



# JASS

*Strengthening & sustaining  
women's organizing power*

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## JASS Crossregional Learning and Visioning **Power – Movements - Change**

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**REPORT**

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## Introduction

JASS' third annual crossregional gathering assembled 27 close allies, board members and staff from 17 countries for a learning and visioning process about feminist movement-building from local to global levels. At a pivotal moment in JASS' young life, as we take our training, organizing, action, advocacy, and knowledge to a new level, we paused to draw lessons on the impact of our approach thus far, seeking specifically:

- a shared understanding and fresh insights about the theory and practice of feminist movement-building (contexts, issues, approaches and strategies);
- new knowledge about the principles and dilemmas involved in building a flexible transnational institution as an NGO-movement hybrid (JASS);
- further clarity about the theory of change, core principles and political philosophy underpinning JASS' movement-building.

These investigations were designed to feed the collective organizational process and consolidation of JASS and benefit the movements and organizations of all who attended, under the many hats we all wear. A vital, non-NGO feature of JASS is that we embrace multiple organizational affiliations within our community. So, some of us doing feminist movement work do it with a JASS hat on, others with another organizational hat, others wearing many hats including "JASS," and still others, with no hat at all – just as an activist. We have gained important lessons from this practice; lessons that will be expanded further in this report. We all put forward different organizational identities depending on the strategic demands of the moment. In this workshop, participants were invited to wear all their hats. So, while we focused particularly on experiences within and related to JASS, we respected and drew on the distinct contributions of the many organizations and individuals in the room.

The following questions guided the presentations and discussions, and continue to frame our ongoing learning and practice:

- What is **political consciousness** and how is it nurtured in new forms of **activist leadership**? What does activist leadership look like in practice?
- How do we **come together across differences** of class, race, age, sexuality and location and sustain our organizing, common agendas and collective action?
- How do we **generate and mobilize knowledge that challenges the dominant thinking** that marginalizes/disempowers women and feminists?
- What does **local-to-global solidarity** look like and how do we deal with the inherent conflict and possibilities of such political relationships?

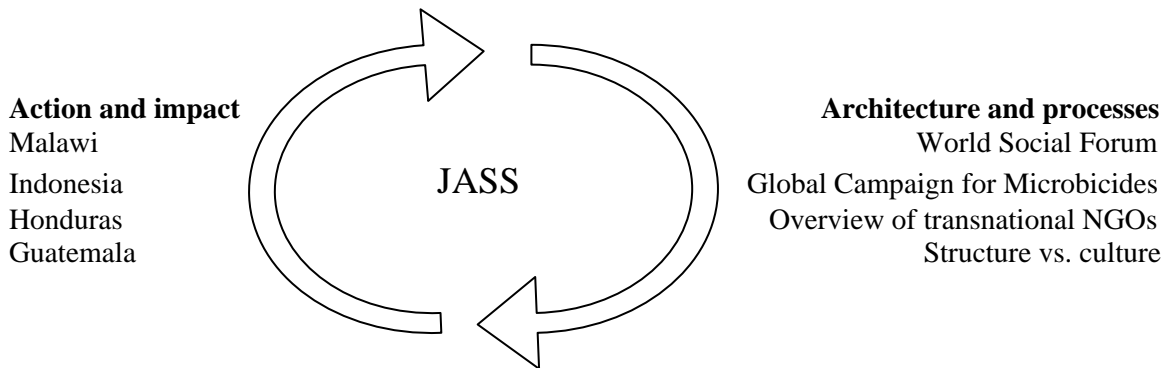
(In the interests of making visible the seams in apparently seamless processes, questions framing particular presentations are given as Appendix 3.)

The workshop created space for learning, reflection and readjustment on two levels.

1. External strategies and tools: What can we learn about organizing, activist leadership, and movement building from case examples – Malawi, Honduras and Indonesia – and from the kinds of tools and how-tos that have emerged in our long-term learning processes (such as Patricia's presentation on conflict) to help improve our strategies and impact, and better understand the common elements of our movement-building?

2. Internal strategies and tools: How do we organize ourselves to respond to the opportunities and challenges we've unleashed? What can we learn as a movement-builder from other innovative international structures – the World Social Forum process and the Global Campaign for Microbicides – and from research on transnational institutions and new developments in organizational theory that would enable us to consolidate ourselves?

Action in the regions intensifies demands on JASS as an organization and a community, so Power-Movements-Change discussions were structured around this cycle.



*Amporn Boontan (Thom) broadcast the meeting live on the web.*

## JASS



*What does it mean to be a part of JASS' community and movement-building initiative? To situate the meeting's discussions and to bring newer staff and allies up to speed, the group began by establishing a geography of JASS with our physical bodies, then a historical timeline with memories and turning points to understand better where we are today and the lessons our trajectory presents.*

## Our Roots

JASS draws on centuries of progressive thought, from anti-slavery, suffragette, feminist, labor, anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles to popular education, liberation theology, and peace, solidarity and anti-apartheid movements. Much of the thinking that supports JASS' work is gathered in *A New Weave* (which translates concepts into practice for activists and NGOs) and explored in the ongoing relationship between JASS and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), including the three faces of power framework. Some of the activist thinkers and ideas shaping our practical approaches – and re-shaped by us as we use them – include Saul Alinsky, Paolo Freire, bell hooks, Marcela LaGarde, women's human rights and ESC rights, and citizen-centered, radical democracy. JASS is fortunate to have well-known innovative thinkers within our community: Srilatha Batliwala, Alda Facio and others.

The JASS approach engages a range of analytic tools. In this gathering, we highlighted four concepts that we consistently explore in our practice:

- **Power:** We apply a framework that defines three faces of power (visible, hidden and invisible) to analyze the world, understand that the personal is political, and in order to build collective power we must identify and strengthen alternative forms of “power to, within, and with.”
- **Hegemony:** One of the most complex dynamics of power, rarely named as such in our day-to-day work, this term describes the net of dominant ideas, ideologies and discourses that normalize and reproduce the dominance of one social group over the others. Through cultural hegemony, according to Gramsci, the ideas of the ruling class are seen as benefitting everyone when in fact they only benefit the ruling class. Invisible power refers to some of the elements of hegemony. The most powerful ideologies shaping women's lives are capitalism and patriarchy and their intersection.
- **Resistance and Transformation:** Understanding and reinforcing women's resistance, from the personal to the public, is a critical element of transformation. JASS strives to strengthen individual and collective actions that cross the line, while at the same time navigating inevitable risk and conflict.

Long-time personal-political relationships forged the community from which JASS emerged. Individual activists met and collaborated on numerous fronts, from the Nicaraguan Revolution, Central American regional struggles, and Women Law and Development in Africa to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and gender-budget advocacy in Southeast Asia. JASS was formed as a “light” institutional frame to carry the energy, thinking and action of these relationships, following “Making Change Happen” a workshop supported by the Asia Foundation right after 9/11 that gathered key early associates and partners like the Institute for Development Studies. (Highlights and the grounding analysis shaping JASS' alternatives were published as the first in the *Making Change Happen* series of occasional papers.)

In its early years (2003–2006), JASS operated on a fee-for-service basis for like-minded justice organizations. Work with larger institutions, such as ActionAid and the Solidarity Center, helped to subsidize the ongoing collaborations with smaller frontline women's



rights and economic justice groups including the Women's Coalition in Mozambique, Las Dignas in El Salvador, and the Uganda Debt Network. In terms of our theory of change, work through these larger development organizations also seemed a way to expand the reach of our innovations in rights-based development and citizen-centered advocacy. Over time, we came to recognize the limitations of this approach. We tended to put in a lot of work into the institution itself, confined by their boxes and structures, without having much measurable reach beyond it.

However, crucial relationships with ActionAid, IDS and the Association of Women's Rights in Development (AWID) deepened in this period and new ones formed, for instance, through the World Social Forum. Then, among other modes of learning and impact, JASS' collaboration with AWID – *Where's the Money for Women's Rights?* – positioned JASS as an international actor and was a catalyst for the Dutch government's MDG3 Fund. Working on a shoestring and in keeping with our commitment to organize locally and globally, JASS also did organizing work within the US for three years, centered on challenging the privatization of public schools and promoting education rights with many allies engaged with the beleaguered Washington DC public schools. (See JASS publication: *Forging a Global Movement*).

The turning point came in 2005, after a three-day meeting of the broad JASS community piggy-backed onto the AWID Forum in Bangkok. Sensing a dispersed impact and concerned about growing fundamentalist backlash, JASS decided to narrow and deepen our focus on women's rights and women's organizing from local to global levels, leveraging the trajectories and relationships of our community in different parts of the world to build a multi-regional organization. Contributory factors in this shift included an enormous women's timeline process that JASS led with all 1,700 AWID participants; the profile of, and interest in, JASS at AWID; a bus trip with Ireen Dubel from Hivos where Lisa and Ireen discussed common interests and expanding our collaboration; the publication of *Women Navigate Power* with ActionAid; and a financial crisis that left staff without pay. In 2006, the feminist movement-building took shape and was launched as JASS began the process of regionalization as an organization.



Reviewing the timeline, PowerMovementChange participants identified three critical moments per region since the feminist movement-building process was launched in 2006:

Mesoamerica:

- The first Panama meeting in 2006, when the Petateras were born and “named for our inspired vision for building the social fabric anew with the values of caring, reciprocity and equality;” in recognition of the near invisibility of women’s rights in the public discourse and policy agenda and the need to strengthen new forms of resistance, the strategy of the Observatorio de la Transgresión Feminista (the urgent action strategy also known as the Feminist Transformation Watch) was launched;
- The first formal “school” of Mar de Cambios (Sea Change, JASS’ evolving leadership school in Mesoamerica) co-hosted with the University of Panama and the International Feminist University in Panama in 2009;
- The 2009 coup in Honduras which prompted JASS to co-organize a fact-finding mission with the Petateras and Radio Feminista, and expanded the solidarity and international advocacy of JASS’ crossregional team in DC because of the critical roles of US foreign policy and the United Nations Security Council.

Southeast Asia:

- The first workshop of Indonesia and East Timor in 2007, an emotional moment of coming together, sharing many similarities and bridging painful historical divisions;
- The regional workshop in 2008, “a few young women were resistant, calling us a lesbian organization because we were open to everyone’s experience. At that point, we realized that the regional level was not appropriate and decided to shift to in-country processes, like the one we had begun in Indonesia;”
- The first intergenerational dialogue in Indonesia motivated by the need to find ways to confront ageism and deepen our aging movements. “We also failed and learned from our failure. It didn’t go very well because ‘senior’ feminists dominated and did not want to listen. Young women felt there was no dialogue and that their voices were not heard. We reflected on that and improved the process for the second dialogue.”
- The establishment of a regional Coordinating Committee after the launch of organizing plans in all 8 countries of the region.

Southern Africa:

- The initial movement-building institute in 2007 that created an inspiring space for incredibly diverse activists engaged with women and HIV/AIDS;
- In 2008, the participation of five young activists from the JASS process in the International AIDS Conference in Mexico City, the African Feminist Forum - a gathering of many prominent feminists - and the JASS training of trainers that consolidated the skills of a core team of young political facilitators;
- Country processes to support women’s organizing in 2009 in Malawi and Zambia. They are very different situations and processes despite the proximity and apparent similarities between the countries.



## JASS Today

*By Lisa VeneKlasen*



*In 2006, we were an intimate but far-reaching community of 20 people from 13 countries with only two full-time staff. We come to the end of 2009 with dozens of women organizing women in many communities and countries on a wide range of issues under many organizational banners but with the platform and umbrella of JASS – a growing international organization built on political and personal relationships bonded by a commitment to building a different organizational space and process. Lisa VeneKlasen*

JASS is in the midst of extraordinary internal changes created by the momentum of our multiregional feminist movement-building since 2006.

Since 2006, JASS' guiding mission has been to strengthen women's voice, visibility, and collective organizing power to create a just and sustainable world for all. Our objectives are to:

- Strengthen activist leadership with women from all backgrounds and walks of life;
- Expand grassroots organizing linked to mobilization and advocacy;
- Forge new alliances and agendas between women from distinct locations, sectors, movements, ages, ethnicities, backgrounds;
- Make women leaders and feminist messages more visible and appealing to the broader public (challenging prejudice, taboos and stigma);
- Increase women's access to and use of resources, rights and freedoms.

When we started JASS, policy advocacy and campaigning – driven mainly by a handful of big Northern-based international NGOs – had become largely disconnected from the constituencies and communities who are ultimately intended to benefit from change. A hierarchy had evolved among the distinct social change strategies leading to a devaluing and under-resourcing of grassroots organizing. In response, in 2006, our core movement-building strategy as JASS focused on promoting and linking grassroots organizing and popular education to advocacy with the added amplifier of communications and on-line organizing. This turned out to be a winning combination. Our processes provided all too rare safe spaces for reflection, learning and analysis among diverse women that seemed to ignite energy and action everywhere. Today hundreds of women from Jakarta to rural Malawi have adopted JASS’ language, concepts and culture as they practice new activist leadership, as they “cross the line” and build the “power within” to make change. They see their change – no matter how local or grand – as a shift in power, as resistance and as a feminist agenda.

### Activist Leadership

Malawi HIV+ women leaders



*"Many of the women boasted that their leadership skills have been transforming their lives and those of fellow women and girls by challenging systemic inequalities" Hope Chigudu, blog from second gathering*

### Political Organizing

Nias Island – vote for women



With partner PESADA in N. Sumatra, Indonesia: Encouraging marginalized women to stand for local government, to vote, and to support other women.

### Mobilization, Resistance and Solidarity



While led primarily by feminists, we have had an uneasy relationship as an organization with “feminism” in our external politics. The word “feminist” has closed many doors where we organize. We recognize how maligned feminism is by every society but, simultaneously, note that dominant forms of feminist organizing have reproduced diva behavior and become disconnected from the day-to-day struggles of women (much as is the case with other social movements.) When we began, we were cautious about the potential alienation that would result from labeling our work “feminist” in some contexts. The first institutes that launched the regional processes were billed as “imagining and building women’s movements for the future.” Although the content of our processes is laced with feminist practice and theory, we didn’t add the specific word “feminist” until the women in the regions demanded it.

Today, we embrace and continuously refresh multiple feminist visions and agendas. What JASS is doing is creating opportunities for all women to reconnect and reclaim feminism as a paradigm for understanding and reorganizing the world. It is clear to us that demobilization in women’s rights efforts has been generated by a lack of diversity, so we are reclaiming how “feminism” encompasses gender, class, race, sexuality, ability and much more and insisting that feminism is both a driving vision and a constant debate.

We make a (somewhat imperfect) important distinction in the nature of our work in different regions between:

**Building feminist movements** (closer to the emphasis of JASS Mesoamerica): mobilizing women and organizations who have come together on specifically-focused gender-equality issues, from domestic violence to reproductive health; *and*

**Feminist movement building** (characteristic of JASS in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa):

bringing a feminist analysis and gender-equality perspectives and strategies into other agendas and movements and, with a feminist vision, building bridges between women in different social groups and movements (unions, positive peoples’ organizations, gay and lesbian alliances, youth, etc.)<sup>1</sup>

In Southeast Asia and Southern Africa, our entry point was young women grassroots organizers (SEA) and HIV-positive women (Southern Africa) on the edge of formal women’s rights or feminist organizations – although our analysis, content and visions are always explicitly feminist. Because we invest primarily in emergent feminist leadership and organizing in these regions, the process has tended to emphasize leadership development, training and learning, with the organizing and action elements being more small-scale and local as we build to regional strategies step-by-step. (See JASS core strategies in the diagram below.)

