

PROJECT GOALS: The Sisterhood Peace Project (SPP) aimed to empower adolescent girls living in rural areas by inspiring them to pursue an education in science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM) fields through exposure, awareness, and skill building. The end goal was to create a sisterhood of confident girls who are strong to break the cycle of gender oppression in the traditional Indian society.

OTHER FUNDING: The Sisterhood Peace Project (SPP) gratefully received in-kind donations such as ability to use the space at Rotary Club of Jalgaon, West and the computer lab at Raisoni Engineering College, Jalgaon.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION: Our first steps included reaching out to the community of Jalgaon District to recruit volunteers and participants for the project. An initial press release announcing the goals of the project was made in a local Marathi newspaper (Lokmat Times). The response was overwhelming. We had a lot of local schools and NGOs approaching us to be a part of this project. One of them was the leader of an *adivasi* (*adivasi* is 'Tribal' in Marathi) group, Pratibha Shinde, who was also awarded the Ashoka fellowship for her work for fighting for the rights of indigenous groups of Jalgaon. After talking to her, we learned that the *adivasis* are among the most deprived and oppressed sections of India. Gender bias and gender oppression has meant that *adivasi* women are worst affected. Moreover, the community has been in a constant battle with the government to gain their land. They live in remoter areas deprived of basic amenities such as electricity, which was the case of a couple of *adivasi* villages in Jalgaon District. Hence, having *adivasi* girls as a huge number of the participants would be beneficial to the community.

The next step included surveying the community for specific needs and finding resources to fit those needs. Local social workers who work with *adivasi* communities advised us that creating awareness about STEM education needs to also embrace that certain scientific facts we take for granted, especially those related to reproductive health and diet, are not a part of their education. In fact, superstitious beliefs can have an effect on community health, especially that of women's. With this information in mind, we designed a curriculum and reached out to individuals and organizations who could help bridge this gap, in addition to offering career guidance and encouragement.

Initially, we planned to have the program for 2-3 hours in the morning, which would allow the participants to go back home later. However, many of the participants came from areas that were not accessible by road so having the participants travel everyday was not feasible. Therefore, we partnered with a girls hostel in town, which then allowed us to spend the whole day with the participants, turning SPP into an intensive summer camp.

The SPP summer camp consisted of three components: workshops, lectures, and visits to relevant institutions. The workshops covered topics that would first help the girls get more comfortable, speak more, and learn new skills. During one of these workshops where girls were representing their villages through discussion of local problems, they were able to share solutions from their own villages, which was a highlight of the program. The most impactful workshop in terms of skill building was the intensive IT workshop. Most of the girls had little or no experience with computers. Some of them had never seen one. However, the pace at which they learned was comparable to any other millennial. Now, they are able to exchange emails and conduct normal MS Office tasks. Above all, we were able to replace fear of technology with fascination and comfort. We also had workshops on career guidance and constitutional rights as citizens of India, where the participants used art and theatre as means of communication. Additionally, Red Cross (Jalgaon District) completed a workshop on balanced diet and took blood samples to determine blood groups and hemoglobin levels in the participants since 70% of the participants did not know their blood type and 90% did not know their hemoglobin levels.

We invited women speakers from different age groups and professional backgrounds in areas relating to STEM. The speakers ranged from two newly graduated engineers who had a difficult time convincing their families to let them work to an OB/GYN who has been practicing for the last 15 years to a retired

science teacher. These workshops not only covered their career paths, but also talked about how they survive in the professional world, which is dominated by men. Moreover, having professionals from health fields speak also allowed the girls to ask questions, especially those related to reproductive health. We visited three industries, including food processing, biotechnology, and PVC pipe making, and two universities in Jalgaon District. Talking to women in these industries was encouraging and eye opening. Moreover, as all the participants came from an agrarian background, they were fascinated to see how science can help agriculture. Another highlight was that the girls were made aware of the numerous scholarship and financial aid opportunities they were eligible for after visiting the North Maharashtra University Camps. We also visited the Gandhi Research Museum in Jalgaon where the all the exhibits used technology to communicate stories.

We ended the SPP camp with a program to which their families were invited. The complete program was lead by the participants. They displayed their talents in dancing, singing, theatre, and poetry. It was also an opportunity to address the issues of gender inequality and the importance of pursuing education.

Overall, the project was well received and more individuals donated their time to volunteer as time passed. I knew the local language, Marathi, which made it was easier for me to communicate and build better relationships with the participants. Moreover, being in my hometown, Jalgaon, it was easy for me to gain resources and connections required for this project. Time was a major constraint, due to the school season starting sooner than expected so the SPP summer camp lasted only for 4 weeks. However, this also enabled us to have an intensive and impactful program.

BENEFICIARIES: The Sisterhood Peace Project benefitted 70 girls coming form 11 remote villages in the *adivasi* belt of Jalgaon District. By the end of the program they had exposure to the benefits and opportunities in STEM careers. Moreover, as the girls grew more confident and started speaking about their struggles, we were able to voice their concerns through local media, which gained a lot of attention.

SUSTAINABILITY: SPP will be sustainable in the following ways-

- We have matched 5 girls with a mentor who is a professional or a university student in STEM fields. This will enable us to keep a track of their progress.
- If finances permit, SPP will have shorter workshops for SPP participants that will go in-depth into the topics mentioned in the workshop during short school breaks.
- We will also fundraise to create a scholarship for the participants.

DEFINITION OF PEACE: On an individual basis, peace is the harmony between mind and body, and on a societal level peace is when the individuals of the community are in harmony. However, for peace to occur, everyday violence due to injustice has to diminish and to do that one needs empowering tools such as education coupled with confidence, inspiration, and encouragement. The beneficiaries of this project were exposed to the tools of empowerment and were encouraged to pursue them, this in turn, made them more confident to break the shackles society imposes on them due to their gender and social status.

HOW DID SPP CHANGE MY PERSPECTIVE OF PEACE AND THE WAY I THINK ABOUT THE WORLD?

I always had a feeling of helplessness and frustration whenever I witnessed gender equality and violence against women, especially when I was in my hometown. However, I was mostly told that I should be thankful for being more privileged. Being funded for SPP enabled me to challenge that and taught me to use locally available resources to empower individuals and create peace. Moreover, I have learned even more about my hometown, a place where I spent 15 years of my life, through the eyes of the participants.

PERSONAL STATEMENT:

"The Sisterhood Peace project gave me the confidence and resources to give back to society and promote the idea of peace that I see for women in the future. This has been an empowering and eye opening experience." -Sonia Kabra



Top: Introduction and orientation with participants

Middle: Concluding speech given by one of the participants for the final function of SPP

Bottom: IT skill building workshop

