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It's become my mantra: 'all activists should build a house'. At the end of the day, you see the wall you built (or plastered, or painted) with your hands, and lots of others' hands. You feel proud. The sense of accomplishment and effectiveness are rarely felt in so much of our activist work. You feel tired, and know exactly why. The feeling at the end of the day of completion, that you've done enough; and it's good. You feel it all surrounded and supported by a community of folks all slightly amazed and giddy that it's really happening, and we're all making it happen.

Natalie, a British-Thai participant in our December 2016 build summed it up this way:

“Someone said we built a house and in the process built a community. We came from very different parts of the world to find we had the same things in common – a desire to contribute to something bigger than ourselves; to help the women who will one day retreat in this house. To discover (or more accurately – rediscover the old) ways of mud building and in the process understand there are other more sustainable ways to live... To find like-minded people and make new friends was the mud-icing on my mud-brick cake. At our closing circle we spoke about how we felt, and some of the words stuck with me – healed, not judged, grateful, supported, inspired, surprised and strong.”

Friends from [International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice \(IWP\)](#) and [Pun Pun](#) have been running women's natural building workshops since 2013. It's been, and continues to be, a rich journey. To date, we've organised and facilitated 10 workshops in 3 countries (Thailand, Burma and the Philippines). We've taught about 165 women from at least 24 countries how to build their own adobe mud-brick home, and how to get thoroughly muddy, love it, and feel more confident in themselves and each other. Each workshop has been hosted by a local organisation that wishes to build a structure (such as a house, meeting room or play space) to support the community. The last four builds were hosted by IWP at our new activist retreat space in northern Thailand – a mango orchard at the base of a sacred mountain surrounded by forest, caves and hot springs.

Over the years, IWP have imagined a safe space where activists can come on their own to rest, recover, relax, reflect and rejuvenate, surrounded by a supportive community (if that is what is desired) and 'permission' for solitude (if that is preferred). As ideas and practices of integrated security, well-being, self care, and sustaining activism take root in activist communities struggling with burnout, depression, trauma and facing increasing oppression, spaces to support and sustain individual's efforts for personal time and reflection are crucial. In particular, safe, welcoming and affordable spaces for women's rights activists and LGBT activists is a need and desire echoed in nearly every conversation we have had with activists in Asia, and around the world.

Following the same model as that of the training center we've run since 2002, our aim in the retreat space is to integrate spiritual and mindful practices into the foundations of our social justice activism and movement building. We promote self-reliance, ecological and personal well-being, and community building by constructing our own buildings with natural, locally sourced, building materials. Building the space has become the retreat for all of us involved in IWP. As it is being built entirely through friends and volunteers sweat and time, the ownership and commitment to its presence is constantly expanding. The women's builds have greatly enriched our sense of community – coming together to bring a needed retreat space into existence.

The workshops combine our loves of feminism, building and community building – promoting self-reliance and well-being in satisfying ways. For many of us, it's a time and space to 'get out of our heads'; away from the constant analysis, thinking and strategising, that's essential for movement work, but also very draining.

When we are mixing mud for mortar, or stacking bricks, or plastering a wall, our presence moves into our bodies and the physical tasks, and then into the surroundings): the laughter and chatting of other women building and the beautiful landscape hosting the build. It is mindfulness in action almost without effort. The courses also embody women's leadership, feminist practice, empowerment, solidarity and team work – without the need to name, interpret, or analyse them conceptually. We simply and powerfully live and practice them, together, through the building process.

We're often asked why we run women-only courses; there are many reasons. Two of the organisers, Peggy and Lisa, had noticed some patterns play out in the mixed gender workshops they hosted at Pun Pun farm. A woman would be working to hammer in a nail or saw a piece of wood, and a man would offer to finish the job. It's not intentional, but this act takes away the opportunity for women to gain experience and the confidence to do it themselves. All of us women have had this happen to us and know how this feels, whether in a workroom or on a worksite. On building sites we noticed women often take on the helper role – they support the effort without being able to develop their own personal skills. This led us to create workshops where everyone believes that all of the participants can do every part of it and to create a supportive community that helps women to challenge themselves to do things that are new or difficult for them, and to feel safe to say when they need help.

Amanda, a British-Thai participant who has joined a few different builds, explained it this way: “The purpose of an all woman build was to demonstrate that women could do every part of a build. If a job needed muscle the job was broken down until it was manageable. No one need compete to show how strong they were. We more preferred to be useful to the whole, pitching in and supporting one another compensating for any shortcomings.”