In Mesoamerica, however, JASS came primarily from within feminist movements – partly due to the power and scale of these movements relative to the other regions.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Srilatha Batliwala: *Changing Their World*, 2008

However, while violence against women – ranging from political violence to domestic violence – tends to be a continuous agenda in Mesoamerica, the issues of focus are not solely gender equality issues. They include corruption, fair elections, free trade, the criminalization of protest and, more recently, a coup d'état. In 2009, in Mesoamerica, we began to engage more extensively with women in other social movements. even though this had been a consistent feature of the agenda since the beginning. Prime examples include the Atenco land rights struggle where women moved into the leadership as the wives and mothers of political prisoners, gradually bringing a feminist perspective to this struggle; and our collaboration with indigenous women and women in social movements as human rights defenders. In supporting these groupings, JASS is moving beyond narrowly-defined women's rights agendas and reshaping what is seen as a feminist agenda.

Thus, our work confirms that the major contextual challenges JASS initially set out to navigate are firmly in place and must be understood if we are to build effective alternatives. They are:

- extreme economic instability, poverty and lack of access to resources;
- shrinking access to justice and basic services from governments pared down by deregulation, privatization and debt;
- increasing grip by religious fundamentalists on legislation (anti-abortion; stoning laws, etc) and the powerful shaming of women's sexuality ("bad" women as the cause of HIV/AIDs and societal ills);
- ascendancy of forceful "hidden" power where actors "under the table" such as corporations, military/police and drug cartels/ mafia control public institutions;
- growing levels of unchecked violence by gangs, random strangers, and intimate partners;
- repression, political violence and censorship alongside the continued mythological functioning of formal, democratic processes through skewed elections and legislative processes;
- the marginalization of women's rights and gender justice agendas.

To tackle these and numerous other facets, women do not need magic bullets or rigid blueprints like the ones that have failed and continue to fail them. Rather, we need the analytical skills and strategies to maneuver strategically within constantly shifting contexts. Key here is the framework for distinguishing between the three faces of power and the conflict tools that our teams are developing, as well our continuous engagement with human rights instruments.

A lot of big development agencies and corporations (Nike Foundation, for example) are promoting the dangerous idea that "girls will fix the world." See the video on The Girl Effect. Send one girl to school and she'll transform the entire village. No one else has to do a thing – not the state, the local government, the men, no one! Just the girls! Plus, there's no question about what *kind* of education she's getting. We have to beware this kind of magic bullet scenario. *Srilatha Batliwala*

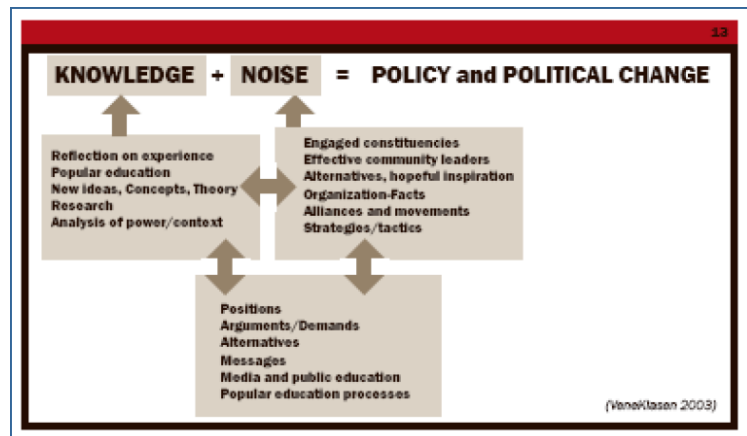


This graphic reflects the relative importance in JASS' work of each facet of power. While the policies and decisionmakers of **visible power** remain important, almost no opportunities to move forward exist in this arena right now. So we engage in visible power primarily to hold the line, and not lose what we've already gained in terms of laws and governments, and also, for emergency responses on human rights violations. Experience and analysis underline the need to focus equally on

**invisible power** – the internalized and “normalized” values, beliefs, stigma and ideology that hold us hostage from within and make us complicit in our own oppression and inequality. This is where the concept of hegemony is critical, referring to the global processes that shape consumerism, individualism. Then, in terms of **hidden power** – the power of decisionmaking forces operating under the table – we see the Catholic Church, rather than elected decisionmakers, deciding public policy in the Americas; while on HIV/AIDS, it's the hidden power of Big Pharma calling the shots. Here too, JASS' focus is not on policy but on, for example, the huge AIDS organizations that have ignored women's voices, and on the corporate sectors that wield so much power on the international AIDS agenda.

Many JASS tools and frameworks are based in our power analysis. “Knowledge and noise,” for example, underlines the necessity to connect our own consciousness raising, research, facts, evidence-gathering, messaging (knowledge) with what do we do to gain public visibility. For those of us on the outside of public discourse and the edge of policy, the task is to heighten visibility and amplify voice via mobilization and media (noise), in order to be heard, reframe debate and have enough influence to change policies and institutions. This is why we often talk about linking face-to-face and virtual organizing. We are committed to demystifying technology and using it in political ways. Our messages have to inspire.

Feminism isn't boring! Often, the most important task of change work is influencing the meaning of events – how events are understood – because of hegemony and the stigmatization of feminism and women's rights. Our forms of organizing and *whose* voices are heard communicate as much about whom we are and what we stand for as the words of our messages.





### **What are we changing?**

Two to three years into our movement-building strategy, what are the injustices we are addressing? Firstly, we are fighting for changes related to political and civil rights especially in Mesoamerica but to some degree in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa, specifically:

- political violence, repression and censorship against women human rights defenders and movement activists;
- corruption and impunity;
- the firm grip of conservative religious (fundamentalists) on policy - resisting anti-abortion, stoning laws and so on;

For this, we are realizing women's rights to communicate, participate and organize!

:

We are making changes with regard to women's economic, social and cultural rights by:

- Fighting poverty and women's access to resources of all kinds;
- Questioning the stigmatization of "bad women" – taking the lid off sex and sexuality and ensuring that the rights of lesbians, trans and sex workers are part of our agendas;
- Challenging leftist social movements and mixed organizations that tolerate machismo, sideline women's leadership and take more than their share of the resources;

We are making these changes by changing how we organize, mobilize and lead by:

- making women and our agendas visible, combining face-to-face and on-line communication and making the right to communicate real by putting technology in the hands of women;
- reclaiming and re-energizing feminisms as a mobilizing vision for change for all;
- strengthening multiple kinds of (non-diva) activist leadership – a style of leadership that prioritizes the skills to facilitate, construct, organize, mediate, connect and inspire over skills to dominate, direct and presume to *speak for*;
- dealing with our big differences – age, class, race, sexuality, location and the implicit power and privilege that come with them;
- challenging prejudice and macho attitudes;
- transforming ourselves and our organizations.

Despite the critical differences in the contexts and dynamics in each region, there are important parallels that enable us, in 2010 and 2011, to begin shaping crossregional agendas on violence and the nexus with sexuality, sexual rights and reproductive rights along with powerful overarching challenges around the closing of democratic space.

The stories and examples that follow provide an opportunity for a deeper look into our strategies and the changes and challenges they are generating.



## Building Movements

*Sharing here, I realized that there are universal issues – violence and reproductive rights – that need North-South and East-West international solidarity and joint action.*  
Jojo Guan



## Linking the Political and Economic in Organizing in Southeast Asia

*By Nani Zulminarni*



*Last night, Daysi told me that I break her stereotype about Muslim women. I want to also say thank you for accepting me as I am – it's my own struggle to be a Muslim and have a clear identity as a Muslim woman. In Indonesia, it's forbidden to be a feminist and wear the veil, but I wear it because of my struggle as a student with nationalist movements where we fought to regain our cultural identity as Muslims. In JASS, I feel so accepted as I am. One common thing we share is our commitment to women as they are. You can find veiled women supporting lesbian rights, and women in tank tops and miniskirts opposing them.*

Nani Zulminarni, co-director of JASS-Southeast Asia and founder/director of JASS ally and host, PEKKA, the Indonesian organization of women heads of households, based in Jakarta.

### Context

While individual countries differ in many ways, the Southeast Asian context is marked by common features:

- Historically colonized;
- Strong traditional, cultural, ethnic, and religious roots that have been exploited by religious fundamentalists in the face of the alienating changes brought by western consumerism and globalization;
- Democratic governance system in process but stalled and fragile;
- Developing industrial economies generating high growth but vast inequalities;
- Strong influence of global economic forces, large role of TNCs (transnational corporations) and China in economies and politics;

- Horizontal and vertical conflict – within individual countries and between countries (for example between Thailand and Cambodia), exploiting ethnic and national differences and fueled by economic changes racism and religious fundamentalism.

Rural poverty and the exploitation of women and children are common throughout Southeast Asia. The region is rich, but the gap between poor and rich is vast, and we see both the wealthiest and poorest. Women make up the majority of the poor in rural areas, and of the displaced in urban areas. For instance, women's development index is very low in Indonesia. Invisible and hidden power – values and beliefs from consumerism to misogyny in the name of religion and tradition – are hugely significant, especially in shaping attitudes to women's status and roles. Populations tend to be politically illiterate and economically independent, with elites exploiting identity-based divisions, using ethnic differences, for example, to build political identities and power. With the exception of the Philippines where women are very politically engaged, women remain disconnected from the political process, the realm of visible power – policy and institutions - and are not considered to have power or influence on decisionmaking.

As in the rest of the world, it is evident in Southeast Asia that it's easier to change a law than to change people's values and beliefs. Many countries in Southeast Asia have decent domestic violence laws but the rates are increasing. In Indonesia, for example, we see a 700% increase every year in domestic violence rates. It is difficult for women to break out of the grip of the socialization of inferiority, self-blame and resignation, so any organizing effort has to build their confidence and sense of their own capacity and agency. To do that, we first bring women together around a small concrete solution that can be achieved collectively and individually and, in this way, women practice exercising our own power. We describe this as identifying and using each woman's own "power within." At the same time, we develop women's political consciousness by critically reflecting on and analyzing unequal power relations, bringing a feminist perspective into our ways of seeing and rethinking our lives and choices.

### **Economic empowerment as entry point**

In the context of poverty, if we want women to be involved politically, first, we must support them to organize for access to cash, economic resources, and property, and to increase their economic bargaining power and the freedom it provides. By setting up cooperatives or credit unions, women begin to ensure they have access to and control of resources, and they practice new leadership and decisionmaking. Women experience and practice democracy and exercise equal power within the cooperatives we work to establish with them: one woman, one vote, and equal rights. This leads to more practical and emotional independence.

**Needs and rights**

In the 1980s, economic organizing was seen as less important because it was not “rights advocacy.” But how can you talk about rights when poor women cannot even feed their children day to day? They’ll never have enough time for training and organizing unless you provide for basic needs. This disrespect for small-scale economic organizing only changed after the financial crisis in 1990s in our region. It became clear that organizing for political needs cannot be separated from practical needs. So we try to work in this kind of more holistic frame. Social safety, education, health – you have to start with these if you are organizing poor women. *Nani Zulminarni*

We work in Malawi with women on the verge of starvation. Some of those who were strong when we met them in February could no longer dance by November. The struggle for survival consumes so much energy – even as they are building a movement, they lack the energy to keep the train going. They do their best and they are motivated, but we wonder will they be there when we go back? You see them wasted and you know it’s because they have no food. You can see what food means to them. We saw them taking food in their handbags from the hotel. If you’ve been starving, you would understand. Our work is positioned against the politics of hunger, scarcity, poverty and we can’t separate the political organizing from this reality. *Hope Chigudu*

**Cooperative credit unions**

We are often asked how we build economic groups without engaging with the huge funding pots offered by the international NGOs and agencies promoting microcredit and microfinance. If women are poor, where do we start?

We start from zero, talking one by one with each woman in a given area to find out her priority concerns. Women always start with the problem of money. So we begin with savings as a practical strategy to bring women together but also to seed a more ideological strategy to resist consumerism. We ask, “What did you buy?” Often it turns out to be junk food and other unnecessary things. With these small savings to start, women are able to invest in joint economic endeavors that generate a growing profit over time if they are frugal and work hard. They control their own income which is not owed to anyone.

We never attach women to an existing cooperative. Rather, they build their own together. From the profit they generate by investing their savings, they eventually have enough to build their own women’s centers. Over time our experience shows that they promote their own leaders to become village head, or members of the village parliament. From there, they have influence, gain more power, and can make bigger change. In the past and in other places, many cooperatives have been focused on finding markets for women’s products. But we feel that women already know what local needs are. Together, they create their own markets.

The cooperative credit union that we work with women to set up becomes a living alternative to the capitalist system – and very specifically, an alternative to the micro-finance model of credit. The starting point is not about giving money. The women in a

community start from their own, available resources – in some cases, the resources can be bananas or coconuts that they can sell. In some areas, they begin by bartering rather than using cash. The point is that they do not need to borrow and accept someone else's terms.



The cooperative is rooted in our culture. The founding father of Indonesia was a socialist who promoted it. We tried to revive this as an empowering system for the poor, after an era of misuse of cooperatives by government. In our model, women decide what to do with the profit in an annual forum, and this is an arena to make bigger decisions and exercise democratic governance.

*This cooperative approach predates the Grameen Bank model which has become so popular. Our approach builds on existing customs of collective savings. For example, when women cook, by tradition they keep a cup of rice each time, pool it and sell once a week. Similar models of savings and informal clubs have existed in many places but in the last few decades have been destroyed partly by the massive extension of individual credit.*

In this alternative model, the client is the owner: the women own and control their microfinance institution themselves – it doesn't belong to an international NGO or bank who then charges between 15% and 30% interest to women. The group builds collective rather than individual assets and, at the end of the year, decides how to share the profits. They divide it by percentages, using money for education, capacity building and individual pay-outs. In this way, some profits go for social justice oriented activities, such as land rights or education advocacy. Members who have more money can put it into the cooperative in order to cross-subsidize other members. This happens frequently even though more money does not buy more power in the collective. In one of our cooperatives, they decided not to take individual profit for five years in order to save to build a center. They built it with their own money, and managed it together. Of course, it takes lots of education – consciousness raising, capacity building. That's an appropriate role for NGOs, not bringing in the money and making profit off the interest that individual women have to pay.

Of course, this model of participatory democracy and leadership creates clashes and internal conflict. People always resist doing things differently. Some want to take control which is why we have a leadership change every three years. That's our role as organizers – to develop and support new kinds of leadership, decisionmaking and organization. It's dynamic – but we focus on building the capacity is to manage conflict.

The kind of formal constitution that groups develop depends on the regulations that apply in a particular context. In general, we register these groups as a legal cooperative, an institution owned by people – this is common in our region. We have our own critique of the Grameen approach. Many NGOs use it as strategy, but the bottom line is that it doesn't change the power relations. It keeps women as individual clients and the impact, for example in the Philippines, is often to intensify competition and undermine the possibility of movement-building. For us, the cooperative is a tool to change women's life, role and status, and the power relations in the community.

Many NGOs focus on targets; disbursement of credit becomes their goal. For us, they stop at the entry point for change. Getting money in women's hands is a means for addressing gender inequality but without other complementary strategies, it is insufficient. Microfinance is the "flavor of the day" development trend and we critique it regularly for the distortions it causes. I belonged to the Microcredit Summit but essentially they are promoting the creation of a bank; the main difference is situating the bank within the village. It has nothing to do with the lives of women. From our experience, they have no idea what the women really need. They don't need a loan! They need to organize! Many banks come to the villages where the coops we work with are situated. Our women say "No, we don't need your money."

Economic organizing in this way also enables us to work under oppressive governments. We say, "We're doing savings and credit," and then the authorities leave us alone. The more women have cash in hand, the more they can bargain with their partners and husbands. In this process, women learn leadership, democratic decisionmaking and how to work collectively. They become more independent and powerful.

### **GLOCAL: Multi-level action as seen from JASS Southeast Asia**

Our strategy involves local, national, regional and global levels, because all these levels affect our lives and our region in an era of globalization, with its shrinking, borderless world exposed to the logic of neo-liberalism. Fundamentalists work trans-border successfully, as do mafias that traffic women, drugs and workers, so we must too.

In addition, there is a domino effect of problems and conflicts across the region and across the globe. The regional body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an economic policymaking forum of governments and economic actors in the region, is growing in power and influence. Civil society needs to monitor and challenge the collective power of governments and corporations and the directions they take.

