Ideation and Goals of the Project

As young Indian women growing up in a patriarchal society, observing the normalisation of both casual and deeply rooted sexism was aggravating. The loss of women’s employment coupled with soaring incidences of domestic violence (DV) during the pandemic was especially abominable in India. Within the first three months of the pandemic-induced lockdown, India recorded a 10-year peak in the number of DV cases. Reading about the shadow pandemic and its exacerbating plight for the women in India, we decided to focus our project on the long-prevalent issue of DV.

Our project, titled Shattering Patriarchy through Conversation, Education and Self-Reflection (SPaCES), aimed to sensitise, and raise awareness in Rajpur village (Haryana, India) on issues of DV, child abuse and women empowerment. The project was designed to engage men, women, and children across ages in its activities. Our goal was to not only get a more nuanced picture of the reasons behind DV in Haryana, but also create a space conducive for listening, questioning, and reshaping attitudes and beliefs about gender. We adopted a two-pronged approach, conducting one-on-one interviews with victims of DV to understand the underlying causes; and used the concept of Forum Theatre (Theatre of the Oppressed) to raise awareness on societal issues in week-long workshops for children in the age group of 13 to 22 years.

Project Implementation and Challenges

Haryana is regarded as one of India’s most orthodox states. It witnessed a whopping 45 percent increase in instances of cruelty against women from 2019 to 2020.\(^1\) Abysmally low reporting of DV cases; self-imposition of gender norms; acceptability and even justification of DV in some cases led us to identify the lack of community space to discuss violence through lived experiences. The scale of DV, internalisation of gender norms, and inadequate opportunities to challenge the same compelled us to choose Haryana as our host site for the project.

Language barriers stood out as our primary challenge in project implementation. Despite initial difficulty, communication was facilitated by our NGO partner who kindly provided translations during the one-on-one interviews. Logistically, we did not face major challenges. Our NGO partner assisted us with attaining administrative and government approvals, and the schoolteachers supported us immensely in overseeing arrangements for the theatre workshop. Everyone in the village was warm, welcoming, and always ready to help.

Our initial aim was to engage adult women in the forum theatre workshops. However, our interaction with them revealed that some women were not too keen on participating, while others were interested but not able to participate as they were constrained by household duties. Subsequently, the workshop was delivered to a group of 60 students at the Rajpur Government School. On deeper reflection, we realised that administering the workshops to adolescents and young adults was a meaningful readjustment to the project plan since students of that age-group were more open to questioning their beliefs and the ones imposed by society. Given this unanticipated change in our target group for the workshop, we feared low registration rates. However, our doubts were quickly dispelled as we received overwhelming registrations from the students, requiring the workshop to be delivered in two batches.

Findings

The interviews helped identify the rhetoric commonly employed in the village to hold intact gender norms and the practice of DV. We undertook in-depth interviews with women willing to share their journeys. Three key themes emerged during this process:

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1) **Internalisation of patriarchy by women:** The interviewees emphasised the need for women to stand up for each other. But they admitted that this has not always been the case, with victims citing instances of their mothers-in-law defending and supporting the son’s actions. As most women enter the patrilocal residence as effectively dispossessed individuals, the male offspring becomes a critical resource to assert their views and importance. Women accepted a life of subjugation in anticipation of gaining authority within the household upon the arrival of their daughter-in-law. Having endured similar patterns of hardship, older women expect young brides to observe restrictive gender norms and violence in silence, shutting down any form of resistance that, in the long-term, could embolden the daughter-in-law to challenge their control. This cyclical nature of women’s power within the household incentivises them to develop vested interests in the perpetuation of patriarchy with age. Classic patriarchy, therefore, pits women against each other as they vie for more individual power.

2) **Stigmatising recourse to legal remedies:** Even today, parents’ honour remains closely linked with how well they have trained their daughters to fulfil their domestic responsibilities as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Women reported that their upbringing was regularly demeaned in case they raised their voice against mistreatment in their husband’s home. Many expressed hesitation in seeking legal help, given that it would take matters outside the household and adversely impact their natal family’s image. Consequently, they typically turned to their natal family – a brother or distant male relative – for shelter and financial help during instances of DV. However, girls in India continue to be regarded as paraya dhan or wealth that belongs to the in-laws, reducing their status to that of a guest within their natal home. Thus, returning home for long periods of time is considered shameful. Oftentimes, mediation efforts by the community reinforces the idea that maintaining marriage for the care of children and family should be given priority over separation. Even the relatively economically well-off complained that the lack of home ownership to seek sanctuary was the single biggest barrier holding them back from escaping abusive relationships.

3) **Imposing norms through appeasement:** During the theatre workshops, young girls shared instances of how they were encouraged to stay indoors. In these narratives, family members described the girls as beautiful and intelligent to limit their movement beyond the household to avoid the evil eye (eye of envy), thus recasting regressive gender norms in a seemingly positive light. The negative consequences of such practices spilled over into other spheres of the girls’ lives, such as convincing them to marry at a young age to avoid unwanted solicitations and depriving them of proper medical treatment by blaming the evil eye for poor health.

The theatre workshop became a space where students realised commonalities in their experiences. During this time, several students reported instances of being physically reprimanded by parents and teachers on opening up about discrimination and assault. The trust fostered between peers through theatre activities gave them a support system to fall back on and encouraged them to collectively take a stand against victim blaming. Forum theatre allows the audience to interrupt the play, take an actor’s place, and re-enact a scene that they disagreed with. Students were asked to write scripts based on their everyday experiences of gender injustices, wherein one took on the role of the perpetrator and the others supported the victim. In this exchange, the perpetrator was asked to defend their actions, and the others had to logically challenge their justifications and put forth their gender egalitarian viewpoints. The students’ exposure to narratives used to rationalise gender discrimination and violence became evident from their grasp over the oppressor’s tongue. Therefore, to help them reason and articulate their gender equal perspectives, students were trained on ways to convey their messages to the audience clearly and highlight how their experiences were influenced by social and systemic forces. Through various theatre activities in a safe environment, participants not only built their self-confidence to be able to speak on provocative issues but also developed empathy, and learned to place faith in each other.

We believe that peace comes from the discomfort of being aware, both of ourselves and the society, to always question existing norms, thereby creating the space for self-growth, and living without fear. COVID-19 has brought to light the shadow pandemic and the surge in DV, necessitating such projects, as peace begins at home.

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The project was a humbling experience and the willingness of children to engage in difficult conversations and act as agents of change reinforced our belief that small local projects have the potential to incite a shift in mindsets, leading to sustained action. Listening and observing the hardships of the people made us sad and angry, making us question the unfairness of life. But at the same time, the experience left us with a reinvigorated sense of commitment to the work we want to carry out professionally and personally.
Community Mobilisation through folk songs on women empowerment

Gender sensitisation learning session using context-relevant workshop material developed for the project

Community interactions during interviews
Stills from forum theatre: a) Depicting alcoholism and domestic abuse; b) Disappointment over birth of girl child

Participation certificates and activity booklets for children to continue engaging with ideas learnt in the workshops