

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

Location: India

Participating Student, Institution: Fiona Almeida '15 Wellesley College

Home Country: South Africa

Section I:

The goal of this project is to educate Siddi girls and women about women's reproductive health and train them to sew and market reusable cotton sanitary pads as a sustainable small business enterprise.

This project was funded by the generosity of the Kathryn Davis Projects for Peace, as well as contributions in kind was made by family and friends. The contributions in kind ranged from time and effort in preparing educational materials, and stitching samples of the cotton sanitary pads. I worked with young Siddi girls and women from rural villages along the Western Ghats of Uttara Kannada, India, educating them on the women's reproductive health, menstruation, personal hygiene, and the use of reusable cotton sanitary pads. My project and presence were welcomed and the women were excited to have someone show interest in their community but especially so in their health and wellbeing.

Phase 1 - I worked in recruiting a group of locals to assist me in implementing my project. I worked with two sisters who are social workers from the Holy Cross convent. The sisters work closely with the Siddi community and run 3 hostels, which host young Siddi girls. The sisters helped me recruit seamstresses and a few Siddi women who in turn disseminated information about the educational programs we were scheduling to run and the training of making reusable cotton sanitary pads. They helped me conduct initial and follow up interviews. There were two young Siddi male social workers, who provided help by setting up educational groups in their villages as well. After recruiting Siddi girls, women and seamstresses we set up educational and training sessions.

Phase 2 - The process of implementing the project came with challenges, learning opportunities, which gave me a greater understanding of Siddi people and their culture. The girls and women attended the educational and training classes where they asked questions and shared ideas about their bodies. It was a very empowering moment of laughter and some tears for all present when the girls and women shared their personal experiences regarding their menstruation cycle. The most challenging part of the project was working with the seamstresses because I assumed during our training sessions we had a mutual understanding about the specific measurements for the pads. The measurements I envisioned were different from how the seamstresses envisioned the cotton sanitary pads to be. After many meetings with the seamstresses, I finally understood the reasoning behind why they stitched the pads differently. The seamstresses had never used a sanitary pad before and were only used to a piece of cloth larger than an overnight pad. They were fearful that there would be leakage because the pad may not be able to absorb the blood during their period. I was able to bridge the gap between my expectations and theirs to produce the pads with the specific measurements, which I had provided. It was important for the pads to be well designed and stitched to the exact measurements because the objective was to provide a quality reusable pad for the girls to feel confident to attend school and for the women to continue going to work without having the fear of leakage that would otherwise keep them at home. I also spent a few days once the project was set in motion to find local suppliers for materials to sew the reusable cotton sanitary pads. I was able to negotiate some fixed wholesale prices for the women so that they can sustain the production of the pads. A total number of 120 young girls and women benefited from this project and we reached about 7 Siddi villages. Overall, the project was a success and presently local women will be able to continue training and educating more Siddi communities. I was also able to extend the program to girls

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and women who face similar marginalization as Siddis do. Presently, there are 6 trained seamstresses teaching the girls and women to stitch the reusable sanitary pads. I have trained three social workers to

continue the education surrounding women's menstruation to villagers I was unable to reach. Further, after 80 samples of the reusable cotton sanitary pads were distributed and tested we now have women placing orders to purchase the pads for their personal use and for friends and family members.

Section II

I define peace as a way for individuals to understand one another without judgment and to be mindful of others and their circumstances. Peace can be generated when we have an understanding of working towards the achievement of enhancing the wellbeing of one another. The reusable cotton sanitary pad is the beginning of a new start for the young Siddi girls and women to start taking charge of their bodies. When women take charge of their bodies they can feel confident and make decisions in a way that will enhance themselves and others in their communities.

While working with the Siddi community I was also able to extend the program to other girls and women facing similar marginalization in promoting the use of reusable sanitary pads and educating them on women's reproductive health. By being able to extend the program, I along with the Siddi communities were reaching out to other women who endure the same experiences and bringing these different communities of women together to discuss their concerns and share their stories. This was a start to opening up dialogue between these women to discuss their health concerns and experiences as well as to create a space where there was cultural exchange between different castes and tribes. This was an incredible journey for me to witness as many of the villagers do not necessarily gather with other villagers due to their perceived caste and tribal differences.

Ultimately, the reusable cotton sanitary pads served as a catalyst. It brought together groups of women from different castes and tribes for a discussion about their bodies. Discussing their bodies has helped them build self-confidence as well as self-awareness, creating respect for one another and forming a network of support, which, in turn, will foster peace across castes and tribal differences.

This experience was challenging but also fruitful. I lived with the community I was working with and shared in their everyday life experiences. I spent days without electricity, running water and amenities that I am use to. I enjoyed religious celebrations and festivals. In the evenings, I tutored the young girls English and immersed myself in their culture by having conversations with locals, and interacting with them on their farmlands. I was able to see first-hand some of the hardships these communities face. Despite the difficulties they face I was amazed to witness the type of kindness and hospitality they share towards one another within their community. The Davis Projects for Peace has allowed me to challenge myself and see the world through a new lens. Through understanding our differences and respecting one another we can overcome conflict and create global peace and understanding.

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