As JASS-Southeast Asia we strategize to build the capacity of local NGOs and individuals to organize at local level and to network and join forums at national and regional level. We endeavor to bring the voices and decisions of the grassroots to regional and global levels.

Our work is complicated by the diversity – social, economic, political– of our context. Malaysia, for example, is highly developed economically, while Vietnam is perhaps the least developed country in the region. How do we bridge and organize across such differences? How do we build a movement when we do not even share a common language? The diversity of cultures and languages is a challenge for communication and networking. Then too, young feminists are at a critical age, facing numerous choices and opportunities, and this has impact on the sustainability of the process.



### **Cooperatives vs. Microfinance**

“Microcredit” and “microfinance” are part of a capitalist project, a campaign to make poor women “bankable” so they can increase the number of people borrowing money and helping to generate profit. The Grameen Foundation has money, but the women involved in these initiatives are trapped in debt. In the 1990s, governments initiated lending programs throughout the region. Microcredit summits are now a big institution. This is not a development strategy. Instead, we build capital from 100 rupiahs a day – collect and slowly build. Nothing comes in from the outside. What we do is the opposite of “You are poor, you need money. Here’s money. You now owe me so work harder.”

*Nani Zulminarni*

I ran an integrated microfinance model in a village in the Philippines but after three years, people ended up with bigger loans and more debt. Poverty reduction is so complex, and how to achieve it with an alternative framework is complex. This is a debate we need to have within JASS on the role of microcredit: it can alleviate but does it significantly reduce poverty? *Marivic Raquiza*

I founded a microfinance institute in Nicaragua. We started very similarly – establishing cooperatives with women bringing in what they had. We had the problem of corruption in some groups, so it failed as a starting point and we went the other way, towards a client/finance institute. *Malena de Montis*

In eight years of writing critically about the depoliticization of women’s organizations and organizing as a result of microcredit, I have often been asked for examples of other ways to ensure credit for women. So I want Nani’s permission to send this example out. *Srilatha Batliwala*



## Malawi: Connecting Individual and Collective Empowerment with Grassroots Women

*By Hope Chigudu and Sindi Blose*



*What I learned was how change comes on the margins – crossing the line by challenging feared institutions. I saw how one woman can change the whole community. Hope Chigudu*



*We dance a lot. I've learned to chechemura! Sindi Blose*

### Context

Malawi (previously known as Nyasaland) is one of the poorest countries in the world. Over decades, since the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Malawians have migrated to Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa as laborers. President Banda led the country from Independence in the 1960s and lasted for far too long (from 1961 to 1994). Women had to kneel for Banda and weren't allowed to wear pants. Banda died but repression doesn't go away easily despite the exercise of elections; its psychological impact has lingered for a long time.

### Malawi in Brief

Population: 13 million

Area: 118,500km<sup>2</sup>

One of the most densely populated countries in sub-Saharan Africa  
164<sup>th</sup> out of 177 LDCs (Least Developed Countries) per 2007/8 HDI (Human Development Index)

88% of population lives in rural areas

Average land holding: 0.8 ha per household

Average arable land: 0.3 ha per family

Subsistence agriculture: 40% of GDP and 80% of employment

HIV prevalence: 14% of adult population

Adolescent female: male HIV prevalence ratio is 5:1

## **JASS in Malawi**

The overall goal of JASS in Malawi is to build the leadership, organizing and advocacy capacity of Malawian women to pressure local and national governance and other agencies to make resources (healthcare, ARVs, food, credit, etc.) accessible whilst implementing laws that support the rights of HIV-positive women and women generally.

JASS presence in Malawi is fairly recent – since 2008 – with really only one year of directly reaching women. The decision to begin national-level work in Malawi was much debated and the start proved problematic, but the initiative is already making a significant impact and generating an enormous amount of learning and inspiration.

## **Getting started**

Women living with and active on HIV/AIDS are JASS' focus here, as throughout Southern Africa. We started out with in-depth country-wide needs assessment, identifying the key players in the HIV/ AIDS sector and mapping the current intersection of HIV/AIDS and women's rights. Our research confirmed that there was both an urgent need and something on which to build: HIV-positive women are trying to organize but most have limited resources or none at all.

Women's rights groups have generally not involved themselves with HIV-positive women or their agendas, tending rather to focus on women's position in society. Most women's NGOs started 10 or 15 years ago and were shaped by international aid agendas without looking at issues of patriarchy, access to resources and so on.

Meanwhile, the country has fairly good national policies but there is little public information about government frameworks such as the National Action Framework on HIV/AIDS (which guides national response and implementation); the National Gender Policy (which advocates for the integration of gender concerns in response to the epidemic), or the Ministry of Women and Children (which lacks the capacity and resources to do its work.)

## **Who are the women we work with?**

JASS works with women living with and active on HIV/AIDS, from all the provinces of Malawi, aged 20–55, and affiliated to different organizations – the women wear different hats at different moments. The needs assessment process helped us to identify women activists, particularly those with a clear constituency and potential to be movement builders. JASS sets out to deepen their understanding, thinking and strategies for change, within the work they were already doing and in response to opportunities that emerge or that they create.

The first set of workshops, in February 2009, involved grassroots leaders of local women's or HIV-positive organizations with one workshop in each of the country's three provinces – North, South and Central. The next step was a follow up workshop in November 2009, connecting a smaller group of the most dynamic and committed of the leaders from all three provinces. For one session of the workshop, the coordinators and directors of the relevant NGOs were invited to join the grassroots leaders to ensure the national-level buy-in required for effective district-level action.



*Networkers, organizers, leaders, fighters, caregivers, lobbyists, strategists,  
and change agents*

### **What does JASS do in Malawi?**

Raising women's political awareness is an ongoing process and takes many forms. Our process enables women to gain confidence from their lived experience and to deepen their own awareness in order to become progressively more independent in their thinking, work and activism.

Together, we map the current Malawian HIV/AIDS context in relation to women's rights issues, drawing always on the women's knowledge of their own situation and the factors involved. JASS training, information gathering, and learning processes are designed to build solidarity between women and – by creating a safe space – unleash their creative strategies. Building on their stories, the concept of patriarchy is immediately understandable and useful as it names the power that all the women live with and under. We work to understand patriarchal ideology so that we can strategize to resist and end it. This is part of the JASS' power-based analysis that leads to an understanding of the primacy of collective action.

As they learn about themselves as women and as activists, the participants come to heal from personal wounds. To document and analyze life experiences and the different forms of power we possess as well as those we struggle against, we use "narrative therapy." Other participatory, creative workshop methodologies – indoor and outdoor – include body mapping, songs, and walking meditation.

### **How is JASS different?**

Many other NGOs address specific issues – medical, psychosocial, justice, livelihoods support – rather than a holistic woman. Hope spent a lot of time on this, asking "Why do you have to identify yourself as 'a woman living with HIV'? You bring so much into this room. Your medical identity is not your whole identity." This is one part of donor damage: in encouraging women to reveal their HIV status, this has become a standard workshop introduction: "I'm Hope and I'm HIV-positive." For real change, women need

to see themselves holistically, recognizing all aspects of themselves and their lives. This gives us a chance to talk about an example of invisible power, the internalized norms and attitudes that might make you blame yourself for contracting HIV, and perhaps inhibit you from seeking justice and taking action.

**Positive Identity/ties**

This refusal to reduce women to their disease is a very powerful message for other women too. *Marivic Raquiza*

It's interesting that "I'm a woman living with HIV" is now seen as negative. But in the HIV world, even though it's a step encouraged by donors, it's a transgressive statement. It goes against stigma and creates collectivity, so can be seen as a positive, affirming statement. *Lori Heise*

The problem is that this is a label that women have been coached to claim rather than something they'd have chosen themselves. *Srilatha Batliwala*

Labels such as 'street children' carry the 'identity power' to mobilize resources and it's difficult to separate the language from the power of donors. *Jethro Pettit*

Something you should know about HIV/AIDS – it has become commercial. At least six people attended JASS Malawi workshops who hadn't been invited, under other people's names. They knew there were gains here. Many workshops and opportunities arise in that sector: travel, a little bit of money, food. So some go for testing and cry when they turn out to be negative, because they've seen their neighbor come out as positive, be paraded around as a positive woman, and receive money to build a house. This is part of the damage done by development agencies. Their neighbor may die in 10 years, but I might die tomorrow of poverty. *Hope Chigudu*

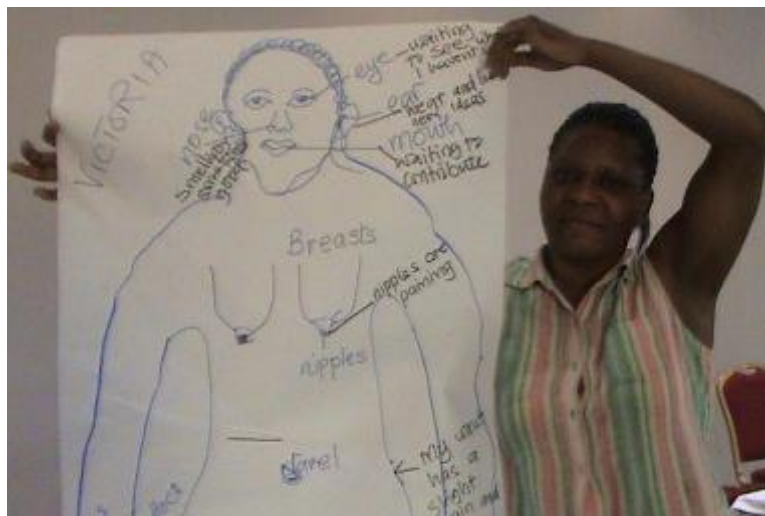
We use different tools to build activist leadership and advocacy. By using the JASS power framework, we aim to build alternative power. Women learn to recognize contradictions, such as decent laws vs. entrenched cultural norms. If women understand the differences between visible, hidden and invisible power, they can look within themselves. This is an important departure from the development framework of only looking outside for solutions.

What is critical in our approach is to recognize that a process that is loaded with theory (vs. practical activities) will lose people. Sitting still for three hours' discussion doesn't engage people in effective ways. It's crucial to remain flexible and proactive. In response to the needs in the room, we stop and do breathing exercises, or meditate, finding ways to give power to each other, or to make sure that a sister who is not feeling well can catch up, so that each one can gather her thoughts. To sit informally and talk while doing other things feels familiar because it is like discussing while working in the fields or fetching water. We allow space for rest and for restoring ourselves through sisterly bonding, celebration, music and dancing. We found out so much about women's lives and history and about cultural norms through drawing maps of individual women's bodies.

### Embodied

We are all working ‘on the ground.’ But sometimes we behave very much disembodied – it’s not merely a question of thought leading to action. Ultimately, we cross the line with our bodies. Hope and Sindi challenge us to think about how to work with head, heart and feet. Dancing, walking meditation: what’s most effective in order to bring the body in? *Jethro Pettit*

We start with how women walk into the room. An energizer will not address that. You need to ask how people are feeling. This gives a sense of where people are in thought and feelings. As the facilitator, you can then work out where and how to start – it’s the issue of flexibility. You have a whole program set out but you must immediately think on your feet and change the approach so that you engage people through their feelings and their interests. So you start from where people are, and then bring the issues in as you go along.





Another element that distinguishes JASS workshops is that we talk about self-care – emotional, sexual, and herbal – and a lot of topics that would never be raised in a ‘normal’ workshop. In evening sessions, we have candles, flowers, and drinks – “Hope makes it so sensual,” says Sindi – and it is in these evening sessions that many of the women come alive. No matter how deeply rooted in their religious beliefs, at night, women *chechemura* (sexually provocative and playful dancing). Older people are not supposed to have fun or dance in a sensual manner so it was interesting for these women to feel free at night at the workshop. That’s part of healing. Many participants are not in good health; some struggle even to sit up straight. But dancing connects to the heart.

Our approach respects and uses the power of writing and of oral history. Women collected stories they had narrated themselves and one of our team, Ndana, documented them. We intend to use these stories creatively, for change. Stories are going to be a part of monitoring and evaluation, and of planning and action. During the workshops, we encouraged women to keep simple journals throughout the day, to share the next day, to encourage self-reflection.

#### **Documenting tools**

It was fantastic when Hope got on the computer every night to blog – three paragraphs that knocked our socks off. Blogging means communicating outwardly. *Annie Holmes*

One of our battles, every time to bring new people in, is the demand for curriculum. We say, “You’ll get it!” And then we send whatever we did. We’re anti-curriculum – we’re popular educators! We use, adapt, and make it up. *Lisa Veneklasen*

Through the workshop process we nurture sisterhood. Early on, we invited women to be each other’s keeper and offer trust and peer support. Division amongst women must be challenged and overcome, particularly that between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women based on sexual conduct. This requires a great leap for many women. We cannot claim success yet, but we are taking steps. Our tack is to demystify sexuality, to encourage an understanding of the issues common in any form of sexual relationship, whether between commercial sex work and client, or between a husband and wife, or within same-sex partnerships. Faced with moral or conventional judgments, we calmly assume a level of respect for those choosing to engage in sex differently from the norm.

#### **Sex workers**

Why do we say ‘commercial sex worker’? We don’t say ‘commercial NGO.’ Many people work for money – we don’t call them commercial doctor, commercial healer, commercial waitress. *Ampoorn Boontan*

The difference is that most of us actually *are* sex workers, but we don’t get paid! When we raise this issue in Indonesia, we say, “We’re all sex workers. You can’t say no to husbands in Indonesia – he can slap you, take you to court.” *Nani Zulminarni*



### **What has shifted?**

- Women are able to articulate what they want and what they don't want.
- Language has changed; women use empowering words.
- Women can show how they subvert, manage and use different sources of power, to advance their rights. In testimonies, they share examples of what they have done to make changes in their lives.
- Each woman developed her own work plan with the context of movement-building, on aspects such as health, awareness raising, outreach, justice, legal reform, and nutrition. These do not conform to logframes. Women have undertaken to mobilize around clinic timetables for providing ARVs, for example, or to demand fair distribution of food coupons.
- Women have documented their own life stories for the purpose of amplifying their voices (and to support a culture of documentation).
- By creating a safe space for open discussion, the process has begun to demystify issues related to sex and sexuality and challenge prejudices.
- Empowerment has spread to other aspects of women's lives, for example fighting for land even though women are not 'allowed' to own land.
- Women understand the interconnectedness of the medical, psychosocial, justice and livelihoods support.

The positive concept of “power within” now forms part of every conversation and every explanation of action between workshops. Women are using their sources of power to demand rights. An early example: women call on the District Administrator; he is not available, so instead of quietly leaving they wait there in order to ask for fertilizer and seeds. “When I got it, I crossed the line,” one woman shared. JASS’ slogan, ‘Women Crossing the Line,’ has been adopted with great enthusiasm. Like ‘power within,’ it is an empowering but open concept; each woman can define what line holds her back and what constitutes crossing it. (In this way, the terms are like JASS’ context-specific approach in general. There are no cookie-cutter, identical steps to follow. Instead, there are processes and frameworks with which one can analyze and strategize within any circumstance.)

As their work plans reveal, the entry point for action is no longer only the realm of visible power (the president, the law). Instead, women begin where they are, building support, changing the mindsets of other women with similar problems. They don't say “when I go back to the organization ...” Rather, they say “this is what I'm going to do, and this is how I'm going to lobby my organization to support it and these are the other organizations I'm going to bring in.” These women are going to be leaders in different ways. Victoria is one example. In her conservative community, she felt empowered by the first workshop to challenge her church's silence and stigma with regard to HIV. Having broken the barrier, and with support from other women, she has now been made the HIV coordinator for the church.

Tiwonge Gondwe, who has been involved with JASS since the beginning in Southern Africa in 2007, has emerged as strong leader in the South. As she has begun to be recognized by big organizations; her leadership has become visible. Together with those she is mobilizing, she plans to press for 5% of the women in her village get access to land. Their plan is to build from there, using the power of increasing numbers to ensure, ultimately, that all the women have legal access and rights to own land.



