

Davis Projects for Peace Proposal

Participating Student, Institution: Fiona Almeida '15 Wellesley College

Location: Karnataka, India

Title: Respect, Peace and Empowerment for Siddi Girls and Women

Summary

In many parts of rural India, menstruation can be interpreted as an abnormal physiological occurrence. During the summer of 2013, I had the opportunity to collaborate with young Siddi girls and women in order to learn how reproductive health is regarded within their community in Karnataka, India. My interactions with them helped me understand some of the challenges they face because of the cultural stigma attached to menstruation and their limited understanding about puberty, and reproductive health. Armed with this information, and through an emphasis of peace and social justice I am motivated to develop a project that will enable these girls and women to gain access to resources that will equip them to take control of their bodies and reproductive health.

The goal of this project is to supply reusable sanitary pads to Siddi girls and women as well as educate and teach them about puberty and menstruation. Another component of the project will recruit and train Siddi girls and women to learn how to sew and market the reusable pads as a sustainable small business enterprise. These efforts will help the girls enhance their future and financial independence while contributing to their development and that of their communities.

Background

Tucked away in rural Karnataka, India, lives a marginalized group of African Indians, who were brought to India as slaves over 600 years ago. They are known as Siddis and belong to one of the lowest castes in India, "Scheduled Tribe" (ST). The Siddis are isolated from the larger society and are discriminated against due to their physical appearance and darker skin color. Siddis lack access to basic resources such as clean water, formal education, healthcare, and sanitation. Many young girls and women face a myriad of challenges regarding their reproductive health and education due to poverty and cultural gender biases. This past summer, I had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork and live among Siddis in Karnataka, in particular with young girls at rural hostels. Many of these young girls live in abject poverty; some are orphans, survivors of child bride practices, human trafficking, and physical sexual assault. My interactions with them educated me about their concerns surrounding puberty and menstruation. For example, some castes in India pathologize this biological phenomenon to make young women feel as if they have a disease. Further, parents or caregivers feel powerless at helping their children during this process because they themselves are not well equipped with the necessary knowledge about menstruation. The girls also disclosed to me that they do not have access to or cannot afford sanitary pads. They resort to using rags from old clothes, newspapers and leaves which put them at a higher risk for bacterial infections. According to Eco Femme, up to 75% of young girls and even some female teachers miss school due to menstruation— compromising their education and overall self-esteem (Eco Femme 2011). During my interviews, I learned that young girls are absent for fifty or more days throughout the school year and teachers will miss four to five days of work per month because of menstrual leakage. Some NGOs are working with local Indian government officials to promote reusable sanitary pads, but their availability has not reached Siddi women and girls who remain at a disadvantage because of their minority status as ST.

Objectives

- 1) To empower young Siddi girls by providing access to reusable sanitary pads and information relevant to menstruation and reproductive health.
- 2) To use visual aids and charts during educational sessions to bring familiarity to the female reproductive system.
- 3) To convene focus groups in three villages that will prioritize the leadership and concerns of Siddi girls and women to foster a peaceful network and support.

- 4) To train girls how to sew cotton sanitary pads as a sustainable business enterprise that will generate income for financial stability.
- 5) To introduce the newly-trained Siddi girls to NGOs such as Eco Femme to which they can market and sell the reusable sanitary pads.

Methods and Outcomes

For the first two weeks of the project, I will meet with a team of five local women that I worked with this past summer in Karnataka. These women will also provide translation services and be compensated for their assistance. The goal of this team will be to draw on local expertise and knowledge as we develop a culturally and age appropriate reproductive health curriculum to be implemented for the remaining eight weeks. We will run focus groups to gather information which will further inform our planning of the curriculum. This partnership will help facilitate the distribution of the reusable sanitary pads to the various villages.

The core educational aspect of the project, will take place in the next eight weeks in various community centers through two phases— educational sessions and training to sew reusable sanitary pads. The first phase will have educational sessions (Sunday-Thursday) that will address puberty, menstruation, the female anatomy and the significance of reusable sanitary pads. These sessions will serve to create a safe space for young girls and women to ask questions in regard to menstruation, gain understanding of their bodies and raise concerns about cultural and social norms. This overall project will increase girls' school attendance and confidence which in turn will improve their literacy levels. In addition, all participants will be encouraged to share their newly gained knowledge with their peers.

The second phase will focus on the recruitment, making and marketing of the pads with the assistance of three paid seamstresses. This will become a sustainable business enterprise that supports educational efforts and financial security for the Siddi girls and women. All raw materials for the making of the reusable sanitary pads will be sourced locally. The final two weeks will be used to evaluate the project in order to inform future initiatives. I plan to interview participants as well as the planning team and video record their feedback.

Experience

For over six years I have worked in the health sector both in my country of origin South Africa (SA) and in the United States of America (USA, Boston). In SA, I oversaw community service reproductive health programs serving the underprivileged and providing medical treatments to HIV/AIDS patients. This job, gave me the opportunity to work for my underserved community in a way that was previously impossible because of the Apartheid Regime in SA. In Boston, I worked at the Brigham and Women's Hospital as a Program Coordinator for the Genetics Department. This job provided me with the skill set necessary to successfully implement this project, such as time and budget management, program development, and community networking. Through Wellesley College, I was privileged to conduct research in India this past summer among Siddi communities where I identified the crucial need that would be addressed by this project. I interacted with local female leaders and attended focus groups that discussed their socio-economic status in India. I taught English to Siddi girls, and met some of their family members. I also created small group meetings with Siddi girls through which they shared their hopes and aspirations for themselves and for their community. In light of my interactions with the Siddi community, I endeavor to create a project that will foster collaboration, peace, and respect for Siddi girls, women and their communities.