

Title of Project: *Using Artivism for Kashmiri Youth Led Peace Advocacy & Healing*  
Country of project implementation: India  
Sponsoring College: International House NY  
Designated Project Leader: Meher Dev

## **Section I: Narrative**

The project has two main components namely – Resilience & Healing (through Artivism, Self-Expression and Day to Day Conflict Management) and Legal Mentorship & Experiential Learning (through Seminars, Career Counseling, Internships). These two components are geared towards achieving two corresponding goals. First to address mental health concerns of Kashmiri law, art, and social work students by equipping them with self-care techniques grounded in artivism, self and collaborative expression, peace psychology and conflict management and mediation. Second to provide special mentorship to Kashmiri law students and provide them with a network of established lawyers, peers and mentors who they can use as life long resources for their legal learning, law practice and *peace advocacy*. The project defines *peace advocacy* as expression and advocacy for one's notions of peace and for human rights of people living in conflict be it through use of law, artivism and any other peaceful means.

Acknowledging that peace advocacy led by individuals living in conflict may aggravate the already existing impacts of the conflict on their mental health, the project commenced with the Resilience & Healing workshops. These workshops have equipped students with a range of self-care techniques to deal with their mental health impacts. More broadly, the motivation for the Resilience & Healing aspect of this project originates from the challenging circumstances of living in conflict and the fact that youth in Kashmir are suffering through direct trauma and intergenerational trauma. The Resilience & Healing workshops were followed with The Legal Mentorship & Experiential Learning sessions to help students build quality advocacy skills. The mentorship program has exposed students to areas of law not taught in their law school at all or in sufficient depth. For instance to international refugee law, laws against sexual harassment, and media and technology law. It has connected law students with mentors in the legal field for internships, practical legal skill building and career counseling.

The motivation for the Legal Mentorship & Experiential Learning aspect of this project originates from Kashmiri law students who had applied for a mentorship program for law students that I ran in Delhi in India in 2016-2017 at Chambers of Supreme Court Senior Advocate Ms. Indra Jaising. In that program, special seats were reserved for Kashmiri law students recognizing the hurdles they face in accessing mentorship and challenges of living and pursuing legal education in conflict. Kashmiri youth face several barriers to be able to advocate for their notions of peace and human rights – these range from obstacles in accessing quality legal education to accessing information due to internet shutdowns to incidents of violence. Due to the erratic nature of the school schedule impacted by lockdowns, the students selected for the Delhi based mentorship program were unable to join that program. Thus, this project's mentorship program is based out of Kashmir. A university campus has been identified as a safe space for students to engage in this project. The mentorship program is specifically filling gaps in legal education and mentorship based on needs identified by the Kashmiri law students themselves. These needs have been identified through semi-structured interviews with over 40 Kashmiri students.

Acknowledging my limitations of being a lawyer who is not from Kashmir and has never lived there, I made it a point from the start to keep in close communication with Kashmiri students, human rights lawyers and law professors and regularly undertook semi-structured interviews with them. Despite the delays in the implementation of this project due to COVID related reasons, internet shutdowns and instability in Kashmir, I always had faith that the project would work and it was a question of 'when' rather than 'if' it would happen. I designed the execution plan of the pilot round of the project with inputs and insights of Kashmiri students and law professors. It was with the immense support of law professors that the project received approval from one of the Law School Deans and was partly hosted on a university campus in a COVID safe manner.

Given the COVID circumstances, the project was implemented through a blended format – with some

sessions being hosted on zoom and some physically. The number of participants was restricted to 20 people due to university COVID guidelines. As the leader of this project, I was based in Srinagar and was in the same room as students for most of the virtual sessions and for all of the physical sessions. There were challenges around low speed internet and university shutdowns due to security incidents. Though, we overcame these challenges by identifying alternative safe spaces to conduct the project such as student friendly cafes, gardens, and office spaces of participating lawyers of the program. There were challenges around ability to recruit staff for the program since people preferred not to travel during COVID circumstances. Though this has led to saving of funds (especially through saving of travel costs) that will be used for a second round of the project.

Kashmiri law professors have shown a keen interest in hosting and running projects like this on a regular basis. Kashmiri and other lawyers who participated in this program as mentors and speakers have shown a willingness to continue to do so on an on-going basis. The pilot round of the project has laid the foundation for the creation of a much-needed network of lawyers, students and artists who can engage with law and in activism together for peace advocacy in Kashmir. This pilot round of this project is serving as a proto-type for the second round of this project.

The plan for the second round of the project has already been developed. The second round will address specific legal gaps in education identified by Kashmiri law students during the pilot round of the project. It will focus on training Kashmiri students as youth mediators and legal researchers. Students will receive mentorship from lawyers on topics including policy-making, judgment and law reading, and negotiation and arbitration. The physical components of the second round of the project (including a student-led evidence-based research and peace advocacy for Kashmiri women survivors of violence) will be implemented after the harsh winters in Kashmir come to an end and once students return to law schools after their winter break for their semester starting March 2022 and ending August 2022. Virtual components initiated during the pilot project will remain active till March 2022 including students' engagement with their mentors, internship supervisors and peer community of law, social work and art students.

Meher Dev quote: "The pilot round of the project has added impetus to mental health related demands of Kashmiri youth by demonstrating how mental health impacts are real concerns and how they can be addressed in a university safe space with the help of peace psychologists, artists, human rights lawyers and mediators. Law students will be citing the pilot as an example as they make the case with their school administrations about providing mental health counseling to students on a regular basis on school campuses. The pilot round of the project has also begun to fill the gap of experiential learning in legal education in Kashmir by providing law students from all over Kashmir opportunities to build practical legal skills under the mentorship of experienced lawyers. Building on the pilot, the second round of the project will focus on training Kashmiri students as youth mediators and quality legal researchers to add strength to youth led peace advocacy in Kashmir."

A big thank you from me as well as from the Kashmiri students who are participating in my project. Included in section II is a hand-written thank you letter amongst the many written by participating students who were suffering from severe mental distress that I wanted to share with you. While the letters are addressed to me, I truly believe that they are for all of us and for both of you as this project would be impossible without your constant support and encouragement.

The aim is to have the final report ready by August 2022.

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## Section II: Photographs