### Insights

- Listen to the head, heart and feet
- Always look out for what is working well and analyze with the women so that they can see it
- Develop and encourage shared and distributed leadership
- Keeping simple journals throughout the day
- Build a sense of community and nurture it
- Encourage peer support and empathy
- Remain flexible and proactive

It was the women who are already established in organizations in towns who took longer to get out of conventional thinking (compared with local-level, rural-based activists.) Struggles within organizations make it difficult for the individual women we support to have an impact. This was the reason that, in the second round of workshops, JASS identified key leaders in organizations whose staff and members we were working with – targeting decisionmakers and coordinators to involve, and invited them to attend a session so that they could come to appreciate and share the core ideas. This joint session was revealing. Women who were strong in their own communities and in other JASS processes became quiet in meetings with their coordinators. From this we learned that it is important to go where people are – they are not as effective out of their own spaces. This also confirms our original assumption that organizations are often not an effective entry point for women’s movement-building. We continue to seek out compatible organizations but often find their bureaucracies – even in women’s organizations – disempowering to women.

### Surprises!

- The number of women who talk about their power within...
- How the slogan “crossing the line” stuck...so many women relate to it and are able to indicate how they crossed the line
- Identification with JASS and understanding that JASS is not a donor organization but an ally
- Continued condemnation of sex workers (sigh!)

Working in a very disempowering environment, women don't always recognize what they have achieved. So, mirroring back what they have done becomes important in giving them energy for the next day.

### **Challenges and Risks**

Many of the women are in poor health, as they live with the combination of HIV infection and extreme poverty. ARVs are of limited efficacy if there is no food. Participants' health has been a big factor in planning and approach, with budget allocations for emergency clinic visits and extra time allocations for rest, as well as the self-care sessions. Even in the months between February and November, a significant deterioration was evident in the women's bodies and strength. We might lose the process and is a major concern.

No matter how effective the workshops are, the lack of consistent support and of coordination of various initiatives is a problem. Continuity with JASS' presence and support is a pressing need.

Given the fact that the majority of international NGOs come to Malawi with both an agenda and a bit of money to give away, there is often a misconception on the part of other NGOs that JASS is a donor. The very fact of being international and even the connection with Washington DC represents a form of power. The grassroots leaders now get it that JASS is not a donor, but their national coordinators don't. We notice that when they realize we don't come with money, the director of an organization sends a subordinate to meet with us or attend a workshop. How do we develop and sustain organizations' interest? How do we explain the value that our work brings to their work? The challenge is to show that we are builders; we're not just dropping and getting out. Who we are and how we operate is clear to the grassroots leaders and activists who are eager to continue working with us for the resources we share and the accompaniment we offer.

### **Next steps**

JASS is committed to an innovative but also realistic strategy in Malawi. Phase 1 is over. This consisted of introducing JASS to many women through a basic training process, and through that, selecting a group of motivated leaders to convene, learn together, and generate organizing plans that in turn, mobilize many.

In Phase II, the women are implementing the first set of activity plans they developed. As we continue to provide effective support to the movement building, JASS will also be visiting them in their communities to document and enable them to communicate with others about the nature of their work.

How do seemingly individualistic organizing plans lead to movement-building? Each woman we work with is truly a leader and a galvanizer in her community. She works with many other women. She might plan how to encourage communities to plant herbal gardens, for example. She can't do that by herself. She involves her group and they petition the chief, the district administrator, and so they form the beginnings of a

movement that spreads. They use the leadership and organizing methods that we have shared, the power analysis, whatever other tools, confidence, and skills they've taken from the JASS workshops and it spreads.

What each woman draws up is not a single organizational work plan – which might take much longer to produce. Instead, we tap into her leadership capacity as a catalyst and link to many people without the initial challenges that institutional structures present, especially for women. She may wear different hats because she's involved with support groups, NGOs, the churches, etc, but it's her own plan for organizing and mobilizing. Even if she leaves an organization, she can still go forward. Of course, she will report back and share with her various organizations. Down the road, as the organizing momentum increases, we will explore linking the leaders' efforts with one another and with organizations, but initially, we seek fast energy and inspiring change.

During Phase II, the knowledge and information generated should be used to begin to provide assistance on the ground, mobilizing organizations and networks to support the movement builders to get access to resources and connections as they grow.

From rigorous monitoring of change with movement building indicators, JASS should assess progress and challenges at the end of this phase, in both programmatic and organizational development. Then we can address these in expanding and deepening our work.

Our insight since 2007 is that women who are natural activists have been so undermined by international aid frameworks and NGO-ization that when we create a different space, an explosion of organizing happens that has a multiplier and movement-building effect in itself. For example, Malawian women start talking about crossing the line. Their leadership and intuitive instincts are being recognized and unleashed so that their organizing is reaching and making change for many. This creates a momentum and opportunity – and a great challenge to live up to and to continue organizing and multiplying. *Lisa Veneklasen*

## Mobilization and Urgent Action Strategies in Mesoamerica

The presentation included a JASS video by Ana Luisa Ahern entitled “Honduras: Women Targeted for Resisting the Coup,” about the coup in Honduras and the feminist resistance that plays a critical role in the pro-democracy movement.

### Learning about Movement-building with the Petateras and the Observatorios de la Transgresión Feminista<sup>2</sup>

*By Valerie Miller*



The genesis of the Observatorio de la Transgresión Feminista as an urgent action, local-to-global mobilization began with JASS' movement-building institute in 2006 (Panama City, Panama) which gathered veteran – some with a shared revolutionary past – and multigenerational feminist activists and diverse social movement leaders from trade unions, indigenous peoples and campesino movements. The workshop created a safe, creative regional space – something that had become nearly extinct in recent years since their heyday around Beijing (1993-1997). The design sought to engender trust and solidarity while surfacing and addressing many sources of conflict plaguing feminists and other social movements in the current context.

The building of a safe space at the first gathering in Panama enabled women in one country, from different positions and with conflict between ourselves, to pull ourselves together, putting aside historic or current tensions between different women's groups, that we have been able to put that aside for one moment and come together for one specific urgent matter. This new way of thinking started in Panama and continues in the Petateras and the Observatorios - the need to forgive and understand to come together to build women's power urgently.

*Malena de Montis*

### Context

From Mexico to Panama, Mesoamerica is home to 70 million women and is one of the regions most negatively-affected by religious fundamentalisms and neoliberal economic policies. These policies – privatization, deregulations, free trade, etc – have deepened patriarchy and exacerbated levels of extreme violence against women leading to cases of

<sup>2</sup> A document entitled “Feminist Transformation Watch – Women Crossing the Line – An Action Approach for Strengthening Collective Power” documents in English our first attempt at in-depth learning about the first three Observatorios in Nicaragua, Mexico and Costa Rica. The learning method we used, called sistematización in Spanish, engages those involved in the action in the process of documenting and reflecting on their experiences to generate insights that will, in turn, improve the strategy used but also to generate theory about movement-building and change for a broader audience. Sistematización looks both at the impact and dynamics of the strategy and the choices that were made in the heat of doing – specifically asking what changed and evolved about the strategy as it was implemented – what adjustments did the organizers make and why? In this instance, a team of five people involved in the Observatorios looked at the process to draw initial lessons.

femicide in three countries. They have expanded women's poverty and increased the exploitation of women's labor, fueling migration by women to the US.

Governments lack both the will and the conditions necessary to guarantee any kind of democratic system or human rights. Corruption and impunity, as well as a great dependence on the U.S. are common. They are controlled by religious hierarchies, drug traffickers, and commercial monopolies. Policies and laws that restrict human rights (such as sexual and reproductive rights) are on the rise, with therapeutic abortions criminalized except in Mexico and Costa Rica. Militarization and increasing repression has led to an increase in violence against human rights defenders and other activists. At the same time, there is a general disillusionment with movements and leaders of the left who have abandoned women's rights to build alliances with the church and continue to tolerate machismo and women's exclusion within their ranks.

In this context, women are fighting for human rights in greater numbers and with increased leadership. Some key struggles of Mesoamerican women include:

- Land rights and the rights of indigenous women/ communities (related to fight against free trade, privatization and for economic alternatives);
- Confronting violence against women;
- Decriminalizing abortion, promoting SRR, demanding secular states;
- Creating/ improving the legal framework + jurisprudence to promote women's rights;
- Demanding freedom of political prisoners;
- Increased violence against women human rights defenders + activists.

### **The Petateras**

The use and creation of new language and metaphors has been an integral part of building an alternative vision and practice from the NGO business responsible for fragmentation and demobilization in the region. In Panama, an in-depth analysis of the region inspired a profound new feminist vision of building a new social fabric based on the values of caring, reciprocity and solidarity. The petate, a traditional mat woven by women through the region and used for every day tasks, was adopted as the symbol for this vision. "We're the petateras" – proposed one participant – "we're the weavers of a petate." Since that time, dozens and dozens have of women in the region have wanted to be a Petatera.

### **A need for alternative strategies**

An increasingly violent context – where governments have less capacity and interest in protecting women's rights and where women's voices and roles are on the margins of mainstream public discourse – demands a dramatic alternative to policy advocacy – an alternative that first, makes women and women's rights visible again and secondly, challenges the dominant thinking about key events. Thus the idea of the Observatorio de la Transgresión Feminista was born. This is a strategy/methodology for political action that originated within the Petateras, with the strong and ongoing involvement of JASS as an institution and staff within JASS who are Petateras. In Panama – at that very first meeting – the emergent group, the Petateras, asked JASS to help coordinate and shepherd this Observatorio process. Together with the Petateras and Radio Feminista, JASS



mobilizes action, resources, connections and solidarity to support actions by women on the frontline challenging injustice/ patriarchy (from corruption to violence/repression to free trade.) The Observatorio is not ongoing process, but is activated during critical or urgent historical moments when Mesoamerican women and/or feminists urgently require regional and international action to back them up and amplify their struggles/agendas. As soon as the strategy was developed, Nicaraguans called for the first Observatorio to be held in November 2007 at the time of national elections there.

The sistematización report, as well as other JASS documents, details the first three Observatorios (accompanying the Nicaraguan elections, women in resistance in Oaxaca, Mexico, and the “No” campaign against CAFTA in Costa Rica.) The focus here is on the lessons drawn from them: the key elements of an Observatorio.

### **How does the Observatorio work?**

First, the local Petateras in coordination with women’s groups on the frontline of an urgent or pressing issue call for the mobilization of a regional and international Watch. Locals organize logistics, largely on a volunteer basis, offering their homes, vehicles, press links, and so on. An international observer group of women in solidarity, also largely volunteer, is mobilized from across the Americas. What’s interesting is that women engage as individuals, often mobilizing the resources of their organizations but often not. Immediate action is made possible by the fact that the agenda is not set through a process between institutions, which can be laborious and slow.

JASS serves as a key behind-the-scenes coordinator, and usually remains invisible strategically to prevent logos and branding from undermining the mobilization and recognition of local actors and leadership. A critical piece of the strategy is communications, contributed primarily by the ongoing alliance with Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE or Radio Feminista), based in Costa Rica. FIRE helps mobilize and define the agenda of the Observatorio, and also documents and broadcasts from the spot where the action is mobilized. JASS activates social media and uses YouTube to expand the visibility. JASS has also activated its alliance with the Nobel Women’s Initiative whose members lend their prestige to amplify the visibility and legitimacy of the Watch and its agenda. They work closely with the JASS team to draft a declaration in solidarity for the local activists on the frontline, and this is circulated to the media and to officials. A report is issued afterwards on the political dynamics and findings of the Observatorio as a learning process, in order to share the lessons both of the Observatorio and of the country strategies which the Observatorio was called to support. Lately, each Observatorio has been of a much larger scale, including a fact-finding mission which adds an explicitly investigative dimension to the Observatorio and expands engagement with regional institutions, governments and media.

Factors crucial to igniting these mobilizations and tapping the imagination in the way these political strategies do:

- A continuously-refreshed, shared vision and analysis of the complex power dynamics, from the visible to those that are hidden and operating behind the scenes to those operating invisibly on public perceptions and social norms – activists involved

understand that our visibility strategy is to alter the meaning of an event in the public discourse (for example, the resistance in Honduras becomes a women-led pro-democracy movement);

- Creative, respectful, inspiring safe spaces where we can be frank and open, and willing to take on personal power issues and surface conflict;
- The inclusion of all forms of artistic expression, (including dancing);
- A shared, compelling, urgent problem that women are facing and a shared commitment to lend visibility to local leadership and strategies;
- Emphasis on building relationships and negotiating differences.

Crucial to the success of the Observatorios themselves:

- The commitment of Petateras and alliances with FIRE, JASS, the NWI;
- The sense of political community engendered and inspired, the in kind contributions, the volunteer support of women;
- The links to other movements;
- The willingness to negotiate with each other;
- The urgency of the problems and difficulty of the context (business as usual is not an option.)
- The role of the communication strategy and the combined efforts and roles of FIRE, JASS and the NWI in that;
- The recognition that policy work is important but its impact is intrinsically limited due to the challenges of context and power dynamics;
- The willingness to park our organizational identities at the door and prioritize the process and the collective.

### **Lessons learned**

Policy advocacy to promote and protect women's rights is necessary, but its impact is intrinsically limited due to the political realities of the current Mesoamerican context. The level of authoritarianism and impunity present in the region, the control enjoyed by numerous factions, and the escalating violence all diminish and weaken the capacity of social movements and activists to take action and have influence. Given the urgent need to make alternative voices and agendas visible and strengthen collective mechanisms for protection, social mobilization and movement-building needs to continue and expand, characterized by its diversity and the increasing participation of women.

### **It takes more than money to mobilize**

It's important to bring to light our broad sense of "resource mobilization" – it's not the money – there's very little grant money involved – it's the personal relationships and connections that open doors, facilitate press attention, transport, housing, etc. And, while JASS and others help to bring in grant money, JASS often fronts the money because even urgent response funding is not fast enough for emergency actions like the coup in Honduras. Everybody involved taps into everyone we know with any influence to mobilize solidarity. Marusia gets in touch with everyone she knows in the Mexican government, Patricia mobilizes her organization and friends, Lisa phones Jody Williams at the Nobel Women's Initiative (which is another partnership based on personal connections.) The team in DC drafts the NWI declaration, translates it, and works with FIRE to get it out.

To face the new political obstacles we face, we have to re-think the strategies and dynamics of social movements in order to:

- Overcome fragmentation and infighting, to generate strategies that integrate social complexities and diverse demands and that are based in human rights and democratic freedoms;
- Build capacity and increase region-wide responses, because many problems are present across the region and cannot be resolved by working only in one country.
- Move from solidarity to shared responsibility in common struggles and strengthen horizontal alliances (particularly important in terms of the movement's relationship with movements in the U.S.);
- Opt for leadership and democratic dynamics that recognize women's contributions and participation and that reject non-democratic practices, machismo and violence against women within social movements;
- Contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric through the creation of community-based security alternatives and development that emphasizes social justice and that modifies structures of power that infringe on human rights;
- Strengthen strategies to protect women social movement activists. They are the most vulnerable to attack due to the fact that they are not recognized as human rights defenders. They are attacked not only by the state but also by other powerful interests negatively affected by challenges to existing power structures and patriarchy.

Those in the region draw particular attention to certain aspects of JASS' contribution:

- Promotion and strengthening of alliances critical for political impact which relies on JASS' respect for the autonomy of its partners, its efforts to find and work with diverse partners (feminists as well as members of other social movements), and the recognition JASS gives to the contributions of each ally;
- Resources and organizing support have made possible the realization of numerous ideas that strengthen the feminist agenda and ability to respond quickly;
- JASS' partnership with the Nobel Women's Initiative has helped legitimize the human rights leadership and struggles of women in the region in the eyes of some who previously were not convinced;
- JASS helped to compel US activists to increase and refine their involvement in the region, recognizing and promoting women's and feminists' contribution and agendas to solidarity work.

