

JASS BIG IDEAS: FEMINIST POPULAR EDUCATION



Mariela Arce

Roads of change

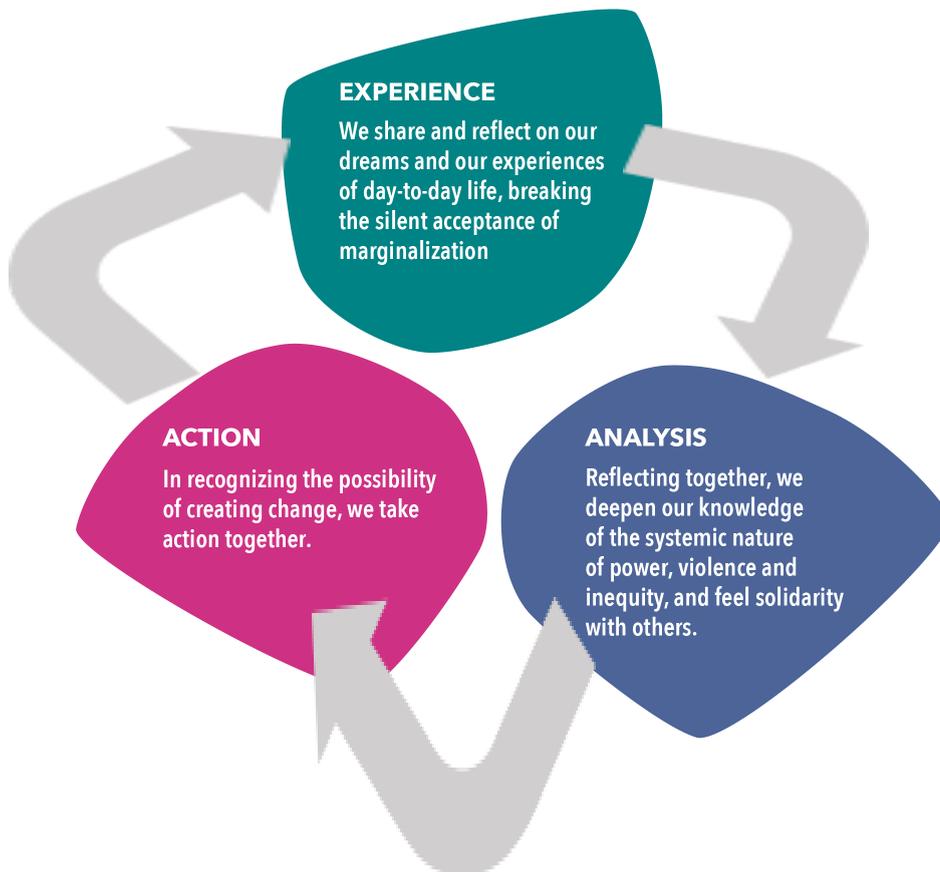
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“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

Audre Lorde

IN BRIEF

The JASS community is steeped in a particularly political way of learning, analyzing, and taking action. From the beginning, this approach – feminist popular education – has shaped JASS’ vision and strategies.



JASS BIG IDEAS: FEMINIST POPULAR EDUCATION

Feminist popular education is action-oriented so it moves through a continuing cycle of reflection and analysis, action and transformation.

Popular education is an approach to literacy, political education, and organizing that invites people to reflect on their lived experience, as a way to “de-normalize” oppression and inspire strategies to challenge the status quo. It focuses on class.

Feminist popular education adds a specific exploration of intersecting power dynamics – including those of gender, race, and sexual identity – that silence and exclude people. It includes our bodies and ‘personal’ lives as part of the story of oppression and liberation, in order to give rise to truly transformative strategies for everyone.

The word “popular” in popular education does not mean fun or cool (as in a pop song), but refers to a vision of the common good – “of, for and by the people.”

IN JASS

JASS’s movement building is rooted in a practice of on-going feminist popular education with activists. We see it as central to individual and collective liberation.

Feminist popular education creates space and processes to:

- affirm and build on people’s intelligence, knowledge, and analytical capacity
- foster critical thinking and questions about why things are the way they are
- ‘de-normalize’ injustice and inequity
- fuel people’s courage, hope, and sense of community
- investigate and challenge power that keeps us silent and resigned
- unleash people’s imagination about other possibilities and their collaborative power to make for change

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IN ACTION



Nani Zulminarni

The River of Life

[Watch on YouTube](#)



Shereen Essof

The Engine of Movement Building

[Watch on YouTube](#)

IN DEPTH

Popular education is attributed to radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, from his consciousness-raising literacy work with peasant farmers, as a “practice of freedom.”

