status. In this way, they gained an appreciation of their own strengths, collective wisdom and power that could be applied to activism.

When feminists encountered Freire's ideas, many identified with his understanding of oppression and the role of consciousness-raising linked to organizing and action in undoing it. However, they challenged his singular focus on class as the source of all oppression and found a glaring omission in that his analyses ignored inequalities in the private sphere. Thus, feminist activists made visible the multiple and intersecting markers of social exclusion and oppression—gender, class, sexual orientation, age, nationality, ethnicity, and the myriad other identities around which social hierarchies are built. And they widened the analysis to acknowledge the many places and spaces in which patriarchy operates—notably, in the domestic, reproductive, and intimate spheres.

II. Principles of feminist popular education

Over the years, popular education has been widely embraced by activists, scholars, and development practitioners. It has inspired the development of a host of participatory and interactive learning methods, but in many cases, they have been separated from the explicit *political* objectives and organizing strategies that are vital to popular education theory and practice. In some instances, popular education has been reduced to a set of fun and dynamic teaching techniques. In others, it has been interpreted as an approach for making complex information simple and easy to learn, assuming—incorrectly—that information alone will change attitudes or motivate action. This has led to confusion in some circles about what, precisely, popular education is, and how it relates to social justice work.

Meanwhile, recent years have spurred a renewed interest in more effective ways to build the voice and power of marginalized communities. In the face of ever-more unequal and unjust global dynamics, social justice actors are rediscovering popular education for its potential to effect transformative people-centered change. Amidst all of this, women's every day acts of resistance including the drive to seek connection and community with others, has kept popular education alive, if not in name, then in practice.

The following four principles reflect key elements of feminist popular education that a) help distinguish it from traditional NGO-advocacy and conventional technical approaches to empowering women, and b) constitute the radical potential of feminist popular education to contribute to feminist movement building and social change.

Principle 1. Knowledge and critical consciousness

In our pursuit of learning, prevailing norms privilege certain types of “expertise” and knowledge over others. It divides the world into separate categories and dichotomies, applying one-dimensional “objective” methods for establishing so-called “truth,” and “legitimate” knowledge. For example, the age-old strategies for harvesting seeds developed by indigenous women over centuries were not considered “knowledge” until formally-trained scientists documented and structured that information. Feminist popular education begins with women’s lives, and their day-to-day experiences as both a source of knowledge and a primary site for transformation. The process involves learning to question and challenge the explanations for why things are the way they are and what is “normal” – perpetually seeking a deeper understanding of power and inequality from the intimate and personal to the more public realms of decision making at the national and international levels. This is the foundation of developing critical consciousness—an explicit goal of feminist popular education. Critical consciousness, along with hope and solidarity, sustains people’s active involvement and capacity to self-organize in response to injustice. Critical thinking skills, a commitment to equality and fairness, and a recognition of how power operates in everyday life are key features of this kind of political awareness.

Principle 2. Validating and building on women’s knowledge and spirit

Feminist popular educators recognize that people are energized and transformed by experiences that tap into how they feel, think and move and that this holistic approach reinforces our multiple forms of intelligence and ability to enjoy and contribute to society. Yet patriarchy operates to discredit women’s ideas and emotions, denigrating how we view our own mental capacities, relationships, feelings, and bodies. Traditional education, especially at higher levels, usually begins with theory and then tests the theory against reality. When educators start with a concept in the abstract, they can derail the empowering effect of analyzing and discovering things for oneself. At the same time, the introduction of new ideas and critical information – handled well – is vital to enable leaders and communities to develop and self-organize with a long-term agenda for change.

Learning processes need to affirm women’s own knowledge and generate the hope, joy and spirit of wholeness that strengthens our sense of integrity, community and possibility. We need to incorporate dreaming, laughter, movement and all forms of creativity into our efforts of reflection and analysis to benefit from our many personal and collective sources of knowledge. This is one of the reasons why songs, drawing, poetry, skits, and personal sharing are vital. However, to avoid becoming solely a “feel good” personal experience – which is a real risk of many stand-alone consciousness-raising and wellbeing approaches -- it is critical that these forms of learning and connecting are combined with analysis, strategizing and organizing. By beginning a learning process that affirms personal and community knowledge and concerns, feminist popular education can give women confidence in their creative ability to change things as well as open them to new ideas, ways of working together and strategies.