### **Next steps**

Going forward, we are challenged in particular to:

- Affirm JASS-Mesoamerica's identity as part of a strategic alliance comprised of activists from several countries in the region, including the US; continue to fight the stereotypes that international organizations are northern and dominant, and that JASS is a "gringa" (US) organization; and increase JASS' profile;
- Continue to build the informed involvement of activists, organizations and media from the US and promote regional action to address shared problems particularly where the US government and US actors (such as conservative religious groups, organizer crime, etc) are complicit with the agendas of our governments;

- Strengthen the learning processes that result from each action, and involve a diverse array of actors and the different regions in which JASS works; and share these fresh insights about women's political participation and women's rights strategies with interested audiences;
- Continue to support the capacity and the autonomy of the Petateras;

As has been done in the work related to Atenco, Mexico where JASS is working with the Mexican allies and the Nobel Women Initiative to seek the release of political prisoners imprisoned as a result of political repression against a land rights movement. In this case, JASS links with women who've taken on the leadership of this land rights movement when their husbands and children were taken prisoner. In this way, we are exploring new relationships and feminist agendas with women from a variety of social movements in the region. In finding new ways to work together, the term "interactive autonomy" (in Spanish – *autonomia interactiva*) was coined. This can mean (for example) respecting the autonomy of each individual and organization involved but in relationship to the potential synergy of the collective – and attending to the balance between the two. The term applies to the articulation between various kinds of political individuals and groupings, such as the autonomy of women's movements as they interact with other social movements. Respecting the autonomy of each player prevents branding from marginalizing the actions of all involved and undercutting the relationships by enabling one actor to claim credit for the work of others.

What also emerged is the need to understand the changing dynamics of governments and the power or lack of power of the state – and the risks it poses to activists who lack protection against non-state actors. There is an urgent need to utilize our strengthened collective power for self-protection as well as to re-imagine what we want from governments and push to rebuild them and reshape a different relationship between them and women's movements.

## Feminists in Resistance against the June 2009 Coup d'état in Honduras

By Daysi Flores



*Daysi brought scarves and T-shirts with the Feminists in Resistance slogan, “Ni Golpes de Estado, Ni Golpes a las Mujeres”, meaning “No coup d’etats, no blows against women” (more effective in Spanish where ‘coup’ and ‘blow’ are the same word.)*



*For Honduras’ feminist movement, JASS and the Petateras have been a huge support. Everyone wants to be a Petatera. The Observatorio de la transgresion feminista in Honduras exceeded our expectations and the Petateras were our reference, our model, when we formed Feminists in Resistance.*  
Daysi Flores

The most recent Observatorio was with the Feminists in Resistance in Honduras. It was the most ambitious – involving a 16-women international fact-finding mission in August – and the most successful in amplifying the agenda and visibility of the women leading the pro-democracy, anti-coup resistance in that country. Actions involved simultaneous protests in several countries across the Americas and gained sympathetic mainstream media attention everywhere.



On the first day of the coup, June 20<sup>th</sup>, ousted President Zelaya had planned a national referendum to determine whether the majority of Honduran citizens were in favor of a Constituent Assembly to revise the constitution, which was drafted in the early 1980s by the US government. This survey, and the claim that Zelaya was allied with Hugo Chavez – the controversial Venezuelan president – and wanted to extend his presidential term were the public justification for the coup. So, on that day, activists actually did the survey, as a symbolic act against the coup-installed government to

demonstrate our thirst for deepening democracy and the redrafting of our constitution as a necessary part of that. We gathered outside the presidential building – not to demand the return of any particular party or president but to call for the return of constitutional order. This was a powerful strategic move that enabled us to present a non-partisan, pro-democracy agenda that appealed to and mobilized across many sectors of society.



As Alda Facio says, “the profound is simple.” And Feminists in Resistance was born in a simple way, on that very first day of the coup. Different women activists called each other and met; we decided to make banners. But what or who shall we sign as? This was in the first few days after the coup and we were ten feminists at a particular moment. We said “We’re feminists in resistance” and that was the beginning of a massive organizing effort that continues today.

Every single day we went to the streets – each day with more and more women by our side. At the end of each day of protesting and marching, we came back to the Women’s Studies Center and talked about how we felt, how we experienced the repression, how to keep ourselves safe and how to build our common strategy. Inspired by the Petateras, although we were affiliated to different organizations, we didn’t want to become a network of organizations. We would be a group of independent women – all there together, on the streets, all the time. We would gather, think and act together.

As we were discussing what to do, Zoila Madrid, one of the country’s most famous feminists got up, looked at us and said, “To think is an action.” Sometimes, when you are an activist facing an urgent situation you assume that thinking is not enough and that stopping the action even a little bit holds you back. But she was right. Our thinking enabled us to be much clearer about our action.



On the second day, we faced tear gas. Many of us wore masks. On the streets, the Feminists in Resistance were very visible. With our green banners, green T-shirts and green hats, we were a small green stain in the ocean of protestors. It was the first time in our political history that a group of women was so visible in the public eye and acknowledged as a group of *feminists*, not just women. This was the first time we were seriously acknowledged by all the social movements and, especially, the Resistance Front. Some of the leaders seemed proud to say “We have feminists in our broad coalition.” They could not ignore our presence there.



One of the grassroots organizers observed, “We have been in resistance all our lives. What difference does the coup make? We know that things can’t get worse.” But we knew that things could get worse and they did. It was not easy for me to have a gun pointed at my chest. I never thought that I would experience this. Just like I never thought I would experience hunger, but I went on a hunger strike for 18 days. Before, we were busy fighting for food and jobs, and against violence. I have been in the feminist movement for 16 years. I never imagined that we could go backwards, that we would have to fight to protect what we already had, rather than moving forward.

For example, some years back when Congress changed the equality law, I was really angry, at a personal level as well as politically. They took away the rights of pregnant teenagers to education. Twenty of us took over the Congress building. ‘No one is coming into the building until we get what we want,’ we said. Five of the Congressmen took off their belts and beat us. That attracted the media. We were like cats, defending ourselves. We had bruises all over our bodies. But in the end they replaced the three articles they had withdrawn from the law.”



Daysi's presentation reminded me of the feelings that surface with conflict – the fear it imposes. For me, while she talked, I felt it. I was breathing fast, trying to catch my breath and not cry, as it reminded me of similar experiences in South Africa. During the apartheid era, when I was very young, I saw a lot of people being beaten up. People would be tied to a pole and beaten until their skin splits. I knew the smell of blood. People were beaten on the streets and in the home. Then, during my work for the Treatment Action Campaign, we would get beaten when doing civil disobedience. We never pay enough attention to the emotions that come up when we face a situation like that. *Sindi Blose*

Lessons from feminists in resistance:

- We were unaware at the beginning of the horror that the repressive forces could do to our bodies. We didn't actually realize, especially us younger ones, what it meant to live under military forces, in a coup.
- Intergenerational movement-building really works! I did a radio program called "Time to Speak" with teenagers – it was the best program against the coup! We had all the generations involved in Feminists in Resistance – from 12 years old to 60-something. In one of our reflections we saw that we had no exceptions – 5 in each of the teens, 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s. We saw this as evidence that the women's movement and feminists have been working for the past 20 years and more. Of course, we sometimes argue, the usual debates between young and experienced women. We were proud to have everyone participate.
- Conscientization through art and interactive projects also works. We did performances and distributed our T shirts. The pro-coup demonstrators wore white T shirts – they were called the "white T-shirt wearers." So, when we did a collective action in front of the US and Latin American embassies, we wore white T shirts stained with red coloring to represent blood.
- This experience taught us how important it is to have our own media outlets, such as Radio Feminista.



**Advocacy and solidarity**

The pivotal role of US government in the Americas and in relation to the coup in Honduras pushed JASS to extend its solidarity into direct engagement in global advocacy in a much more significant way. We took up a rare opportunity in the case of Honduras – when our feminist allies were brought to Washington, DC to testify before the InterAmerican Human Rights court – to organize meetings with key legislators and foreign policy officials as well as an event to educate the public and the media. Once we recognized that the leading international solidarity and human rights organizations did not have a women’s rights focus and that the international women’s rights groups seemed to be silent on Honduras, we jumped into this political void to organize petitions to the UN Security Council and to Secretary of State Clinton. We also did some media outreach. In the future, we see that JASS Crossregional will assume a greater role in taking the agendas of our sisters in the Global South to the powerbrokers in the Global North where some of us sit. This will be driven by the agendas in the region and our role will depend on the political potential for reaching a pivotal decisionmaker in the North who can respond to this agenda. But, we won’t (for example) campaign for South Africa to switch off the power in Zimbabwe until Patience and Martha tell us to. *Lisa Veneklasen*

**Challenges:**

- How to face the failure against the dictatorship, against the coup without letting it discourage or demobilize us? How to take care of each other, how to handle the emotions we face and how to create our own security system. For example, we said to one woman, “You must go and present this report, because if they see your face at the Inter-American Human Rights Court, they won’t touch you.” And that’s true – it worked. Her visibility in front of the Court has protected her from repression.
- How to face emergencies, such as incarceration? One member of our group was jailed for murder. She wouldn’t kill a fly – they say she killed a man. She was accused because she’s a feminist in resistance. We had to understand and develop strategies to counter the legal charges against us.
- How to face all the changing scenarios. That’s one of the biggest challenges. Many who worked in organizations said, “We used to work with the state. Now, what are we going to do? Where are we going to appeal?” Our scenario changed repeatedly. We can only get protection and recognition for our rights outside the country.
- How to avoid or minimize the conflict generated by the ways that much-needed funding is channeled through organizations? How to embrace the challenges of handling resources and leadership styles openly without it undermining our connection to each other?



## Conflict as an Opportunity for Change in Guatemala

By Patricia Ardon

*Understanding and negotiating conflict is an essential piece of JASS' work given our core business of building alliances among diverse actors and the risky nature of political organizing in some contexts. Externally, the change our actions produce generates backlash, so we need ways to mitigate the conflict that empowerment and mobilizing produce. Internally, given the diversity we demand, conflict among women, within movements and amongst us as JASS is a fact of life and must be understood and managed. JASS bases its approaches the principle that disparities in power between parties and people in conflict need to be addressed as part of making positive change (see Adam Curle, 1971; John Paul Lederach, 1995). Efforts from Guatemala to transform conflict and empower peasant women and their organizations illustrate some of the challenges and possibilities of our approaches and the underlying power dynamics that shape them.*



*Conflict can pose either a danger or an opportunity for positive change.*  
Patricia Ardon

In Guatemala, we have used and adapted a variety of tools to strengthen the capacity of groups and organizations involved in conflict situations. Guided by the notion that tools are not simple technical fixes or easily applied from one situation or country to another, we have developed context-specific processes over the years that are designed to be responsive to our particular cultural and political dynamics. We have approached our work from a nuanced vision of conflict as normal, ever-changing, sometimes destructive, and potentially transformative, shaped by differences in power and people's needs, values and interests. Our efforts have emerged from a certain moment in history and our ideas and approaches have evolved over time.

For 36 years Guatemala experienced an internal armed conflict in which tens of thousands of people were killed and 'disappeared' (90,000 according to some estimates), and more than 400 villages destroyed. Large numbers of people were tortured and communities torn apart. Particular atrocities were enacted on indigenous populations; thousands of women were left as widows to head traumatized families living under the constant threat of persecution. Many came together in organizations made up of survivors of this violence to seek solace and justice. Yet, despite the 1996 Peace Accords, impunity continues and justice is simply an empty promise. People's pain and suffering have not

been resolved, and divisions persist. Guatemala remains a very racist, stratified, conservative, sexist and class-based society. For example, 8,000 women have been killed in the past two years, with only two of these murders resolved legally through the courts.

In the aftermath of the Peace Accords, colleagues and I worked in the program Propaz (Pro Peace) sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS) to facilitate greater dialog between key players in society – government, private sector, and civil society organizations. The Accords called for the establishment of commissions composed of these same players to develop policy proposals addressing a range of root causes of the conflict, one of which was on land rights and rural development. My comments will focus on some of the approaches and tools that we used and refined during our work on the land ownership process.

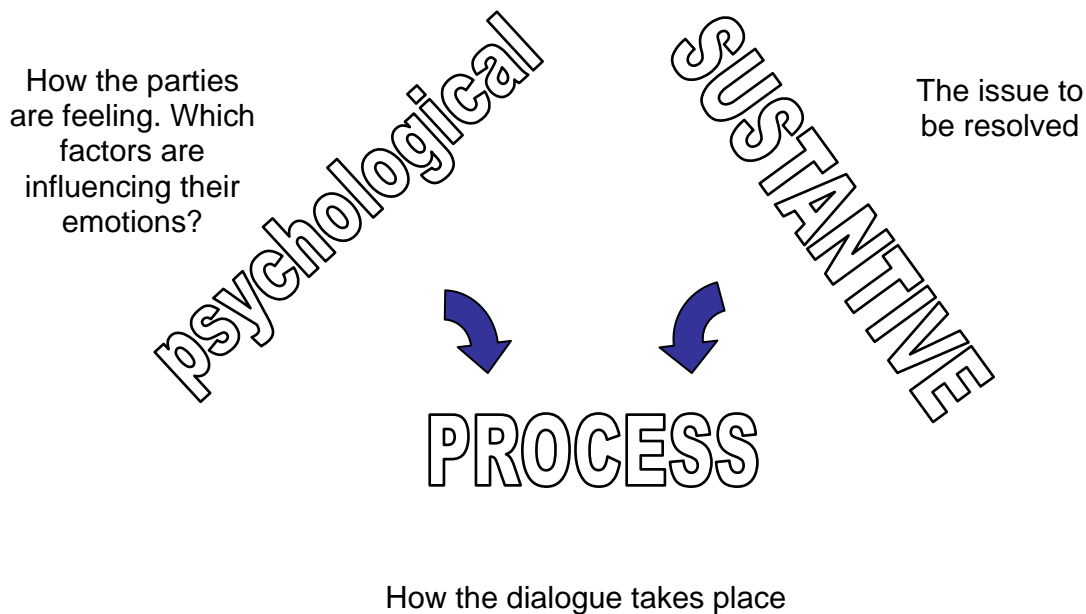
In the land and rural development commission, the major limitations were twofold: large land owners refused to participate and no women were represented. We used the program's claim to be 'democratic' as the basis to get the commission members to request input from women's organizations' and recognize their needs. Despite these (significant) limitations, a policy proposal from the commission was approved as the Land Registry Law, and some specific concerns from peasant women were introduced indirectly.

Understanding the need for balancing power relations, we worked to strengthen the participation and voice of peasant groups so they could enter the discussions more effectively. Dialogue among their organizations revealed a number of different policy positions, as well as the 'celebrity' role of certain players who wielded certain power over the process. While the differences in their proposals did not appear to run deep, antagonisms due to long-standing unresolved injuries and tensions complicated their ability to gain full agreement and build a united front. The key learning from this process was not to generalize: inaccurate generalization deepens the conflict and takes it to new levels, drawing in a whole new set of people and further complicating decisions.

We saw the conflict and differences between them as an opportunity to talk about unresolved grievances from the past, and to identify commonalities and differences in their proposals. In this way, we saw danger and opportunity as two sides of the same coin. By the same token, change in and of itself is not always a good thing since if power differentials and underlying tensions are not addressed, change may reinforce conflicts and inequities.

We talked about what it takes to pursue an effective dialog and developed an image and framework to explain some of the key elements, called the Triangle of Satisfaction. This tool, along with the others that we developed and adapted, may appear very simple, yet they took years to refine and fully identify and capture all the basic elements.