“When feminists encountered Freire’s ideas, many identified with his understanding of oppression and the role of consciousness-raising linked to organizing and action in undoing it. However, they challenged his singular focus on class as the source of all oppression and found a glaring omission in that his analyses ignored inequalities in the private sphere. Thus, feminist activists made visible the multiple and intersecting dynamics of social exclusion and oppression—gender, class, sexual orientation, age, nationality, ethnicity, and the myriad other identities around which social hierarchies are built.”

Read more in this [paper](#) by JASS founders, Lisa Veneklasen and Valerie Miller.

Read more: Feminist Hiking Collective interviewed [Patricia Ardón](#) (JASS Mesoamerica) and [Shereen Essof](#) (JASS Director) about our practice of feminist popular education.

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JASS facilitators share many years of deep practice of feminist popular education:

- building on participants' **experience**
- inviting and deepening their **analysis**
- strategizing and taking **action**
- nurturing **leadership**
- honing and sharing holistic **facilitation** skills

EXPERIENCE

“The JASS feminist popular education starts with her story. Deep, personal gripping life stories, stories that take each woman to her cellar where demeaning stories buried in a box are shared. Each woman shines a light into all the corners of her body and the story is aired. Each story is carved in some power dynamics, be it the power a chief wields, power wielded by tradition and religion and hence internalized, power of a security guard at a local clinic who won't let this woman go in to get her ARVs: Power, power, power. In sharing these stories, her body becomes a vehicle for learning to question different kinds of powers that society normally takes for granted, and with this understanding, her possibilities are released, blockages are cleared, and she is able to break free of limits. Her inner knowing and personal shifts reverberate in the room and there is new energy. At this moment, there is some kind of relief as individually and collectively, the women cross a threshold; in their words, they cross many lines. They start getting empowered, advancing to another level of critical consciousness, and organizing. They become alive to the world around them.”

[*Hope Chigudu, JASS Southern Africa*](#)

“In Malawi, we started with a really powerful process of body mapping, where women spoke really intimately about their life journeys and their bodies and how it is that they carry differing manifestations of patriarchy on their body, including what it means to live positively (HIV+). In these spaces we sit on the floor and over drinks and snacks we share stories of our lives, our coping strategies and indigenous knowledge systems around sex and sexuality, and what it means to live positively. It was really in that process that we began to realize the issues that women were experiencing with specific ARVs. And so that became the very potent and pivotal moment that allowed us to escalate the movement building agenda in Malawi.”

[*Shereen Essof, JASS Director*](#)

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ANALYSIS

“We use a lot of personal stories to share among the activists and then we turn to inspirational stories so activists can learn about the societal, regional, and cultural systems that oppress them. Storytelling helps not only to inspire others, but also to reinforce within themselves this encouraging notion of confidence and self-worth. When activists hear similar stories of shared experiences, they will come to an understanding of rooted systemic obstacles that women face, and therefore find common ground and cross the line hand in hand.”

Chan Kunthea, JASS Southeast Asia

“The JASS Mesoamerica School of Feminist Alchemy (Escuela de Alquimia Feminista) is a space where women from different organizations come together to learn, build collective knowledge, and exchange experiences and strategies. Alquimia is a place not only for academic or theoretical training, but also for the exchange of strategies of struggle and experiences of resilience. It’s a space where collective dreams and learning processes are generated by both the popular educators and the activists who participate in these trainings.”

[*Mariela Arce, JASS Mesoamerica*](#)

ACTION

“JASS creates a domain within which a woman living with HIV continually deepens her understanding of power, sex, and resources. It shares with this woman some feminist popular education tools that enable her to realize that she has the capacity to participate actively in the same world that humiliates her. She can be visible and can amplify her voice. With the right tools, especially those that explain how systems of power operate, a huge fundamental shift of mind occurs. She develops a different sense of what it means to be human. This woman starts to appreciate that she is a legitimate citizen, that it’s possible for her life to have meaning. She stops embodying the labels and the trademarks imposed by society. She leaves them behind like a pile of citrus peel. She blossoms into her rightful name.”

[*Hope Chiqudu, JASS Southern Africa*](#)

“Women find common ground when they realize they are impacted by the same issues, and share the knowledge they have in their hearts, minds, and bodies for their wellbeing. Finding common ground when we are building communities or movements is really important because it enables women to build their collective power, define and drive their agenda, and bring about the change they want.”

[*Sibongile Singini, JASS Southern Africa*](#)

“We are convinced that systemic structural changes should and can only be possible through alliances between women from different parts of the world, through methodologies and strategies that allow us to exchange, and the conviction that political education is fundamental. That it is not only daily activism that counts, but also being able to grow together. And that remains at the heart of JASS.”

[*Patricia Ardón, JASS Mesoamerica*](#)

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“The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others.”

bell hooks, author professor, feminist, and social activist

LEADERSHIP

“JASS has developed feminist leadership principles over many decades and currently works on applying and refining them through training in our feminist movement building schools. This training uses an evolving, highly interactive, feminist popular education curriculum that focuses on giving women who are already involved in grassroots organizing the confidence, skills, allies, and strategies they need to be stronger and make their movements stronger.”

