

Women's Dance and Self-Defense for Peace & Empowerment

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"Our bodies change our minds, and our minds change our behavior, and our behavior changes our outcomes"
-Amy Cuddy, PhD

Background:

Rape in India has been described by Dr. Radha Kumar as one of India's most common crimes against women¹ and by the UN's human-rights chief as a "national problem"². Official sources show that rape cases in India have doubled between 1990 and 2008³; according to the National Crime Records Bureau, 24,206 rape cases were registered in India in 2011. The Indian government estimates that an Indian women is raped every 22 minutes, "affecting women of all classes"⁴. In New Delhi, the gang beating and raping of a 23-year-old university student on a bus that resulted in her death caused continuous protests in India and around the world⁵. Other protests, like New Delhi's "SlutWalk" in 2011 have also drawn awareness to sexual violence against women. This recent traction in the media of the rape and abuse that many Indian women suffer has led us to believe that now is an ideal time to address these issues with Indian women in a comfortable, safe, and engaging setting to lay the foundation for peace between genders.

Project & Objectives:

We plan to teach dance movement therapy and self-defense, concepts that we did not come across on our travels in India. Our project will open a new door for women in Varanasi. Many women's groups focus on problems *created by* the patriarchal tendencies of India's society, such as lack of financial independence for women. We believe such problems for women in India are created by a lack of empowerment and by a lack of skillful defense against misogyny. Our program is focused on directly challenging this structure, empowering women to take control of their lives and promoting peace by defending against sexual violence.

Our project would take place from July 1st-August 31st (see *Appendix C* for details) in Varanasi, a pre-industrial city in northern India. Varanasi is one of the oldest, continuously functioning cities in the world. This, along with the fact that it is the holiest of the seven holy cities to Hindus and Jains, has made Varanasi a cultural hub for thousands of years⁶. We chose to implement our project in Varanasi because it allows our project to be advertised to a wide range of people, since it is a popular tourist destination as well as pilgrimage site. In addition, we spent three weeks in collaborating with Nirman school in Varanasi, providing us with contacts and familiarity with area.

We Will Work With:

- Banaras Hindu University (BHU), where we will work with Centre for Women's Studies and Development students and interested student body.
- Nirman, a progressive inter-city elementary school and not-for-profit NGO focused on tackling problems of Indian education, where we will work with women teachers and students.
- The Yoga Education Training Society (YETS), a non-profit organization in Varanasi "providing free education for helpless and slums kids for better life"⁷, where we will work with slum children and their mothers.

We have been in contact with Nita Kumar (Nirman and BHU contact) and Somit Dutta (YETS), and they have both agreed to work with us (see *Appendix D* for details).

Dance Movement Therapy Program

Sexual harassment and assault can cause women to disconnect from their own bodies, disrupting vertical integration of the mind and body, one of seven types of integration that makes up a healthy individual⁸. We will first work with repetitive, power movements which are proven to raise testosterone and lower cortisol levels, changing brain chemistry resulting in strengthened confidence, self-perception, and chances for success⁹. Social psychologist and Harvard professor Amy Cuddy also points out that women, "feel chronically less powerful than men", and that this can be tackled through changing one's body language during a social threat, leading to "a behavioral outcome that makes [one] feel more powerful"¹⁰. Next, we will teach dance choreography which will be specifically designed to require the women to depend on each other and trust in themselves to present something that they are proud of. Teaching dance will foster playfulness,

self-confidence, and positive relationships between women, thus reconnecting them with their own bodies, each other, and the outside world, promoting individual and communal peace among women.

We will rent space to teach this program to elementary teachers at Nirman (July), to college students at BHU (August), and to the mothers at YETS (July-August).

Self-Defense Program

Self-defense provides women with personal power and skills that may help prevent future violence and abuse. We will be participating in the WomenStrength self-defense program by the City of Portland Police Bureau and shadowing the instructor of Lewis & Clark's self-defense class in preparation. We plan to model our program after their instruction, which is designed to "help women identify their risks and evaluate their strengths, and to explore their options for dealing with the threat of sexual violence" using verbal and physical strategies¹¹. By the time of instruction, we will be able to teach women how to verbally respond to potential sexual threat, strike vulnerable areas, escape from choke holds and body grabs, and execute defense techniques from the ground. Teaching self-defense will equip women with the tools to identify and prevent violence from occurring to themselves and others, actively promoting peace one woman at a time.

We will rent space to teach this program to elementary teachers at Nirman (July), to college students at BHU (August), and to the mothers at YETS (July-August).

Children's Program

We will teach dance classes that stress respectful, safe, and fun ways for children of both genders to interact and make positive, appropriate contact with each other. We will also do group activities focused on teamwork, communication, self-esteem, and anger management to build camaraderie across genders and practice appropriate ways of expression. We will draw inspiration from Gilbert's "BrainDance", Jones' "104 Activities That Build", Rohd's "Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue", and Malchiodi's "Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children", most of which were recommended to us by an associate at Bradley Angle, an organization offering safety and empowerment to domestic violence survivors^{12, 13}. These activities will foster self-confidence and empathic awareness of others, priming the children to carry peace into adulthood and perpetuate it among their communities.

We will rent space to teach two groups of students per week at Nirman: K-3rd year students and 4-6 year students (July-August). We will also rent space at YETS to teach disadvantaged children, many of whom live in slums.

Women's Dialogue

We want to create situations where women feel safe and accepted, and where they can discuss what the conditions are concerning their safety, what a safe relationship feels like to them, what they can reasonably do to attain safety, and any other issues that arise. We plan to rent a space at YETS for this purpose, adding to their newly created a women's group. We also plan to initiate a women's group club at BHU, which will focus on proving a safe place for discussion and our women's self-defense program.

Sustainability

To continue promoting peace after we leave, we will teach the teachers at Nirman our children's program. We will also provide grants for two students who will intern with us to fill our shoes at the BHU women's group club focused on discussion and self-defense when we leave at the end of August. Most importantly, the introduction of a new, peaceful, socio-cultural perspective that we provide through our programs will have an effect on each individual we teach as well as all those that they interact with.

Who We Are

We met on Lewis & Clark College's study abroad program in India during the fall of 2011. For three weeks of the program, we lived in Varanasi, giving us the connections and knowledge we need to initiate this project. Miranda has been involved with The Creative Dance Center, which focuses on Anne Green Gilbert's educational approach towards dance for 19 years. Using Anne's unique "BrainDance" method, dance is used as a medium towards education in other areas of life, such as confidence and interpersonal skills. Hillary has worked with a Dance Movement Therapist focusing on troubled youth of both genders, giving them the empowerment to move forward despite their past academic pitfalls. Additionally, we have both been taking dance courses for the past few years at Vega Dance Lab in Portland, OR.

* *Appendix A: References*