## Triangle of Satisfaction



**Three key dimensions to be considered in a dialogue process.**

In working with the groups, we identified three dimensions of the dialogue process that needed to be considered for success. The framework included the following aspects and moments:

**Psychological:**

- Gain trust
- Pay attention to feelings
- Identify who is a “negative influence”
- Create a “secure space”

**Substantive/Content:**

- Define the “real issue”? Often, what appears to be the real issue is not.
- Have agreed upon external “honest brokers” identify commonalities and differences in proposals
- Link points made by different with key aspects of the Peace Accords
- Develop analytical documents using content from both parties
- Invite ‘experts’ to talk about specific issues
- Invite participants to analyze role and impact on women and other population groups in their proposals

**Process:**

- Decide and analyze who participates in process and in whose name
- Identify who influences the “visible” actors
- Choose a “neutral” space or rotate among spaces

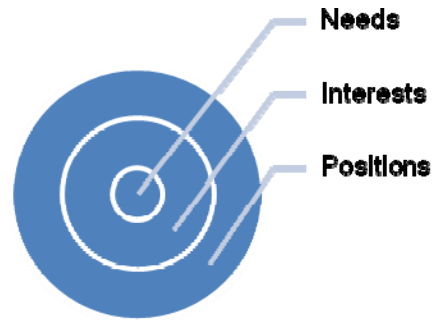


Design the process

Ensure good logistics

Invite people who are acceptable to both parties, and others to share their dialog experiences in different contexts

As we moved to deepen the discussions, we talked to each organization separately to identify their actual interests – what they really wanted from the proposals – and, from those, what were their “negotiable” and “non-negotiable” points. As with an “onion”, we disaggregated needs from interests to concentrate on the latter, and to realize the consequences of attaching our efforts to hard and fast positions that are never open to change. Like the curves of an onion, this process is not linear. The visual reminds us that apparent ‘reality’ is not always accurate: there is more behind what we see on the surface. It looks mechanical here, but of course it’s not step 1, 2, 3.



#### **Positions, interests and needs**

**Sex workers.** One set of positions taken by some groups imply a total ban on such activities – “all sex work is violence against women and should be abolished.” Those taking such positions have forgotten the basic interests of women engaged in this work which relate to economic survival.

**South Africa and President Jacob Zuma.** Our position from outside the country about not engaging with his presidency because of the rape case and other accusations against him might be strong. Yet things may have changed in the political context on the ground, such as Zuma’s new position on HIV. The history and reality of his actions are still there. But people’s views about whether their original position to refuse to deal with his government have shifted in light of all the other priority issues that require some kind of public engagement

This last example relates to the most delicate aspect of international solidarity. People from outside our countries take positions based on certain information, sometimes based on simple stereotypes or incomplete analysis, forgetting to take into account what’s happening on the ground at the current moment. This is particularly significant when addressing control and power issues not in times of overt dictatorships per se but rather when power is expressed through more indirect and nuanced means. We can make the situation worse by responding without having all the information or consulting with those directly involved.

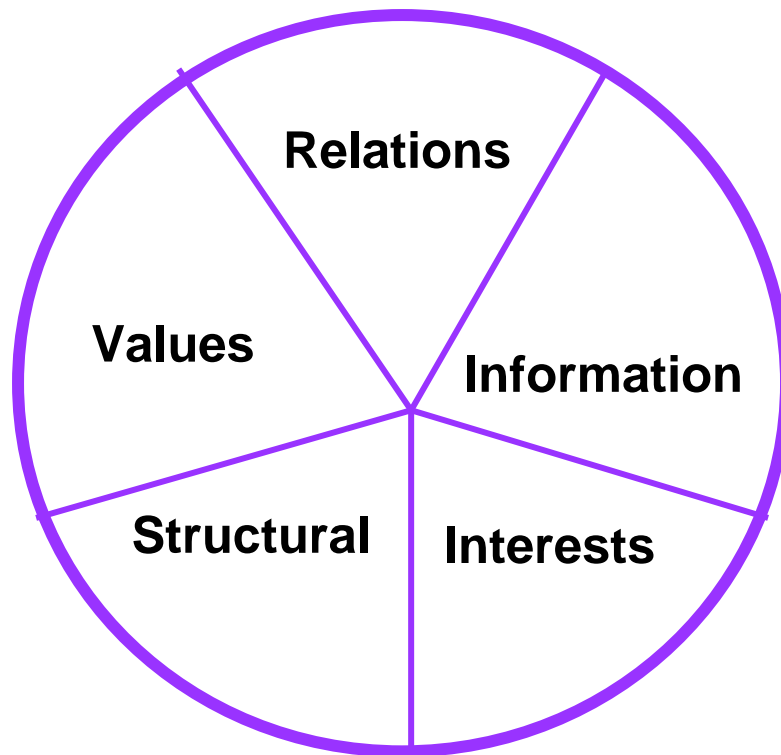
Positions are usually informed by a political analysis, or commitment. A position becomes negative and a conflict becomes intractable when one says, “I am staying here, and am not going to move.” You can sabotage your real interests if you blindly attach yourself to a fixed position and then try to start a dialog from that position. The interests and dynamics that informed your initial position might have changed or there may be more incremental steps that will allow you to satisfy your needs. As a dialogic methodology we analyze these different perspectives and their implications in order to better engage with one another and develop negotiation strategies. In many ways it is similar to doing a problem analysis – how we frame the problem helps determine what solutions we seek in response and how effective they will be.

From there, we invited an “expert” in rural development from El Salvador – a trusted outsider, an ‘honest broker’ – to help identify commonalities in the parties’ proposals and their questions on approach, and their differences. We consulted peasant women from the three participating peasant organizations about developing a workshop to identify and discuss their views. Throughout, we emphasized specific concerns rather than conflict between organizations.

We designed three gatherings, sharing the design with each of the organizations and incorporating their feedback. The encounters were facilitated, with the emphasis on common interests, which resulted in the identification of common actions. In this case, the process did not aim to establish a strategic alliance but rather to create the possibility of such an alliance through the development of specific actions and the identification of specific concerns of the women involved.

The whole process took more than two years, taking considerable time and effort to mobilize women’s peasant organizations and get their voices heard and their involvement ensured. The women – some from women’s groups and some from mixed peasant organizations – didn’t know each other but had a lot of assumptions that needed to be clarified, so it was important for them to get to know each other beyond the surface. Conflict within their organizations took the visible form of problems of leadership styles and levels of decision-making; accusations of being “sell-outs” to the government and to patriarchal interests; and verbal offenses and hidden strategies to discredit some leaders. We helped them identify latent conflicts; analyze structures, systems and mechanisms for decision-making and identify gaps in their processes. We also worked with them to analyze how the system and patriarchal values, behaviors and ways of exercising power affect relations among women and to envision different futures which involved imagining the ideal kind of organization they wanted to build and then using the “Circle Conflict” to visualize jointly the causes, perceptions, and misunderstandings underlying the conflicts between them.

# The Conflict Circle



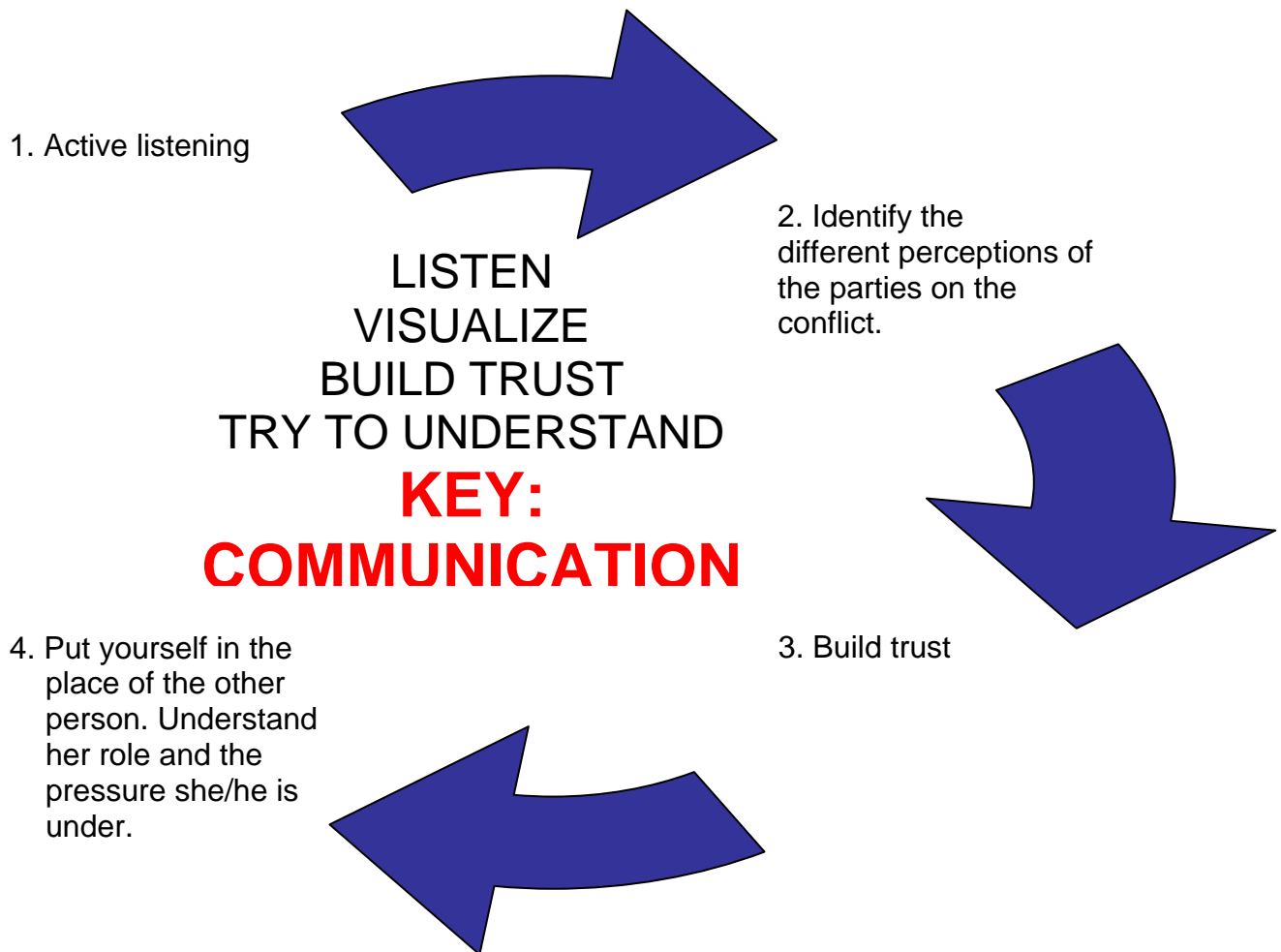
We found that the major limitation of the Conflict Circle model is that it is static, whereas conflict is dynamic and changes over time. However, in designing strategies to transform conflicts in our organizations and communities, the Circle of Conflict did lead us to recognize and incorporate these important considerations:

- |                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>Relationships</b> | Given different perceptions, establish basic common concepts.   |
| <b>Information</b>   | Establish valid sources for all! This facilitates communication on a firm basis.  |
| <b>Interests</b>     | When these are incompatible, reflect on their fairness, and the extent to which they endanger other interests and needs.  |
| <b>Structural</b>    | Balance the importance of responding to immediate needs while at the same time building for longer term structural change |
| <b>Values</b>        | Reflect critically on our own values so we can see how they influence our ability to grow and become agents of change     |

As we carried out this work, we realized how much conflict can arise from a lack of information, too much information, misinformation and pure gossip!

Over the two years we played the role of a support NGO in facilitating the space and interaction among peasant groups. This process required some steps that sound minor but were in fact crucial to building trust and remain true today. These include: making sure that meeting notes are accurate and true from everyone's perspective, ensuring that the space is comfortable and that childcare is provided. It also involves paying attention to skills and attitudes of active listening, imagination, trust, and empathy in order to ensure healthy interaction and communication.

## Basic Tools



Finally, after two years, a joint agreement was reached between the participants in representation of Guatemala's peasant women. Afterward some participants went back to own organizations, others formed a new one. At first, they wanted to call the new group Sinergia No'j, the same name as my organization. That gave us pause! But eventually, they gave themselves a new and quite beautiful name: Heart of the Land.

## Lessons for JASS

As we deepen our ability to manage the conflict we face among women and as we engage with power, it is important to learn from the many practitioners and well-known theorists in the field but also to be aware of the fact that they often leave out the essential aspect of power differentials and culture in their analysis and efforts – an omission that can be counterproductive and dangerous, particularly from a gender perspective. For further reading on the intersection of power, culture and conflict and strategies to address these dynamics see Adam Curle and John Paul Lederach and for intersections with gender see Deborah Kolb, and Joyce K. Fletcher. Many of these ideas on conflict, gender and power are captured in the book that Lisa wrote with Valerie – *A New Weave of Power, People, and Politics*.

Different cultures deal differently with conflicts. It's important to take into account these cultural differences to develop the most appropriate and effective processes. In Western cultures, for example, you would say if people don't talk, they're not sincere or honest; they are trying to hide something. But that is not necessarily the case in other cultures – people speak and communicate in other ways. It is also question of power. We need to create processes to address conflict that pay attention to cultural aspects and recognize people have a range of ways to deal with conflict in their own contexts.

In JASS, we seek to build alliances and action at different levels – internationally, regionally, and nationally – and across differences and disagreements. As we all negotiate and clarify our needs, positions and interests, this process and these tools will be extremely useful. Even within this room, we need to be clear that conflicts of interest may exist and that these approaches can be applied to our own work.

The presentation on conflict and ways to involve women in processes of conflict transformation led to a range of additional country-specific reflections.

## Fundamentalisms

**India:** Today is December 6<sup>th</sup>. This day in 1992 was one of the worst in the modern history of my country. One million people, one quarter of them women, tore down the historical Babri Mosque. Why are so many women mobilized so successfully by the fundamentalists? While men prepared to pull down the mosque, the women cooked and made tea. Why is it that we, as a force, people like us, have been so weak in comparison? Labor movements and other movements have never really given women a space to be part of constructing something big. Perhaps fundamentalists are so successful because they give women such a space. Somehow, we have to understand how we can more effectively give women that feeling – not for hate or destruction but for something much better. *Srilatha Batliwala*

**Indonesia:** Today, we mobilize 1,000 women to protest the Pornography Law. Tomorrow, 150,000 Muslim women take to the streets, opposing us and supporting this legislation. The authorities applaud – women fighting against each other! On the stoning laws in Aceh, we have problems. Women oppose the stoning law except for the part

about homosexuality. They don't want to step into those discussions. They don't want Jakarta women to influence those matters. That's the strategy of fundamentalist groups – use other women to organize, mobilize to use invisible power. Their strategies are so effective. We try to have a dialogue with them – we want them to think as women – as mothers, daughters, wives, lesbians – but invisible and hidden power is so strong. They say, “You will go to hell.” But we believe good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere! Seriously, we have done a lot of reflection on this over 20 years' work, but we reach only 100,000 grassroots women, while these fundamentalist can mobilize such huge numbers of all ages on the streets. Perhaps we have to learn their strategies.

*Nani Zulminarni*

**The Philippines:** Feminist movements are so progressive and radical – we challenge the status quo – that women find themselves disturbed in their comfortable status. When the reproductive health issue was a campaign, very few women would tackle it, and yet the Catholic Church could gather so many against abortion and contraception. *Jojo Guan*

**Zimbabwe:** Facing death, even the most progressive feminist might turn to a fundamentalist church. When people die, where does a feminist go? You have to work very hard to find comfort within feminism. We've done a lot but we have to make our feminism comprehensive and embracing of other things. Another thing is visible results. Our processes do not deliver immediately – people want to see the results of change. Many times, we talk but we can't deliver quickly. I'm talking about women on the ground. We say housing is a feminist issue. But she wants a house now. Some youth can get her one tomorrow. *Hope Chigudu*

**Zambia:** One of the participants in a JASS workshop, a Catholic nun, was the one who embraced feminism, not the NGO-aligned women. A journalist was arrested for taking a photo of someone giving birth outside the hospital and charged with distributing porno material. Women NGOs were agreeing that it's pornography, but the nun said, “Who can get aroused by this?” I was apprehensive about showing the video from Mesoamerica – “take your rosaries out of our ovaries.” And sure enough, some women said it was blasphemy. But the nun could acknowledge that people in her own church use faith for bad reasons. *Martha Tholanah*

### **Indigenous Women's Rights**

As in Guatemala, indigenous women in Malaysia face double oppression: both from the dominant culture and within their own culture. You can be accused of betrayal for being critical of your own people. JASS can play a role in facilitating discussion among indigenous women from different regions.