One of the important skills of a feminist popular educator is knowing how and when to weave in new information and ideas into the learning process that help challenge assumptions and prejudices, and counter misinformation or provide missing data. A more comprehensive analysis enables women to develop more effective strategies that challenge discriminatory and destructive systems, behaviors and beliefs.

Principle 3. Understanding and navigating power

Facilitating activists’ ability to see and analyze how power operates helps them understand and challenge the structural drivers of inequality and violence against women; and anticipate and manage conflict both among

organizations and in terms of backlash. Power³ operates on three interrelated levels: through **visible forms**—e.g. discriminatory institutions, laws and policies; through **hidden power**, referring to the ways powerful forces like multinationals and religious extremists shape public discourse and political agendas while delegitimizing opposing voices; and through **invisible power**, socialization, ideologies and harmful cultural norms and practices that prevent people from seeing and questioning injustice and reinforce women's sense of inferiority and shame. Naming how power operates both to oppress and to liberate, bolsters activists' confidence in the possibility of change and better equips them to address the complexities of change. Having a common framework for understanding all the dimensions of power, including the ways that we perpetuate and reproduce inequality in our own lives, enables women to work together more effectively on common strategies.

Principle 4. Self-care - Heart-mind-body

Burnout is a common condition for many women activists whose multiple workloads at work and in their families add to the stress, and wear and tear of political organizing. For many women – especially those challenging sexual and gender norms – speaking out and joining political movements provokes stigma and isolation, even retaliation, from their own communities, organizations and even families. Over many years and especially in violent or risky contexts, the physical and emotional trauma that women and women activists experience can leave deep seeded scars that, if unacknowledged, undermine women's sense of self and agency. Processes that enable women to deal with the exhaustion, fear, anxiety, shame and self-blame that over-work, violence, sexual coercion, abuse, and loss of family members generate—are vital to sustaining activists, organizations and movements. Incorporating healing and self-care into feminist popular education simultaneously serves as a common form of resistance among women, and a powerful motivation to (re)engage. Meanwhile, women's activism and victories often generate backlash, including fundamentalist attempts to roll back rights and violent repression by state and non-state actors. Therefore, risk assessment and safety planning are essential components of feminist popular education along with practical strategies for women to renew their energies, imagination, and hope.

III. Methodological approaches for feminist popular education

Feminist popular education is an iterative, structured process, but there are no predictable steps and outcomes. Although participatory learning methods use certain techniques, the process is not linear. Because the facilitator cannot anticipate how learners will think and interact, she must listen carefully and engage in the process as it unfolds. There are no mechanical formulas for developing an inclusive, empowering education process although some basic steps and prior thinking about how *conscientization* might work are essential.

When designing programs, educators need to tailor their approaches and materials to the learning styles and background of the participants. In cases where groups are not literate or are working in languages other than their own, visual approaches such as drawing, videos and sociodramas will be invaluable starting points for deeper discussions. Since each person has different ways of learning, it is important to incorporate a wide variety of approaches into any training or education initiative.

Additionally, it must be recognized that from a pedagogical standpoint, the educator-facilitator brings to the encounter other sources of power -- from knowledge about methodology and the issues under discussion to the role as designer and coordinator of the learning process itself. The facilitator plays an important and distinct role in guiding analysis and questioning, and creating a safe, structured space that allows people to go beyond their comfort zone and probe prejudices and difficult questions about power. This approach involves dialogue, joint discovery and critical analysis that helps learners to gain confidence in their own ability to sort

things out. It also enables people to see that they are not alone, or “to blame” for their predicament and opens them up to a deeper analysis of the social forces shaping injustice.

There’s a common misconception that the popular educator simply facilitates the knowledge and empowerment of others, as if to be an invisible presence or blank slate. For feminist popular educators, it’s vital to be self-aware about the power and information she represents and embodies in the process, and to manage her role in a way to find opportunities to continue to deepen and stretch the thinking through questions and additional information.

The methodological approaches below help to ensure that people and their experience are the starting point, and that leadership development, learning and action are always a part of the learning.

Create safe space

To ensure that everyone is engaged in the process, facilitators must establish trust within the group and ensure participants’ confidentiality. Facilitators must actively work to create an environment in which participants can discuss personal experiences without judgment and build relationships and confidence that both affirm and add to their knowledge. In some cases, facilitators may need to protect and wait through silence to give space for those who are less confident in public settings. (See below for acknowledging and address conflict.)

