

"The Sisterhood Peace Project" (Jalgaon, India) June-July, 2016

BACKGROUND

A prominent form of gender inequality in India is unequal participation of women in the workforce, leaving them socioeconomically dependent on men and thus the "weaker sex."¹ Violence against women stems from such perceptions and creates an unsafe space that hinders the development of women's professional lives. India has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates among developing countries.² Lower female labor force participation and weak entrepreneurial activity drags down economic growth, and studies have shown that empowering women has significant economic benefits in addition to promoting gender equality.³ Gender equality is an essential condition for maintaining peace in the community. According to the UNESCO institute of statistics, in India the enrolment rate of females drops from 69% in secondary education to 23% in tertiary education.⁴

The gender gap increases even more in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine (STEM). A recent study has shown that girls in government schools in urban and rural areas in India are directly and indirectly discouraged to pursue STEM fields even though their test scores are as good as those of their male peers.⁵ Moreover, they are not exposed to female role models.

Jalgaon District in the state of Maharashtra suffers similar issues. Many girls who attend government schools⁶ are oblivious of the post-secondary educational resources Jalgaon District has. Moreover, they are not aware of their rights as women and usually accept lack of opportunity as a part of "being a woman." As one moves up the ladder of education and employment, many girls fall through the cracks and become victims of forced early child marriage, domestic violence, and employment in the informal sector with unequal pay, creating a vicious cycle of lack of education and societal oppression.

INTENDED PROJECT AND OBJECTIVES

The Sisterhood Peace Project (SPP) aims to break the cycle of oppression by showing adolescent girls what they are capable of through inspiration, exposure, awareness, and skill building with the primary goal of boosting their confidence as contributors to the society, especially in STEM fields. SPP also aims to familiarize the girls with the educational support and resources in their surroundings. The project will do so through the medium of workshops, field trips, and mentorship. The project aims to recruit underprivileged girls from government schools from in Jalgaon District, with the aim of having 50-70 participants in the age group of 13-18 years old. Since I am a native of Jalgaon District, I will travel to the government schools in these villages to recruit participants. The Rotary Club of Jalgaon West has agreed to help me with the recruitment of participants for this project⁷.

The workshops will be 2-3 hours long and will be conducted in the local language (Marathi). I plan on hiring 4-5 female volunteers from local colleges for the workshops. The syllabus for these workshops will be developed in consultation with Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT)⁸ and Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan Jalgaon Center⁹ and will include:

- *Understanding the struggle of women*: This would include discussions on understanding gender dynamics in society with special focus on patriarchal politics in family, education and career. The goal of this workshop is to foster critical thinking skills.

- *Discussion of ambition and struggles*: This would include group discussions, brainstorming sessions, and team building exercises. This will be followed by a questionnaire about the ambitions of each participant.

- *Leadership and confidence*: This would include exercises adapted from leadership workshops I have attended. Additionally, a session on human and women rights including anti-dowry law awareness will be executed.

- *Career development in STEM fields*¹⁰: Seminar on general pathways a student can take after entering STEM fields, college application procedures in India, and potential of STEM fields.

¹ Das, Sonali. "Women Workers in India: Why So Few Among So Many?"

<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2015/wp1555.pdf>

² https://www.proliteracy.org/downloads/proliteracy_international-programs-publications-and-training_critical-issues-literacy-and-women-against-violence.pdf

³ <http://wol.iza.org/articles/female-labor-force-participation-in-developing-countries/long>

⁴ <http://www.uis.unesco.org/DataCentre/Pages/country-profile.aspx?code=IND®ioncode=40535>

⁵ "Women and Girls in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) in Indian Secondary Education." *Feminist Approach to Technology* (http://www.fat-net.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/FAT_STEM_GIRLS_Report_2014.pdf)

⁶ Government schools in India are usually poorly funded and lack infrastructure and/or resources for quality education.

⁷ The Rotary Club of Jalgaon West (<http://www.rcjalwest.org/>) has been conducting community projects with 141 government schools in Jalgaon District for over a decade. Letter of support can be provided upon request.

⁸ FAT (www.fat-net.org) is an NGO based in New Delhi (India) that empowers women by enhancing women's awareness, interest, and participation in technology, regardless of background and socioeconomic status. FAT has been working across India through various programs on skill building and feminist advocacy since 2008. FAT has agreed to collaborate with this project by providing guidance on implementation, syllabus design, and sending volunteers for the IT skill-building workshop. Letter of support can be provided upon request.