*In Malaysia, indigenous people organize separately, as do all other ethnic groups. We have a lot of women's organizations working with the international movement, but in our own country we never join together and demand our rights. Among indigenous women, I'm the first woman to speak out for our rights. But even though I'm a woman, my priority has been to work together with men to demand our land back. Previously, I did not feel the need to create awareness among women, even though we face a lot of the same problems as other indigenous women. I have not tried to tell my community that they should not oppress women – I have just said they should join the fight for our indigenous rights. But the men don't realize what women face; they only want to recruit women into the land struggle.*

*Last night, I received a message from a friend of mine, a man, who is always beside me in the struggle – it hurt me very much. They had just finished a meeting with the government agency that oversees and controls indigenous people. Their decision on indigenous land rights was to give only five acres for each family. To announce this decision, the government agency did not call all the indigenous people, but only five men. These men did not confront or challenge the government; they just agreed. They did not consider what I tried to tell them – not me alone, but the 60,000 people behind me. We already stated clearly what we wanted. But these five men just agreed to the government decision.*

*It is 53 years since independence in Malaysia, but indigenous people are always left behind. We will have a conference on land in our country – that's one of the ways we want to push the government. We do not want five acres; we want to be recognized as the original people of our nation. Everybody can stay in Malaysia, but our rights must be recognized.*

*So now I must decide – do I continue to work with indigenous people as a whole, or do I start something new with indigenous women?*

Tijah Yok Chopil

## Multigenerational movement-building

By Nani Zulminarni



Social change takes a long time. To sustain the struggle for equal rights, we need many generations to be involved and new generations joining all the time. This is the work of a lifetime, not a three-year project. We need young women to step in, learn, be involved and eventually, take over.

In Southeast Asia, we feel the generation gap in experience, knowledge and opportunities in our social movements. What emerged in our cross-generational dialogue that we hosted as JASS Southeast Asia is that we have

women in their 20s, and others in their 40s and 50s – but where are the ones in between? It feels like a lost generation. In the late 80s and 90s, many women became disconnected from feminism by the complexity of development discourse, the narrowness of donor agendas and “Women in Development” / “Gender and Development” slogans that corrupted and depoliticized feminist thinking and action. Suddenly we found the focus to be how to make women’s numbers visible as beneficiaries of development, not how to change their lives, status and power. In other words, women were the object of development efforts not the agents. As development workers, you were getting things done but it was not about the passion of fighting for the bigger dream of equality. In practice, it meant counting numbers: how many women came to the workshop?

In assessing where our women’s movements are, we don’t see a conflict between generations, but rather a need to build our collective power from different perspectives and angles and to share confidence and creativity while remaining grounded in the grassroots. We begin by challenging the power relations between generations but it was also about inequality amongst us as shaped by class and rural/urban divides. It was also about styles of leaders and role models – whether leaders were using their power to activate social change, vs. what we call “the diva syndrome.”

Our recent, national meeting in the Philippines reached some realizations about multigenerationalism: the ‘Young Once’ have renewed energy because of the ‘Young Ones’ and deeply appreciate that the struggle will live on because of the younger generation. *Jojo Guan*

## **Building JASS**

What can we learn from other cross-regional processes and organizations? Three JASS board members drew on their own transnational organizational experiences and research to provide big-picture thinking about building a new kind of international organization. This helped open up discussion and thinking about the dilemmas and questions that JASS is facing at this point in our growth:

- Tension between who we are and what we are becoming
- Balancing diversity and autonomy with coherence
- Balancing innovation and flexibility with need to deliver
- Growth: expansion and reach OR depth and continuity?
- Structure and/ vs. culture
- Learning vs. doing

### **The challenges of building a space like JASS**

An ongoing challenge for JASS in the era of elevator-speeches is to find simple, clear descriptions for what we do and for the unusual shape of our cross-regional organization, which looks different wherever you go. One focus of the Amsterdam gathering was to analyze JASS' evolving architecture, to learn from other models, and to discuss how the vehicle could be improved for the journey.

Among the questions and challenges that JASS faces are these:

- How do we embrace our different rhythms in different regions without falling apart?
- How do we define absolute non-negotiables?
- How do we weave a common global agenda from regional dilemmas?
- How do we resist pressures to become IBM – a large-scale institution, rather than light-on-our-feet and flexible?
- What does it take to build global solidarity beyond North–South?
- Branding, visibility – how do we ensure that each organization is recognized, named and acknowledged in this process (including JASS)?
- How do we build mutual accountability in our deliverables and communication processes?

Other questions that arose in discussion included balancing responsibility to donors and to the grassroots; interrogating power within JASS, in feminism and in terms of friendship and trust; the role of fear in organizations, and the danger of conflictual relationships that don't sit quietly but fester and spread. What does it mean that we are all in this room together? Can we clarify the purpose of being together in JASS: individually and across regions? What are the systems of governance that we need, in order to work together? Can we draw some conclusions about ways of working together? E.g. what does it mean for us to be together as a group – new people and longstanding; people working at different “levels”; challenge of building a space like JASS – that was focus of most people's doubts.

From the JASS Board meeting, held just prior to the workshop, came the call to consolidate rather than expand.

To explain the strange being that is JASS, people proposed metaphors, such as a flock of birds. They know their direction and where they're going but can adapt if food the situation is not good on their route and change formation to protect themselves from bad weather. Birds prepare themselves well for the journey: by the end, they have lost weight but are able to feed again and put on weight. No leader is visible, but they fly as one. On the other hand, birds don't seem to do strategic planning but take off with an intuition that links them. As JASS we need to stop more often to make explicit the planning and analysis that underpin the coordinates of our journey.

Another metaphor: a fleet of sailboats. They can move together but also separately, as they navigate storms and currents. Are we clear in terms of who does what, and how the boats move as a fleet? If we don't know where we're going, it could be a mess – creative or otherwise.

## **Lessons about Building an Alternative Space from the World Social Forum**

*By Atila Roque*

*Recognize the power of feminism to disturb the collective and to reveal and challenge deep rooted authoritarianism. WSF was challenged by feminism and changed completely from its first to its second year.* JASS board member, Atila Roque, is from Brazil, co-directs INESC (Institute for Socioeconomic Studies) and co-founded the World Social Forum.

It is impossible to synthesize everything we learned from the experiences of the World Social Forum (WSF). Assuming that everyone knows what it is, I have highlighted several dimensions that seem to be important, from ongoing reflection, and of relevance to JASS.



The WSF did not arrive out of the blue. Its emergence had a great deal to do with 1990s – the presence of civil society on the international scene, the UN cycle of Forums in Beijing, Copenhagen and elsewhere, the Durban meeting against racism. WSF is part of this.

None of these processes arise as natural evolution. Human agency and initiative are behind it. The people who started WSF had the merit of believing in the idea. A businessman came up with an idea: “Every year we watch Davos making all this noise. Why not an anti-Davos? Instead of the World Economic Forum, a World SOCIAL Forum.” Good idea! We talked about it and thought we would try a meeting of 3,000 people. That's crazy! How are we going to raise that much money? We flew to talk with the mayor of Porto Alegre and got the use of the university and kicked it off.

Immediately, we realized that we'd have an event of 5,000 people. But in fact 15,000 came. The second WSF: 50,000. The third: 100,000. Why? Because we went after the idea – an idea based on a demand we sensed. We had no idea how powerful the idea was until we saw the response. Wow! We hit a nerve.

From the beginning, several things were very clear. We wanted it to be a truly international process – not only Brazilian. So we put together an international consultative group involving five initiators – one NGO, one trade union, one massive social movement, one church (a conference of bishops), and one business association. How did those five, very different organizations, manage to put together such a huge event? Each reached out to its own international networks.

The second step was to agree on the terms of that space. (Here, I am summarizing a big debate!) We strongly believed that we could not allow a conventional format, so we had to say it's not a network of networks, there will be no consensus, nor a final declaration. No one speaks in the name of the WSF – everyone IS the WSF. Until today – ten years later, when I am no longer on the organizing committee – I could say that I'm part of the organizing committee, or of the international consultative group of the WSF. But that is different from the WSF issuing statements.

The WSF had several characteristics:

- A Charter of Principles was laid out, saying, for example, that WSF is a civil society entity, things on which we all agreed.
- The emphasis is on process – WSF is not an event but an ongoing process. This approach is strong in Latin America, and especially in Brazil. The process is more important than outcomes.
- The social struggle must take place at local, national and global levels. The global and local must happen at same time, not either/or.
- WSF works as a catalyst for things that become visible in that space.
- We brought in diversity and conflict – two dimensions are very important to build the trust to move into global space.
- WSF expands the realm of possibilities. In the early 1990s, the 'Washington Consensus' exerted strong ideological pressure narrowing the economic policy alternatives, and there was talk of the "end of history" as the Berlin Wall fell. WSF revitalized the idea of alternatives at a time when a single model was pushed. Hence the slogan: Another World is Possible.' We revitalized the whole idea of Utopias (not only one).
- WSF functions as a possibility for new alliances. I wish progressive academia was doing more to document and research this while it's still alive in memory, to fund consistent research into this – including activist research, not just academic.
- WSF offers the possibility for self re-interpretation of our own struggles. When WSF goes to Morocco, Europe, Africa, and so on, attendance becomes much more diverse, so there is a sense of something evolving, the sudden possibility out of isolation to connect to a global movement.

- WSF is an initiative from the South. Most international campaigns come from the North.
- No one could claim ownership of the process – for better or worse. It's difficult to raise funds for something that cannot be owned. WSF has no particular leadership at civil society level.

I see a number of lessons for JASS in the WSF experience:

- Keep JASS an open space, consciously welcoming the kind of conflict and diversity you've welcomed but guided by shared principles. To put us in one rigid shape would kill us.
- As JASS, continue to trust your own instincts and big ideas.
- Cultivate the participation of youth. People say, "Ohm you're just a Woodstock!" I say, "Yes, WSF is also about celebration, enjoyment, the party. It's an alternative Woodstock."

## **Lessons about Building Flexible Structures from the Global Campaign for Microbicides**

*By Lori Heise*

*Along with playing a lead role in advocacy against gender-based violence, JASS board member Lori Heise founded the Global Campaign for Microbicides and headed up a multi-country study of domestic violence and women's health for the World Health Organization.*



A microbicide is a gel or a ring inserted into the vagina that would protect you from HIV rather than negotiating condom use with your sexual partner. The idea came from women at the grassroots who realized how inadequate the tools for protection were. Given the power imbalance in most parts of the world between men and women, it was clear that it would be difficult to empower women to protect themselves. We knew, of course, that a new tool – such as microbicides – can't do everything but it can be a useful preventive in the hands of women in addition to long-term social change.

We spoke to pharmaceutical companies but they were not interested in investing in research because they didn't see that they'd make money from a market defined as poor women. So we saw that we'd have to create the research ourselves.



In establishing the Global Campaign for Microbicides (GCM), we had three goals:

1. An instrumental goal, to get a product, get the science;
2. To build movements while doing that, to use this issue as a way to create linkages, for example between HIV and sexual and reproductive health and between HIV and social justice or women's groups. This problem sits at the intersection of various different movements so it provides a good way to start a conversation.
3. A way to change the science model. The drug-development process – usually governed by pharmaceuticals – would now involve the participation of communities.

We knew we'd need activism in the North (for money and access to decisionmakers) and in the South, where the need was for trials and for massive usage, once approved. We needed something agile that could support local activism, but not overwhelm it. It would not be the top issue on people's organizational agendas (and it shouldn't be). One of the things we did was to combine mutual teaching and learning about science with organizing for pressure, to come up with a new way of organizing.

For the purposes of this meeting, I will focus on the structure that emerged. We faced a number of challenges. Because we had organizing going on in the US and Europe, as well as in Southern Africa and Southeast Asia, there was distrust. This was a difficult issue to organize around. How would we overcome power imbalances? We used simple means: for example, one meeting would be scheduled on Southeast Asia time, the next on African time, so that the same group wouldn't always be put out. Little things like this are part of trust-building and movements.

Because we had instrumental goal – to make scientists develop a product – we had constant tension between our process goals and our success in getting money and scientists. Be careful what you wish for! Suddenly, GCM became a science train going so fast. We needed to engage with the train, but we also wanted to keep the process going. However, if we focused entirely on the process and ignored the train, it would go without us. We were committed to building new women's leadership but also engaging with science – which was almost all male with age-based assumptions. No one in the science establishment was likely to listen to young women.

What we ended up with as a structure or platform was paid staff members – key support people in different regions (Canada, US, Belgium, Kenya, South Africa, India) – working with a great range of women on the ground. How to keep all that going with integrity, and how to create trust – the fundamental element? A number of the lessons we learned might be useful for JASS.

- ***Clarity of purpose and shared culture***

Despite wide differences, a clear purpose meant we could get endorsements from the Junior League (wealthy women in North America) to LGBT organizations. To create a shared culture means you have to repeat that history, again and again as new people are always coming in. How hard that is to do! Especially when everyone is busy. But it's necessary.

- ***Support scaffolding***

The right structure, the right people, and the right information flow – this combination gives us boundaries, safety and a backbone. Having the right staff and people is 90% of the battle, especially as we're competing with large organizations for staff. Then, how to deal with the conflict, anxiety, and guilt of having the wrong person in a job? Letting people go often does them a favor.

- ***Clarity of roles and processes for decisionmaking***

How do you create participation of decision-making in a global organization? It's easier to make collective decisions when a few people are in same small area. But people make different assumptions in different places, so this kind of clarity is crucial.

- ***Commitment to mutual accountability***

There is a tendency to construct accountability in one direction, for example to donors but not to the constituency. We tried to ensure accountability North to South, leadership to staff. Issues around power and conflict arise here. Cross-regional/transnational organizations get caught between the expectations of donors and constituencies. To meet donors' needs, we become a pest to grassroots partners, especially when money is involved. The organization can come to be seen as a donor themselves.

- ***A fourth type of power***

We talk about the three faces of power, but identity or location or standpoint also conveys a kind of power. We all know about the power I have as North American woman, with privilege and information. I can use this power either to dominate or to facilitate. But there is a power that comes from being marginal – from the South, a lesbian, etc. And that power can also be used either constructively or manipulatively. In movements, sometimes people from margins don't do the work and get away with it. But we are all accountable to the mission and need to be able to call each other on that. I have seen this corrode a lot of relationships.

