

Strengthening Women's Organizing Power

A regional network of the international feminist organization, JASS Southeast Asia (SEA) is dedicated to strengthening and mobilizing women's voice, visibility and collective organizing power for justice for all. JASS SEA is grounded in a web of alliances with diverse young and grassroots women in five countries: Indonesia, East Timor, Malaysia, Cambodia and the Philippines. The five-women regional coordination team scale up JASS SEA's work by drawing upon their own organizations. These include a vast grassroots women's cooperative movement organized by women-headed households in Indonesia, an NGO development network in East Timor and the indigenous people's movement (Orang Asli) in Malaysia – an indication of the bridges that JASS SEA builds across sectors, ethnicity, class, religion, and location. JASS SEA's approach to political capacity-building equips women activists with new knowledge, skills and confidence through unforgettable and creative participatory processes. Sustained mentorship over time then supports women to:

- ♦ continue their growth as activist leaders and reach out to empower others with the confidence and information needed to demand rights and resources;
- ♦ help their families and communities adapt to crises, including natural disasters, beyond their immediate control;
- ♦ challenge norms, prejudices and taboos that prevent women – and young women in particular – from speaking out, and that perpetuate inequality and poverty;
- ♦ mobilize their collective citizen power to influence public institutions and policy at local, national and regional levels.

JASS Southeast Asia's activist leadership training since 2007 – local, national and regional – has engaged over 300 primarily young women. Many now lead their organizations while others have launched their own initiatives. These women are making a visible impact on LGBTI organizing, reproductive health, economic empowerment, and land rights.

Regional Advocacy through ASEAN

JASS is educating and mobilizing a growing regional constituency of women to engage actively with the new Civil Society Conference of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Given ASEAN's critical economic role and political influence, JASS SEA pushes for a focus on women's economic rights strategies as well as sexual and reproductive rights within the regional gender equality and women's rights agenda.



A Regional Agenda for Women

Southeast Asian women face increasing inequality, migration and natural disasters. Devastating in themselves, these factors compound global crises of energy, food, climate, and governance. Many governments in the region, diminished by years of downsizing and corruption, lack the capacity and political will to uphold women's rights or provide protection. Social conflict around class, ethnicity, gender and religion continues to intensify, as corporatized globalization pushes individualistic, consumer-oriented economies. Powerful religious fundamentalist forces limit women's basic freedoms and rights, while cross-border migration generates (often sexual) exploitation and violence.



Women Organizing for Economic Democracy

How can women organize locally around practical needs and rights – to food, land, water, jobs, and safety – in ways that also expand their collective political influence? Microcredit is widely promoted as a magic bullet for addressing women’s poverty, but growing evidence demonstrates that loans and indebtedness do little to empower women. Building on the innovative economic and political empowerment strategies of JASS allies, PEKKA and PESADA in Indonesia, JASS is working to document, replicate and scale-up alternatives: viable savings and business cooperatives that, combined with human rights education, become a political force for local democracy and women’s rights.



“When I have challenges and struggles in my personal life and my work, and I think I don’t have support and don’t have anywhere to go, I have JASS. JASS is my family. JASS is home.”

- Yasinta Lujina, young feminist leader, East Timor

JASS SEA Writeshop

A JASS SEA online writing training course in Bahasa-Indonesian created an online writing community, using a listserv and blog to share personal and political essays. In 2010, 14 of the young women activists from across the country met to improve their writing skills as a critical tool for effective activism and advocacy.

Professional writers shared skills and experiences, and the group wrote a letter advocating for the release of a JASS SEA alumna imprisoned for her organizing work.



Savanah

Chea Cheysovanna, a young Cambodian feminist activist, left a JASS SEA regional workshop inspired to ground her women’s rights activism in her own personal experience. Equipped by JASS’ capacity-building, Chea went on to gain a decision-making role within her Phnom Penh-based organization. She is working on a new advocacy process, seeking affordable payment plans to enable women to rent or buy land.

Process First, “Issues” Second

In the safe spaces that JASS SEA creates, and using JASS frameworks – especially the three faces of power – women analyse their own lives and context, devising strategies to address their real needs and challenges. Unexpected subjects are raised. At the very first movement-building institute, for example, a young Indonesian lesbian felt comfortable enough to speak out about her sexuality. From one evening’s conversation emerged a major theme, and JASS SEA has continued to lift the lid on sex and sexuality ever since. Other strategies have focused on women’s meaningful participation in local government election and debates on village-level distribution of development resources. JASS sees conflict not just as inevitable but also as an opportunity for learning and action. In the Philippines, JASS SEA’s double role – as a regional insider, yet unconstrained by national tensions – enabled feminists from opposed political groupings to come together for the first time to find a common agenda as women.

“I want to write about the difficulties experienced by rural women in accessing health facilities. And I want to alert the responsible parties that women’s rights to adequate health care are still being ignored.”

- Sutyem, Writeshop participant