The very act of women building is breaking long-held beliefs and taboos about women's strengths, capacities and position. Even having a woman's body physically higher than a man is taboo in many cultures, including that of Thailand. I remember the broad smile of our Thai co-facilitator, Non, as she sat on the roof ridge beam of the first house we built, saw in hand, as a male neighbour walked by, did a double-take, and then walked by again a few minutes later with other male neighbors. When they asked what we were doing, she proudly explained this house had been built entirely by women, and hadn't we done well? While there has been the occasional snide and sexist remark for the most part, our bystanders are visibly impressed and tell us so.

Girls and women are not encouraged, and in fact are often forbidden, from climbing trees and ladders, lifting heavy objects or using tools. Challenging the fears and reluctance that women may have internalised around trying those things is very powerful, particularly when surrounded by supportive friends cheering you on and helping to mitigate the risks. Khin, a Burmese participant in a build in Thailand (who then organised her own workshop in Burma the following year), was adamant that it was not possible for her to be on a ladder. She had never been on one and didn't plan to start this late in life. We offered to support her a few times, holding the ladder, or her body, or whatever would feel safe; she would climb one rung, but wouldn't go further. Towards the end of the build, there was a moment when a woman on the roof needed a hammer passed up to her –the only way to get it high enough for her to reach was via the ladder. Khin was the only one around and up she went, seemingly without thinking about it, although it undoubtedly took tremendous courage. From the top of the ladder, Khin looked around and declared ‘I can do it! We can do it!'; this become our chant for the rest of the build.

Workshop participants have ranged from 8—70 years old, with children as young as ten-months-old accompanying their mothers and playing/being cared for on site. The workshops usually have more child participants than in mixed-gender workshops; perhaps this is because the mixed gender workshops typically have more dads than mums participating. For working mothers, an interesting process often happens: they arrive flustered, still struggling to shed the residue stress of their daily lives of balancing work and nurturing children. They may feel guilty for not dedicating their precious time off work to their children and instead pursuing one of their own ambitions. However, most kids are delighted to be surrounded by a big gang of attentive, funny and interesting aunties from around the world, a pile of beautiful wet mud, a sand pit and a

new gang of fellow children to hang out with. By the end of the workshop, there is a realisation that the act of mothers taking the time to do something for themselves and letting their child be a part of that is a gift to the child. It's inspiring for them; they too walk away with the belief that they can build a house and that they can do anything. We allow both boys and girls into the workshops, since few kids in today's gender stereotyped society would get to hang out with a group of women as they build a house from start to finish.

The wisdom and reflections that participants share keeps us motivated and energised to continue to create these spaces. Susanna, a Malaysian participant who has joined two builds, shared her thoughts: “Insights after three days of building a mud house with a diverse group of women... 1. self-sufficiency or self-reliance is not the aim of this kind of building... this kind of building is all about building and relying on community; 2. our bodies are amazing tools – [they] told us we don't need many tools to build a mud house... but I'm discovering my fingers, toes, heels, arms, forearms and knees as all perfect for the task of building; and 3. building taps into good common sense and physics that we can all readily access in the recesses of our minds.”

“I feel healed.” Amanda wrote on her blog afterwards:

“Healed from my fractured life of keeping up with my tribe in three different time zones all on Facebook. ... Healed by the door that had opened to greater control of our lives. Healed by living in community for ten days harvesting the stories of woman I met. Stories of seeking a better life for ourselves, stories of self-healing, independence and free thinking. I could spot us now, see these women at airports traveling alone all over the world bringing home new skills and ways of thinking.”

Masjaliza, a Malaysian participant in our February 2017 build, shared her post-build reflections in the form of a poem; her feelings resonated with many of us:

the orange tinge on the soles of my feet have washed away  
grime trapped under my fingernails all but gone  
skin burnt by the Chiang Dao sun is back to its usual brown  
I'm at my desk shuffling parts of a mundane life  
took a break, closed my eyes  
am reminded to a time when  
the earth was under our naked feet  
in a pit we mixed clay, sand, and husk or straw  
lime, glue, sifted sand and soil, tinted with earthy colours stirred to a smooth finish with my  
gloved hand  
it feels like a lifetime ago  
when I, girly-girl – will leave the hammer job to someone else – climbed up scaffoldings,  
heaved bricks in a chain line, carried buckets of mortar, shaped cobs into patties, and with a  
machete, took my anger out against Trump on a piece of human-made brick to make it fit that  
bloody difficult corner  
I was a proud construction worker  
words like plum bob(by), trowel, spirit level, hoe (haha), rolled off my tongue  
we didn't just gobble up the snacks, lick the juice of the best tasting pomelo in Thailand off the  
palm of our hands, do singalongs, or name that tune.  
we.built.a.house!  
a fuckin' house  
with real walls, windows, and doors  
nooks and crannies, fittings for light switches and plug points

kitchen, toilet, larder/store-room big enough to feed a village  
I still cannot believe it  
there was no blueprint  
but my mud sisters and I  
we built a house  
with the collective strength of our bare hands  
we built a house  
yes we did.

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