**North-South Accountability**

The North comes with the resources to run programs or initiate processes, while the South has disadvantages with access to resources. In some senses, that conversation has gotten old, is not fully accurate and become a handy excuse that people from the South use so as not to be accountable. However, it is still true that if you have resources, approach a person without resources and want to collaborate, that person is likely to say yes to everything. At end of the day, they may be unable to deliver because they had to address their own practical needs. The lesson is for the South to say no, even if we have the capacity, and despite the pressure to scale-up. JASS  
*Southern Africa team*

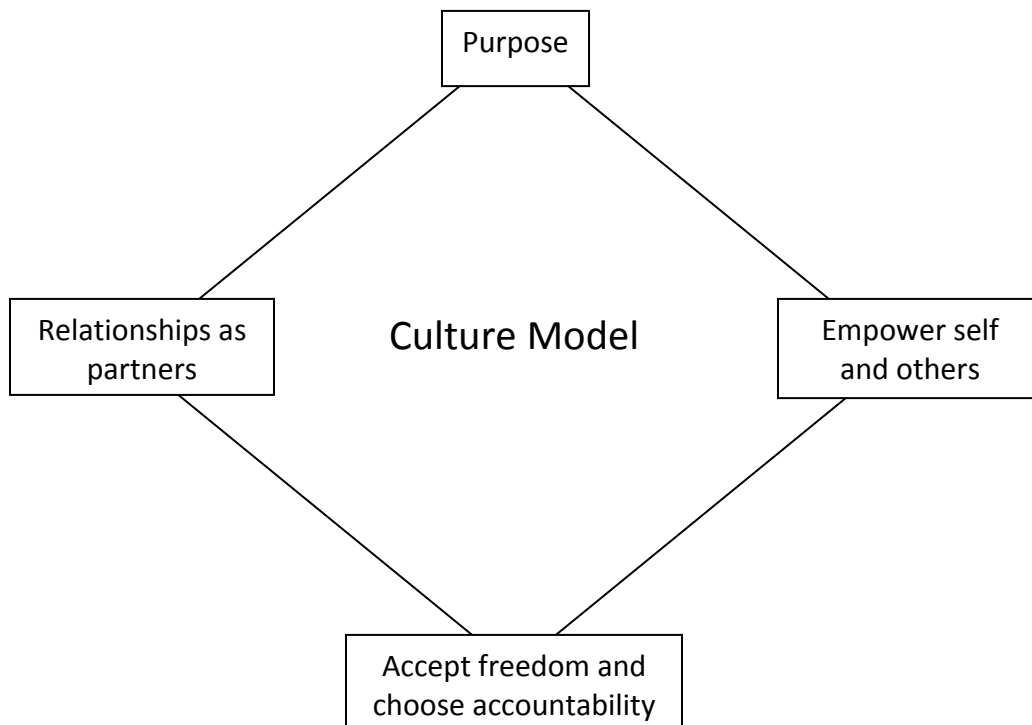
## Building Agile Organizations: Balancing Structure and Culture

By Ellen Sprenger

*To be confused is a sign of innovation and change work. If we stay with same logic we'll stay in same place – so congratulations on confusion as well as clarity.* Ellen Sprenger, JASS Board Co-chair and feminist organizational consultant



The latest thinking on forms of global organizing focuses on the tension between culture and structure. To go overboard in either direction leads to bureaucracy or chaos. Many of the models out there are inspired by the military or the church. If we look at JASS from the angle of structure, we don't get it. Particularly when fundraising, something this fluid and responsive is hard to define! However, once we recognize that movements are about people and relationships coming together around a purpose, it makes sense. In fact, JASS has come together in ways that mirror and emphasize most recent theories and models, ones that privilege the organizational culture, values and non-negotiables over the structural, organogram approach.



Using this model, we can probably all identify negative attributes of an organization in trouble: where personal gain is more important than a shared purpose; where a worker leaves part of themselves at home before they walk in the door, rather than engaging in the organization with their whole and best selves; where the relationship with the boss is more like child and parent, than like partners who challenge each other. In its ugliest manifestation, the worker walks in, does as little as possible except to please the boss and is interested only in the paycheck and status. That defines an overly bureaucratic organization, focused on control and we have all experienced something like this. To make something very different, we need our own language of organization building. The tension between structure and culture is also that between bureaucratic and entrepreneurial. When we speak of non-negotiables for an entrepreneurial organization, we are not talking about laws but about connecting with your deepest sense of purpose. Once you agree on these, you have a very powerful organization.

Of course, you need a bit of structure. (Think of the title of the 1970 booklet, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness.”) If we have no idea of the structure we want, you can be sure that some structure will emerge and it might not be the kind we want.

As in the diagram, this approach is based around four non-negotiables.

1. **Purpose.** This is not the mission statement but rather the outcomes of the work. What do we want to accomplish? Again, not a logframe but the compass that drives us, our deepest sense of purpose. (Easy when you work in a corporation: kaching kaching! It’s the profit you’re after!) Being able to link every decision back to the purpose helps us to say yes and no to opportunities and invitations.
2. **Relationships.** This means collaborating as partners, not parent-child. When we engage in this way, we don’t get answers but rather powerful questions that provoke us further. Not “I’m the boss – I’ll tell you what to do,” but rather encouraging curiosity, in the way Atila explained in relation to the WSF journey/ process.
3. **Empower self and others.** We understand that when younger women are silenced, we need to counter that kind of mechanism. But if I as white woman from North keep quiet and never speak, something dysfunctional is happening. Everyone in this organization needs to be empowered to engage.
4. **Accept freedom and choose accountability.** This is not the same as the absence of pressure, but rather something almost spiritual. It’s not about the circumstances under which you live but about how you relate in the world, choosing to be accountable.

The result is that we run an organization by invitation, not by punishment. To take Lori’s expression, we are looking for scaffolding, light structure that supports but does not impede or weigh us down.

For JASS, it is important to be clear about number 1, the purpose. As the board, we see JASS growing. But we also need to know how much growth can you handle? Then, accountability mechanisms also translate into decisionmaking, global relations, and the fit of personnel and purpose (am I the right person for board right now?)

In discussion groups as regions/crossregional, participants raised immediate concerns around the way JASS works and could work as an innovative cross-regional organization:

- Who makes decisions? How to make this transparent and agile at the same time? Is consensus possible? Is it necessary?
- Can we be a truly global organization? How do we build true partnership given a one-way North-South resource flow – although we know there are abundant resources in the regions as well? How do we build global advocacy within regions?
- What are the technical and creative ways to manage information flow and email fatigue?
- How do we deal with branding and visibility, particularly in the face of donor demands? How do we balance attribution and contribution?

Overall, our most productive task seems to be agreeing on the principles that define the container (not constrainer) of our organization, so that it's clear that what is JASS and what falls outside, while accommodating different rhythms and priorities.

### **A Decisionmaking Scale**

A small organization is like a kitchen table that everyone sits around, sharing. This creates a set of expectations and a type of familiarity that cannot work in a larger organization. People feel a sense of loss when they no longer know everything that's going on; they tend to feel left out. What we did at GCM was to put on the table: we can't afford for everyone to be involved in every decision. Now, we need a new balance and structure. Our culture was based on transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness. Who needs to be involved in which type of decisionmaking? We shared how that happens, aiming for transparency about the mechanisms. We found that was enough, as long as people know HOW things are being decided.

We went through an exercise listing all the decisions, concretely, and then for each one deciding who has to be involved in that decision, and what level of quality control was needed – this varied by region, and over time. When working with a new person, more checking is needed, with more delegation when they have a better understanding and can represent the organization.

We create a delegation continuum of six levels – from 1. Do exactly what I say to 6. Entirely your decision – and this allowed us to use a shorthand: “is this a 4 or a 6, a 1 or 3?”

*Lori Heise*

## Transnational Architecture: What Does the Research Tell Us?



*By Srilatha Batliwala*

*JASS Board Co-Chair Srilatha Batliwala is Associate Scholar in AWID and a Research Fellow at the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, Harvard University, where her work focuses on transnational civil society, transnational grassroots movements, and practice-research engagement.*

Why do we use the word “transnational” for organizations such as JASS? “Global” means the entire world, so only an organization that works in every country in the world can call itself global. “Multilateral” means that government is involved, but we are civil society so ours are not multilateral organizations. “International” has come to be associated with something that’s on top with everyone else being a small piece of that big thing. We like the word “transnational” because it’s about connections across country divides – not perfect connections, but a bit more equal. So the term speaks to relationships and linkages between work and initiatives in different relationships around the world.

We often use the word “structure” for how something is shaped, but “architecture” is a bit different, implying many different structures within a larger shape. It simply means a design that holds together a number of different structures.

We did research to define the architectures of ten different international NGOs or transnational organizations for a number of reasons, the fourth explaining why the whole question is of interest to JASS:

1. How does power work within an organization? Its architecture reveals this.
2. Does the flow of power allow the whole entity/network to make decisions effectively and to seize opportunities, without complicated 50-person consultations before issuing, for example a statement, and responding to challenges?
3. How does the architecture respond and account to constituency/ members?
4. How can we learn from the architecture of others to shape our own organization? The research into different models provides a resource for making choices. Women’s initiatives lack information on how to organize ourselves, so we stand to learn from the experience of other transnationals.

The five types of architecture identified in the research can be seen on the PowerPoint. The diagram for each one demonstrates the relations between and power within the central office/ HQ/ secretariat (symbolized by a red circle) and the other elements of the



organization. Every transnational endeavor has some coordinating effort, the place where everybody connects. This is often the place where much of the decision-making power lies, along with the raising and control of money.

In summary, the five types of architectures:

	Type	Examples	Power
1	Federation structure	Amnesty, ActionAid, Transparency, Greenpeace	Red holds all the power and launched the branches. But branches are registering locally so they can fundraise
2	Confederation structure	Oxfam International, Shack Dwellers International	Members came together to form red to serve their purposes (peer learning, exchange, and speak with one voice).
3	Unitary organization	Plan International	Centralized decisions, with input from program countries and decentralized fundraising
4	Network Structure	Social Watch, CIVICUS	Romanticized as “equal.” No financial relation between secretariat and members.
5	Movement Support Organization	AWID, WIEGO	Confederate structure, red exists to support members, and to have a global voice and standing

Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS), founded in 1995 at the Beijing Conference, as an open space (literally, a tent) for grassroots women to talk, bond and vent, is interesting for JASS in representing three intersecting arenas:

1. NGO constituencies: Mostly country level, but some are regional (e.g. MINE from European)
2. Grassroots constituencies (which connect both to the NGO level and to the secretariat), including Mothers Centers (around 8,000 of them across Europe), GROOTS Kenya (around 400 village groups across the country), FSWW in TURKEY, SSP in India, and Comite – Honduras (see <http://www.groots.org/members.html>)
3. Secretariat/s, the first in New York, but then others were established on themes such as disaster, women’s voices in local governance, and women’s economic empowerment.

The research highlights key questions for the kind of transnational organizing that we do as JASS:

- What are the linkages between local and transnational organizing and change? As we document what we do, we need to be able to say, “Here’s how it worked in this particular circumstance.” For example, what JASS did at AWID was transnational organizing: presenting the work for review and adaptation.

- Who plays what role in transforming the lives of poor women?

Often, NGOs want to do the work with women, families, and communities work because that's their legitimacy so they may be reluctant to cede those activities.

- How do you create a culture of mutual accountability?

People find ways of sabotaging a top-down structure in which money is wielded like a stick. Then we have sweet “flat” networks, whose problem is the lack of accountability. All of which leaves us with the task of consciously building a culture of mutual accountability.

### Going forward

JASS hopes to map out existing decision-making processes and obligations, in order to name the continuum that we're on. A useful exercise would be to take two specific, concrete things – one at regional level and one with a cross-regional link – and brainstorm what a mutually accountable way of working would look like in practice.

Three future themes for cross-regional development and collaboration emerged from this gathering:

- Microcredit/ economic and political strategies
- Radio and communications
- Indigenous women

As Sri observes, we have all spent a lot of time trying to find a magic architecture – that does not really exist. It's more about the WAY we do the work. Hope says: “Signing up for JASS is like building the helicopter while flying at 30,000 feet.” We are not the usual NGO, and there is a cost to maintaining our character and identity.

### JASS Southeast Asia Regional Team

In deciding who would participate in the Power – Movements – Change meeting, the region had a double agenda. They used the Amsterdam event to gather a potential regional team. This group worked closely over the four days, using this valuable face-to-face time to consolidate their connection and plans for 2010. These individuals committed to taking responsibility for national-level activities. At regional level, they will form an ad hoc team to work on technical and conceptual matters. Two of the eight countries were not represented, so Thom (Amporn Boontan) became JASS' “ambassador” to Burma, while Marivic Raquiza, as a board member as



well as one of two Filipinas at the meeting, will lead the needs assessment team to Vietnam.

Responsibility in this work is a two-way street. In taking on work, we take on accountability for completing it. *Southern Africa*

Collaboration with IDS is possible on three points:

- Communication and media – see [ourmedianetwork.org](http://ourmedianetwork.org)
- Power analysis – [powercube.net](http://powercube.net)
- Documentation and learning – Pathways to women's empowerment, power and development relations, capacity collective



## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Abbreviations

ARVs – Antiretroviral treatment  
 AWID – Association for Women’s Rights in Development  
 CEDAW – Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women  
 CIVICUS – World Alliance for Citizen Participation  
 Comite – Comite de Emergencia Garifuna de Honduras  
 CRS – Catholic Relief Services  
 FIRE or Radio Feminista – Feminist International Radio Endeavor  
 FSWW – Foundation for the Support of Women’s Work  
 GCM – Global Campaign for Microbicides  
 GROOTS – Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood  
 IDS – Institute of Development Studies  
 JASS – Just Associates  
 LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender  
 NGO – non-governmental organization  
 NWI – Nobel Women’s Initiative  
 PEKKA – Indonesia Women Headed Household Program  
 Propaz – For Peace Program  
 SSP – Swayam Shikshan Prayog, meaning Self Education for Empowerment  
 TNC – transnational corporation  
 WIEGO – Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing  
 WSF – World Social Forum

### Appendix 2: Participants

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## Appendix 3: The Seams

In the interests of making overt some of the thinking and preparation that underlie apparently seamless processes, we append some of the notes that guided and shaped presentations for Power – Movements – Change.

### **Framing questions for Indonesia presentation**

Suggested elements and format: visuals help bring it to life

- Brief explanation of the context and profile of the women you work with, etc.)
- Review of your goals – why focus on this, why now?
- Basic elements of your strategy or approach
- Examples of impact, challenges, surprises successes – brought to life with real stories about real women
- Insights and conclusions for JASS and other movement-builders

### **Framing questions for Malawi presentation**

You’ve both developed so many rich and complex elements in the work in Malawi, with extraordinary impact in a short time. Please bring this alive for everyone in the meeting!

Building on the powerful reflections that Hope shared from this most recent workshop (and the earlier ones), we’d like you to talk about individual and collective empowerment in the context of Malawi and with positive women. You might draw upon the key elements of JASS’ approaches (such as power) that you have used/re-shaped in this process.

Suggested points and information to weave into your presentation:

- **Situate us in Malawi and Southern Africa:** quick descriptions of the context and the women; and a brief explanation of JASS Southern Africa’s focus on women living with and active on HIV/AIDS.
- **Power to and within:** tell us (and show us with pictures) some of the women you’re working with; the process and how they’ve responded. Why is this process unique and different from many of the “interventions” that “target” the women? Bring to life the specific impact in the way women’s lives are changing already and the actions they’re taking.
- **Why and how does this relate to movement-building:** how and why is this process so critical organizing women and building women’s collective power? Reflect on the invisible power dynamics affecting women’s sense of self and relationship to each other.

To finish, you may want discuss JASS Southern Africa’s strategy of building from local to national to regional levels. How are the ideas, principles and practical experiences that you’ve discussed above embedded in that strategy? What are the key lessons for JASS to think about overall?



## **Innovations & Insights in Transnational Civil Society Organizing**

**Purpose:** explore what we can we learn and use from research on transnational civil society, processes and innovations that can be applied to JASS' challenge of building effective governance and structures as a hybrid NGO - movement?

- How to acknowledge and celebrate the differences between the regions without a) losing basic coherence? And b) creating an implicit hierarchy where some work is considered more important or advanced than other work?
- How to embrace different rhythms and priorities without dissolving coherence?
- How to define and maintain respect of the non-negotiables?
- How to ensure the financial resources are *always* seen as one of many other types of resources brought to the table upon which JASS depends
- Is consensus possible? Desirable? How to continually build and maintain common principles while growing and extending?
- How to grow a common global agenda out of distinct regional agendas – is this necessary/desirable to scale up impact?
- Are the demands of institutions (policies, systems, structures) inherently demobilizing? How to remain responsive and protecting our flexibility while ensuring accountability to our mission, goals, constituencies, donors?
- What does it take to build and sustain local to global solidarity in the current global context? Beyond North-South. Embedded in the institution?
- Branding, visibility, recognition: Whose movement is this anyway? The moments and dilemmas of remaining behind the scenes/ invisible? How to lend JASS to increase visibility and clout of national and regional groups that JASS work is built upon?
- Not meaning to dominate does not mean you don't dominate; dealing with power and privilege transparently.

Some tensions and balancing acts where push and pull come at different moments around different issues:

- Between autonomy and centralized decisionmaking
- Between democracy and pressure for impact
- Between context-specific and coherence
- Between process (how) and substance (what)