⁹ Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan Jalgaon Center is comprised of local teachers and professors. In addition to helping me with syllabus design, the center has agreed to assist in making the workshops culturally sensitive and relevant to the locals of Jalgaon. Letter of support can be provided upon request.

¹⁰ I have particularly chosen STEM fields as I am from one (Biochemistry) and have enough knowledge about the careers in the same.

•*Stories of eminent women in STEM fields*¹¹: Scientists, industrialists, nurses, doctors, professors from in Jalgaon District will be invited to share their stories and information about their fields

•*IT skill building workshop*: Basic computer and internet skills will be taught, based on the skillset the participants possess, with the curriculum provided by Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT).

In addition to the workshops, we will also be having field trips to two eminent polytechnic universities and other technological institutions in Jalgaon District, such as industries and research labs. The field trips will supplement the 'Career development in STEM fields' workshop. This will allow the participants to see academic and real world examples of opportunities in STEM fields.

The project also aims to match the participants with mentors who are pursuing their bachelor's and master's degrees in the area. The mentors, who will be preferably in the participants field of interest, will assist the girls with their academics, call them monthly to track their progress at school, and meet with them at least three times a year. A call for mentors will be made on social media and local news in early May 2016.

Towards the end of the project, a final video focusing on the dreams and the ambitions of the participants will be produced. The video will be shared with the participants and the community. Moreover, the participant's families will be invited to a concluding reception along with their mentors. The purpose of this function is to show the progress of the participants to their families and introduce the families to the mentors, hence adding to the support and community building process of SPP.

By the end of the workshops and field trips, the project aims to create a sisterhood of 50-70 young girls who have gained confidence in themselves and each other as well as increased strength to pursue their ambitions. These girls will be more self-assured, as they will be familiar with the resources Jalgaon District provides and how to use them. They will also be bolder, as they will be aware of their rights as women and students. Learning about IT will add to their skillset, making them more capable as they are eventually poised to enter the workforce. The mentors will provide them with prolonged support and inspiration.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

A call for mentors and volunteers will be made on social media and local news in early May 2016.

Week 0: Finalize syllabus for workshops with the participating organizations (FAT and Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan).

Week 1 & 2: Hire volunteers, publicity, press release, start admission, conduct interviews to incorporate community needs for project.

Week 3 & 4: Get to know each other and talk about ambitions and struggles, workshop on leadership, confidence, and career building, inspirational speeches from eminent women in Jalgaon and surrounding areas.

Week 4 & Week 5: IT workshop

Week 6: Field trips to universities and industries in Jalgaon. Matching with mentors.

Week 7 & 8: Reflection session, matching with mentors, final video project, and concluding function with the girls and their families.

The workshops will take place in the hall provided by the Rotary Club of Jalgaon West. The IT workshop will take place in the computer lab of Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Jalgaon Center. All participants will be offered a stipend for their travel fare and food.

MEASUREMENT OF PROGRESS

The 50-70 girls that will attend the workshops will have the ability to share the experiences they have been exposed to with their family members, peers, and other people in their surroundings. The project will encourage the participants to discuss gender issues in their communities and think critically about the mainstream views they are subjected to on a daily basis. A qualitative survey of the girls' ambitions and familiarity with Jalgaon's resources will be conducted before and after the workshops to assess the workshop's effectiveness. Additionally, the video and the final function will provide a platform to show the ambitions of the participants to the society, potentially generating more support for them and for SPP.

SUSTAINABILITY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This project aims to create a sisterhood of adolescent girls in Jalgaon District who will support each other and will be supported by their mentors. At the end of the project, I will share my experiences with FAT in an oral presentation to further the discussion on strategies to bridge the gender gap in India. A more developed version of the project will be curated based on the feedback from the participants and FAT. This syllabus will be shared with FAT, to be used in different locations of their operation. Locally, in Jalgaon District, annual gatherings of the participants will be organized with the help of the mentors and the volunteers in order to strengthen the SPP community.

The participants of this project will indeed be sisters promoting peace, as they will be change agents in their society. They will challenge the stereotypes and restrictions put upon them, creating a ripple effect. These confident and bold girls will not be afraid to break the shackles of forced marriage, dowry, unemployment, and violence as they will be equipped with skills and inspiration that will fuel their dreams.

¹¹ The Rotary Club of Jalgaon West has agreed to connect me with women leaders in STEM. I also have personal connections in the city who have agreed to speak for the workshop.