

Introduction:

As a woman growing up in America but often traveling to my family in Agra, India, I always grapple with my encounters with poverty and inequality. This struggle has given me an irrepressible gratitude for my freedom to realize my potential, as well as an unshakeable desire to share with others that which is my privilege when it should be every woman's right. Education and development of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills¹ are crucial to self-actualization and happiness. Yet, many young women I encounter in Agra have not even been exposed to these concepts. Many girls drop out of school to work as maids, family caretakers, or play in the streets. I have met and talked with several who are full of unfocused energy and restlessness. It pains me to see these young women underutilize their potential simply because they are not encouraged and unaware of how to take charge of their education, health, and ambitions. I am driven to want to work with these girls because empowering young women is crucial to empowering communities. In fact, "Helping girls stay in school, avoid early pregnancy and marriage, and develop [vocational and personal capacity] are efficient and critical interventions to [uplift communities from] intergenerational cycles of poverty. Evidence shows that investing in girls'...opportunities has a large development impact on their families and their future children, with long term benefits for [larger] growth."² I would like take the first step toward this larger growth by setting up an **8 week program** (of fun, engaging, interactive workshops, team-building exercises, and skill-building activities) for disadvantaged but receptive girls in Nagla Kharga to motivate, educate, and inspire them to make positive and self-affirming decisions.

Project SHAKTI Overview:

- **Who:** 35 girls aged 9-14 who demonstrate eagerness, commitment to attend, and need (I will involve all caste/schooling levels)
- **Why:** To instill self-worth, self-confidence, and self-efficacy in girls and galvanize community development toward concrete improvements in female health, literacy/school-enrollment, empowerment, and leadership.
- **Where:** India³: Nagla Kharga village in Kuberpur District Agra, Uttar Pradesh⁴, India (specifically, their assembly/school space)

Community Needs:

Health: Most girls lack modern knowledge of germs and menstrual hygiene and ways to combat related social issues. The high occurrence of easily preventable communicable diseases strains a girl's ability to follow dreams or go to school. If the girls grow up to be mothers incapable of implementing feasible health/nutrition/sanitation practices (like washing hands and boiling water) poverty is perpetuated.

Education: In spite of access to free school, about 40% of girls dropout due to a combination of disinterest in school-work, lack of support/mentorship for girls who do attend school, cyclic poverty and need to earn money, and the misguided mentality that there is little value in an educated girl. I have seen under-education lead to decreased independence and community leadership.

Self-concept: many girls do not see themselves as independent, capable agents of change with the power to choose actions to positively impact their own lives, families, and communities. Other negative self-concepts stem from health and education issues (e.g. some girls feel too ashamed to attend school when menstruating). And, it is therefore important to address these three areas of improvement holistically.

Impact: Lay the groundwork for them to be more able to help themselves and create opportunities for happiness.

- **Knowledge/Exposure:** I will organize a health-examination and teach them what they need and want to know about living healthily and independently. Participants will learn from dialogues with each other and with urban counterparts in a pen/pal exchange program.
- **Motivation:** I will coach them to see the value in education, their unique potential and strengths, and teach goal-setting and goal-reaching skills. I will leave behind a peer-support group that school-going participants will mentor each other in.
- **Self-Confidence:** I will guide them toward a can-do attitude, appreciation of themselves and their values, and practice with communication and other personal-efficacy skills. They will clarify their interests and discover their ability to learn from resources such as the books I obtain from their requests.

Implementation: June 22nd –August 31st | CORE PROGRAM: 2-hour sessions 5x/week JULY 6th–AUGUST 14th (8 weeks)

APRIL-JUNE:

- Continue to read other NGO reports & tutor to rehearse skills, begin purchasing materials, compile & create lessons and handouts.

JUNE 22-28: *Arrive & Prepare Site, Sustain*

- Build working relationship with community through 1-on-1 and group meetings with its teachers, leaders, and members. Develop mutual trust and understanding of each other's needs, then appeal to their interests to develop program while projecting a positive energetic tone.

JUNE 29-AUGUST 14th:

- Select "applicants" by door-to-door interviews & de-brief participants on program structure/content, expectations and get them excited! Also begin process of working *with* girls to build the specific agenda around *their* interests and needs.
- Introductions & Pre-Program Questionnaire to identify initial attitudes/conditions in areas of program goals
- Coordinate special projects, field trips, speakers, Mother & Daughters Day, Parent Orientation

- Work with school to enrich library (based on student input) & implement sustainable programs to increase school quality/retention.
- Organize peer-support group with girls.
- Continue holding participatory informational sessions for community.
- Rotate young women participants to help me plan/conduct next lesson. Solicit evaluation after each session so that I only improve!
- Respond to Mid-Program Questionnaire.
- Continue meeting mentors, advisors, and professionals for feedback.
- Appoint adult & participant community leaders in each focus area (health, education) and train/equip them to preserve program's spirit.

AUGUST 15-31: *Close program*

- Post-Program Questionnaire to measure efficacy & change in attitudes
- Have installed Pen-pal system, and timed events (eg. "Time capsules") to ensure that the program's success endures. In the Peer-Mentor Group girls will motivate each other and practice positive life strategies.

POST-PROJECT: (in addition to completing the Project Report)

- Gradually taper but sustain support of Pen-Pal & Peer-Mentorship Programs; Re-visit & maintain long-term relationships

¹These objectives are listed as top Strategic Priorities for attaining gender equality [Millennium Project Task Force on Empowering Women]

²As noted by the World Bank Adolescent Girls Initiative project, among many others.

³Despite endowing *all* citizens with *de jure* right to education, India is far from universal and gender-equal primary school attendance.