Chan Kunthea, JASS South East Asia

“We decided to create these spaces and processes like the [Alquimia leadership course](#) with the idea of generating learning and analysis about power and other themes central to build indigenous women and land defenders’ strategies, of trying to link the local with the global, of provoking alliances between them, because it is not only the knowledge that we share among all of them to strengthen the struggles and movements, but also spaces where they can get to know each other, exchange, build common strategies and accompany each other.”

[Patricia Ardón](#), JASS Mesoamerica

FACILITATION

“We want to move away from calling ourselves ‘trainers’ because our approach to knowledge is much more political and dynamic. We’re not delivering knowledge to those who don’t know; we are generating knowledge collectively from personal and political experience, with new ideas and how-to’s woven in. The process forges relationships between women that are critical for movement-building, and the knowledge guides our collective action.”

[Lisa Veneklasen](#), JASS co-founder

“How do you explain the magic of JASS’s Alquimia Leadership and Training School? The School provides truly miraculous moments of collaboration, creativity, and critical inquiry – all focused on building and strengthening women activists and their movements for justice. Add some good music, dancing, singing and a few bad jokes and – abracadabra – wonderful synergy and solidarity.”

[Valerie Miller](#), JASS co-founder

“Education [is] the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world.”

Paulo Freire, Philosopher

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IN MANY VOICES

“Feminist popular education is about liberating ourselves to build a future we have not seen yet.”

JASS

“When we talk about radical healing, it involves going deep, to unlearn, and unlearning is perhaps the main challenge in feminist popular education – to unlearn what we have learned all of our lives and learn a new way of seeing and living.”

[Patricia Ardón](#), JASS Mesoamerica, interviewed by The Feminist Hiking Collective

“I have always thought that what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others.”

Ella J. Baker, activist community educator (quoted in Hatzenbeler)

“[Ella] Baker’s view of teaching for liberation was based on the need to empower ordinary people to dig within themselves and their collective experiences for the answers to social and political questions. She did not want her students to see her as the repository of all knowledge but to discover their own insights and knowledge base. Her pedagogy was democratic and reciprocal and she relied on the collective wisdom that resided in poor and oppressed communities. Baker’s commitment to democratic education and empowering her students to believe in and connect with their own knowledge and wisdom illustrates the values of popular education.”

Sam Hatzenbeler (thesis): Radical Education and Social Change: An Experiment in Student-Driven Democratic Feminist Education

“We have found powerful possibilities for dialogue among feminist collectives in different grassroots organizations, seeking new ways to engage in politics, and confronting male and machista ways of exercising power, that go beyond the fragmentation among organizations. Being active in different movements we discover that the incidences of men taking over an organization’s voice and political life repeat themselves in very similar ways, which is why we facilitate workshops to challenge machismo in our own collectives. A feminist perspective grounded in the body-territory and in a critique of daily life enriches the perspectives of those movements.”

Read more in this AWID [interview](#) with Claudia Korol, member of Pañuelos en Rebeldía.

“A primary critical question is what can help create hope, since people organize out of hope, not despair. People taking action creates hope, people winning victories creates hope, people developing stronger relationships with one another creates hope, people coming to new understandings and developing new skills and confidence creates hope.”

Susan Williams, popular educator at the Highlander Center

“I think if you are building a movement, it can only be sustained when it is led by collective power.”

[Nani Zulminarni](#), JASS Southeast Asia

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IN GROUPS

People are energized by a highly participatory process. Drawing, role play, collage, song, games, poetry, and storytelling enable people to broach difficult and painful subjects. In an atmosphere of trust, respect and care, people share their stories, problems, hopes and fears openly, and begin to recognize their courage, resourcefulness, and integrity.

Feminist popular educators are both facilitators and organizers themselves, and are self-aware about the power and information they represent and embody. Facilitators create a safe, structured space in which people can go outside their comfort zone and probe difficult questions about power and prejudice. Because the facilitator cannot anticipate how learners will think and interact, she must listen carefully and engage in the process as it unfolds.

1. Experience

People give voice to their stories and dreams, identifying common concerns and sources of personal strength and resilience, discovering their “power within.”

2. Analysis

People analyze their realities together, challenging myths and assumptions and examining the forces that shape their contexts. This changes their understanding of the world; fosters a sense of themselves as potential actors, not passive victims or recipients; and sparks the potential for collective power.

3. Action

People apply their new awareness in developing shared agendas and joint actions to make change.

Check out more movement-building tools about Feminist Popular Education on our [We Rise website](#).

This [Big Idea – FEMINIST POPULAR EDUCATION](#) – is online on the [JASS](#) (justassociates.org) site.

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