Start with the concrete experiences of women’s daily lives

People absorb, connect emotionally and act on information that is directly related to their daily lives. While many people often assume that “good” information or messages alone will motivate people to act, this is rarely true. People often lack vital information to help them understand, contextualize, and address the problems they experience. That kind of information is rarely gained from a well-framed message or other kinds of top-down educational or advocacy processes. In fact, beginning a learning process with facts and analysis disconnected from peoples’ local realities, concerns, feelings and experience can sometimes be disempowering. It can reinforce the paralyzing myth that they are incompetent and only experts know what’s “right.”

In contrast, by tapping personal experiences, women get in touch with their own sources of strength, pain, identity and inspiration and can transform these dimensions of their lives into action and connection with others. This may entail painful moments of reflection and consciousness-raising to begin developing new ways of making sense of their stories and relationships and new ways of thinking and acting.

Ask open-ended questions that promote critical thinking

One of the facilitator’s roles is to ask questions that assist learners to examine their own situation more closely and deepen their understanding of the different forms of power they face and perpetuate. The facilitator also introduces new ideas and information to supplement and broaden the analysis and, by so doing, strengthens critical thinking skills and strategies for change.

Enable learning by doing: concrete problems, practical solutions

Beyond the importance of relevance and consciousness-raising, adults often learn faster when the information they gain addresses the problems they face directly. Integrating some form of action in the process – a small or large step toward problem-solving – is vital to sustaining the growth and change initiated by reflection and analysis and building leadership and organizing skills. The action can be as small as seeking out information from an official source or attending a community meeting and over time, potentially larger. The action itself is a learning experience that should be integrated into continuing reflection and analysis over time.

Prioritize reflection and dialogue to internalize knowledge from practice

When approached as a process, feminist popular education involves multiple moments of learning-action-and reflection. It is this reflexive practice that enables activists to gain knowledge from practice and is a defining characteristic of feminist popular education.

Acknowledge and address conflict

The same power imbalances that generate conflict in society are present in groups brought together to learn, plan, and act. Surfacing, naming and understanding how socialization around race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, etc. underpin the personal and political structures shaping inequality is a vital element of empowerment, and must be handled carefully. This approach contrasts with the tendency to see women as homogenous, and to ignore or smooth over the power differences between educators/organizers and "women participants" and differences among women themselves.

Finding common ground with respect for differences does not mean consensus. Instead, it is important to create space to surface and deal constructively with conflict, including respect for disagreement. In this way, the feminist popular education process seeks to create the experience and practice of inclusive, participatory democracy to develop new kinds of leaders and ideals.

IV. Making Sense of the Dynamics of Consciousness

Critical awareness is more like dance – two steps forward, one step sideways, three steps backward -- than a linear progression as represented below. In fact, many of us have all three levels of consciousness operating simultaneously depending on the specific circumstances. Nevertheless, it can be useful to think about the different characteristics of each way of seeing the world. During a workshop in 1997 that the authors facilitated, a group of Latin American women activists and feminists – many of whom are now part of JASS -- developed the following chart in an effort to unravel and be more sensitive to the complexities of consciousness-raising in their work.

Levels of Consciousness		
From Passive to Questioning Consciousness	From Questioning to Analytical Consciousness	From Analytical to Active Critical Consciousness
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You assume class status, race dynamics and gender roles-duties are "natural"• You believe you are to blame for poverty, economic and social problems• You are not familiar with other perspectives about what's wrong and why; if you are, you find them threatening and you criticize them• You begin to have access to information and experiences different from what is familiar to you• You begin to question aspects of your life and to search for answers to your problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You begin to name and analyze situations that you have lived• You begin to confront and place blame; you feel angry• You begin to discover how your predicament as a worker, mother, young man, (race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) is a social, cultural, economic and political construction; not a predetermined role incapable of change• You reaffirm your self-worth and potential for change• You connect with others who share similar problems and interests to explore how to resist and change things	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You develop your critical analysis, question yourself and your world; you seek out more information to explain things• You begin to be a more active part of a group or community• You take political actions• You face the interpersonal and social conflict that your changes and political view generate• You create spaces to negotiate fundamental areas of life - work home, family, and related changes• You become increasingly involved in organizing for political change