⁴Uttar Pradesh consistently ranks in the Top 5 worst states in Universalization of Primary Schooling against every benchmarks [NUEPA]

Support & Preapproval:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nagla Kharga resident and leader Mr. Mahipal Singh, has helped me make this project Nagla Kharga-specific & offered to introduce me and act as key male supporter. • Sociologist and Social Worker, Dr. Mala Gupta, is eager to mentor me, will accompany me, and connect me to resources & personnel. • Agra-based family practitioner, Dr. Subhash Gupta (also unrelated) will conduct the medical screening and offer medical advice. • I am applying for a smaller supplemental grant from Carleton College so that I may incorporate internship experience to bring more expertise to my project. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Founder of NGO <i>Girls Helping Girls</i>, Ms. Sejal Hathi, and I are in dialogue about creative collaboration opportunities. • Educator, Ms. Sima Soni, will accompany me and help me work with the community to establish the Peer-Mentorship Program. She will annually return to Nagla Kharga to represent me and offer support. • My extended family (also active community members and philanthropists in Agra) will connect me to human resources, and help me work with <i>Agra Women's College (BDK)</i> as well as a suburban all-girls' school (grades k-11) to assemble women to participate in my pen-pal/exchange program with project participants in Nagla Kharga. |
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Why I'm Qualified:

My fresh energy, fluency in Hindi, familiarity with the local culture, and my similar age and background of being from Agra- will enable me to earn acceptance into the community and deftly develop active partnerships. I can furthermore bring good mediation, negotiation, motivation, and community relations skills from my (total) 4 years of leadership experience in community service initiative-organizing and Student Council. I have strengthened my public organizing abilities through various workshops and books (including a week-long Sierra Club "Running a Campaign" Training camp). In my county's Environmental Quality Advisory Council, I gained insight into how to implement reform both in public policy and on the ground from my involvement in collaborating with local citizens, NGO's, and government branches. I learned how to motivate others to listen to our council's recommendations, carry out 'capacity building' for smaller environmental groups, incorporate feasibility and competing interests into project planning. I have demonstrated my classroom skills in teaching elementary school children ecology and nutrition. Most importantly, entering Nagla Kharga with humility and a desire to listen and learn would come naturally to me. Intrinsic strengths that will help me conduct this project include: empathetic/active listening, trust-building, a habit of seeing the best or potential in people and awakening them to it, and the ability to advise others toward their values and goals.

Questions & Solutions:

- **Which successful project models is my methodology based on?**

My Project shares elements with case studies analyzed by Terry Alliband in *Catalysts of Development: Voluntary Agencies in India World Education*, social entrepreneur successes-stories from David Bornstein's *How to Change the World*, and NGO's program outlines/assessments from *CARE*, *Girls Helping Girls*, and the *Centre for Development and Population Activities* (particularly their India-based girls' *Better Life Options Program*, *Women's Leadership Development Program*, and publications such as *Building Women Leaders*). Project SHAKTI's activity ideas stem from my various camp and mentoring/teaching experiences as well as readings in educational psychology.

- **Can I maintain assertive & focused despite pressures from inside and outside the community?**

Yes. I will first inspire the young women to want education and fulfillment. Once we have a common vision, I will make sure to hear clear definitions of the participants' interests and needs; and then, even when difficult, I will always act on behalf of those interests. I will be prepared to achieve this with deft relationship building, negotiating, and compromising strategies. I may juggle competing visions for the project but with Dr. Mala Gupta, I can handle this.

- **Can I maintain retention/interest throughout the program?**

Yes. All sessions will challenge girls to think in novel ways. The girls will enjoy discovering their unique potential and strengths. The atmosphere will give them a sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, and keep their attendance high. I will follow strategies other programs have used to create community investment and interest. Besides physical incentives, the program will also provide a "safe space" for them to express themselves, learn, & interact.

- **How will I NOT become disheartened by larger ideological & economic obstacles to female empowerment?**

I will follow successful models and anticipate resistance while cultivating support (like from Mr. Mahipal Singh). I will be resourceful, creative, and do extensive research in order to make confident & independent choices. I will make sure to take advantage of every opportunity to impart empowerment, however small. So, I will also encourage smaller steps (e.g. "be aware of your rights, look out for your health, speak up, encourage your daughters to attend school when you become mothers"). **There is a continuous spectrum of opportunities to empower, and I will aim high but I am 100% certain that I will find success somewhere.** My project plan will hold up; I have done my research and I will continue to research and solicit input from various NGO's and development agents. Furthermore, since I do not believe I am giving charity or entitled to gratitude, I will not be disappointed when I do not receive thanks. Rather, I will stay invested because I have a stake in actualizing the rights and creative potential of my sex so that we may better our world.

- **Will I be Safe?**

Yes. I will have reliable transportation, a cell phone and cell-phone service, and a safe place to stay. All project sites (school, temple, Panchayat spaces) are safe as well. I will often be accompanied by either my primary project mentor Dr. Mala Gupta and other professionals.

Why Empowerment is Crucial for the Girls of Nagla Kharga:

Every human deserves a chance to good health and fulfillment. I know that even if I help even 1 girl feel more confident in herself, my trip will be worth it because when individuals unleash their creative potential, they not only positively affect those around them, but they *pass on* their optimism in a ripple effect. Underrepresented girls in Nagla Kharga have the unique capacity, as young women, to uplift their families and communities. The capability of a girl in Nagla Kharga to effectively direct her family and give life to her volition is a powerful and absolutely necessary step toward localized community-driven development and gender equality for all of India. With project SHAKTI, I hope to impart tools and attitudes for self-empowerment that will remain long after this summer.